

Vineet Thakur

University of Leiden.

E-mail:

v.thakur@hum.leidenuniv.nl

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38140/aa.v56i2.8964>

ISSN:0587-2405

e-ISSN: 2415-0479

Acta Academica •
2024 56(2): 184-188

© Creative Commons
With Attribution (CC-BY)



An 'Asian' perspective on Europe and its wars

So often as an Indian academic working in Europe, I am asked to speak on an 'Asian perspective on Europe'. The willingness to make sense of how 'Asians think about us' has peaked in Europe in what is now feared to be the 'Asian' century. Every time I am asked this, I cannot but remember another question that the Iranian American scholar Hamad Dabashi asked a few years ago: 'Can non-Europeans think?'

Dabashi was making a point about political philosophy, where all great thinkers are assumed to be Western. Non-western thinkers do not enter any lists of great thinkers. In the field that I come from, 'International Relations', there is a well-cited book called *Fifty Key International Relations Thinkers* (Griffiths et al. 2009). Guess how many of them are non-western, or non-white: zero!

In a way, 'what do Asians think about Europe' is a historical reversal of the usual framing. Earlier, the question would always be: what does Europe or the West think about country/region A, B and C? The assumption has always been that Western/European perspective is more consequentialist since the relationship between the West and the Rest has been one of a giver and a taker. The West is the font of ideas and products, while Asia or Global South provides empirics and raw material. Europe is always the benchmark for what is liberal, enlightened, good and every other polity is measured against those parameters. In fact, Europe is the parameter. Think about how we theorise and evaluate regionalism. Whether any form of regionalism is successful or not

¹ Hamid Dabashi, 'Can Non-Europeans Think?', Al Jazeera online, 15 Jan 2013, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2013/1/15/can-non-europeans-think>, accessed 11 December 2024.

is measured on the basis of how perfectly it has mimicked Europe. Hence, the terms of engagement of a dialogue in which two equals participate has never really existed.

Asia is, obviously, not a monolith. Essentialist tropes on 'Asian' ideas have in the past led to odious outcomes. Pan-Asianism, led by Japan in the interwar period, was one such idea which led to the Great East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere during the World War II. These notions are based on some sense of exceptionalism which is connected to a certain innate Asianness. But to anyone who has actually met people from Asia and not their stereotypes, Asians are not innately somewhat more spiritual, or hardworking, or good at mathematics! There is vast plurality among Asian cultures; and cultures themselves are not cast in stone – they are products of specific histories, and they also change with history.

However, one still can suggest that there is some commonality of Asian perspective on Europe, that is informed by one common set of experiences: which relate to colonialism and racism, that Asian countries suffered from the West (broadly, Western Europe, the United States, and, not to forget, the Russian Empire). It is this history of colonialism that shapes a certain common perspective on Europe.

I often provide the following illustration to my students on how Europe looks to Asians through the lens of colonialism compared to how Europe imagines itself.

8 May 1945 is widely hailed and commemorated as Victory Day, or Europe Day, in Europe. This day marks the end of World War II. The same day there were massacres in two Algerian towns called Setif and Guelma. Algerians, who had fought with France in the War against Germany in which between 15,000 to 45,000 Algerians died, were indiscriminately killed by French forces and settlers (estimates vary between 6,000 and 45,000). Hence, the day war ended in Europe, France started another in Algeria. In the East, at the end of the War, European colonisers – France in Indochina, the Netherlands in Indonesia – went back to shamelessly 'reclaim' their colonies and launched more wars. European colonial countries just went back to business of colonisation after proclaiming that the Second World War was about freedom.

The end of World War II is closely tied to a moral viewpoint on how wars should end. The trial courts and the international legal architecture built after the War was made to ensure that the aggressor pays. For instance, Germany had to pay 280 million marks to Netherlands for war time occupation. But when this victim, the Netherlands, went and launched a war in Indonesia, it was the victim that had to pay 4.5 billion guilders for its own freedom (in today's currency this would be 13.9 billion USD). This money impoverished an already poor Indonesia

but financed post-war reconstruction in the Netherlands. To re-emphasize: Indonesia, a country that had been completely ruined by colonialism, and which saw the fourth largest civilian deaths during the World War II (nearly 4 million), and another 100,000 deaths in the subsequent war with the Netherlands, had to pay 4.5 billion guilders for its own freedom.

So, while Europe thinks of itself as the land of liberty and freedom, there are good reasons for why those claims are looked at with deep suspicion elsewhere in Asia and Africa.

A skeptic here might of course say: but didn't that happen 75 years ago? Why should that matter in 2025?

