Assuming Superpower Status? Evolving Asian Perceptions of the EU

Assumer le statut de Superpuissance ? L’évolution des perceptions de l’UE en Asie

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Introduction

The EU faces a global relevance challenge. Its unique attributes (consensus, soft-power, rule of law and regionalism) are often difficult for outsiders to interpret or value appropriately: too often these characteristics are seen to imply complexity, ineffectiveness and delay. Only since the turn of the 21st century has Europe begun to ponder quite how it is viewed externally and what the consequences of its international image might be (both for domestic European reasons as well as for influencing international issues). The 2009 Lisbon Treaty reflected this new awareness, with the launch of the European External Action Service and the creation of the post of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy the most explicit response. Relevant literature have underlined the past missed opportunity to investigate “not just why and how the EU behaves differently because of its different configuration...” but “if such a distinctiveness is likely to feed back into the EU’s internal and international credibility, and possibly also into the self-identification of the Europeans as a political group” (Lucarelli, 2007, p. 268). The absence of any empirical evidence upon which to evaluate these ideas was also noted as was the unique exception of the pioneering “research team focusing on perceptions in the Asia-Pacific region” (Ibid., p. 258), led by the authors of this paper.
The ever-changing EU external images and perceptions are fascinating cognitive puzzles. Yet, importantly, they also have palpable real-life repercussions. The EU sees itself as one of the affluent and benevolent ‘poles’ in the on-going mutlilpolar redesign of the modern world (Renard and Biscop 2012), and the one who emanates its international influence by diffusing certain values and norms, a ‘superpower-in-waiting’ – ‘an international governing body able to enforce its will upon the most powerful states ... in an era when the world is divided politically into these states and their satellites’ (Merriam Webster Dictionary, on line). Are these self-visions in sync with the views on the EU among other participants in increasingly less Eurocentric international life? Has the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty brought any positive changes to the EU’s images and solidified its international reception as a powerful, effective and able international actor? Has the sovereign euro debt crisis ‘damaged’ the image of the EU as a credible, prosperous and reliable partner? Indeed, the innovations of the Lisbon Treaty – the appointment of the EU’s first High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the launch of the European External Action Service– suggested that the EU was serious to become “…a major actor in global affairs” (Emerson et. al., 2011). Yet, in the eyes of international opinion (EUobserver, 2011), the EU’s credibility as able ‘soft power’ and a well-governed entity was jeopardised by the sovereign euro debt crisis which coincided with the post-Lisbon innovations.

This newly discovered interest in the perceptions of the post-Lisbon EU’s global role among academics and practitioners is welcome and timely. This analysis continues to be ground-breaking and complements the limited existing empirical assessment of how the EU is perceived in Asia. Our interest towards Asia is contextualised within a major shift in international relations in the early twenty-first century: “a transition to a very different world – a world in which Asia is likely to become a key player” (Renard & de Swielande, 2011, 4). Conceptualizing Asia as “the young and dynamic” region and contrasting it with “the old and stagnating Europe” (ibid.), the authors argue that “in this period of transition, it is unsettling to observe how inward-looking Europe has become” (ibid.). Aware of this challenge, European Council President Herman Van Rompuy called upon EU leaders on the eve of the October 2010 Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) to re-focus on Asia as a strategic partner who plays an increasingly important role in international organisations such as G20 and in international negotiations on trade and the environment (as cited in Taylor 2010). However, recently some have warned that for many in Asia, “the EU is becoming irrelevant and unimportant”, mainly due to the Union’s “weak political imprint in Asia” (Islam 2010).

To test this claim, this paper will examine how the Asian reputable news media represent the EU and how this is translated into the images and perceptions held by citizens in Asia towards the Union. The aim is to highlight some of the broad themes that emerge through a comparative analysis. How do EU images in Asia differ before and during the sovereign debt crisis? To what extent did the different Asian societies and media share similar perceptions of the EU? To what extent could regional differences be identified? And, what factors helped differentiate ‘Asian’ responses? The focus for comparison is on the EU seen as a political, economic, social, environmental and developmental actor. The findings debate the EU’s expectations and capabilities in Asia. This debate reflects on the hypothesis of ‘capability-expectations gap’ (Hill 1993) (namely, the gap that exists between the excessive expectations placed on the EU from both inside and outside the Union and the insufficient capability assigned to the EU by its members that renders it...
unable to match these expectations). Later, this concept was elaborated on and reconceptualised as an ‘expectations deficit’, which appears when expectations for the EU in the international arena remain low despite the growing weight and influence of the EU as an international actor (Tsuruoka 2008).

