

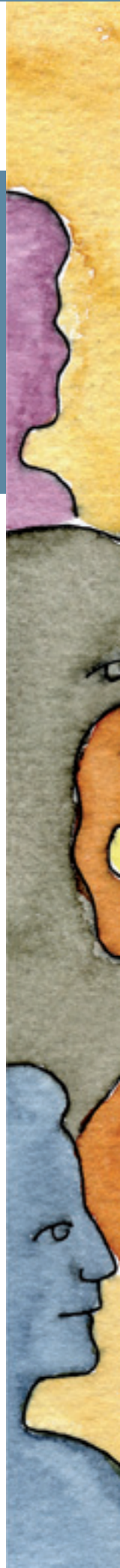


# Perspectives on the Role of the EU: A Study of Asian Stakeholders' Opinions from Six Countries

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# Perspectives on the Role of the EU: A Study of Asian Stakeholders' Opinions from Six Countries

## Abstract

This study, undertaken in 2006–07 and first published here, provides a cross-national look to inform our understanding of European Union (EU) external perceptions and raises issues related to EU public diplomacy. EU relations with Asia appear to have been rediscovered in the EU's external relations agenda. Whether examined on a country-by-country basis or through inter-regionalism, European and Asian links have increasingly come to reflect a growing interdependence at the trade level. Yet, while economic ties have grown closer, political, developmental, humanitarian and environmental ties have not reflected such a degree of convergence. This unidimensionality has retarded a more balanced perspective on the nature of EU involvement from emerging countries.

From the perspective of Asian elites, the findings provide a counterpoint to the economic and political reality of each bilateral relationship with the EU. The EU is a 'significant other' for each Asian partner studied, but typically the EU's importance was undervalued and misperceptions held. When a country's policy choices are constructed from imprecise or inaccurate information, the risk of making sub-optimal decisions increases. Good policy choices require informed decision-makers.

## Summary of Recommendations

EU public diplomacy efforts should consider traditional elite targets (civil society, business, political and media stakeholders) as well as academic and other intellectual elites in the region.

The EU should not presume that local political elites place any priority on the EU or are even that well-informed about the nature of the Union and its policy scope. Regular, targeted and proactive public diplomacy initiatives need to be developed for cross-party 'Europe friendship' groups as well as parliamentary foreign relations committees. To complement this, a greater utilization of EU-funded academic centres is recommended. Delegations should help facilitate local EU research centres to liaise with local politicians and officials engaged in foreign affairs. And, strengthen sister-city links and insist the heads of delegations 'press the flesh', as Asian culture highly values personal relations.

**The EU should not presume that Asian political elites place any priority on the EU or are even that well-informed about the nature of the Union and its policy scope. Regular, targeted and proactive public diplomacy initiatives need to be developed for cross-party 'Europe friendship' groups as well as parliamentary foreign relations committees.**

For business elites, EU officers should hold regular briefings on locally relevant EU policy developments, in order to provide businesspeople with a single point of contact and a fixed calendar of events. Provide hard-copy and electronic information on a range of EU actions/regulations/standards. Officers must demonstrate better awareness of local issues, and provide more information on the commonalities between the partners. Open information bureaus in significant business/political centres, not just capital cities.

To bolster dialogue with civil society elites, EU external relations officers should not talk 'at' but 'with' local civil society representatives.

For suggestions on reaching media elites, please see the companion paper, 'An Unrecognized Global Authority: Asian Views of the EU's Development and Humanitarian Role'.

## Introduction

The last decade witnessed the rediscovery of EU relations with Asia in the EU's external relations agenda. The 1977 agreement between the European Commission and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is the longest lasting formal relationship that Europe has with any part of the world, and since 1996 this link has been enhanced through the Asia-Europe Meeting process. However, the intensity of the region-to-region dialogue historically has been modest. The shadow of China's and Japan's efforts to remain special partners reflect the priority for bilateralism to dominate relations with Europe. But, whether examined on a country-by-country basis or through inter-regionalism, European and Asian links reflect a growing interdependence at the trade level.

Yet, while economic ties have grown closer, political, development, humanitarian, social and environmental ties have not. How the EU is understood in the region and how its role is perceived remains largely unknown, with few empirical studies of EU perceptions in general (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2006; Gallup International 2007; GARNET 1007; Lucarelli 2007), of Asian perceptions in particular (Tsuruoka 2006; Chaban et al. 2006; Shambaugh et al. 2007; Lisbonne-de Vergeron 2006; 2007; Holland et al. 2007; Chaban and Kauffmann 2007; Chaban and Holland 2008), let alone specific elite stakeholder views of the EU's emerging international role (Murray 1999, 2002a,b; EuropeAid 2003, 2007; Elgström 2006; Elgström and Smith 2006; Chaban et al. 2006).

Data for this analysis was generated by the first stage of the transnational multidisciplinary study 'The EU through the Eyes of Asia', involving six locations in Asia: Japan, South Korea, mainland China, Special Administrative Region (SAR) Hong Kong, Singapore and Thailand.<sup>1</sup> In each location, a comprehensive study was undertaken of media imagery of the EU in the daily nationwide news; analysis of public

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<sup>1</sup> Supported by Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), <<http://www.asef.org>>. The second phase of the project involved three more Asian countries—Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines (study completed in 2008). The data of the second stage of the project is currently under analysis.

opinion; and finally, a survey of the EU views held by national decision- and policy-makers (further referred to as elites). The study of EU perceptions among Asian elites – the focus of this paper – involved representatives of political, business, civil society and media circles. Political elites were identified as primary political actors (current members of national parliaments representing different parties and holding various ministerial portfolios, as well as government officials). Business respondents included members of business networks (national business roundtables, chambers of commerce, etc.), as well as leading exporters to the EU. Civil society interviewees represented non-governmental organizations (NGO) and non-state actors (both of international and national standing). Finally, media elites included leading journalists (based locally and in Europe) and media ‘gatekeepers’ (editors-in-chief, editors of various editions and television news directors) of the media outlets that had been identified as national leaders in EU news coverage.

