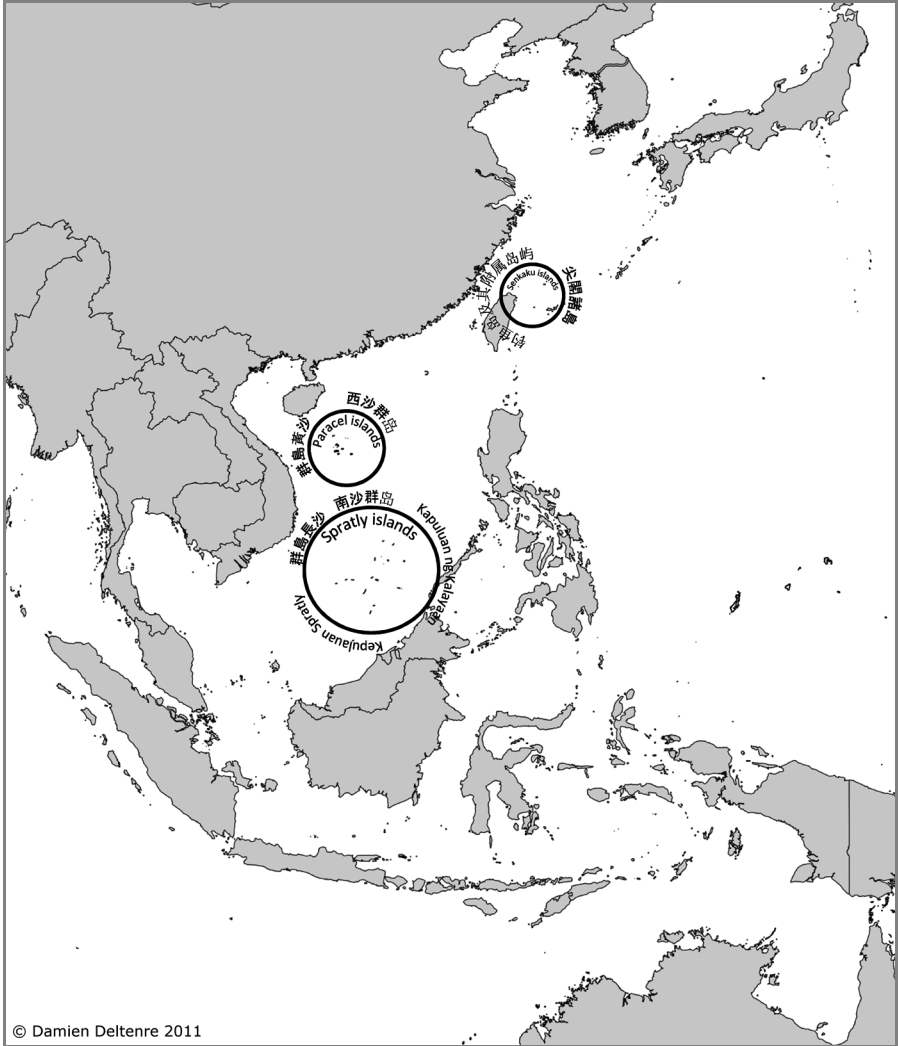


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Introduction

THOMAS RENARD & TANGUY STRUYE DE SWIELANDE¹

We are now well into the twenty-first century. In appearances, things are not so different from a few decades ago: the US is still the sole global superpower and the West still – somehow – rules the world. This is as far as appearances can go. Tectonic shifts are altering the foundations of the global system. The global economic crisis is destabilising Western economic supremacy; the general confidence crisis in Europe – topping all other crises (democratic, political, financial, monetary, strategic, etc) – is questioning the very future of the European Union; and upheavals in North Africa and the Middle East are confronting the West with its hypocritical approach to human rights and development. And then, far beyond Europe, there is the rise of Asia.

The rise of Asia is first and foremost perceived in its economic dimension – particularly as dynamic Asian economies have recovered from the crisis faster and better than the West. China is announced to become the first global economy in 2016, according to the International Monetary Fund. But the rise of Asia is also palpable in many other dimensions, such as financial and monetary (e.g. the internationalisation of the Chinese renminbi or Chinese rescue plans for the eurozone), scientific (e.g. new Asian space programmes), and military (e.g. the new “arms race” taking place in Asia).