This analysis uses data from an ongoing since 2002 trans-national comparative research project ‘The EU in the Eyes of Asia–Pacific: Media, Public and Elite Perceptions’ (Holland et al 2007, Chaban & Holland 2008; Chaban et al 2009, Holland & Chaban 2010) involving 20 Asia-Pacific nations. This analysis explores EU pre- and circa-crisis imagery in public opinion and news media in seven Asian locations: Japan, South Korea, China, India, Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia. The analysis monitors EU daily coverage by 21 reputable national papers and seven television channels, as well as assesses EU perceptions among the general public from the seven locations: 4,800 Asian respondents (400 respondents per location) in the ‘pre-crisis’ stage of investigation, and 7,000 respondents (1,000 respondents per location) in the 2012 survey. This paper starts with discussion of the theoretical background of this inquiry into the interaction of media, media message and public understanding. It then describes research methods and proceeds to compare EU images in the seven Asian locations in media and public opinion before and during the sovereign euro debt crisis. In its discussion, the paper uses its empirical findings to test ‘capability-expectations gap’ hypothesis and explore the role of external images in widening/or mending that gap.

**Theoretical considerations**

Grounding this inquiry in the common knowledge paradigm of political communication studies (Neuman et al., 1992), this paper focuses on how political information is organized and structured in the public discourses of leading print and television media in selected Asian locations, and how that information compares with public perceptions in these countries. The use of common knowledge theoretical paradigm emphasizes a “more balanced inquiry into the interaction of media, media message, and public understanding” (ibid., p. 16), and calls for “the systematic integration of multiple methodologies” (ibid., p. 19) (in our case, content analysis of media texts and public opinion surveys). This research assumes that subtle but nevertheless powerful effects of mass media may lie in their selection and presentation of certain issues (and nonpresentation of the other issues) (ibid.).

Combination of the two abilities of media – to raise an issue’s visibility (studied in classical agenda-setting) (McCombs and Shaw 1972) and to frame this issues in a particular way (studied in cognitive linguistics and critical discourse analysis) – allows this paper to assess which EU-related events, actors and issues become news for the Asian public, how much volume and intensity this information is granted by the local newsmakers, and how the EU is reported. While there is no agreement on definitions or operationalisations of the concept of framing (Adam, 2010, p. 6), either in communication studies or in the wider field of social science, this research follows literature which differentiates between media and audience frames (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999; Neuman et al., 1992). The former interpretation is concerned with selection, organisation and emphasis of information that is featured in the news. A such, the concept of media frames is applicable to both news as a product (choices of language and repetition of certain story schemas that organize and frame reality in distinctive ways), as well as news as a process.
(the act in which “journalists emphasize certain aspects of a news event and downplay others” (Fahmy and Kim, 2008, p. 445), “organizing a news story, thematically, stylistically and factually, to convey a specific story line” (Lee et al., 2006, p. 502), in order to provide information and guidance for the public). The latter perspective – audience frame – deals with how the news information is processed and comprehended. In this case, the audience frame is defined as a schema of interpretations that enables individuals to perceive, organize and make sense of incoming information.

Applying the concept of framing to both media and individuals, this study interprets content analysis of EU news in terms of identifying “common patterns in how the news is framed” (De Vreese 2001, p. 108). It is seen as an “indispensable step” and an “important prerequisite for the study of effects of news frame” (ibid.). The study shares a view that “the frame provides more than a simple position or argument about an issue” (Aarøe, 2011, p. 209), because the frame also “spell[s] out the essence of the problem,” gives meaning to the issue, and suggests how the issue should be thought about and understood (Nelson & Kinder, 1996, p. 1057). With media framings of international counterparts arguably possessing a stronger effect on public opinion on foreign issues (Galtung & Ruge 1965; Wanta et al. 2004), the mass media is assigned here a special role in the formation of public perceptions by providing the public “with a new vocabulary of motives for the purpose of accounting for or rationalising the policies and actions of the government” (Movahedi, 1985, p. 20). It is argued that primed patterns of media visibility and framing are more likely to correlate with particular visions of the foreign counterparts including their perceived importance to the nation in question (however this paper would like to reiterate that the perceived importance is not the direct function of the public’s exposure to media, but to a complex combination of many other factors of which media is one).

**Methodology**

The EU’s imagery is traced in public opinion and news media in seven Asian locations: Japan, South Korea, India, China, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. Daily coverage of the EU and its institutions is monitored in 21 leading dailies and seven television channels (Table 1). In each location, four media outlets were monitored daily and in all sections: a primetime news bulletin on a television channel with the highest rating and a nationwide outreach; a reputable national daily newspaper with the highest national circulation; a business daily targeting specialized audiences possibly involved in business dealings with the EU; and (for comparative purposes) an English-language newspaper read by educated locals who wish to profess their skills in English, foreigners wishing to learn about the locations and expatriates residing in the country.  