Considering the extensive number of lines for comparing the data, this paper focuses on one particular approach – the selection of specific cases and comparing them across all four circles (188 interviews in total, see the Appendix for discussion of methodological considerations) and all selected locations. Three cases have been chosen for comparative analysis: first, elite perceptions of the EU’s international roles; second, perceptions of the EU as an important domestic partner for the six locations studied; and third, elite spontaneous images associated with the notion of the EU. This paper aims to explore the most typical (stereotypical) and frequent images and perceptions of the EU among Asian movers and shakers. Its objective is to provide a focused summary of the qualitatively enriched information and diverse opinions surveyed and outline the major trends that describe how the EU was understood as a global actor and domestic partner in the Asian region by those who were in positions to make decisions having major consequences in the region. The stereotyping process was understood as a cognitive necessity that arises in response to humans’ limited capacities for information processing – a simplified categorization of the world that exists in the long-term memory and is resistant to sudden environmental pressures. Stereotypes were viewed as a concept held by one social group about another which are used frequently to justify certain discriminatory behaviours.

With this research focus in mind this analysis does not provide detailed information correlating personal background or political affiliation of each of the 188 individual interviewees with their perceptions of the EU. Instead, analysis provides a comparative account for the most *typical* imagery, which is considered vital in terms of understanding the relationships between the six Asian locations and the EU.

### **Case 1: Elite Perceptions of the EU’s International Roles**

The two research questions directing this case study were ‘Is the EU seen as a global power?’ and ‘Is the EU recognized as an international leader?’ Findings from this 2006 survey in six Asian locations confirmed those from earlier surveys in 2004 (interviews with international negotiating elites) and in 2005 (interviews with the Asia-Pacific elites in Australia, New Zealand and Thailand) (Chaban et al. 2006). Across very different locations and elite circles, the majority of the respondents reported that while the EU was perceived to be a significant source of power and influence in the world, it was not necessarily seen as a leader in the global political arena. Perceptions of the EU’s human rights and democracy promotion role were beginning to become evident.

**When asked what kind of power the EU was associated with, Asian elites most frequently named the EU's economic power – a single market uniting strong and wealthy countries.**

When asked what kind of power the EU was associated with, the respondents most frequently named the EU's *economic power* – a single market uniting strong and wealthy countries. In support of this perception, interviewed elites repeatedly listed the EU's large population, land mass, prosperity, trade volume, industrial leadership, strong single currency and economic unity. All these factors were seen as increasing the

EU's bargaining power in global economic issues, making the Union one of the three major trading blocs (along with North America and Asia). Predictably, this particular perception dominated business sector responses, yet it was also the most visible in all the other three circles across all six locations. Importantly, however, perceptions of the EU as an economic power were not always benign. Indeed, there was a common vision that the EU's bargaining power was able to hurt other nations. For example, a Korean interviewee noticed, that out of the three trading 'giants', only the EU has a common trade policy against non-member countries. It was also commented that the Union possesses the authority to impose its economic regime globally – a Hong Kong respondent argued that external manufacturers must now 'obey' EU strict regulations if they want to enter the Union's market.

Major differences were observed across borders when respondents commented on the EU's capacities as a normative, cultural, diplomatic or military power. For example, among the Japanese interviewees, the EU's competence as a *normative power* (see Manners and Whitman 2002, 2006) was the second most popular answer after the image of the EU as an economic power. Frequent references to the EU's capability in establishing and standardizing values on environmental policies were made in Japan. A vision of the EU as a normative power was also noticeable in Thai interviews, this time highlighting the EU's normative authority in the area of international human rights. In contrast, normative aspects were mentioned only occasionally in other locations.

Respondents in the two ASEAN nations, Singapore and Thailand, believed that the EU's power was also attributable to the strong *cultural* presence of its major member countries (the United Kingdom, France and Germany). These perceptions were more prominent among the Singaporean media elites, who stressed visions of the EU as a 'soft power' (Duchene 1972), while such a view was more typical of all categories in the Thai sample. As one Thai politician noted:

'...Europe is the number one in civilizations. To stroll along a street in Madrid, Venice or Paris is the best [experience]. The lifestyle of Sweden, Denmark and Norway is the best. Freedom in the Netherlands is the best. French cutlery is the best. German efficiency is the best...'

**The EU as a diplomatic power was highlighted most by political respondents in South Korea and mainland China, who recognized Europe's historical contribution to global diplomatic relations. Yet the EU was not credited by respondents for strong diplomatic efficacy, but rather individual European countries were regarded as the key players.**

However, this cultural element was sometimes seen as reflecting snobbism and Eurocentrism – one media interviewee from Singapore noted that there are '[many] Western orchestras in China, but relatively few Chinese orchestras in Europe'! The other four locations in the study did not stress this particular dimension of the EU's capacities.

The EU as a *diplomatic power* was highlighted the most by political respondents in South Korea and mainland

China, who recognized Europe's historical contribution to the development of global diplomatic relations (as far back as the Treaty of Westphalia) as well as the EU's current contribution to the development of international norms and values (such as improving human rights and advancing world peace). Yet, taken as a whole, the EU was not credited by respondents for strong diplomatic efficacy, but rather individual European countries were regarded as the key players. The United Kingdom, France and Germany were repeatedly mentioned.

