

**Launch of the project “Asia’s Century”
Bucharest, Romania, 24 March 2022**

On Thursday, March 24, 2022, MEPEI (Middle East Political and Economic Institute) and EuroDefense Romania, in partnership with IFIMES (International Institute for the Middle East and Balkan Studies), ICI Bucharest (National Institute for Research & Development in Informatics), and AIES (Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy), organized the conference for the launch of the international project “Asia’s Century” 2022 – 2027. Moreover, in terms of media partners, the project benefits from the support of the digital news channel Financial Intelligence.

This project aims to facilitate communication and cooperation among EU countries and countries from Asia. It is also aimed at overcoming barriers generated by the current pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine crisis, as well as contributing to resuming direct interinstitutional and human contacts.

If the 19th century was Europe’s century and the 20th century was considered mainly America’s century, there are more and more arguments for profiling the 21st century as Asia’s century. “The West has been at the forefront of the world history for almost 200 years. Now it has to learn to share, even abandon, that position and adapt to a world it can no longer dominate” (Kishore Mahbubani, former President of UNSC).

Therefore, the project aims to stimulate the interest of officials and business people in Asia and raise public awareness, especially that of the young generation, about Asia.

In an attempt to connect participants in a live event, the conference was developed through a hybrid format, with participants engaging in face-to-face conversations in the Panoramic Conference Hall of the Marshal Garden Hotel in Bucharest, while a part of the audience joined through the online Zoom platform. Nevertheless, the live meeting benefitted from a significant presence of over 20 ambassadors and diplomatic representatives accredited in Romania (Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, China, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, South Korea, Kuwait, Lebanon, Malaysia, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Thailand, Turkey, Turkmenistan, UAE), and over 40 participants including academics, Romanian diplomats, business people, researchers, and mass-media.

PARTNERS:**MEDIA PARTNER:**

Overall, the representatives of the organizing think-tanks promoted the idea that the EU needs to work towards an in-depth understanding of Asia, and that Asia also needs to enhance its knowledge of the EU.

These thematic strands were addressed from manifold perspectives by the keynote speakers:

- **Prof. Anis BAJREKTAREVIC**, Department Head for Strategic Studies on Asia, International Institute for the Middle East and Balkan Studies (IFIMES), IFIMES Permanent Representation to Austria and Vienna-based IOs;
- **Dr. Werner FASSLABEND**, President, the Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy (AIES), President EuroDefense Austria, and former Minister of Defense of Austria (1990-2000), Austria – *Online intervention*;
- **Prof. Teodor MELEȘCANU**, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs – *Online intervention*;
- **Prof. Adrian SEVERIN**, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs;
- **Amb. Viorel ISTICIOAIA-BUDURA**, career diplomat, former Ambassador of Romania to People's Republic of China, Mongolia, Republic of Korea. As an European official, was Head of the Asia-Pacific Department with European External Action Service and Ambassador of the EU to Japan - *Online intervention*;
- **Dr. Alexandru GEORGESCU**, Scientific Researcher ICI Bucharest, Strategic Analyst, Secretary General EuroDefense Romania.

The event was moderated by **Dr. Liviu MUREȘAN**, President of EuroDefense Romania.

The opening remarks were delivered by **Mr. Flavius CABA-MARIA**, President of MEPEI, who underlined some of the key aspects related to the project.

- The 21st century can be regarded as Asia's century, in line with the region's growing influence on the world's economy, mainly as a "restoration", and not as a revolution, since it already accounted for more than half of world economic output for 18 centuries.
- Currently home to more than half of the world's population, the region has made the transition from low to middle-income status within a single generation, while, by 2040, Asia is likely to generate more than 50% of the world GDP, and by 2050, according to the Asian Development Bank estimates, 3 billion Asians could have living standards similar to Europeans. As such, it is important to underline that when the economy might begin to swing, then the political and cultural influences will follow, thus putting Asia in a similar position to the one of the US at the beginning of the 20th century: "an economic giant, but a political dwarf". It is clear that it remains fractured politically and that it grows more so with the rise of great-power competition.

- However, at the global level, there is a power gap due to the faltering leadership of the US, which could be filled by Asia. And although China plays a big part in the global and Asian economy, including through its Belt & Road Initiative across Asia, the continent should be regarded from a broader perspective, by taking into account its five main regions: Western Asia/ Middle East, Central Asia, Eastern Asia, Southern Asia, and South-East Asia. Far greater than just China, the new Asian system taking shape is a multi-civilizational order spanning from Saudi Arabia to Japan, and from Russia to Australia, therefore linking five billion people through trade, finance, and infrastructure networks. In this context, Asia is returning to the stable multipolar order that existed long before European colonialism and American dominance, with India and Southeast Asia coming into their own as economic and strategic hubs. Asians are sharing economic and governance models as never before, and their confident outward push is remodeling business and cultural life.

Professor Anis BAJREKTAREVIC, who delivered the first keynote presentation, emphasized the idea that the 21st century is predicted to be the Asian century.