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L’Espace Politique, 19 | 2013-1
To enter the media sample, a news story had to reference the ‘European Union/EU’, its institutions (EC, EP, ECB or ECJ), and/or ‘ASEM’ at least once, even briefly. The research was explicitly EU focused; consequently, items that were about individual Member States without any EU reference were not included in the database. The overall sample from seven Asian countries (pre- and circa-crisis samples) constituted 13,928 news items. Out of those, 13,569 articles were located in the leading newspapers and 359 items were found on the prime-time television news.

The media study in this analysis was grounded in the tenets of content and discourse analysis theories, as well as cross-national comparative media research combining quantitative and qualitative measures. The visibility of the EU representations was assessed in this study using two categories – volume (calculated for comparative purposes in monthly averages) and degree of centrality which measures the intensity of EU representation in the reportage (minor, secondary or major) (Kevin 2003). Framing of the news was assessed in terms of leading themes (the EU as a political, economic, social, environmental and developmental actor) and evaluation (positive, neutral, and negative).

The public opinion samples featured 2.8000 members of the general public in the region in the ‘pre-crisis’ phase (400 respondents in each location, margin of error ±4.9%) and 7,000 respondents in the latest 2012 phase (1,000 respondents in each location, margin of error ±2.5%). Each sample was stratified by age (18-64), gender and ethnicity for each local population. Both surveys were administered by professional social research companies. Depending on technology penetration in each location, the ‘pre-crisis’ surveys were administered either on line or by telephone. The 2012 survey was administered on line. The identical questionnaires administered in local language used in this study comprised in the ‘pre-crisis’ phase 20 questions (including two open-ended questions, nine structured questions and nine demographics questions). The 2012 phase had a slightly modified questionnaire, with only one open-ended question due to budgetary

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<table>
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<th>Table 1: Media under observation (with readership numbers)</th>
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restrictions. Transcribed verbatims in local languages, responses were subsequently translated into English for comparative purposes. The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS, while the extensive verbatim answers in the open-ended questions were assessed qualitatively. Two questions were comparatively analysed in this study: firstly, about the spontaneous (stereotypical) images which come to respondents’ minds when they hear the words “The European Union” (open-ended question); and secondly, about the ranking of the most important international counterparts for their country (closed-ended question).

The relatively small sample size means that the survey results need to be interpreted only as indicative of general trends: certainly no direct causality between media effects and public opinion is being drawn.

Comparative results: main findings

Visibility

Figures 1 and 2 present the monthly averages for each media outlet across seven Asian locations before and during the euro debt crisis. Given these figures represent 26 leading media outlets in the ‘pre-crisis’ study and 28 in the ‘circa-crisis’ study, the extent of EU coverage appeared limited overall. The most striking finding was for television. The EU was virtually invisible on the Asian television news (even during the dramatic unfolding of the crisis in 2011). Moreover, the data, where it existed, was dominated by China (EU reportages appearing roughly 12 times a month in 2006 and 2011). Elsewhere on the most popular national Asian prime-time broadcasts, the EU was never mentioned more than four times a month.

The ‘pre-crisis’ levels of EU coverage in the popular prestigious press were at comparatively similar, if low, levels for China, Singapore, South Korea and Japan with under an average of two items a day appearing in these most widely read papers. In striking contrast, in India, Thailand and Malaysia, the popular prestigious press rarely covered the EU. Predictably, there was more EU affairs covered in 2011 -- the euro debt crisis did raise the profile of the Union in the reputable press in Asia. The most voluminous reportage was in Japan and China (99 and 71 items per month respectively in the three observed dailies). Yet, once again the Thai and Indian press were not putting the spotlight of attention on the EU (28 and 25 items per month on average respectively). The most dramatic change was observed in South Korea where the combined monthly average in the thee observed press outlets fell from 76 to 34, and from 2.5 to 1.3 items on television (a peculiar situation which could be explained by the fact that EU-Korea FTA negotiations which dominated reportage in the past had become a history in 2011, and Korean news media has re-focused on the US-Korea FTA instead).