In all six locations, all elites were unanimous in their views that the EU could not be recognized as a *military* power. A Singaporean businessperson summed up this universal perception: '[the EU] is too diverse to be a military power'. This assumption of the EU as a fragmented internal entity contributed to an overall impression that the EU was not seen as an *international leader*, especially when it came to 'hard' power actions involving 'flexing' military muscles. Clearly, the 21st-century emergence of European Security and Defence Policy missions and the establishment of EU battlegroups had yet to permeate even elite opinion (and this lack of knowledge reflected the general absence of EU military news items in Asian media). Commonly, respondents voiced perceptions of the EU as a collection of separate member states that provided a relatively low level of political support for the more centralized EU organization. This disparity poses both internal and external challenges for the EU as a possible leader. Internally, diverse cultures and different national interests were seen to supersede the attempts to develop political integration within the EU. Externally, multiple voices and conflicting positions were perceived to underline the EU's several high-profile failures as an international leader. Interviewees across different locations often listed these failures, including the EU's inability to speak with single voice in its Middle East policies, a limited influence in North East Asia, the failure to present a single position on the United States (US)-led war in Iraq, the absence of unified leadership or will in addressing the Balkan problems in the 1990s, the presumed absence of an independent and 'ready-to-act' army and the lack of a commander-in-chief to make final decisions.

This dominant theme among Asian elites of the EU as an immature international leader corresponds to what first Hill (1993) and most recently Tsuruoka (2006) termed an 'expectations gap', a low awareness of the EU's capabilities to undertake international political leadership, despite the Union's huge potential and significant achievements. Importantly, however, this study found that the perception of the EU's competencies as an international leader had subtle local nuances. The majority of respondents in China and South Korea did not see the EU as a political leader 'yet', indicating perhaps that it might become such a leader in the future in the eyes of these respective elites. Many Korean respondents recognized some European countries (the United Kingdom, France and Germany) as world-renowned political leaders. Interestingly, the EU's 'big three' were perceived to act visibly and decisively on the world stage in contrast to the EU's lower profile. Some Hong Kong interviewees believed that the EU served as an 'occasional' international political leader, providing a counterbalance to American views, taking the lead in areas in which the United States of America (USA) was not doing a 'good job' or was disinterested (such as fighting global warming and promoting multilateral cooperation). Yet, most Hong

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**The dominant theme among Asian elites of the EU as an immature international leader is termed an 'expectations gap', a low awareness of the EU's capabilities to undertake international political leadership, despite the Union's huge potential and significant achievements.**

Kong respondents refused to afford the EU the role of an international political leader, specifically mentioning the EU's 2004 enlargement as a source of greater diversity and incoherence in the European Common Foreign Security Policy.

**The EU is recognized as a pioneer in peace making, conflict resolution, fighting global warming and as an advocate for human rights.**

**Interviewees from Japan noted the ability and potential of the EU to influence world politics, set the global agenda and facilitate the implementation of various international policies.**

Perspectives from Singapore, Thailand and Japan constituted an alternative image of the EU as an international leader. Most of the political interviewees in Singapore, for example, considered the EU to already be strong in certain areas of international relations, successfully addressing issues with the USA, Russia and China. The EU was recognized as a pioneer in peace making, conflict resolution, fighting global warming and as an advocate for human rights. Singaporean elites also saw the EU to be largely that of a 'broker' rather than 'change leader', as well as a possible model of integration for ASEAN. In Japan, 18 of the 32 elites

(56 per cent of the sample, the highest of any location) considered the EU a recognized international political leader in environmental and economic policies, a view also shared by many respondents in Thailand. Interviewees from Japan also noted the ability and potential of the EU to influence world politics, set the global agenda and facilitate the implementation of various international policies.

## **Case 2: The EU's Perceived Importance**

In this case study, respondents were asked to identify the importance of the EU to their own locality, both in the present and in the future. First, the respondents rated EU perceived importance using a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 was not important at all and 5 was very important). With exception of Japan and Thailand, the ratings of the EU's present-day importance in all the other locations oscillated between 3.5 and 4. The Japanese elites rated the EU on average higher, from 4 to 4.5. Thai respondents, on the other hand, rated the EU the lowest, averaging between 3 and 3.5. Significantly, in five locations, the perceived importance of the EU was on average expected to slightly increase in the future. The notable exception was Thailand, where the already low perceived importance was thought likely to further decrease (from 3.1 in the present to 2.9 in the future). Interestingly, in all locations the newsmakers and media 'gatekeepers' were the least generous and optimistic – they assigned the EU either the lower rankings on average, or anticipated a future decline in the Union's importance.

With one important exception, when compared with other global players, the EU was not generally regarded by Asian elites as among the three most 'significant others', despite the EU being either the first, second or third most important trading partner for all the locations in this study. The USA, East Asia (China and Japan) and Asia as a whole led in the perception of importance, with the USA being a top choice for the respondents in Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Thailand. Predictably, China led in perceptions of importance for the Hong Kong respondents. ASEAN entered the Thai elite perception after the USA, China and Japan. In contrast to other locations, interviewees in mainland China assigned the EU a much higher importance – it was seen sometimes as 'No. 1' or as 'No. 2', following the USA. This particular elite perception in mainland China echoed the findings from a 2006 public opinion survey conducted in the six Asian locations where the EU was assigned the highest future



rating of importance by the Chinese public (Holland et al. 2007). Remarkably, the survey found that the general public in the other five locations all de-prioritized the EU's future importance. The EU was placed fourth in Korea and only sixth in the other locations (*Ibid.*) In line with these public perceptions, the Asian elites in the majority saw the EU to be geographically, historically, militarily and politically distant from 'their' region, or as a Thai political respondent commented:

'The question is that if we're short of the things they have, can we survive, from the perspective of national interest? Yes, we can. That's why I give a low number. ...It's like we live in our little home. Our neighbour is a millionaire whose house is big and posh. We don't have to be like them and we don't have to know them, right? The case would be different if the millionaire owns the road which we have to pass every day. If they block the road, we will suffer, so we have to make acquaintances with them. As long as they mind their own business and we our own, it's okay. That's the way the EU and Thailand is'.

However, for Thailand the EU was ranked as more important than Russia (although Russia is geographically closer than the EU, ideologically and economically it was seen as more distant).

