

# Europe must share power

Asian nations want to copy – not dominate – the West | By Kishore Mahbubani



**T**he big question that Europe has to answer in the 21st century is a very simple one: is it a force blocking or promoting progressive change?

The general assumption among leading European minds is that Europe plays a positive role on the world stage. The reality, however, is more complex. It is this complexity that I try to draw out in my new book "The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East."

It is easy to describe how the European Union has been a positive force. The greatest achievement of the EU is not just that EU member states have not fought wars against each other. The real achievement is that there is no prospect of war between any EU member states.

This represents the highest peak of human civilization in the area of peace and security. No other region has achieved this. In East Asia, the guns, too, are silent. There are no wars between states. Yet East Asia has not achieved zero prospect of war. And it is far from doing so.

Similarly, in terms of internal regional cooperation, it is difficult to match what Europe has done in opening borders and facilitating greater trade and economic cooperation. The euro experiment has been a success, so far.

Germany lacks the will to act globally, wrote the *Neue Züricher Zeitung's* Eric Gujer in August 2008 in the first article of our series "Germany: the anxious great power?" Responses followed that questioned both Germany's reluctance and its great power status. The series' scope expanded with an

assertion that Europe, not Germany, is the real sleeping giant. Berlin's foreign policy even hampers that of the EU, wrote another contributor. The present article compares Europe's declining power in the world with the expanding political and demographic weight of Asian countries.

Given all the achievements, it may appear that Europeans have entered heaven in the 21st century, especially when viewed against the major traumas they experienced in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Yet there is also no doubt that the people of Europe live with rising levels of insecurity. Indeed, most look into the future with apprehension.

By contrast, the most optimistic young people in the world are young Asians. Why has this happened, and what strategic errors has Europe made? The first geopolitical error by the EU was to create an oasis of peace and prosperity within its borders without sharing any of it outside. Hence, whether in North Africa or the Middle East, in the Balkans or the Caucasus, Europe faces serious political and economic problems right on its doorstep.

In contrast to the EU, China has shared its prosperity with all of its neighbors, including previous rivals like Japan and

India. The EU has done little to effectively develop Africa. By contrast, China has proposed, negotiated and concluded a free trade agreement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in record time. This agreement, which encompasses some 1.8 billion people will be the world's largest.

Hence, Asia is witnessing a rising tide of prosperity that reaches almost three billion people. In contrast, the prosperity of the EU is confined to less than 500 million citizens.

The long-term tragic consequences of these geopolitical mistakes are not difficult to predict. In my book, a revealing chart compares the population of Europe with those of its neighbors in North Africa and West Asia in 1950, 2000 and 2050 (see below).

The relevant figures for the EU are 349.8 million, 451.4 million and 401 million respectively, whereas the same for North Africa and West Asia are 163 million,

587.3 million and nearly 1.3 billion respectively. At the same time, Europe has the most rapidly aging population of any region.

If Europe does not start exporting jobs to Africa, for example, by abolishing its Common Agricultural Policy, Africa will begin moving even more Africans in massive numbers to Europe. This is inevitable.

The second geopolitical error that the EU has made is to cling to its previous domination of the global order. In some ways it is remarkable how much power Europe was able to accumulate in the 19th and 20th centuries.

A small country like Portugal could colonize South America (Brazil), Africa (Angola and Mozambique) and even take bites out of India in Goa and China, with Macau. This only occurred because these centuries were historical aberrations.

From the year 1 A.D. until 1820, China and India always had the largest economies. By the middle of the 21st century, the four largest economies of the world will be China, India, the U.S. and Japan. Not a single national European economy will be in the top four.

Yet, in denial of the inevitable, Europe refuses to give up its over-representation in global institutions. We still have a rule that says

that the head of the World Bank should be an American and the head of the International Monetary Fund a European.

This is because Europe is over-weighted in the IMF voting structure. Belgium has a larger share of the IMF vote than China. Similarly, Europe is over-represented in places like the UN Security Council (where the time has come for a single European seat), the G-8 and the Basel Committee.

Perhaps the only positive result to have emerged from the great global financial crisis of 2008 is recognition in both America and Europe that no solution can be found to any global challenge without the help of Asian nations. Asian nations have the largest pools of foreign reserves and the fastest growing economies.

In the short term, economic growth will also slow in Asia. But in the medium and long-term there will be no change to the positive growth trajectory of Asian nations.

There is one important point that Europeans need to recognize about the rise of Asia. As Asian nations rise, their goal is not to dominate the West. Instead their goal is to replicate the West. They are happy with the rules established by the West in the liberal international order post World War II.

Since the Asian countries are becoming the biggest beneficiaries of this order, they are ready to become responsible stakeholders in the global order. But to achieve this, the West, especially Europe, will have to learn to share power with Asian nations in the 21st century.

If the EU succeeds in doing this, it will have demonstrated that it is a positive force on the global stage. If not, it will play the role of a major spoiler of the global order. So European leaders need to make some critical decisions in the 21st century.

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Population and age in the EU and 25 countries in North Africa and West Asia: 1950, 2000 and 2050 (projected)

Source: Paul Demery, "Population Policy Dilemmas for Europe at the Dawn of the 21st Century" in: *Population and Development Review* 29, March 2003

