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The View Across the Bosphorus



Surveys on how Europeans view Asia reveal dissonance and China dominance

If perception is reality, then in the eyes of the countries that make up the European Union (EU), there are two distinct faces of Asia. The first is that of a rapidly rising economic juggernaut that has become the world's financial engine. The second face is one of culture and colour.

The dichotomy was uncovered by a recently published study by the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) in Singapore, which tracked the perceptions of the leaders, media and public in eight EU member countries. The study, "Asia in the Eyes of Europe: The EU's Perceptions of Rising Asia", was conducted in response to the growing importance of perception measurement in the realm of public diplomacy, particularly as a barometer of how the relationship between the two continents is developing.

The EU is already one of the largest trading partners of many Asian countries and the largest source of humanitarian aid to the region.

The study involved Germany, France, Italy and the UK, which are the four largest economies and most populous countries in the EU, as well as smaller nations representative of their respective geographical subregions — Austria, Denmark and Romania. Belgium was also included, as it is a founding member of the EU, with its capital Brussels regarded by many as the 'capital of Europe'.

"For people in international relations and diplomacy, the most important finding is that there is a dissonance in how [EU] governments perceive Asia compared to the media and larger public," Sol Iglesias, director of intellectual exchange at ASEF and one of the editors of the study, told Asia360 News.

"In official discourse and diplomatic circles, they are increasingly looking at Asia as a socio-economic region. But the rest of the public sees Asia as a diffused, faraway place, with a lot more emphasis on culture and economy than political identity," Iglesias added.

The Danish, for example, tend to see Asia as "a mysterious far-away place with exotic food and a friendly yet culturally distinct population," noted the report.

HAND IN HAND

What some citizens in the EU believe to be the most important areas of cooperation between their countries and Asia.

Germany

Human rights and democracy – 16%
Security and anti-terrorism – 16%
Trade – 15%

France

Human rights and democracy – 13%
Environmental protection – 13%
Trade – 47%

Italy

Human rights and democracy – 19%
Environmental protection – 20%
Trade – 41%

Denmark

Human rights and democracy – 23%
Environmental protection – 21%
Trade – 29%

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These findings are important, since it gives further impetus to the efforts of many Asian countries trying to develop their own subregional blocs, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), while at the same time, affirming the importance of individual countries' cultural assets to their international perception — a valuable insight when it comes to developing their tourism industries, for example.

This, in turn, may help policymakers project themselves more effectively when engaging stakeholders in other regions.

The results of the survey are also important to European governments at a time when many of their citizens are beginning to see Asia as critical to their own countries' prospects.

China overtook the US as Austria's biggest overseas trading partner in 2010, while France has become the seventh most popular destination for Asian students (a 50% jump between 2005 and 2009), with Chinese the second largest group of foreign students in the country after Moroccans.

In Germany, where Chancellor Angela Merkel famously declared in 2010 that multiculturalism "had failed", half of the public respondents had positive impressions of Asia.

The survey yielded a number of other surprises. When the researchers were conceptualising the survey in 2009, they expected the two rising Asian giants, China and India, to captivate the mindshare of their participants. As it turned out, in almost all the countries surveyed, it was China that singlehandedly pushed most of Asia out of Europeans' field of vision.

"China [is] being used as a symbol and a proxy of a 'rising Asia'. However, this over-representation of China's role is misleading as it largely ignores the increasing relevance of other Asian countries and regional bodies for regional, inter-regional and global governance," the authors wrote.

However, China's perceived overshadowing of its continental neighbours is not a phenomenon unique to the region.

"I know small European countries complain that the world only sees France and Germany even though all of them are part of the EU," said Iglesias.

"Asian countries would benefit by projecting themselves, like those groupings that have tried to promote themselves as a common market like ASEAN. [Individual countries'] visibility is not very well perceived outside of Asia in this regard, except for very large economies."

Iglesias said Asian countries should invest in joint visibility efforts to gain relevance and break out of China's shadow. This could be done by tackling thematic areas through roundtables and portraying collectively what their respective regions can offer in terms of political, social and cultural ties.

In this sense, the report noted that Asian countries have "long considered the EU as a reference point for their own regional cooperation and integration agenda." The multitude of subregional groupings such as ASEAN, ASEAN-3, SAARC and the East Asia Summit (EAS) bear testament to this view. However, the EU should be regarded as a reference point rather than a model. Even with the recent bailout troubles in the EU acting as a cautionary tale, more fundamental historical problems might also be obstacles for Asian integration a la the EU.

In ASEAN for example, where member countries are still relatively young nation-states compared to the European constituents of the EU, the notion of sovereignty is "still very closely cherished", Iglesias said.

The image shows a screenshot of a Facebook post from the page 'Asia360 - News in Context'. At the top, there is a 'Sign Up' button and a prompt to 'Create an account or log in to see what your friends like.' Below this is the page name 'Asia360 - News in Context' with a 'Like' button. The main content is a grid of six news thumbnails, each with a number (4, 5, 6) in the bottom left corner. Below the grid, it says '10,858 people like Asia360 - News in Context.' There are two rows of profile pictures of people who liked the post, with names: Igb, Bipul, Chandra, Rahul, Ip in the first row; Nurhanashal, Yogendra, Nice, Subhro in the second row. At the bottom, there is a 'Facebook social plugin' logo.

While Asian policymakers may be much more cognizant of the EU as an economic and political power, perceptions among the Asian public of the EU are also changing. In the latest preliminary research done by ASEF, it emerged that while in the past (based on initial surveys done in 2005 and 2006) the EU was seen in a more nuanced way as a social, political and economic entity, it is lately being seen largely as an economic one — perhaps a consequence of the media's fixation on the impact of the EU's financial turmoil.

“The people's perceptions of the EU are largely influenced by what's tabled in the media; but the EU works beyond just economic and financial issues. Many success stories in environment and climate change, for example, need to be highlighted to increase the public's awareness on what the EU does to improve lives,” said Ambassador Marc Ungeheuer, head of the EU delegation to Singapore.

Even then, the EU occupies less mindshare in Asia, compared to how much larger the latter looms in Europe. But this might not be due to perceived irrelevance of the EU on the part of Asians.

“In Asia, there was a lack of appreciation [for the EU]. The EU is in fact one of the largest trading partners in Asia and it is the largest development donor. And yet, in public opinion polls and in the media in Asia, the EU is close to invisible,” said Iglesias of the preliminary findings.

“The level is nowhere as high as how Asia is seen in Europe. I think it's more of the fact that the US occludes the rest of the West, in the eyes of the East.”

Such research will become increasingly important especially as more multilateral negotiations are conducted and free-trade agreements forged between Europe and Asia. The published survey on European perceptions serves as a blueprint for policymakers on both sides of the Bosphorus looking to build stronger and more lasting bridges between their peoples and institutions. JC