Although the ratings were very similar across borders, the meanings assigned to the concept of *importance* were different in each case. For example, the Japanese respondents saw Asia as a whole (and China in particular) to be of greater importance than the EU: Asia was seen as an 'arena' in which Japan played a key role and China was viewed as a 'competitor' in this arena. In contrast, the EU was seen as a foreign 'partner'. The Korean elites also contextualized the EU's importance *vis-à-vis* the growing importance of China. Yet, the signifiers were different in this case. It was noted that China's growing importance required increasing efforts by Korea, resulting in a withdrawal of some resources from the traditionally emphasized US–Korean relationship, and even further from the already limited resources for the EU–Korean relationship. The recent emergence of EU–Korean free trade negotiations since 2007 may well positively impact of this earlier elite position found in the survey.

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The elites further elaborated their perceptions of the EU's importance through a series of questions where they commented on the state of relations with their own country (or SAR in the case of Hong Kong). The prevailing majority of respondents recognized that EU relations with their respective locations were either stable or improving. Importantly, in some responses a relatively neutral notion of 'stability' was contrasted with a more negative notion of 'stagnation'. For example, in Hong Kong, many interviewees could not identify any major issue which would strengthen or worsen the relationship. Moreover, when asked 'Which issues in Hong Kong–EU current relations have the most impact on Hong Kong?' a majority of respondents could not think of any of such issue. The notion of a stagnating relationship was particularly prominent in the Japanese case. The EU–Japanese relationship was not considered problematic by respondents, yet, it was not seen as improving positively. Thus, many respondents were under the impression that the relationship was stagnating.

Since the respondents had the most difficulties identifying the EU's current status as an international political leader, the study focused on the respondents' recommendations for future content for any political dialogue with the EU. Significantly, each location came up with distinct prioritized sets of relevant issues. In the Korean case, diversifying its foreign relations and, in this context, increasing attention to the EU was seen as a healthy balance to an over-represented and over-emphasized relationship with the USA. As a Korean NGO interviewee stated:

**The EU was seen by the Korean elites as an example of a successful model of peaceful integration, the practice of which could be studied and adapted.**

'Let's say there is a ship. If the ship is lopsided, there are high chances to be overthrown. Like the lopsided ship, Korea is not balanced at all. The country is leaning towards the US[A] simply too much. In this context, it is likely to be overthrown. What we need is some balancing... The EU can be that'.

The EU was also mentioned in relation to North Korea. Formally, North Korean issues are addressed by six countries – the two Koreas, the USA, China, Japan and Russia. The EU is not a partner of the 'Six-Party' talks, yet it was hoped that the EU could still play an important role in influencing North Korea's nuclear programme on the peninsula (similar to the Union's role in relation to Iran). Finally, the EU was seen by the Korean elites as an example of a successful model of peaceful integration, the practice of which could be studied and adapted. As one NGO interviewee noted:

'The most economically powerful country in the EU, Germany, has the same historical experiences. And the country was successfully unified. There are lots of things we can learn from that [unification] process'.

In Japan, trade and environment were the two most frequently mentioned issues to focus on in an official dialogue with the EU. Respondents demonstrated a high awareness of specific EU environment-related regulations, such as Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals; Restriction of Hazardous Substances; and the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions scheme, and their impacts on Japan. However, the next most noted response in Japan was 'nothing special' (a response also prominent in Hong Kong and in mainland China). Such a response probably adds to the image of 'stagnation in relations' and the attitude of 'indifference' noted above.

Political recommendations for the Singaporean Government's dealings with the EU included: sharing counter-terrorism information; continuing dialogue on maritime security; and contesting the EU on human rights issues (Myanmar in ASEAN in particular). The most frequent recommendations to the government of mainland China included closely following the EU's ongoing enlargements, negotiating the EU's arms sales embargo, and continuing the dialogue on human rights.

Moving away from economic and political relations, a number of other issues repeatedly surfaced on the list of recommendations: to pursue a dialogue with the EU on culture, education, technology exchange, science, environment and climate change. Importantly, across the six locations, the EU was perceived as a positive and strong leader in environmental areas, or as one Singaporean civil society actor noted, 'They take the Kyoto Protocol very seriously'. Environmental protection was considered to be an area for substantial collaboration between the EU and all the locations in the study. It

was also repeatedly mentioned that Asians could learn more about environmental concerns from the EU and deal better with climate change through cooperative collaborations.

Irrespective of nationality, most respondents believed that the EU was getting stronger. The two most frequent arguments were the ever-enlarging EU and an increasingly stronger euro. When questioned about enlargement, respondents were asked to discuss their perceptions of recent EU enlargements in terms of risks and opportunities for their locales. Interviewees in all six locations envisioned mainly economic opportunities for their countries: the EU was seen as a bigger and easier market to access with unified rules and regulations and greater travel convenience for businesspeople. This economic unity was perceived to be instrumental in reducing costs and time in dealing with the EU, as well as in 'offer[ing] a more predictable and less risky operating environment', according to a politician from Singapore. Korean respondents specifically expressed their interest in the manufacturing facilities in the eastern member states with their cheaper labour. A rare political perspective on enlargement opportunities entered the pool of Singaporean perceptions – a local civil society representative noted that EU expansion was considered likely to hasten greater ASEAN integration.

Overall there was a strong tendency toward opportunities, rather than risks, in the perceptions of enlargement everywhere. This was a dominant perception in mainland China (almost 50 per cent of the respondents). Also, remarkably, in Japan, none of the interviewees felt that there were only risks associated with the EU's expansions. Where it was felt that there were risks, these were balanced by opportunities. However, 1 in 6 of the Japanese and 1 in 5 of the Chinese interviewed felt that there were neither risks nor opportunities for their countries associated with the enlargement. In Hong Kong, 43 per cent of respondents insisted that the entry of the new countries into the EU would lead to no real impact for Hong Kong. Similarly, some interviewees in Singapore saw the EU enlargement as irrelevant for Singapore: 'the enlargement won't affect us much because they are still a distance away. What really affects us ... [is] not really EU but what happens in Asia'. Arguably, such a perception, detected to various degrees in all six locations, may again point to the attitude of indifference towards the EU. Internal developments in Europe are seen by Asian decision- and policy-makers as being of little consequence for their part of the world.

