

# Why Asia Is Fast Replacing Europe as America's First Strategic Concern

*Europe's Leaders Have an Opportunity To Help Asia Develop a NATO-Like Alliance of Democracies*

**N**ext week, a meeting will take place in Riga, Latvia to discuss the pending expansion of the Atlantic alliance to include as many as 10 new members whose citizens were formerly under Soviet dominion.

That the meeting is taking place at all is testament to the success of NATO, a welcome reminder as European capitals and Washington worry about their diverging world views and NATO's future capabilities and mission. As serious as these problems are, a profound development affecting Europe and its alliance with America has received little attention.

Asia, not Europe, is fast becoming America's major strategic concern.

"Europe for geopolitical purposes is done," says Ivo Daalder of the Brookings Institution. Far from being a blow to NATO, Asia's rapid development as a strategic concern — and the lack of effective organizations guaranteeing the security of its democracies — offers Europe's leaders a unique opportunity to apply the lessons of the last 50 years.

America had already begun to rethink Asia strategy before the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington D.C. took over the foreign and defense policy agenda. Pentagon studies had identified Asia as the most likely site of a future conflict and strategists responded by laying on war games, redeploying submarines, and engaging in active diplomacy to support America's military posture in the region.

Even before becoming president, George W. Bush pursued a

historic change in America's approach to Asia. "Right now America has many important bilateral alliances in Asia," Mr. Bush told a campaign audience.

"We should work toward a day when the fellowship of free Pacific nations is as strong and united as our Atlantic partnership." The president's allusion to NATO could only mean one thing — a security organization of America's democratic allies in Asia.

If anything, the terrorist attacks of September 11 made this project more urgent. "Asia, not the Middle East, is the most dangerous area for the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction," writes Paul Dibb, a former Australian defense official. "More than half of potential proliferators of nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles and chemical and biological weapons are in the Asia-Pacific region." One of these proliferators is China, which is developing its military at a rapid rate, threatening Taiwan, and seeking allies in Southeast and Central Asia. Another, North Korea, continues to present a threat to South Korea, and the 37,000 American troops stationed there. The existing organizations for Asian security lack the the mission of guaranteeing the security of Asia's democracies, let alone the ability to achieve such a mission.

The well-established Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or Asean, and its security arm, the Asean Regional Forum, or ARF, was founded in the 1960s as a bulwark against communism. Yet Asean has failed to reconstitute itself in a meaningful way. By the end of the 1990s, the group's expansion to include Laos, Burma

and Cambodia, and North Korea ended a brief period during which it seemed possible that democratic values would become part of their agenda.

Other new additions to the alphabet soup of Asian multilateralism have also disappointed. Kazakhstan's strongman, Nursultan Nazarbayev, inaugurated the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, a huge group of countries including China, Iran, and even Egypt because its Sinai peninsula falls within Asia. The CICA lacks a coherent mission and philosophy. The same can be said of the Asia-Cooperation Dialogue, which convened this month in Thailand. It was a "very strange meeting with no agenda, no tangible goals and everybody expected to say only nice things," said Kavi Chongkittavorn, managing editor of Bangkok's the Nation newspaper, and an expert on Asian affairs.

Then there is Europe's own creation, the Asia-Europe Meeting, which brings together the European Union with Asian states for "an informal process of dialogue and consultation." A "giant smokescreen," says Kay Moeller of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs.

September 11 changed everything. The war in Afghanistan

brought America and Europe together into the region. In fact, European troops have at times been in Afghanistan in larger numbers than the Americans, while in Central Asia, America has bases and influence unimaginable just a year ago, eclipsing, for now, both Russia and China. Opposition activists fear that American and coalition dependence on these regimes will enable them to resist pressure for democratization, leading ultimately to a crisis, crackdown, and greater radicalization. While it may not be the Bush administration's intention, Central Asia's strong men may benefit from their new relationship with America. "Washington appears to lack a strategic vision for the region, such as one that would unite major powers to press for democratic change," writes Ahmed Rashid, author of "Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia."

The allies have the experience and Asia needs an alliance devoted to protecting its democracies. But the Bush administration seems to have gone off the idea. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz gave the idea of an alliance of democratic Asian countries a big thumbs-down in late May. "I certainly don't envision a NATO-like security structure in East Asia," he told a group of journalists. "NATO ... started, obviously from a Cold War period when we were allied together against a common enemy. East Asia's a very, very different situation where the diversity of countries, the diversity of interests doesn't call for that kind of structure."

Exactly what interests in Asia are inconsistent with NATO-like organization, Mr. Wolfowitz, who is associated with the Reagan administration's support for dem-

ocratic transitions in the Philippines and elsewhere in Asia, did not say. Perhaps he is wary of alienating China, perhaps cognizant of historic enmities between America's close allies Japan and South Korea.

Why not a NATO-like structure? The ability of Asia's existing talk shops to secure the peace is, as Paul Dibb succinctly puts it, "a myth." An alliance of democracies — and one that can in time welcome new members — has worked in Europe, with great and unforeseen success. It's time for America and its European allies to apply the lessons and principles of the last half century to a new set of circumstances.

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