



European Alliance
for Asian Studies

The Role of Area Studies, and Asian Studies, in Europe: The Present, the Future, and How to Get There

A position paper on Asian Studies in the EU

In this position paper we address and suggest the following points:

1. European knowledge actors (academic, cultural) need to engage more proactively and creatively with Asia and Global South partners to mitigate the risk of a new fragmented world order.
2. The need for a sustained and consistent support for the work of Area Studies in Europe, including long-term financial commitment for academic and cultural institutions and programmes operating in, on, and with Asia, and the Global South.
3. Research and educational activities on and in Asian societies by European academics should be carried out on the basis of enhanced collaboration and community building, with Asian and global partners, and amongst European ones.
4. European scholarship on Asian and Global Studies needs to abandon lingering Western-centric biases. Academic Area Studies, and Asian Studies in particular, can play an important role in determining how European societies engage with other regions of the world in a strategy integrating the world's increasing multi-centeredness.
5. Area / Asia Studies in Europe cannot play the strategic role it is deemed to be assigned if all funding mechanisms are time-restricted and if they are only built on competition and division (between individual scholars and institutions) and not on the promotion of collaboration among the different actors.
6. Because of their intrinsic interdisciplinarity, and their close association with world regions, European Area Studies should help position humanistic civic scholarship and its constitutive relevance well beyond traditional academic circles.
7. The strong ties Area Studies institutions have with partners in the Global South should not be harmed by a lack of a EU-wide coordinated policy regarding scientific visas to Europe.

The Geopolitical Context

Recent geopolitical developments and crises (COVID-19 Pandemic, Russo-Ukrainian War, tensions in the Taiwan Strait, conflict Israel-Palestine) each and every time demonstrate how Europe as a global geopolitical player is becoming marginalised. The Ukraine-Russia war in particular has highlighted a decoupling trend among the countries of the Global South, including Latin America, Africa, Middle East, and South & Southeast Asia. Given the critical importance of Asia and the risk of entering another geopolitical order dominated mainly by China and the United States, it is critical that Europe's diverse knowledge actors engage more proactively, and creatively, with Asia, itself taken in all its diversity. These European knowledge actors must also reinforce their engagement with Global South partners, beyond Asia as geography, to mitigate the risk of a new fragmented Cold War-like world order.

Europe's accumulated experience and knowledge, as well as the region's diversity of approaches to Asia and the Global South should enable its knowledge actors to play a crucial role in influencing geopolitical trends within and outside Europe. Taking stock of recent examples of fields such as Soviet/Russian and Arabic studies that were inconsiderately abandoned in the aftermath of the Cold War and rediscovered only in times of crisis, it is crucial for European and state institutions to preserve, extend and utilise these reservoirs of knowledge about, and engagement with Asia, and recognise the critical role Area Studies can play in empowering European societies in the face of a growing multi-polar world. This requires sustained and consistent support for the work of Area Studies, in its different activities and programmes, including long-term financial commitment for institutions operating in, on, and with Asia, in the world. On the contrary, if this engagement with Asian cultures and polities, and related activities of research and education continue to be neglected, we can predict that Europe will be poorly prepared to face new global crises and challenges in the next decades.

The European Alliance for Asian Studies brings together institutions that systematically address the Asian world-region by foregrounding culturally and historically contextualised strategic knowledges and expertise. We can describe their contribution along five functional areas of operation: **Research, Education, Dissemination, Networking, and Capacity building.**

Research

Research in Area Studies – as a collective as well as an individual enterprise – requires environments of intellectual freedom, long-term and continuous institutional commitment, as well as spaces of experimentation and exploration unconstrained by short-term narrow concerns. Area Studies research presupposes the time-consuming acquisition of different languages and contextualised knowledge procurement. Such research therefore cannot develop in an ad-hoc, on-demand context triggered by a sudden crisis.

Current support for Asia-related research in the European academic realm in particular is too often limited to the kind of individualised, competition-based model encountered in academia – this competition-based approach, if seeking to promote merit-based selection processes, also leads to the perpetuation of discrepancies between different European actors, their atomisation, and consequently, an impossibility for them and their supporting institutions to ‘think big’, or ‘outside the box’.

The current system, moreover, is stifled by a systemic division between fundamental versus applied research pursuits. In Asia, moreover, research conducted by European scholars is too often carried out in a one-sided extractive fashion, rather than through lasting collaboration and community building which are the basis of long-term fruitful exchanges with Asian counterparts. At the same time, European collections hold unmatched information on (Asian and Global South) societies that may come to great value for them as they find themselves in reclaiming their identity and their own autonomous narrative: European institutions should be valued by European and national decision-makers as both generators and repositories of Asian knowledge heritage that should be valorised for its ‘cultural diplomatic’ potential to build bridges and cultivate long-term goodwill vis-à-vis Asian societies and their polities.

Transmission and Education

Young Europeans, in particular students, are increasingly interested in Asian languages, cultures, societies and their polities. They are deeply aware of being part of a larger world in which Asia is one of the most active factors of global transformation, a region increasingly connected with other world constituencies such as Africa, North and South-America, the Middle East, Oceania, and the land-mass of EurAsia. Young Europeans engaged in knowledge building in and on Asia are fully aware of the fact that Europe is increasingly peripheral to many of these global connections. European education institutions, including universities, need to better embrace this inter-regional globally-connected reality. In their activities, they must abandon a lingering Western-centric bias as a self-detrimental tendency. Greater resources must be allocated to European academic and educational institutions to encourage and deepen this considerable interest amongst the European youth, notably by facilitating their exposure and collaboration with Asian and Global South counterparts.