The perception of the euro was virtually consensual – it was seen as a healthy, desirable and credible alternative to the US dollar. Again, a continuum of views was registered in this instance. For some, the euro was already a successful and powerful currency. For example, a Singaporean political interviewee noted that the euro was 'amazingly strong' and his colleague from Hong Kong echoed this by saying that Europeans 'have made good strides in the strengthening of the euro compared to the dollar'. The birth of the euro was seen as widening the choice for investment, as well as a new medium for trade. As a key global currency, the euro was also considered to be very beneficial for the world as a reserve currency. The consistent and prudent policies of the European Central Bank were often praised. For

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others, the euro was not yet seen as a superior currency to the US dollar – ‘at this point in time, the euro is not important because the US\$ is still the almighty’ (as argued by Singaporean civil society member). However, respondents frequently mentioned a potential for the euro to grow and establish itself further. For example, a Korean civil society representative believed that ‘...money is valued by the countries or regions that print and use the currency. In this sense, the euro has a lot of potential to grow since the EU’s influences are growing.’ Arguably, with these interviews being conducted in 2007, and with the ongoing crisis of the US currency in 2008–09, the perception of the euro versus the dollar may have further swung towards the former.

### Case 3: Spontaneous (Stereotypical) Images of the EU

Respondents were asked about the three immediate associations that came to their mind when they heard the words ‘European Union’. Individual answers were grouped and categorized and a summary of the four most frequently mentioned categories are presented in Table 1.

**A limited number of themes were prioritized by the respondents in their spontaneous associations with the EU. Several major images of the EU surfaced: the EU as a synonym for European political unity and ongoing integration; the EU as an economic power; the EU as an entity with its own internationally recognized symbols (EU flag, euro); and the EU as a place with cultural, historical and civilizational cachet.**

**Thai interviewees also underlined the typical images of the EU in terms of political power, yet they focused on the EU as a balance to US hegemony and an agent for democratic developments in the world (international human rights in particular). However, this comment was the exception to the rule: few considered the EU as reflecting democracy and human rights principles.**

Revealingly, a limited number of themes were prioritized by the respondents in their spontaneous associations with the EU. Several major images of the EU surfaced: the EU as a synonym for European political unity and ongoing integration; the EU as an economic power; the EU as an entity with its own internationally recognized symbols (EU flag, euro); and the EU as a place with cultural, historical and civilizational cachet. Occasionally, other associations surfaced. Japanese respondents, for example, specifically highlighted the EU’s normative capacity in the area of environmental protection. Singaporean respondents, in contrast to interviewees in other locations, frequently saw the EU as still being divided with difficulties becoming a unified bloc. As one of the representatives of the civil society group noted, ‘There are so many countries involved so it is difficult to generalize about the EU as it is very diverse’. Correspondingly, the spontaneous image of the EU reflected the presence of prominent individual countries. Mainland China elites specifically recognized the EU politically as a world power, as well as a regional authority and a union of strong powers. Thai interviewees also underlined the typical images of the EU in terms of political power, yet they focused on the EU as a balance to US hegemony and

an agent for democratic developments in the world (international human rights in particular). However, this comment was the exception to the rule: few considered the EU as reflecting democracy and human rights principles.

### Discussion

This paper has presented a comparative analysis of three case studies dealing with national elite opinion about the EU in six Asian locations – first, perceptions of the EU in terms of its international roles; second, images of the EU as an important (or

**Table 1: Most Frequently Mentioned Spontaneous Images of the EU**

Rank	Japan	South Korea	Singapore	Hong Kong	Mainland China	Thailand
1	European unity/ Integration	Euro	European unity/ Integration	Euro	Economic power/ Economic unity	Civilization/ Culture/ Art/ Standards of living
2	European governance/ Policy environment	Tradition/ History/ Culture	Economic power	EU flag	Euro	Economic power/ Economic unity
3	Euro	EU flag	United Kingdom, France and Germany	European unity/ Integration	World & Regional power/ Unity of strong powers	Political actor (balance to the USA, democracy)
4	Values/ Diversity/ Culture	Economic bloc	Culture/ Tradition	Civilization/ Diversity	History/ Tradition/ Civilization/ Culture	European unity/ Integration

irrelevant) international counterpart; and finally, spontaneous stereotypical images of the EU. Taking into account the diversity of samples in this study (Japan, South Korea, mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Thailand; and political, business, media and civil society elites), the important question that emerges is whether there is a common perspective of the EU held by Asian policy- and decision-makers? Despite limitations (only six locations were studied in the ASEAN region, with only 188 elite representatives being interviewed), this study provides a systematic, detailed and methodologically rigorous glimpse into contemporary Asian perceptions of the EU.

The first significant observation was that in the eyes of Asia's elites, the EU's present and future importance was often considered lagging behind that of other international partners in the region, namely, the USA, North East Asia (more specifically, China and Japan), and Asia as a whole. Persistent priorities assigned to the USA in the eyes of Asian respondents were explained by a Japanese political interviewee, who believed that the 'present era [is] *Pax Americana*', and under such circumstances, the EU's importance will take time to become truly recognized. Interestingly, mainland China's respondents featured slightly different reactions. Sometimes, the EU was seen as the most important partner to China, sometimes as the second most important after the USA. Intriguingly, there was a general consensus among the majority of the interviewed elites that the EU's importance will grow in the future, although not to the extent to overshadow the current leading top three players. Somewhat more puzzling was the discovery that media elites in the region were the least generous in identifying the EU's present-day importance and the least optimistic in assigning the EU's future importance.