Let me frame my answer in the form of another query: can Europeans say the same about the holocaust? Can one say that the Holocaust was long time ago? Or that the Jewish communities are very prosperous now and that they even have a state to themselves, so why do they continue to hold on that grudge? That would be, undeniably, a preposterous question to ask.

The Holocaust obviously has shaped post-War Europe like no other event. As several scholars have argued, it is the central reference point for a European identity: it is a negative apotheosis of European history: EU itself is a project of that NEVERAGAIN philosophy.

The question Asians would ask is: what role does 'Colonialism' play in that identity? Was colonialism a lesser crime? Nearly 800,000 Algerians died in the war against France. Why does colonialism not evoke the same revulsion? If the answer is that the holocaust is important because Europe was directly involved in the victimization of Jews – but so was colonialism? And it is here one realizes that not only is colonialism seen as something far less formative for European identity, it is hardly even seen as a crime. In fact, it is appalling that we continue to have debates about whether colonialism was actually good for the colonized: they got civilization, Christianity, and railways, after all. Would one have the same debates about the holocaust?

And it is here that European duplicity becomes so much more apparent for those who experienced colonialism. Perhaps no other event in contemporary history has signified this stark duplicity more than Israel's war on Gaza, where European politicians have weaponized the memory of the holocaust to abet and enable a brutal colonization and what is possibly a genocide. On the one hand, European countries stand united against Russia and in favour of Ukrainian self-

determination, appealing to sentiments of freedom and liberty, whereas on the other, the lives and liberty and freedom of Palestinians are utterly dispensable. It is so infuriating for any human, not least any non-white person, to see that European politicians do not want to acknowledge even the humanity of Palestinians: the only Palestinian identity they are ready to acknowledge is that of Hamas.

The war on Gaza is then an affirmation of what Asians have always suspected, although to be fair they had started becoming less susceptible of. At least in the last three decades or so, as Europe became less of a security actor and more of an economic actor in most of Asia, and as the United States took on the mantle of being the imperial power, Europe's self-fashioning of itself as a normative power has had some currency. But Gaza has been a stark reminder of how all of that is merely a chimera.

My sense is that we may be reaching a time, when perhaps for the first time in 500 years, Asians, for good or bad, may not be thinking about Europe as much. Although two of the current wars are happening at the margins of Europe, the primary geopolitical theater has moved to the Asia-Pacific. That is a region in which Europe is automatically less relevant. In 2022, the Indian foreign minister S. Jaishankar, who I personally find very disagreeable, said something which captures this sentiment. As Europeans kept trying to shame India into not buying gas from Russia and kept badgering India for financing Russia's war, he said: 'Europeans has to grow out of mindset that its problems are world's problems'.²

And in a way, he was right. Why should India not tend to its own needs? Nearly 45 per cent of India's population (620 million people) – equal to 81 per cent of Europe's population – lives under 3.65 dollar a day at PPP.³ For Germany and Netherlands, that figure is: zero percent! So, the hike in oil prices affected Indians much worse, especially the poor: it is a question of life and death, and not just bread and butter.

But at the same time, there is a broader geopolitical game at play. With India's relations with China deteriorating, India had considered the warming friendship between China and Russia with some alarm. Russia has in the past been India's all-weather friend, and the country cannot afford Russia's accelerated drift towards China in this geopolitical game that is playing out in Asia. Europe does

2 PTI, 'Europe Has to Grow Out of Mindset That Its Problems Are World's Problems': Jaishankar', The Wire, 3 June 2022, available at <https://thewire.in/government/europe-has-to-grow-out-of-mindset-that-its-problems-are-worlds-problems-jaishankar>, accessed 11 December 2024.

3 Source: World Bank: <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>

not have much skin in this game, and so its perspective is becoming less and less relevant. As Europeans sit around the table and prognosticate on the war in Ukraine becoming global – even becoming a World War III,⁴ to Asia it appears like a provincial matter.

So, to circle back to where we started: what do Asians think of Europe. Perhaps in the long run, they may not be thinking of Europe – which is not necessarily a bad thing!

Vineet Thakur is a university lecturer at Leiden University in the Netherlands. He has previously worked at Ambedkar University (Delhi), University of Johannesburg and SOAS London. He was a fellow at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, Amsterdam, and Smuts Visiting Fellow at Cambridge University. His research focuses on postcolonial International Relations (IR), disciplinary histories of IR and diplomatic histories of India and South Africa.

References

- GRIFFITHS M, ROACH SC AND SCOTT SOLOMON M. 2009. *Fifty key thinkers in international relations* 2nd ed. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203886878>

4 Sumi Somaskanda & Holly Honderich, 'Ukraine warns of WW3 ahead of long-stalled Congress aid vote', BBC News, 18 April 2024, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68840261>, accessed on 11 December 2024