

KEEPING EU-ASIA REENGAGEMENT ON TRACK

RICHARD YOUNGS

The relationship between the European Union (EU) and Asia is in flux. The EU intensified its economic ties to Asia and boosted its security cooperation in the region in 2011 and 2012. But new challenges, including the crises in Ukraine and the Middle East, have made it difficult to sustain this incipient momentum. There are a number of steps that EU and Asian governments can and should take to continue to strengthen their relations.

A New Focus

- The eurozone crisis encouraged the EU to upgrade its trade and commercial relations with Asia, as European governments sought out economic growth that was lacking at home.
- European and Asian governments have made many formal commitments to strengthen their economic and political ties. With EU agreements proceeding slowly, member states have often pursued their own bilateral pacts in the region.
- The EU has begun to position itself as a partner in nontraditional security approaches in Asia, launching strategic dialogues and calling for the rule of law to be applied in maritime disputes. While this attention to soft security is much needed, the model is meeting severe resistance from some Asian countries.
- The long-overlooked relationship between the EU and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) received a particularly important boost as European governments deepened their ties to the region. But to progress further, it must overcome growing tensions within some ASEAN member states.
- As the economic crisis subsided, so too did some of the impulse behind the EU's turn toward Asia. Meanwhile, concrete follow-through on existing commitments has been lacking.

How the EU and Asia Can Maintain the Momentum

Expand trade rules. In trade policy, the EU and Asia should build on the plethora of bilateral free trade agreements either signed or being negotiated to develop more multilateral commercial rules.

Stress unity, not bilateralism. The EU will not have a single foreign policy in Asia that completely cuts out member states' policies. But European governments should temper the trend toward competitive bilateralism and focus their efforts on more coherent aims.

Promote soft security. Although the EU will not be a major security player in Asia, it can and should do more to promote nontraditional forms of cooperative security.

Focus on human rights and democracy. As social protests gather steam in Asia, the EU will need to reconsider the place of human rights and democracy in its Asian policy, correcting its neglect of the issue in recent years.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Youngs is a senior associate in the Carnegie Endowment's Democracy and Rule of Law Program. He is an expert on the foreign policy of the European Union, in particular on questions of democracy support.

CONTACT

Christine Lynch
Senior Communications Manager
+32 2 209 29 93
lynch@ceip.org

CarnegieEurope.eu



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