Consequently, for Asian citizens who rely predominantly on television and the popular press for international news, finding information on the EU is generally difficult with a significant number of people likely to have at best just a passing and obscure understanding of the importance of the EU internationally. If we assume that each county’s influential elites are also likely to be high consumers of both English-language and business dailies, then arguably a more reassuring conclusion may be drawn. However, the overwhelming level of EU reporting in English-language papers in South East Asia also suggests that such readerships may well be expatriate rather than local in nature.
Turning to the business dailies, regional differences are apparent. In both pre- and circa-crisis stages, the EU was found most often in the business dailies in India and North East Asia (except in China). It was also not the case in two out of three South East Asian locations (Singapore and Thailand). In the 2011 study, the priorities have not changed. Business papers were the undisputed leaders in the EU coverage in all but two locations. Once again, the Thai English-language daily and the Chinese popular paper were more attentive to the EU than their respective business counterparts.

In our study, China appears to be an exception. Compared with other locations, the most popular sources of current international information in China (national television prime-time newscast and the most circulated popular paper) carried the most information about the EU, both before and during the crisis. This suggests that the EU’s more prominent presence in the popular news may lead to a more prominent profile in the eyes of the general Chinese news audiences, compared with other populations in the sample.

Figure 1: Overall Distribution of EU news Items across 26 media outlets (monthly average), ‘pre-crisis’

![Graph showing overall distribution of EU news items across 26 media outlets.](image)
The data on visibility is further complemented by the insights into the intensity of EU representation (major, secondary or minor). Importantly, the share of news which featured the EU and its institutions as a main and/or secondary actor has slightly increased across all seven locations (Figures 3 and 4). Yet, in both pre- and circa-crisis samples, minor angle – i.e. when the EU and its institutions are reported in passing mentioned in one or two sentences – dominated. Specifically in 2011, the year which featured not only the reportage of economic woes in Europe but the EU’s reaction to the events of ‘Arab Spring’, the EU was not recognised by the Asian newsmakers as a leading actor worthy to be cast in a major role in the times of crises.

Figure 3: Intensity of EU media representations, pre-crisis.
Overall, the modest level of reporting raises serious issues about the EU’s visibility and identity in Asia: it is hard decisively conclude that the EU has an undisputed and transparent presence. Opaque may be a better description. Paradoxically, the sovereign euro debt crisis raised the EU’s visibility only partially. And if people prefer to access television for international news, the conclusion is even less sanguine and has significant public diplomacy implications.

Framing

The focus on the presence of the EU in Asian media can provide an initial estimate of the broad public exposure and awareness of the EU among Asian citizens before and during the euro debt crisis. The overwhelming description of the EU used in the ‘pre-crisis’ Asian media surveyed characterised the EU in either economic or political terms, with some evidence of a more nuanced EU global role as both a social, environmental and developmental reference point (Figure 5). While the economic importance of the EU was hardly surprising, the emergence of the EU as a recognised political actor in the ‘pre-crisis’ reportage was an interesting development: there was even a suggestion that the traditional criticism of the EU suffering from an “expectations-capability gap” (Hill 1993) in its international relations may need to be rethought. Arguably, this depiction could have indicated a reflection of the shifting external perception of the EU, namely from an inward-oriented civil authority to an internationally visible ‘powerhouse’. Despite subtle differences in the coverage of the EU in the different locations, the Union’s social, environmental and developmental actions had a particular pattern of visibility in a ‘pre-crisis’ Asian news media; namely, limited coverage (very low in the environmental case and extremely low in the developmental frame).

It is noteworthy that the pre-crisis EU was presented in the Asian media as an international political actor. A closer examination of those reports where the EU was presented as a political actor unearthed a significant common perspective: around three-quarters of these news items related to an external view of the EU in the world compared...
with less than one-quarter focused on internal European questions. Overwhelmingly, the EU’s external political action was located in Middle East. The two leading themes for the EU’s internal political actions were EU enlargement (focus on Turkey) and the Constitution/Lisbon Treaty. While the emergence of the EU as a global political actor in the Asian media was a welcome sign of multidimensionality in EU news reporting, as noted already, traditional perceptions had not waned totally, with the EU still presented as primarily an economic actor in almost half of all EU news reports in the monitored Asian media. This general preoccupation with the EU as a mercantilist entity matches the trading realities for all our analysed locations. At worst, the EU was a country’s fourth most important trade partner (Malaysia) and at best first (China) for both imports and exports. Two separate economic themes were clearly apparent: the EU as a trading partner and the EU in relation to business and finance. These two topics combined accounted for over two-thirds of all news stories on the EU as an economic actor.

Two themes in pre-crisis EU social affairs coverage – migration and the EU and EU actions in the field of social legislation, welfare and human rights -- were reported by media in all 12 locations. Three topics – the EU’s role in the Kyoto Protocol, the EU’s attitudes to climate change and the EU’s actions to reduce CO₂ emissions – appeared in the environmental frame across all locations in our study. A scant coverage of EU developmental actions presented three major angles – EU assistance to countries outside Asia, the Union’s aid to neighbours in the region, and the EU’s help to the locality of the media source. In all locations the third angle was the least reported (even in those locations where the EU is among major developmental aid providers).