**There was a general consensus among the majority of the interviewed elites that the EU's importance will grow in the future, although not to the extent to overshadow the current leading top three players.**

**Predictably, the EU was universally recognized as an economic power. Occasionally cultural, normative and diplomatic aspects of its power were recognized, with each location assigning different priorities to these.**

Predictably, the EU was universally recognized as an economic power. Occasionally cultural, normative and diplomatic aspects of its power were recognized, with each location assigning different priorities to these. A perception prevailed that the EU is not a major political or military power. The views of those who insisted that the EU lacked political capabilities can be summed up by a Singaporean civil society respondent, who described the EU's respective efforts as 'boxing well below its weight'. Related to this vision, the Union was not assigned the role of an international leader. Rather, the EU was seen to be a political actor of some importance and visibility on the international scene. Most frequently and typically, the EU was cast into a role of a global economic 'giant'. Beyond its economic role, the EU was most regularly seen as a divided and military-impooverished entity unable to be a lead performer on the international stage. Such a view would no doubt further frustrate the supporters of the failed Constitutional and Lisbon Treaties as it underlines the necessity for an effective European External Action Service as well as an EU foreign minister. Whether these changes would have been sufficient to change the external perceptions of the EU's political and military limitations is debateable: what is more certain is that without them Asia's elites are likely to continue to question the EU's 'hard power' credibility. This vision of the EU being 'not a leader yet' corresponds to the findings of Tsuruoka's reverse 'expectation gap'.

**A perception prevailed that the EU is not a major political or military power. The EU was not assigned the role of an international leader. Rather, it was seen to be a political actor of some importance and visibility on the international scene. Most frequently and typically, the EU was cast into a role of a global economic 'giant'.**

Although seen only as a 'superpower-in-waiting' at present, the EU, as an international leader, was credited with greater potential in the future. The EU's growing strength (as perceived through ongoing enlargement and a strongly performing euro) was not seen as threatening. The EU's potential was regarded as more of an opportunity than a risk by the Asian interviewees in the study. An evolving and stronger EU was also seen as a solid basis through which the EU could become a widely recognized influential international leader, possibly counterbalancing the USA in the future. Remarkably, EU leadership in the environmental sphere was comprehensively recognized by the elites across the six Asian locations, and the EU's profile has the potential to increase significantly in Asia due to the EU's commitments in this area. However, the EU's role as an international human rights advocate was only marginally recognized, and the EU's role as a global development 'champion' was totally absent.

**Beyond its economic role, the EU was most regularly seen as a divided and military-impooverished entity unable to be a lead performer on the international stage. However, an evolving and stronger EU was also seen as a solid basis through which the EU could become a widely recognized influential international leader, possibly counterbalancing the USA in the future. The EU's potential was regarded as more of an opportunity than a risk.**

Stereotypical images of the EU included several prominent trends, including ongoing integration and economic power. Also, such positively charged themes as European culture, history, tradition, civilization and standard of living were repeatedly mentioned in association with the EU. This prominence of positive perceptions detected among the Asian elites were somewhat undermined by a number of responses which indicated a growing feeling of 'indifference' towards Europe and the EU, despite the Union's economic weight and growing political presence in the world. A continuing negative perception was

a persistent recognition of divisions between the member states and the dominance of national interests of a select few countries, instead of a supranational consensus. This was seen as undermining the EU's political prowess in the world. The final negative perception was a concern that the EU, an economic 'heavyweight', might use some of its economic bargaining power at the expense of other countries in the world.

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## Conclusions

European Commission delegations in Asia are essential tools for contributing to the perceptions of the EU held by Asian elites. This study suggests that despite the specific funding for public diplomacy found in all delegation budget lines, the impact on perceptions appears at best limited and skewed. Typically, this is an area where the Commission either relies on global policy studies of a general nature or on ad hoc and methodologically dubious selective studies. For example, the limited nature of the 2007 'EuropeAid'-funded attempt to find out the views of ASEAN gatekeepers towards the EU illustrated both the Commission's interest in this topic as well as the difficulties of gaining robust and reliable data. We contend that the study presented here provides a rare scientifically validated analysis of what has generally been missing in commentaries on EU perceptions. If read in conjunction with the media and public opinion studies that support the wider project from which this case study is drawn, the contribution to EU public diplomacy is profound.

The study of perceptions in relation to the EU's external policies is relatively new and can take many forms – through media representations, public discourse or through key stakeholders. While limited, a number of empirical studies have been reported that examine the perception of the EU in an Asian-Pacific context. This article addresses two related themes: an attempt to provide an empirical assessment of the EU in the eyes of Asian elites; and it contributes to this new and growing literature on EU external perceptions in general. This multi-country case study is conceptually located within the 'capabilities-expectations gap' approach first articulated by Chris Hill as a framework for accessing the anticipated roles of the EU with the actual perceptions of key practitioners.

As suggested earlier, EU relations with Asia appear to have been rediscovered in the EU's external relations agenda. From the perspective of Asian elites, the findings provide an interesting counterpoint to the economic and political reality of each bilateral relationship with the EU. The EU is a 'significant other' for each Asian partner studied, but typically the EU's importance was undervalued and misperceptions held. When a country's policy choices are constructed from imprecise or inaccurate information the probability of making sub-optimal decisions increases. Good policy choices require informed decision-makers.

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**The data analyzed here suggests a realistic potential for an enhanced EU-Asian dialogue and for elites to be an important component in that process.**

be an important component in that process. The exact shape of that relationship remains uncertain. The prominence of the EU-ASEAN inter-regionalism may be increasingly overshadowed by the EU's bilateral 'strategic partnership' with the Chinese. Further analyses of how elite perceptions of the EU evolve will be both a practical as well as an academic necessity.

## **Policy Recommendations**

EU public diplomacy efforts should consider traditional 'elite' targets (civil society, business, political and media stakeholders) as well as academic and other intellectual elites in the region. (For recommendations on how to enhance public diplomacy with media elites, please see the companion paper, 'An Unrecognized Global Authority: Asian Views of the EU's Development and Humanitarian Role'.)

