

The EU through the eyes of Asia: Media perceptions and public opinion in 2006

In 2006, a study initiated by the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) of media and public opinion perceptions of the European Union was undertaken in six Asian locations - Thailand, South Korea, Singapore, Japan, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and mainland China. This article summarises the findings from the daily analysis of three newspapers and one prime-time television evening news in each location for the period 1 January – 31 October 2006 as well as from an online public opinion survey conducted in November 2006 (400 respondents in each location).

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To summarise, 7,850 news items related to the European Union (EU) were identified in the 18 newspapers surveyed demonstrating that coverage of the EU is modest. Where the EU is reported, it is predominantly described as Europe as an external actor elsewhere in the world (interacting with a third party), and not as necessarily locally relevant. Compounding this, the importance of the EU angle to a story was typically minor although the tone of the reports were generally neutral-positive. The EU's economic prowess is still recognised but this is now balanced by recognition of an emerging active political international role, even when that role is with a third country elsewhere. Against these common themes regional differentiations were also evident with mainland China the most noteworthy case.

On television, the EU appears almost invisible (just 185 news items in total), except perhaps on CCTV-1 in China where an average of 11 news items a month mentioned the EU as either a major, secondary or minor actor (a total of 129). The findings for television coverage across the six locations were broadly consistent with those for the popular press: third party and a minor focus on the EU and generally neutral in tone, yet with a strong awareness of Europe as an international political actor (perhaps reflecting the nature of television, where foreign affairs generate images that are more audience appealing). But clearly the EU is now visible as a political actor and it appears widely recognised in the popular media that there is at least a face (Javier Solana) if not a single phone number that former US Secretary of State Mr Kissinger could now contact!

So, if the EU is largely peripheral in the mass media is that necessarily problematic? The data suggest that there is a potential 'expectations deficit': if the EU is not given prominence and its role in the region under-reported, reduced expectations of Europe's involvement may be an inevitable consequence. A self-fulfilling logic – lower demands leading to reduced media interest leading to lower demands... - could ensue. Given that the EU is a major economic partner for all the areas covered in this research and has growing political and security relationships, misperceptions based on media choices pose significant policy challenges, such as a possible undervaluing of the EU-ASEAN/ASEM relationship. Any such downgrading runs the risk of missed opportunities for both the EU and Asia. While under-reported, the positive development unearthed by the findings is the emerging perception of an EU that is more economically and politically bal-

anced: Europe's image is no longer just that of 'Fortress Europe'; rather the EU as a benign, international actor is being reported more often and more accurately. Provided that this media trend continues (and the EU's global role continues to expand) new opportunities for matching Asian needs and objectives with what the EU might be in a position to provide are possible.

What then of public opinion?

Although for all the locations studied the EU constituted a major economic player this reality was not reflected when respondents were asked to rank the EU. The EU was given significantly less emphasis and importance and nowhere ranked higher than fourth, and in Japan and in Singapore only the sixth most important current partner. Opinions on the EU's future importance reflected a similar pattern. Evaluations of the current state of relations with the EU were overwhelmingly viewed as positive everywhere (on average in excess of 85% describing it as steady or improving). Only Thailand displayed any meaningful level of discontent (with 6.8% of respondents describing the relationship as worsening). However, the relatively high percentages in both Thailand (31.4%) and South Korea (30%) that viewed the relationship as "improving" may also suggest that the past was somewhat more negative.

One specific EU event common to all Asian locations was the 6th Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) held in Helsinki in September 2006. When respondents were asked about the extent to which they followed this news item divergent patterns were evident. Singapore (43%) and Japan (48.8%) were similar – this time in their shared disinterest towards ASEM – while South Koreans were the most actively engaged with ASEM developments (with 85.7% following news of the meeting).

