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Introduction

Jan VAN DER HARST

Present-day East Asia is in the centre of political and economic interest. It is impossible to overlook the region, which has evolved into one of the growth engines of the world. Apart from Japan and South Korea, China in particular attracts the attention. Deng Xiao Ping's Open Door policy, starting in the late 1970s, has set in motion a development which has changed the country immensely and has not stopped producing its impact until this very moment. China keeps on moving ahead, thereby increasingly influencing the rest of the world, including its neighbouring regions East and South-East Asia and, further away, the European Union.

Understandably, as a result of this fast development, most of the academic studies on East Asia, in relation to Europe, focus on present-day issues, covering trade, finance, investments, security policies, etc. Increasing interdependence in the global sphere and the rapid disappearance of geographical barriers have made the relationship between the two regions so urgent and dynamic that issues of the day – like tensions regarding the South China Sea, China's Belt & Road initiative, Huawei's 5G network, and North Korea's nuclear diplomacy – tend to dominate the academic debate.

In this turbulent atmosphere of breaking news, short-term solutions and unpredictable behaviour, it seems all the more expedient to look at the Europe-East Asia relationship with somewhat more distance and reflection. This was exactly the aim of a conference at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, organized by the European Union Liaison Committee and the Centre for East Asia Studies Groningen on 14 and 15 June 2018. Asian and European scholars convened together to produce a survey of how the contacts between the two regions have developed over time (1945-today), both on the bilateral and multilateral (EC/EU-ASEAN) level and how Europe has approached the gradual rise of East Asia as a global competitor.

The conference in Groningen underlined that the European Community became an important international actor from the 1970s onwards. Until then, the young EC's external policies had mainly concentrated on transatlantic developments and the partnership with former colonies in Africa, but – paradoxically enough – after the energy crisis of 1973, the Community managed to extend its global reach, including an increasing involvement in and with the East Asian region. The European Commission under the activist External Affairs Commissioner Christopher Soames played an important role in making this happen and confronted the member-states with communitarian attempts at internationalism. Another finding of the Groningen conference was that during the 1970s and 1980s, it was Japan rather than China that attracted Europe's political and economic attention. In current times of China-centrism we tend to forget it, but before 1990 the relationship with Tokyo was by far the most important for the EC and its member-states. Indicatively, the greater part of the contributions

to this contemporary-historical Europe-East Asia issue is about the relationship between Europe and Japan. Of added value is the input by various Japanese scholars with their knowledge of the region and their expertise with Japanese primary source material. The conference offered an excellent example of scholars from different parts of the world willing to learn from each other and exchange academic views.

The first article of this volume, by Anjo Harryvan, addresses the relationship from a European-business perspective. Harryvan focuses on the instrumental role played by the Dutch electronics company Philips to lay the foundation for the Europe 1992 Common Market campaign leading to the EU internal market. Alarmed by Japanese competition, Philips CEO Wisse Dekker successfully assembled European business leaders to pressurize the political elites to make serious business with the process of overcoming European economic fragmentation.

Hitoshi Suzuki and Izuru Makihara analyse Japan-EC/EU relations over a longer period of time: 1970-2005. Whereas the early years were characterized by trade conflict and European misgivings about Japanese protectionism, the period after the end of the Cold War in 1990 shows a much more cooperative relationship, with an active Japanese involvement in the economies of Central and Eastern Europe and a strong bilateral understanding on environmental issues, leading to the Kyoto Protocol of 1997.

The third contribution, by Takeshi Yamamoto, analyses the EC-Japan relationship in the context of the US-EC-Japan trilateral diplomacy in the era of détente. The early 1970s were characterized by fierce divisions between the Nixon administration in the US and the EC member-states about the issue of how to give shape to the Henry Kissinger-designed ‘Year of Europe’ concept. Against this background of transatlantic skirmishes the government in Tokyo desperately sought to multilateralise Japanese diplomacy and enhance Japan’s voice in the international political arena, but for a long time it was unsuccessful in realising its aims.

Naoko Kumagai looks at Europe and Japan from an entirely different perspective. She has made a thorough study of the sensitive topic of comfort women – young women who were forced to provide sexual services to officers of the Japanese army before and during the Second World War. Kumagai makes a comparison of how the Netherlands and South Korea – both countries with many female victims of cruelties inflicted by Japan’s military – have reacted to the postwar reconciliation policies instigated by the Japanese government. Distinguishing between pragmatic and reflective reconciliation, Kumagai shows why and how the Netherlands and South Korea responded differently to Tokyo’s ‘moral atonement’ project.

The next two articles, by Tomoya Kuroda and Ludovica Marchi, are focused on the multilateral framework of the EC/EU-ASEAN relationship, with Kuroda covering the period of the 1970s and Marchi addressing more recent developments. Kuroda argues that although for the EC the ASEAN framework was not as important as the ACP (Africa, Caribbean, Pacific) and the Mediterranean countries, Brussels was certainly interested in formalizing relations with South-East Asia. Against the background of a declining US hegemony and an emerging sense of European identity, the

EC started to develop a global strategy during the 1970s. One of the manifestations hereof was the EC-ASEAN Cooperation Agreement, signed in March 1980.

Marchi addresses the security relationship between the EU and ASEAN focusing on the case of crisis management and disaster relief in Myanmar. She analyses the EU's attempts to stimulate security cooperation in and with Myanmar via the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). In this case, the EU demonstrated its ambition to make others benefit from Europe's own experiences and practices. It was another example of the EU seeking to expand its influence outside the own realm.

A fully different approach is taken by Robert Tabaszewski, who in his contribution writes about health as a value in the integration policy of European and (South-)East Asian countries. Although the health policies of the EU and ASEAN countries are gradually getting closer together, there is still much that needs to be done in order to overcome the lack of mutual understanding of the traditional values in the two regions. Despite closer EU-ASEAN cooperation on the protection of human health, Tabaszewski points to the dangerous effects of still existing practices in Asia, like the illicit trade in harmful substances (narcotics).

After these examples of multilateralism, Paul Rusman in the final article to this Journal issue addresses the bilateral frictions between China and the Netherlands in the early 1980s, centred around the sale of Dutch-produced submarines to Taiwan. For the Chinese government this was impossible to accept: how could The Hague's professed 'One China' policy be reconciled with the country's industry selling war materials to Taipei? China was unwilling to concede to Dutch claims of saving their shipbuilding industry in times of economic recession and high unemployment, and eventually the Dutch government was forced to retrace its steps. It was an important moment for the Netherlands to realise that its commercial interests were better safeguarded within the multilateral framework of the EC/EU than being exposed unilaterally to the arbitrariness and dominance of rising Asian countries.

It is a reasoning which is still valid, and makes even more sense in today's world.

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Walther Müller-Jentsch, magazin-mitbestimmung.de,
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