Media coverage of the EU circa the euro debt crisis demonstrated media’s ‘retreat’ from profiling the EU as an international political actor, as well as a social, environmental and developmental actor (Figure 6). The lion’s share of reports in all types of media surveyed in the seven locations talked about the EU as an economic actor and partner – but this time it was depicted as the one with the major problems. Three economic themes were prominent: the state of the EU’s economy, the EU’s local and global actions in relation to business and finance, and the EU as a trading partner for locality in question. The Middle East remained the main international arena for the EU’s international political actions – this time the reports dealt with the EU’s involvement in the ‘Arab Spring’. The EU’s environmental and developmental actions were practically invisible in the 2011 reportage.
Overall evaluation showed that 75% of the media reportage circa the crisis portrayed the EU from a neutral perspective. Positive perspectives surfaced in 14% of all news items in...
the seven countries. Only 11% of the EU news carried an explicitly negative assessment of
the Union’s actions. In a paradoxical contrast, the pre-crisis ratio of positive vs. negative
EU news constituted 10% vs. 12% respectively. In other words, while neutrality dominated
the reportage in both stages of our research, the EU’s actions before the crisis were
reported from a slightly more negative perspective than a positive one. During the crisis,
the actions of the EU and its institutions were evaluated more positively than negatively.
In addition, the circa-crisis share of positive news was higher than the pre-crisis one and
the increase in negativity was only minimal. This intriguing situation could be explained
by the fact that newsmakers assigned a lot of negative evaluations to the misfortunes and
misgivings of the individual EU Member States, while the EU was presented as an actor
who could offer some solutions.

Public Opinion

25 The most interesting and distinctive comparative findings related to the mental images
respondents had of the notion or concept “the EU”. Respondents were asked “When
thinking about the European Union, what three images/words spring to mind...”. The
most visible concepts associated with the EU remained the same in both phases, yet
the valence of those visions changed.

26 As shown in Table 2, in the ‘pre-crisis’ sample the euro has clearly stamped its identity on
Asian citizens as the leading symbol representing the EU. At this time this image had a
predominantly positive connotation – a healthy and vibrant international currency, a
promising contender to the US dollar and a symbol of advanced integration which
afforded high standards of life to European citizens. As shown in Table 3, images of the EU
at the time of the crisis were once again dominated by the notion of “euro”, yet this time
these dominant visions were mostly negative – depicting the common currency as a
troubled financial project jeopardising the well-being of the European citizens.

27 The second image that emerged in both phases suggested a positive political perspective.
In the ‘pre-crisis’ stage, other than in Thailand, the values and virtues of the process of
European integration – be that preventing war, creating multiculturalism or enhanced
prosperity – were among the top three most cited EU images. In the 2012 study, rather
generic images of “Europe”, “Union” and “EU” (as an acronym spelled in Latin rather
than the native scripts) appeared in all sampled countries. While the recognition of the
Latin-scripted abbreviation could be interpreted as recognition of the ‘EU brand’,
collective notions of “Europe” and “Union” tend to show a spontaneous awareness of an
integrated (at some level) entity. This is an important observation – even in the times of
crisis, external (Asian) observers still see Europe in terms of unity rather than discord.

28 The third theme to emerge in the ‘pre-crisis’ situation was again economic in nature. In
the ‘pre-crisis’ study, it was positive in evaluations: the role of the EU as a commercial
power which managed to secure wealth and prosperity for its people. In contrast, in 2012
the image of “economy” did not carry the same meaning and connotation -- the EU’s
economy was seen as staggering and unwell.

29 The final theme in both stages draws us back to the ‘split personality’ of the EU and the
enduring impact of the nation state. In the ‘pre-crisis’ phase, in four out of seven samples
(Japan, Singapore, Korea and Thailand), respondents also conceptualised the image of the
EU through individual countries. In the 2012 phase, this conceptualisation occurred
among respondents in all seven locations. Looking at all locations, however, perhaps, this
combination of an awareness of ‘common’ EU images as well as recognition of Europe as a conglomerate of individual countries is a realistic and balanced assessment of the current nature of European integration.

Importantly, the positive common themes were more pronounced than those images that emphasised European diversity over unity in the ‘pre-crisis’ phase. The situation became different in 2012 -- while the European integration was still acknowledged from a positive or neutral/matter-of-fact perspective, negative themes were more visible in spontaneous images of the Union. As such, we could present empirical evidence that the sovereign euro debt crisis has indeed ‘damaged’ the image of the EU in Asia.