### ***For Political Elites***

A clear message from the examined elites was the necessity to increase the regularity and intensity of contacts by European Commission officials and delegation staff with local parliaments. Simply leaving such contacts to any visiting European Parliament members is not sufficient: regular, targeted and proactive public diplomacy initiatives need to be developed for cross-party 'Europe friendship' groups and their equivalents as well as parliamentary foreign relations committees. To complement this, greater use of EU-funded academic centres is recommended. Delegations should help facilitate local EU research centres to liaise with local politicians and officials engaged in foreign affairs. In this way these local policy-shapers can benefit from high-quality analytical insights into the EU's competencies and relations with a locality in Asia. The EU should not presume that local political elites place any priority on the EU or are even that well-informed about the nature of the Union and its policy scope. In addition, delegations as well as Brussels-based country desk officers should consider co-writing policy reports with local EU research centres.

A greater use and promotion of sister-city local government links should be developed. Building on this, individual-based initiatives could be devised such as introducing EU scholarships for local students to study the EU in Europe. Finally, personal relations are of great importance across most Asian cultures and these may take a relatively long period to become established and effective. Consequently, the role of the head of delegation becomes crucial and the criteria for appointment should acknowledge the necessity for any delegation head to be a proactive and visible presence.

### ***For Business Elites***

First, a series of regular briefing seminars updating locally relevant EU policy developments and EU-local relations should be organized, targeting major national business organizations in order to provide businesspeople with a single point of contact and a fixed calendar of events to schedule into their activities. Second, provide hard-copy and electronic news and information on a range of EU actions/regulations/standards, particularly in the technology and environment sectors where the Union is regarded as a regulatory authority. Third, business elites called for EU external relations officers to demonstrate better awareness of local issues and greater possession of location-specific information, as well as the ability to provide more information on the commonalities



between the partners (such as common strategies on tackling environmental/energy crises, a shared World Trade Organization stance, etc.). Finally, European Commission delegations need to open information bureaux not only in the capital cities, but also in other significant business/political centres.

### **For Civil Society Elites**

Civil society by its very nature is diverse and changing and this requires greater investment in developing relations. While challenging, this group of opinion-shapers should not be given a lower priority in the EU's public diplomacy efforts. To bolster dialogue, revisit the communication style to ensure that EU external relations officers do not talk 'at' but 'with' local civil society representatives. This was a frequently noted problem. With the growing involvement of China externally, the EU is certainly no longer the only option for engagement and needs to reflect upon this in its style of public diplomacy.

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Professor Holland is internationally recognized for his work on the EU Development Policy and Common Foreign Security Policy. He led the 'EU External Perceptions' project, which was named by the EU's Directorate-General for Education and Culture as one of the 'Top 20 Jean Monnet Success Stories'. His fellowships include the Jean Monnet Fellow, European University Institute, 1987; Alexander von Humboldt Fellow, Freiburg, Germany, 1992-94; Rockefeller Bellagio (Italy) Fellow, 2000; and Jean Monnet Chair of European Integration and International Relations, 2002–06.

The author of some 20 books, Professor Holland studied in the United Kingdom and received his undergraduate degree at the University of Exeter, his graduate degree at the University of Kent and his doctoral degree at the University of Exeter.

## Appendix A

### 1. Methodology of the Perceptions Studies

The primary goals of the research of the European Union (EU) images and perceptions were to identify and measure how the EU is interpreted and understood in non-European countries and to address those missing elements in the studies of the EU's international identity through collecting a pioneering and unique systematic empirical dataset on EU external perceptions. A common methodology has been applied in each of the 18 countries so far examined.

In every location, the project has investigated media imagery of the EU, as well as the perceptions of the Union among the general public and national stakeholders. Since 2002, more than 14,000 pieces of news have been analyzed; 5,600 members of the general public interviewed in national surveys; and 400 Asia-Pacific national decision- and policy-makers have been interviewed face-to-face. Crucially, in every location local researchers were responsible for conducting the data collection in the appropriate local languages and according to cross-culturally sensitive protocols. This highly systematic methodology was rigorously applied and implemented across all locations, and involved numerous research training workshops held throughout the region to ensure reliability and consistency in data collection and collation.

### 2. The Three Elements: Media, Public Opinion and Elites

#### *The Media Analysis*

For the print media, EU reporting and imagery in the selected most popular prestigious newspapers were investigated (Japan, South Korea, mainland China, Special Administrative Region (SAR) Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia); for the visual media, six prime-time television news bulletins on national state-owned channels were monitored (in South Korea, mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia) (see Table 1).

The methodology of content analysis is used in the analyses, allowing for both qualitative and quantitative interpretive insights into the media texts. The underlying conceptual approach is consistent with that suggested by Manners and Whitman (1998: 246): 'a position from which to commence conceptualizing the global role of the European Union as being greater than the sum of its parts'. Respectively, the key terms under observation and used to delimit the media dataset were 'the European Union/EU', as well as 'Council of Europe', 'European Central Bank/ECB', 'European Commission/EC', 'European Parliament/EP' and 'European Court of Justice/ECJ' and their officials. Consistent with the focus of this analysis (and of the wider project) – the Union as a communal actor in the national arena – member states appear in the media text datasets *only* when connected to an EU news story and not when the member state was reported in its own right without any EU connection.<sup>13</sup> The media analysis explores the visibility and framing of the EU in news reporting across various frames: political, economic, social, environmental and developmental.

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<sup>13</sup> The methodology of the study assessed whether the EU and its institutions and officials were reported as a major actor with a member state(s) framed as a secondary or minor actor; or if the member state was a central focus of the report, and the EU and its communal actors were a minor reference.

