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European powers and Asian security

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For The Straits Times

Can Europe make a difference to the Asian balance of power?

Noted Australian scholar Hugh White thinks not.

In his article in The Straits Times last week, he rightly points to the current European preoccupations with the Russian challenge on the continent and underlines the fiscal and military limitations of Britain and France in projecting effective power into the Indo-Pacific.

Mr White, however, underestimates Asia's need for European powers in shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific amid the rise of China.

The issue is not whether Asia can "rely" on Europe to produce a balance of power in the East. If the region can no longer depend on the United States to deter a newly powerful and assertive China, where is the question of Europe replacing America?

The question is whether Asia, faced with an admittedly difficult challenge in the face of a rising China and a distracted America, will be better off having the Europeans engage more purposefully with regional security issues.

COLONIAL LEGACY

The idea that Asia must welcome the former colonial powers back into the region certainly grates on the sentiments of most political classes in the region. Modern Asia's national narratives, after all, are founded in the struggles against the colonial powers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Meanwhile, the post-war generations in Europe have (mostly) gotten over the nostalgia for colonial glories. In any case, Britain's retreat from the east of Suez at the turn of the 1970s seemed to put an end to any significant European security role in the Indian Ocean and beyond.

Although France never left the Indo-Pacific, its military and political influence was limited to a few pockets. After the Cold War, the intense focus on constructing the European Union has seen the steady decline in the level of Europe's political interest in Asian security issues.

The proposition that Europe and Asia have little to do with each other's geopolitics had indeed taken wide root in the 21st century.

But thanks to the quirks of history, what seems impossible one day looks essential not too long after. If security collaboration with former European colonial powers is becoming an important imperative for the Asian nationalists, returning to the old battlefields is becoming a strategic necessity for the diminished European powers.

Thanks to US President Donald Trump, many of America's leading allies in Asia and Europe are coming to terms with the fact that America is now a major variable in world politics. Important segments of public opinion in the US – on the left as well as the right – are asking why the country must expend so much of its blood and treasure to secure its rich European and Asian allies.

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POST-TRUMP REALITIES

Asia must be sceptical of the assurances from America's old foreign establishment that Mr Trump is an "aberration" and Washington will return to "normal" after his brief moment in the sun.

While America is unlikely to turn its back on Asia in the near term, a rearrangement of traditional US alliances and burden-sharing between Washington and its partners is inevitable and would have significant geopolitical consequences for Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific. This, in turn, produces three sets of demands on America's allies and friends.

One is that Europeans and Asians cannot choose a permanent confrontation with the two great powers in their neighbourhood – Russia and China. Europe needs a political accommodation with Moscow and Asia has no option but to live with a more powerful Beijing.

Their success in coping with the challenge, however, depends on effective responses to the other two imperatives – taking greater responsibility for their own security and strengthening partnerships with each other as a supplement to the traditional alliances with America.

Thanks to Mr Trump and China's surprising penetration of the European Union's backyard in Central Europe, the debate in Brussels on building an autonomous defence capability has got a fresh lease of life. In Asia, the US allies (the spokes of the famed hub) are tying up with each other. They are also looking at new partners – like India, Indonesia and Vietnam – outside the traditional US alliance system.

Non-aligned India, on its part, is simultaneously expanding its security ties with the US while complementing them with partnerships with other Asian countries.

However, the most important new element of India's strategy is the strategic outreach to France and Britain. New Delhi, which once actively shunned strategic collaboration with former colonial powers, now sees them as a necessary part of its quest for a multipolar world.

Japan is actively trying to draw Britain and France into its efforts to construct an Indo-Pacific balance. Australia is finding common cause with France in the South Pacific as well as the southern Indian Ocean, where Paris has considerable residual influence. For Singapore and Malaysia, it makes sense to explore the prospects to revitalise the Five Power Defence Arrangement with Britain, Australia and New Zealand.

Not all these efforts may succeed. But if politics is the art of the possible, then Asia has every reason to try and find different ways to redress the current imbalance in Asia.

While noting that European powers cannot counter China's military power, Mr White misses the point that France and Britain, acting in concert with Asia's middle powers, could make a difference over the longer term. This would involve France, Britain and other European powers boosting the national defence capabilities of Japan, Vietnam, Indonesia, Australia and India. It would also entail a stronger multilateral security engagement between the EU and Asean.

Asean's strategy in the 21st century was about involving all the major powers in the construction of regional stability. In the post-Trump world, Europe must necessarily become an important part of that strategy. For Asean, having Britain and France as well as the EU around in the region is better than not having them at all. Europe, in turn, is beginning to see that the security of Europe and Asia is increasingly interconnected.

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