- After the 15th century, Europe was like a small peninsula of the Asian continent and with the great discoveries following, the shift of gravity has changed, a gradual shift which from the 15th century until nowadays, is an anthropo-geographical version of change, in which geographical peripheries became center and centers became peripheries, such as Central Asia, China, Syria, Iran, etc.

- What are the prospects for the cooperation between Asia and Europe? The keynote underlined the fact that Asia does not need Europe for its own development because they have everything needed for that. However, it is still essential to point out what Asia still needs and that Europeans could contribute. One of these aspects is related to the necessity of a security and political setting because it is easily noticeable that there is no centrality within Asia. In comparison, even for Africa, there is the African Union, which, even if not perfect, still depicts the unity of all states.

- Nonetheless, for Asia, there are also ASEAN, SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council), etc., multiple synergies and multilateralizations between the large democracies and economies of the Asian continent, with so many dynamics and multiple centers, which are selective and regional and not pancontinental, with no place to articulate security aspects. Also, countries follow their own aspirations, seldomly taking into account the neighbors' needs. There is no country in Asia that does not have border disputes with its neighbors and, with such a security setting, it is hard to have a center.

- Developments in Europe such as the OSCE or the Helsinki treaty might provide inspiration for Asia, which needs to develop its own Helsinki agreement and spirit. Therefore, Europe could bring to the table its own experience, without doing it for Asia or instructing it on how to do this. While the predominant security structures in Asia are bilateral and largely asymmetric, Europe enjoys multilateral, balanced, and

symmetrical configurations. In the presenter's opinion, regardless of Asia's impressive economic growth, it should have a pan-Asian institution.

- Europe's architecture of multiculturalism could be of interest to Asia. Multiple exchanges are necessary for the complex design a pancontinental multicultural organization, considering also the importance of integrating the security dimension, mutual recognition of borders, etc.

Dr. Werner FASSLABEND considered the topic from a different geographic perspective, adding that, at AIES (the Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy), the question of Asia is not addressed from a continental point of view, but rather by taking into consideration geostrategic regions. Thus, they promote the concept of "Indo-Pacific century".

- Historically, Asia was not defined as the center of the world. Nowadays, the shift is real and all the dynamics happening are driven by the Indo-Pacific region.

- As such, the demographics, the driver for most domains, is a very important factor, Asia is home to almost 5 billion people. While Europe, China, and even Africa are stagnating, with the US a bit on the rise, Southeast Asia and its Western part are exploding and this defines dynamics economically, politically, technologically, culturally, and in a secure manner. Thus, it becomes a decisive matter for the comprehensive development of the new world order, from politics to technology, and so a question of Europe's role in the world.

- Both China and India are changing the world, historically having been very much terrestrial-oriented countries, never sea powers, only with small exceptions. With its development, China became a global power, with a big influence in Africa and South America, and even in Europe. With the Belt and Road Initiative, it is compensating for its sea power, with the maritime aspect becoming more and more important due to the demographic and commercial approaches to the sea, an enormous change that leads to the geostrategic approach.

- In this context, the security question will be on the table and it is not by chance that the biggest military budgets and expenses are from this area, whether it is China, India, or the Arab countries. Also, the nuclear question is an open question in the area, which might be solved by the negotiation in Vienna. Mostly, all changes are fundamental and all of those countries are leading countries in some aspects, for example technologically, such as Japan, China, and South Korea.

- The questions will be related to the development, since many limits are the Asian lifeline in terms of electricity, trade, which will become the European lifeline because all of the big markets such as China, Japan, India, South-East Asia will be there. As China and India change the world, given technological innovations and huge Asian markets, Europe must be able to take part in this huge Asian development.

Professor Teodor MELEȘCANU approached the conference themes from the Romanian perspective.

- During the Romanian Presidency of the EU in 2019, one of the top priorities was establishing deeper relations between the EU and Asia, including the plan to organize a summit between the EU and the Arab League nations.
- The Arab countries, as well as Central Asian countries, tend to develop their international relations capitalizing on the energy sector, including oil, gas, which offers a great potential for the development of institutions. Moreover, it is important to bring together Arab countries and Central Asian countries in systems that could put forward elements for cooperation with Europe, to build a stronger future.

In his keynote, **Professor Adrian SEVERIN** addressed the geopolitical shift of power, from West to East.