Perhaps the most significant findings relate to the images of the EU. The survey asked respondents: "When thinking about the EU what thoughts come to mind?" There were some remarkable similarities across the locations (see Table 1). Firstly, the Euro is now widely associated with the EU even if this symbolic linkage distorts the reality that just 13 of the 27 member states have currently adopted the single currency. It featured in first or second place in the minds of Koreans, Japanese, Singaporean and citizens of Hong Kong. Secondly, for these four regions the notion of the EU as a positive example of integration was also prevalent cementing a somewhat benign and unified image of the EU from an external Asian perspective. But thirdly, and perhaps paradoxically, in all locations the EU was also represented through individual Member States potentially

Table 1 Public Opinion "Dominant EU Images"

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
Korea	European union, integration	Euro	Individual countries	Exceptionalism/problems
Thailand	Individual countries	Economic power	trade	Euro
Hong Kong	Euro	trade	European union, integration	Individual countries
Singapore	European union, integration	Euro	Economic power	Individual countries
Japan	Euro	European union, integration	Individual countries	Disparities/unfairness

undermining the notion of a collective group of 27 and reducing the EU to the EU3, for example. Thailand presented the most extreme case and was unique in predominantly presenting the EU in economic and country terms. This notwithstanding, the images expressed by the majority suggest that Asian publics have a supranational appreciation of the EU rather than one based around antagonistic images of 'Fortress Europe' or national imagery.

Can EU visibility in the Asian media be raised?

A starting point would be to build on what Mr Solana has achieved. Here, the European constitution plays a crucial role. The more the EU can have a single external personality, then the more understanding in the media and public opinion is likely to follow. Second, the Euro was a significant dominant image which, while not created for reasons of external perceptions, is now a symbol that the general public in the Asia-Pacific region associate with the EU. Increasing the visibility of Euro as an international currency in the region could be a way of raising visibility in general for the EU. Third, the positive interpretation of Europe's integration project as a reference point (not a model) could be developed more assertively within ASEM, again increasing the profile and relevance of the EU among Asian citizens.

Increasing EU public diplomacy constitutes a fourth mechanism for addressing Asian perceptions of the Union. While greater financial resources may be part of the solution, a better strategy rather than just more money may be the more effective approach. Lastly, in terms of comparative advantage and distinctiveness, Europe's global development role appears to have been under-utilised in the EU's public diplomacy. The combined Official Development Assistance (ODA) of the EU and the member states represents over half of the world total. Yet, both in public opinion, and in the Asian media, the notion of Europe as a 'Development Superpower' largely

lacks profile and needs to be popularised through a more active and directed public diplomacy.

Conclusions

Persisting stereotypes can be promoted and maintained where the media fails to provide informed news and accurate portrayals of actors. Such misperceptions based on inadequate knowledge can lead to inappropriate policy choices. The general low level of news reporting on the EU in Asia heightens this risk. While the data does provide some grounds for limited optimism (the changing recognition that Europe is more than 'butter mountains' and 'tariff quotas'), and even conceding that the EU is still punching below its weight as a global actor, the media's perception of the EU's importance for Asia and its level of coverage is lower than is justified. There is a paradoxical challenge too: the EU has to be careful, if it enhances its profile it must ensure that it can meet renewed and higher expectations. If the EU promotes itself and raises expectations of being a serious political actor, there needs to be the capacity to deliver, otherwise the project becomes self-defeating.

More broadly, the analysis presented here is not disconnected from the wider debate on the nature and direction of the integration process. What happens externally does have important internal implications for integration. If there is a supportive external view concerning the purpose of the EU, if integration *per se* can provide benefits externally for Thailand, South Korea, Japan, China, Singapore and Hong Kong (whatever those may be) then the potential exists

for a positive spill-back effect that might influence Europe's public. Were European citizens informed about the EU's wider agenda and that it is more valued externally than it is perhaps internally, there could be positive outcomes for the construction of European identity. Consequently, how the EU's external image is represented and conveyed can play an important dynamic in the internal integration process. The success of that enterprise, however, depends upon the portrait of the EU as painted in the global media. <

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