**Table 1: 'Popular' newspapers and television prime-time news bulletins monitored <sup>2</sup>**

	Location	'Popular' press	Circulation	TV newscast	Viewers	Period
2006	Mainland China	<i>People's Daily</i>	3 000 000 <sup>4</sup>	<i>CCTV</i>	34 per cent <sup>5</sup>	Jan–Dec 06
	Hong Kong SAR	<i>Oriental Daily</i>	530 000 <sup>6</sup>	<i>TVB Jade</i>	86 per cent <sup>7</sup>	Jan–Dec 06
	Japan	<i>Yomiuri</i>	10 032 441 <sup>8</sup>			Jul–Dec 06
	South Korea	<i>Chosun Daily</i>	2 300 000 <sup>9</sup>	<i>KBS</i>	35 000 000 <sup>10</sup>	Jan–Dec 06
	Singapore	<i>Lianhe Zaobao</i>	200 000 <sup>11</sup>	<i>Channel 8</i>	N/A	Jan–Dec 06
	Thailand	<i>Thai Rath</i>	1 000 000 <sup>12</sup>	<i>ITV</i>	N/A	Jan–Dec 06
	Indonesia	<i>Kompas</i>	500 000 <sup>13</sup>	<i>TVRI</i>	N/A	Jan–Jun 08

<sup>3</sup> Press data from Vietnam and the Philippines is currently under analysis as is the television data from Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines. In the Pacific, television data was not collected as there are no comparable indigenous prime-time news programmes.

<sup>4</sup> Source: People's Daily Online, <<http://202.99.23.198/about/aboutus.html>>, accessed 11 December 2008

<sup>5</sup> CCTV occupies a market share of 34 per cent nationally according to 2005 statistics from its official Web site, <<http://www.cctv.com/profile/intro/index.shtml>>, accessed 12 December 2008

<sup>6</sup> Source: Oriental Daily official Web site, <[http://opg.com.hk/tc/product\\_newspapers.html](http://opg.com.hk/tc/product_newspapers.html)>, accessed 11 December 2008

<sup>7</sup> TVB Jade occupies 86 per cent of the TV audience in Hong Kong. Source: <[http://i1.web.vip.hk1.tvb.com/www.tvb.com/affairs/faq/interim/2008/pdf/c0511\\_080827\\_ir.pdf](http://i1.web.vip.hk1.tvb.com/www.tvb.com/affairs/faq/interim/2008/pdf/c0511_080827_ir.pdf)>, accessed 12 December 2008

<sup>8</sup> Source: Japan Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC) 'Newspaper Publisher Report' <[http://adv.yomiuri.co.jp/mdata/english/2008\\_2010/newspaper1.html](http://adv.yomiuri.co.jp/mdata/english/2008_2010/newspaper1.html)>, accessed 11 December 2008

<sup>9</sup> Source: <<http://www.mondonewspapers.com/circulation/worldtop100.html>>, accessed 11 December 2008

<sup>10</sup> In 2007 KBS has a worldwide viewership of 35 million according to its 2007–08 annual report: <[http://english.kbs.co.kr/about/annual/KBS\\_Annual\\_Report\\_2008.pdf](http://english.kbs.co.kr/about/annual/KBS_Annual_Report_2008.pdf)>, accessed 12 December 2008

<sup>11</sup> Source: *Lianhe Zaobao* official Web site, <<http://www.zaobao.com.sg/pages/lianhe.html>>, accessed 11 December 2008

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<sup>13</sup> Source: 'Kompas daily replaces its editor in chief', *Jakarta Post*, 12 December 2008, <<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2008/02/12/039kompas039-daily-replaces-its-editor-chief.html>>, accessed 12 December 2008

### **Public Opinion Survey Analysis**

For public opinion, the perceptions of the EU held by the general publics of Japan, South Korea, mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Thailand are reported (representing 400 respondents in each case, with identical questionnaires translated into appropriate local languages) (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Public opinion surveys** <sup>14</sup>

<b>Location</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Sample size</b>	<b>Method</b>
Hong Kong SAR	November 2006	400	Internet
Japan	November 2006	400	Internet
South Korea	November 2006	400	Internet
Singapore	November 2006	400	Internet
Thailand	November 2006	400	Internet
Mainland China	November 2006	400	Internet

The analyses presented in these papers focus on respondents' answers to just one particular question (from a total of 24 questions asked): 'What three thoughts come to your mind when you hear the words "the European Union"?' This question is argued to reveal (stereo)typical visions of the Union. Special attention has been paid to the spontaneous associations that relate to the images of the EU's emerging role in international affairs.

### **Stakeholder Interviews Analysis**

A target of 32 interviews in each location was considered to be sufficient to obtain reliable representative views. The size and profile of the sample and the nature of the data contemplated reinforced the choice of the data-collection strategy – individual, in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured on-record interviews – which facilitated a more personal and flexible approach, respectful of respondents' privacy and status. It also enhanced the response rate significantly. Each interview included 18 questions, and lasted 45 minutes on average. The issues targeted included professional involvement and personal contacts with the EU; perceptions of the EU (images and evaluations) and its importance to their locality (present and future); the state of the relationship and the bilateral main issues (present and future); the role of the local European Commission delegations; the EU and Asia-Europe Meeting process; and finally, access to EU news and information.

Interviews were conducted in 2007 in the respective local languages, Thai, Korean, Japanese, Cantonese and Mandarin (transcribed into English) and English. Due to challenging political circumstance in Thailand (the 2006–08 coup), the rate of responses was low. To guarantee a higher representation of Thai elite opinions, the database has

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<sup>4</sup> Data from Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia is currently being collected.

incorporated results from a previous series of elite interviews in Thailand (Chaban and Holland 2008), conducted in 2004 which followed the same methodology and employed the same questionnaires. In total, this article analyses responses from 188 Asian elites (Table 3). Both content analysis and qualitative interpretative methodology were employed in analyzing the interview data. A comparative approach was chosen as the study's dominant framework as it is widely acknowledged to 'open up new and rather exciting subjects for investigation' (Lazarsfeld 1976: 487).

**Table 3: Number of interviews per location**

Total	Japan	South Korea	Singapore	Thailand	China	Hong Kong
188	32	27	32	34 (14 in 2007) (20 in 2004)	32	31