- Centuries of European and American order have left Asian peoples powerless (perhaps with the relative exception of Ottoman Turkey). Today they are called, objectively, to resume the exercise of power that they have not exercised for a long time and which, for them, has never had the same meaning and the same way of expression as those of Europeans and Americans. For Asians, power was measured not by the ability to impose order on others, their own pattern of living and thinking, but by the ability to challenge those who challenged their innate legitimacy or superiority, while maintaining an identity, even when they were compelled by brute force to submit politically and economically. In the Asian conception, power is not acquired, but created; it is immanent, intrinsic and not extrinsic.
- Under the impetus of China and Russia, especially in the region, an impressive number of forms and structures of cooperation and integration have emerged in the region (some inspired by NATO or the EU), proving the ability to federalize Asia and announcing the coagulation of the powers held by the states of the continent in an irresistible continental unity. Recent developments in the diplomacy of some of the Arab countries (the UAE, Saudi Arabia), Iran's older or more recent diplomatic intricacies in its relations with former Arab rivals or with China or Afghanistan, talk about the fact that Asia can be a continent of a single plural power (as Europe has always strived to be.)
- On the other hand, there is the issue of psychological unpreparedness at the level of major Asian players (including China, the world's leading emerging superpower) to take on a global and even regional leadership role. Such a role is somewhat incompatible with Asian culture. Thus, a conflict may arise between the objective and subjective premises of the "Asian century" and the post-American Asian world order. Objectively, Asia has the data to impose its global order in the next century, while subjectively, it might still be difficult to do so.

- The American model is not as attractive as before, and the US does not have the strength anymore to preserve it worldwide, therefore Asia has the possibility to develop its own model, culturally, economically, and politically. As a result, multilateralism is a desirable solution, as an alternative to the dominance and balance of power. Although Asian countries could impose an economic model based rather on austerity rather than wealth, as compared to the previous old order, it is important to join this self-designed model, based on self-vision, and led with harmony for development, with the purpose of being integrated. With certainty, Asian countries are able to remain diverse and find a way to unite in the name of security, welfare, prosperity, and peace and order.

- The “Asian century” should mean a return to the origins of the Asian culture that has always sought harmony, an order that will definitely not coincide with the one that Europeans are familiar with and that reflects the values specific to their culture. It is in Europe’s interest to look at and collaborate with Asia.

Ambassador Viorel ISTICIOAIA-BUDURA underlined the idea that the moments of the wake-up call might lead to rebalancing the global order.

- Once again in human history, it seems inevitable that two major regions of the planet, the West and the East, will enter a new phase of interaction. Potentially looking for a new balance, mutual adjustments, and refreshed ideas for partnership. Not in polarization, sometimes simplifying the dramatic and debilitating logic of the past, but in a spirit that can help explore a possible convergence and mutually beneficial cooperation.

- In general, through the collective efforts of the Member States, the EU has a positive account of its relations with Asian partners. Since 2018/2019, collectively, different Member States of the EU adopted a number of decisions to enable cooperation and diversification in Asia and the relation with Asian partners, even in domains such as security.

- Economically, the trade relations between the EU and China have grown by over 25% last year, showing thus the partners’ mutual interest, even though based on an agreement from 1985, when China looked different from the one today. Over the past decade, the EU developed over a dozen trade partnerships with Asian states – Japan, Singapore, Vietnam, South Korea, etc.

- In addition, political agreements were coupled with economic and trade agreements, commissioned by the EU institutions, frameworks that promote common work. However, the main problem with all of these agreements is the implementation and the private investors’ knowledge of the public trade agreements.

- East Asia, with a deficit in collective organization, does not promote enough involvement and cooperation among member states. There are frameworks for

collective cooperation, but the potential was not reached yet and, thus, it is difficult to assess the success of this context.

Dr. Alexandru GEORGESCU concluded the keynote speeches with practical suggestions that could be developed under this initiative.

- With regards to Asia, where in comparison to the US, there are countries with a lot of financial power projection, it is essential to mention that any country with this kind of power tried at some point to develop some kind of cooperation initiative, not just China, with the Belt and Road Initiative. Japan is another example in this spectrum, due to its Eurasian Initiative and other initiatives regarding development assistance in Central Asia. Also, a similar example is that of South Korea with the Trans-Eurasia Information Network. This means that countries in Asia, cooperating with countries in neighboring regions, created infrastructures that enable the transport of goods and people or the transfer of infrastructure.

- With this Asia project, the focus is on the governance aspects and the sharing of European experience in multilateral cooperation, in domains such as governance, technology, security, etc. by aiming to develop new models together, for example in the domain of cyber diplomacy, cyber security, that are very important due to the risks involved in all reliant systems and the consequences of interconnectedness during crises.

- Another matter for cooperation is related to the critical infrastructure protection, the transfer of experience, the development of new models, etc. not just of theoretical matters, but also of practical aspects on the agenda, which ensure the security of supply, logistics, cyber systems, proper cooperation between counterpart institutions, etc. by going further and promoting cooperation.

For the present project, there are **further envisaged activities**:

- Identification of topics of common interest, especially in areas such as international relations, security, cyber, critical infrastructures, climate change, etc.;

- Developing mass media materials, studies, and books on the diversity of countries from the EU and Asia;

- Information exchange platforms, to facilitate joint research endeavors, international, bilateral and multilateral project proposals, and establishing contacts for mutual benefits;

- Initiating international projects, strengthening relations among think-tanks, research institutes, academia, and mass media from the EU and Asia;

- Building sustainable networks of networks in the EU and Asia.

Further suggestions are welcome.