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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**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 on-going 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 6.5% regarding 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 the member 2006. When respondents were asked about the extent to which they followed this news item divergent patterns were evident. Singapore (45%) in particular gave it a high profile reporting 36% of the time in their second disinterest towards ASEM – while South Koreans were the most actively engaged with ASEM developments (with 8.7% 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 17 of the 27 member states have currently adopted the single currency. It featured in first or second place in the minds of Koreans, Japanese, Singaporeans 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 undermining the notion of a collective group of 27 and reducing the EU to the EU of, for example, Thailand presented the most extreme case and was unique in predominately 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 nationalist 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 external relations, as the EU continues to expand, 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 European publics. 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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**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 of Who and why do certain choices (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.

The ‘EU through the eyes of Asia’ is the pilot project of the European Studies in Asia (ESIA) network initiated by the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF). This ongoing two-year trans-national study is a collaboration between ASEF and the National Centre for Research on Europe (NCRE) at the University of Canterbury’s centre in the Asia region, Chulalongkorn University (Thailand), Korea University, National University of Singapore, Keio University (Japan), Hong Kong Baptist University and Fudan University (China). The project will be completed later this year. This article is a summary of the second interim report. Please visit http://www.esia.asef.org to view the full report.