Table 2: Dominant images of the EU (spontaneous responses) in the ‘pre-crisis’ surveys

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<th>1st</th>
<th>2nd</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>Euro</td>
<td>Enlargement</td>
<td>Union/Integration</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Euro</td>
<td>Union/Integration</td>
<td>Individual countries</td>
<td>Disparities/Unfairness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>Union/Integration</td>
<td>Euro</td>
<td>Individual countries</td>
<td>Exceptionalism/Problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>Sports (football, wrestling, badminton, F1)</td>
<td>Union/Integration</td>
<td>Advancement (esp in technology)</td>
<td>Freedom/democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>Union/Integration</td>
<td>Euro</td>
<td>Economic power</td>
<td>Individual countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>Individual countries</td>
<td>Economic power</td>
<td>Trade</td>
<td>Euro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>Business/Trade</td>
<td>Union/Integration</td>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>Economic Power</td>
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Table 3: Dominant images of the EU (spontaneous responses) in the ‘circa-crisis’ surveys

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Country</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>Euro</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Union</td>
<td>France/ Germany</td>
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<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Euro / UK</td>
<td>Europe</td>
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<td>Japan</td>
<td>Euro</td>
<td>“EU”</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Greece</td>
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<td>S. Korea</td>
<td>Euro</td>
<td>“EU”</td>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Economy</td>
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<td>Europe</td>
<td>Euro</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>Euro</td>
<td>“EU”</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>France</td>
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To fine-tune the spontaneous images of the EU, the respondents from the general public were also asked about the EU’s importance (international and local). Respondents were asked to identify the most important international counterparts to their country and rank them. In both pre- and circa-crisis circumstances, the most important partner for all North East and South Asian locations was the USA, and China was ‘No.1’ for all South-East Asian respondents (Table 4). In both phases, the EU’s rank was on average higher in North East and South Asian samples than in South-East Asian cases. Arguably, the public opinion may reflect on a more engaged and targeted EU policies towards those countries -- China, Japan and India are the Union’s ‘strategic’ partners in the region, and South Korea has just signed an FTA with the EU. Another observation was an increased ranking for the EU in the perceptions of its importance in all cases – with the Chinese public assigning the EU a status of the most important partner. This is an important finding – despite experiencing the on-going crisis (arguably, a short-term obstacle), the EU is still recognised by the general public in the Asian locations to be an important partner (a long-term perspective).
Intrigued by the patterns in the EU’s perceived importance during the crisis, this study has investigated the areas in which the EU is seen as an important partner. In the 2012 survey, trade was named as the top cooperation area for all seven locations and economy was the second most cited cooperation field in all but two countries (India and in South Korea). Collaboration with the EU in science and/or research fields was seen as important in China (3rd place), India (2nd and 4th respectively), Malaysia (3rd and 4th respectively) and Thailand (3rd and 4th respectively). Political issues also entered the list of main cooperation areas: diplomacy in South Korea (2nd place) and Singapore (4th place), prevention of terrorism in India and Singapore (both on the 3rd place), and a more general political dialogue in China (4th place). Interaction with the EU in the cultural domain was stressed by the Japanese and Korean respondents (4th place). Dialogue on environment entered the list only in the case of Japan (3rd place). These findings point to the EU as an able and valuable counterpart to the leading Asian economies. The crisis might be seen as more of an internal development harming Europe inside, yet when it comes to the international (bilateral) perspectives, the EU still seem to matter to Asian players in a variety of ways.

**Discussion and conclusions**

Research presented in this paper took place in two periods. Firstly, it assessed EU external images during the 2006-10 – a unique set of data on EU visibility that was evident in Asia under the Maastricht and Amsterdam provisions as well as before the main outbreaks of the sovereign debt crisis. Secondly, it looked into the 2011-12 media and public opinion data about the post-Lisbon EU affected by the severe economic and financial crises. This provides an important benchmark against which the impact of the post-Lisbon launch of the European External Action Service and new High Representative...
of Foreign and Security Policy may be compared and assessed in one region: Asia. Given
the tremendous diversity within Asia as a region, the number of Asian locations studied
in this chapter is a relatively small sample size from which to make ‘region-scale’
conclusions. Nevertheless, these seven locations represent regional leaders and dynamic
Asian economies providing a significant number of unique results for comparison,
justifying the size of the sample. Cumulatively, the comparative analyses of the media and
public opinion evidence presented here paint a compelling portrait of how Asia perceives
and interprets the EU.