Global power is increasingly diffused, flowing – or rather pouring – from the West to the rest. Kishore Mahbubani, a former Singaporean diplomat, speaks of an “irresistible shift of global power to the East”. This might be an

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overstatement, in the sense that many challenges and uncertainties could still hamper or reverse Asia's emergence. Moreover, one should not forget that the shift of power is not only to the East, but also to the South and to non-state actors: power is being diffused globally and across the board. Yet, it appears quite clearly that the early phase of the twenty-first century is indeed a transition to a very different world – a world in which Asia is likely to become a key player.

In this period of transition, it is unsettling to observe how inward-looking Europe has become. Since the failure of the constitutional process, and even more since the economic crisis, the EU has been mired in internal politics and institutional reforms. As Europeans are trying to determine the course of their own future, they easily tend to forget that the world pursues its own course – with or without Europe. The difference in pace between the young and dynamic Asia, and the old and stagnating Europe is striking. European policymakers certainly do not ignore the major changes affecting our world, but they somehow appear unable to deal with internal and external crises *simultaneously*.

Over the last decade, the European Union has pretended to play a global role – developing a foreign and a defence policy, adopting a security strategy, or initiating “strategic partnerships” with emerging powers – but it has in fact achieved little more than rhetorical successes. The EU has indeed become a “global player”, in the sense that it has increased its global footprint, but what it really needs is to become a “strategic player”, that is introducing a sense of priorities in its external action.

Becoming a strategic player implies a greater understanding of the issues at stake and the regional dynamics taking place in Asia. Such understanding is a necessary condition to the drawing of a sophisticated and cogent strategy for the EU to deal with a rising Asia. Of course, there is no shortage of literature on Asia, but this special issue of *Studia Diplomatica* is designed to highlight some specific geopolitical and geostrategic issues in the Asia-Pacific region, and to bring these more closely to the attention of European thinkers and policymakers.

One common theme to most articles in this issue is the rise of China and its greatest (soon dominant?) role in the region. Tanguy Struye de Swielande describes China's new ambitions in its maritime neighbourhood, leading to tensions and potential flashpoints, but also to necessary adjustments by other Asian countries. Illustrating this, Bruno Hellendorff explains how the rise of

China is having an impact on the strategic posture of Australia – forced to develop a new “hedging” strategy. Similarly, in her article on the changing foreign policy of Indonesia, Shada Islam acknowledges the salience and the influence of Beijing on Jakarta’s ambitions to become a regional and a global actor. Sico van der Meer in his contribution focuses on the Korean peninsula, and more particularly on the North Korean question, which has significant repercussions for regional and global stability.

Frans-Paul van der Putten focuses on the other great power in the Asia-Pacific region, i.e. the United States. In his article, he argues that the changing balance of power in the region – particularly the rise of China, but also the way other regional powers adjust to China – is creating the basis for a rethink of the US regional strategic posture in the long term.

Strategic issues – or high politics – are not completely disconnected from trade and economic matters – or low politics. Lurong Chen, Philippe De Lombaerde and Nishalini Nair discuss regional dynamics, and more particularly the role of China and Japan vis-à-vis ASEAN economies.

Finally, this special issue of *Studia Diplomatica* offers a perspective on the EU’s interests in Asia, as well as on the relations between Europe and Asia. Michito Tsuruoka looks critically into the EU’s definition of its strategic interests in Asia (and in the Asia-Pacific) and suggests a new framework to define these. In his contribution, Bertrand de Crombrugghe discusses EU-Asia relations in the framework of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), drawing some lessons from the past, and more particularly from the eight Summit process, which was held in and chaired by Belgium.

The editors are very grateful to several colleagues for their precious help and comments during the elaboration of this issue. More particularly, they wish to thank: Umur Akansel, Sven Biscop, Jo Coelmont, Hosuk Lee-Makiyama, Alexander Mattelaer, Patrick Nopens, James Rogers, Luis Simon, and Stijn Verhelst.