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It has taken Europe's leaders some time to adjust to Asia's rise, and the implications of that for EU policymaking. Kishore Mahbubani remembers Brussels' condescensions and counsels a fresh EU approach

Europe's existential nightmare has come alive; a seething young population of angry and dissatisfied Muslims just across the Mediterranean in increasingly unstable states. Europe made the strategic error of assuming that its support for the autocratic pro-Western regimes of Presidents Ben Ali and Mubarak in Tunisia and Egypt would enable them to carry on forever. But by bottling up change, these two regimes instead unleashed political volcanoes that exploded on Europe's doorstep. And Libya, no matter how it ends, will exacerbate the political instability.

These political explosions are another powerful reason why Europe should re-examine its Asian policies. The biggest strategic flaw in the EU's policies towards Asia is the assumption that these policies can continue on autopilot, even when the world is changing rapidly and Asia keeps rising so steadily.

Just look at how dramatically Europe's and Asia's roles have reversed in the past 20 years. When the Cold War ended the EU was overcome with political hubris. I was present when in 1991 the then EU Commission President confidently pontificated at an ASEAN-EU meeting that after the Cold War only two superpowers remained: the U.S. and the EU. What arrogance! And then in 1997/8 the Europeans enjoyed a moment of *schadenfreude* as the rapidly emerging East Asian economies crashed in the Asian financial crisis.

Now the shoe is on the other foot. The eurozone economies are struggling to emerge from the Western financial crisis (yes, the Western financial crisis of 2007/9). Some EU states face the danger of defaulting and the euro's fate is uncertain. But while the eurozone was struggling, China's economy grew by 9% in 2010, India's by about 8% and Singapore's economy grew by almost 15%.

Yet even while power shifted rapidly to Asia, the EU strategic documents on Asia published in 1994, 2001 and 2007 continued with the same tone and content as though nothing fundamental had changed in the strategic balance between Europe and Asia. A great deal of European condescension towards Asia drips through their pages; just look at how its *Regional Programme for Asia* strategy document (2007-2013) described the political situation in Asia: "The region is also characterised by: the emergence of two dominant powers (China and India) in an unstable region; security challenges and the fragile situation in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal; large refugee and migratory flows; the risk of nuclear proliferation; problems with democratisation and respect for human rights; lack of adherence to labour standards; unemployment, against the background of significant demographic challenges; the potential scale of natural disasters, as well as health threats (Avian Influenza, HIV/AIDS); and the extent of environmental degradation and related global threats."

This analysis is not wrong. The glass remains half-empty in Asia, but look too at how the situation has improved. Despite the rapid emergence of the new powers, the region remains geo-politically stable. ASEAN continues to outperform the EU geo-politically by bringing all the great powers into new concentric circles of cooperative engagement. To understand how much more geo-politically stable the East Asian region looks, the EU should ask itself the simple question of whether it would feel more secure if it had governments like those of Indonesia, Brunei and Malaysia at its doorstep rather than the current regimes of Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. Doesn't this indicate that the time has come for the EU to learn some geo-political lessons from Asia?

The biggest flaw of the EU's strategy documents on Asia is that not once did these documents even suggest that the EU could learn lessons from the Asian experience. And yet, as I argue in my book, *The New Asian Hemisphere*, the "march to modernity" that Asia has unleashed from Shanghai to Mumbai would benefit Europe enormously if it were replicated in North Africa and the Middle East. Asia can teach these regions how to achieve this, and Europe cannot. Yet Europe will be the first to benefit if North Africa modernises.

The time has therefore come for the EU to discard its prejudices and take a fresh approach towards Asia. All hints of arrogance and condescension should be scrubbed out of its strategy documents, for learning comes only with humility. The EU should make a determined effort to understand how replicating the East Asian experience in its immediate neighbourhood could mean a more stable future for Europe.

These EU documents should also strive to be more intellectually honest. It is misleading to suggest that in 1996 Asia contributed to 33% of global CO₂ emissions while the EU contributed 14% without mentioning that historically the EU has contributed far more, and that on a per capita basis, each Asian was responsible for little more than a quarter of each European's contribution. Such intellectual dishonesty insults the intelligence of Asians.

To put it simply, the time has come for Europe to stop lecturing Asia and to begin learning from it. Yes, there is a lot Europe can learn from Asia, and Europe would be better off after learning these lessons. Its geo-political nightmares would then begin to disappear.