Although different Asian societies offered differential balances and local emphases, the
broader analysis has indicated that in the pre-crisis period, the EU was increasingly being
viewed as a more diverse and multi-faceted actor projecting images of being a political, as
well as (to a lesser degree) social, environmental and developmental actor. Among the
striking pre-crisis findings was a common emerging view of the EU as a global political
actor ‘somewhere else’ in the world. The role of the euro has also emerged as a new
pervasive positive symbol of European identity and integration, although the conflicting
presence of key Member States and perceptions of diversity also coloured and
complicated Asia’s view of the EU. The on-going sovereign euro debt crisis has led
economic external profiles of the EU to once again become dominant, yet they are now
depicted from a different vantage point. In the eyes of Asia, the EU turned from an
‘economic giant and powerhouse’ into a ‘hobbled economic giant’.

Recognizing a diversity in conceptualizations of framing, this study interpreted the
notion of frame as a process which has to “select some aspects of a perceived reality and
make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a
particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment
recommendation” (Entman, 1993, p.52). In this light, the emphasis of Asian reputable
media on economic themes in the Union’s coverage circa the crisis – at the expense of
other EU representations – has reinforced the message of the EU’s “weak political imprint
in Asia” claimed by Shada Islam. This is an important finding – for some critical
observers, the EU’s lack of a “political and security profile in the region” translates to its
lack of definition of intentions in Asia (Tsuruoka, 2011, p. 96). Also significantly, in this
economically-themed reportage, the EU has a minor profile – a framing that suggests the
Union is perhaps absent or ineffective in dealing with the current major economic crisis.
For the Asian newsmakers, the role of the main ‘saviour’ of Europe stays firmly with EU
Member States leaders. Arguably, these frames further contributes to the ‘belittling’ of
the image of the EU as a capable economic and political power within and outside the
Union’s borders.

This research believes that Asian media reflections on the EU’s role in the sovereign debt
crisis continue to support Hill’s “capabilities-expectations gap” hypothesis which was
first articulated two decades earlier. Lisbon inevitably raised expectations of the EU’s self-
articulated ambition to play an effective global role, yet capabilities to achieve that
objective have been impacted by the crisis – for example reduced foreign and defence
budgets as well as a priority given to internal EU issues over external involvement.
Patterns of evaluation and intensity suggest that Asian media have given the Union the
‘benefit of the doubt’ and have been inclined to praise its efforts. The study demonstrated
a low share of negative assessments ascribed to the EU’s actions during the crisis and a
slightly larger share of positively-framed news items. The number of news items which
profiled the EU as major or secondary actor was found to increase over time. As such,
these frames reveal some expectations from Asian opinion-formers that the EU may be the capable one to salvage the European economy. Yet, another common finding was the limited media interest in the EU throughout the region. With the exception of China, the EU is virtually invisible on Asian primetime television news. Moreover, the EU was persistently profiled from a minor angle. These findings suggest that the newsmakers in Asia channelled the view on the EU’s insufficient capability that renders it unable to match existing expectations. In addition, the dominant neutrality of EU representations – while preferable to overtly negative imagery – does not help achieve an overall image that the EU as a capable actor. In the case of a topic like the euro crisis, the EU arguably needs to be seen as an effective actor being able to elicit strong positive and/or negative reactions from external commentators (it means they care). However, the neutrality indicator should be treated with caution here – some of those neutral depictions may point more to cultural and journalistic practices rather than indicate effects/impacts produced by the EU.

The importance of foreign news for the general public perceptions of foreign counterparts has been tested and proven (Wanta et al., 2004). In this regard, the consistency of the categories of spontaneous images of the EU among Asian public could be related to the most visible media images before and after the crisis. The set of stereotypical public visions was found to be limited: the euro, the EU’s economic power, integration/union and EU individual countries. A future investigation of EU images in the region may test if these categories of media images and spontaneous visions of the EU remain the same. Nevertheless, this study already suggests that further theorising and practicing of the EU’s foreign policy and international identity in Asia should prioritise these themes. They seem to be the most easily recognised ‘EU attributes’ in Asia.

Significantly, respondents in seven Asian countries still see the EU’s integration and union in positive (or at least neutral) terms. The study also found out that the EU’s overall positive assessments in news media did not plummet down – the EU’s and its institutions’ efforts to salvage the community seem to be noted by the Asian newsmakers. These findings in a way contradict an argument by a US scholar who noted that the EU is seen outside as “dying – not a dramatic or sudden death, but one so slow and steady”, mainly due to a “renationalization of political life, with countries clawing back the sovereignty they once willingly sacrificed in pursuit of a collective ideal” (Kupchan, 2010). However, the overall negative context surrounding the crisis in Europe did leave an imprint on public opinion – our study demonstrated changing connotations assigned to the identical cognitive categories in the stereotypical visions of the EU. Evidently, the sovereign euro debt crisis did ‘damage’ the EU’s external image.

