

» ASIAN PERCEPTIONS OF EUROPE

# A second fiddle with a few strings missing



BY JONATHAN EYAL  
*ST Europe Bureau*

AT THE Shangri-La Dialogue last weekend, French Defence Minister Herve Morin made a startling remark.

Acknowledging that "during the 25 years to come, the centre of gravity of the world will move to Asia", he went on to say that while Europe will become "full players" in the region, Asia itself should stop "considering Europe as a second-ranking power".

Most leaders pay compliments to their hosts while undertaking foreign trips. But very few indeed openly complain about not being taken seriously.

Yet Mr Morin did precisely that in front of the biggest assembly of Asian politicians and military commanders. And although no other European representative echoed his remarks, the French minister did express a widely shared European frustration with Asian governments. They supposedly simply do not rate the "old continent". What he failed to explain, however, is what should be done to reverse this process.

At first sight, the idea that Europe can be treated as a "second-ranking" power seems ludicrous. The European Union (EU) has the world's third-biggest population, after China and India. Its economy is slightly larger than that of the United States. Its combined military has 1.5 million men and women and includes two of the world's major nuclear powers.

Furthermore, the EU is a key trading partner for every Asian country. Indeed, it is now China's biggest single customer. And if this is not enough, European nations controlled most of Asia as late as half a century ago. This, of course, creates many drawbacks, but indifference or ignorance about Europe is hardly something Asians can be accused of. And yet, the perception among Europeans is that their continent is sidelined in Asia.

Until fairly recently, the evidence for this feeling was purely anecdotal. No longer, for an exhaustive study has now quantified the real feelings of Asians about Europe. And the message is grim.

Conducted by the Asia-Europe Foundation, together with a network of academic institutions in Europe, Asia and New Zealand, the study is entitled *The EU Through The Eyes Of Asia*.

The researchers found coverage of European affairs in Singapore's media was the most extensive in Asia, three times bigger than that provided by the Japanese newspapers and TV stations, and 25 per cent more than the total number of European news items which appeared in Chinese media outlets.

Singapore – and Hong Kong, the runner-up in the frequency of European media stories – may have an inbuilt advantage. Both have a mass-circulation English-language press which tends to report European stories with greater regularity. "The modest level of reporting raises serious issues about the EU's visibility and identity in Asia," concludes Professor Martin Holland, the report's chief coordinator.

A deeper analysis of the aggregate media figures reveals an even more disturbing picture. Many of the European stories in Asia's media outlets concerned celebrity gossip as well as European fashion, sports or cultural activities. And, among the purely political stories about Europe, a full quarter of them were largely negative.

## A CERTAIN LASSITUDE

Europe has achieved a great deal through "soft power" – its subtle economic, cultural and political influence worldwide. Still, "soft power" has its limits and the people of Asia instinctively sense it. They know that, ultimately, the only nations which matter are those which can combine "soft" and "hard" power. The US and China do; Europe does not.

The most negative stories were about Europe's supposedly highest achievement: the multiracial and multi-cultural identity of the "old continent". Asians responded badly to the publication of cartoons offensive to Islam, to racial tensions in Europe, and to the connections which some European politicians made between ordinary Muslims and terrorism.

Not one of the countries surveyed regarded the EU as their most important foreign partner. China came closest, by identifying Europe as its second most important interlocutor after the US. But in Japan, Singapore, South Korea and Thailand, people put the EU in the fifth or sixth order of importance, way behind China, the US or other Asian nations.

Nor does anyone believe that the trend will improve: When asked to guess which country will be their top partner in the future, all the surveyed Asian nations – apart from China – invariably kept Europe at the bottom of the pile.

Europe's main achievements were simply ignored. The EU prides itself on the successful political and economic integration of its member states. But only 1 per cent of Singaporeans surveyed regarded the European model of integration as bearing any relevance to Asia.

What can be done about this state of affairs? Asian leaders have always been keen to engage with Europe, but have been frequently stonewalled by European politicians, who see no electoral advantage in attending Asian diplomatic gatherings. But that's Asia's way of doing business, and if the Europeans wish to be taken seriously, they need to adopt it.

Much more can be done to encourage cultural exchanges, expand diplomatic representations and fund European studies at Asian universities. But the impact of all these is likely to remain small and, at best, incremental. Asem, the Asia-Europe Meeting, a yearly jamboree designed to bring the two continents together, has had almost no impact on the perceptions of ordinary Asians, according to the study.

What most European politicians hate to admit is that the opinions of the Asians may actually be accurate, and that the problem lies with Europe itself. After all, Europe may still be rich, but it is in relative

decline. Its economic growth rates are meagre and, despite a few notable exceptions, it is not at the heart of technological innovation. Nor is it a continent which welcomes immigrants with open arms.

More importantly, Europe takes no active part in tackling Asia's security concerns. Its diplomats hold strong opinions on human rights, China, Tibet, Taiwan or North Korea, but the only aircraft carriers in Asian waters belong to the US. When Britain and France recently ordered new aircraft carriers, these were laughed at by the rest of Europe as irrelevant toys of no practical value.

Europe has achieved a great deal through "soft power" – its subtle economic, cultural and political influence worldwide. Still, "soft power" has its limits and the people of Asia instinctively sense it. They know that, ultimately, the only nations which matter are those which can combine "soft" and "hard" power. The US and China do; Europe does not.

Ultimately, "Europe" remains a purely political construct. It acts as one on trade, and the people of Asia fully acknowledge its might on economic issues. But when it comes to foreign or military policy, the EU is still just an amalgam of nation-states, most of which have neither the capacity nor the aspiration to become global players.

The short answer to the French Defence Minister's plea is that Asia will regard Europe as a big power only when Europe starts taking itself seriously. If Europeans do not like the way they are perceived, they'd better look at themselves in the mirror.