In this effort to revamp educational capacities to better match the global needs of their youth, European institutions should encourage ways for universities to reclaim their role as *public service*, by looking at methods to better engage with different segments of societies not normally associated with Academia. The Humanities and Social Sciences’ Area Studies and Asian Studies in particular, for their capacity to critically and wholistically embrace the multi-causal effects of globalisation, can play a critical role in facilitating this necessary transformation — an unavoidable development that will affect all areas of knowledge and every field of academic practice.

Dissemination

The members of the European Alliance for Asian Studies share a common responsibility for the dissemination of the knowledge they generate through their multifaceted activities. In so doing, they have contributed to create a community of Europeans who share a common-yet-diversified interest in Asia. Each member represents a different national historical tradition of engagement with Asia and the rest of the world. The multicultural and multilingual heritages of Europe must be seen as an asset that, put together, embrace multiple connections with Asia and the rest of the world. However, whilst Asia and most of the rest of the world has been forced to acquire Western knowledge, Europe is now falling behind in its capacity to in turn acquire and connect knowledge on and from areas hitherto deemed less capable of universal experience, even though their economic and geopolitical role is now central.

The Alliance aims to address these unbalances through a coordinated strategy amongst its members aimed at seeking to reach out beyond academic circles. Its members have adopted a decentralised communication approach to share global and national-interest contents; open calls for fellowships, conferences, international workshops, and other events and opportunities. It also supports a vigorous debate on the implementation of Open Access, the management of Archive data, and the issue of access to research in general. The Alliance takes advantage of the dissemination tools developed by one of its members, the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), notably its world-wide renowned periodical *The Newsletter* (80,000 subscriptions world-wide), and the large-scale conference-festivals of ICAS and Asia Africa, it co-organises with different partners.

Network and Capacity Building

Network-development and capacity building are other essential missions carried out by the Alliance's members. They transcend disciplinary and geographic boundaries. As part of this effort, the Alliance endeavours to establish ties with Asian diasporic organisations in Europe, and beyond.

Moreover, European Area Studies institutions already entertain strong ties of reciprocity with their partners in Asia and beyond. These ties, however, are often harmed by the lack of an EU-wide coordinated policy on scientific visas, a situation that especially undermines exchanges with partners from the Global South. EU policy on this matter lags far behind the kind of open-door strategy towards scientists as they exist in the UK and the US.

More generally, we deplore an absence of concerted support for Area and Asian Studies on the part of European institutions. In general, Europe lacks a long-term common vision on how to build strong ties with Asian and Global South countries, ties that should match, in the case of Asia, American or Japanese – and soon Chinese – long-standing efforts to support the

development of academic capacities in different parts of Asia and the Global South, and with it, infrastructures to further their interests in these regions. (Cf. the decades-long works of private or autonomous institutions like Ford or Rockefeller foundations, or the Japan and Toyota foundations, for instance). If similar initiatives have been carried out on the part of some European member countries, they often remain narrowly nation-centered and dependent, with little possibilities to accompany a broader collaborative approach, at least amongst European actors. Worse, a rare example of successful inter-European collaboration, the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS), co-established by Scandinavian countries in the 1960s, whose working mission effectively transcended narrow national agendas towards Asia, is now being abandoned by its original supporting states.

The issues of environmental and social sustainability cut across all functions featured in the activities of the Alliance members. Climate change profoundly affects Asian and European communities and Europe. It cuts through national and sub-regional divisions. This is an area where we believe large-scale collaborative exchange projects between Asia and Europe could help to significantly re-position Europe and European Area Studies actors as essential players in the unfolding phenomenon of the global rise of Asia and its consequences in the affirmation of the Global South.

Conclusion

It is critical that both European decision-makers and European public opinions become better informed on, and engaged with Asia-in-the World, especially with what is now called the Global South. Policies and political choices must reflect an awareness of the dynamics at work, in Asian societies, but also in relation to other world regions, including Europe. Through its numerous Area Studies academic and cultural institutions, the continent's capacity to engage with its Asian partners may also influence the continent's ability to position itself with regard to the Global South. A sustained decrease in support for knowledge on, and engagement with Asia, and the lack of a coherent vision on Europe's role vis-à-vis the Global South, can only deepen our continent's marginalisation and disconnect when it comes to global crises, undermining further its geopolitical, economic, and scientific standing for many years to come.

It is urgent for European institutions to value the accumulated knowledge, experience, and interactions its different Area Studies academic members entertain with Asia. A smart strategy would be for Europe to better harness these resources by supporting and promoting a vast pool of expertises on and with Asia and the region's global connections. The mobilization of Area Studies European capacities should help enhance the continent's reactivity on many global issues, from global warming and migration to pandemics and economic downturns. Only by enhancing Area Studies multipronged expertises in its midst can Europe effectively enact a tangible knowledge-based cultural diplomacy, one that suits the kind of fluidity and volatility now required in the current multi-centered world order.

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