Another discovery was a regional pattern in perceived importance of the EU after the outbreak of the euro debt crisis – a higher rank (among the top three) in North East Asia (China, South Korea and Japan in our study) and South Asia (India in our case), lower in South East Asia (Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand in this research). Over time, public perceptions of EU importance in China remained high. While many explanatory reasons could be considered in this instance (political, cultural or economic), we argue that irrespective of the crisis the EU’s pro-active treatment of those countries as ‘strategic’ partners (and a key economic partner in the case of South Korea) triggered a higher level of appreciation of the EU among the general public. In contrast, the three South East Asian countries in our sample have a long tradition of dealing with the EU in a region-to-region format (the EU-ASEAN dialogue) which may obscure the EU’s impact on the
bilateral level. Moreover, none of the South East Asian countries in the sample have a status of an EU 'strategic' partner and their respective FTA negotiations with the EU are only in the initial stages. This type of information could be used by the EEAS practitioners dealing with Asia to fine-tune their respective dialogues in the sub-regions of Asia.

Importantly, despite economic challenges in Europe, trade and economy were seen as the main cooperation areas with the EU for all locations in our study. These were the dimensions emphasised by the news media as well. The EU is still seen as an international actor who has something to offer in these areas, as well as in science and research. Political and cultural dialogues were seen as peripheral, and, tellingly, the EU’s reputation in the field of environmental cooperation mattered only in one case, Japan. These findings seem to indicate that in the eyes of Asia, the EU still possesses a sufficient potential to remain relevant and capable in certain areas (specifically, trade/economy and science/research). As such, study and practice of the EU’s interface with Asia could look closer at the enhancement of EU global economic governance and advancement of Europe’s ‘knowledge society’ and its international outreach. On the same note, the efficiency in communicating environment and development messages should be revisited. These revisions are they key if the EU is serious about shifting from ‘global’ to ‘strategic’ player – “that is introducing a sense of priorities in its external action” (Renard & de Swielande, 2011, p. 4).

This comparative analysis focused on a limited number of findings from a large-scale comparative study “The EU in the Eyes of Asia-Pacific” (2002-on-going) which has involved by 2012 20 locations in the region. This study considered the dynamic in visibility and perception of EU impact in Asia before and during the EEAS formative years which coincided with the major economic challenge in EU history. With “the beating heart of international affairs [...] moving from the Atlantic to the Pacific in the twenty-first century” (Renard & Biscop, 2012, p.xv), future studies could assess EU post-crisis images in Asia and test if expectations for the EU in Asia remain low despite the growing weight and influence of the post-Lisbon EU as an international actor.

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NOTES

1. For more information, see www.eupereceptions.canterbury.ac.nz

2. The choice of these seven Asian countries is based on the fact that these influential countries were studied in the two phases of the research project “The EU in the Eyes of Asia–Pacific” – before and after the outbreak of the euro debt crisis providing a solid foundation for our comparative case-study.

3. In the “pre-crisis” study, press outlets in South Korea, China, Thailand and Singapore were monitored for 12 months in 2006. Television news bulletins in these locations were monitored between February–December. The Japanese sample included six months of press monitoring (July–December 2006) and no television data. News outlets from India and Malaysia were...
monitored for six months in 2010 (July–December), Indian sample had no television data. The second phase of the study, observed all newspapers (21) and all television news bulletins (seven) in January–June 2011.

4. In 2011, 'Eurozone' was an additional search term

ABSTRACTS

Using nuanced and specific to each geographical context news media and public opinion data from a trans-national comparative research project 'The EU in the Eyes of Asia-Pacific' (2002-on going), paper draws together a number of common comparative themes from the seven case-studies of EU external perceptions in Asia: Japan, China, South Korea, India, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. The study explores EU media and general public images in Asia before and during the sovereign euro debt crisis testing the claim that the on-going economic crisis has 'damaged' EU external image. The findings debate on the EU’s expectations and capabilities in Asia. This debate reflects on the hypothesis of ‘capability-expectations gap’ (Hill 1993) (namely, the gap that exists between the excessive expectations placed on the EU from both inside and outside the Union and the insufficient capability assigned to the EU by its members that renders it unable to match these expectations).

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AUTHORS

NATALIA CHABAN
PhD, Associate Professor, Deputy Director, Jean Monnet Chair on European Identity and Culture National Centre for Research on Europe