

The Contemporary Europe Research Centre
A Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence

European Institute for Asian Studies



INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

27 – 28 March 2008

CONTEMPORARY EUROPE RESEARCH CENTRE

Jean Monnet European Centre of Excellence

The University of Melbourne

Level 2, 234 Queensberry St, Carlton

CONFERENCE SUMMARY

Introduction

An international conference *EU-Asia Relations: A Critical Review* was held in Melbourne between 27-28 March 2008. The conference brought together academics, representatives from EU institutions and students to examine and assess the EU's external relations and objectives with Asia-Pacific. Papers looked at issues of differing perceptions between the two regions and their impact on the relationship; regionalism, global governance and cooperation; the direction of Asian integration; the economic aspect of EU-Asia relations; and areas of cooperation on global issues. The aim of the conference was to contribute to the relatively new academic interest with the EU's growing international presence in the Asia-Pacific region.

Session 1: How Europe Looks at Asia

This session addressed European perceptions (specifically EU perceptions) and interactions with Asia. The reoccurring themes during this session was the need for a review of the EU's strategy towards Asia; and the impact of differing perceptions and expectations between European and Asian partners on the development of the relationship.

In reviewing the EU's engagement with Asia since the adoption in 2001 of the EU's Asia Strategy, Dr. Fraser Cameron argued that, in spite of its commitment, the EU's engagement in Asia has not measured up to expectation within the region. He identified a number of factors which have hindered the relationship. Among them were: the EU's internal preoccupation with enlargement, the Lisbon Treaty, leaving little room for the EU's external relationships; perception among Asian countries of the EU focusing too much attention on China to the detriment of stronger links with other countries in the region; the lack of Asia expertise within the EU. Key to the development of a comprehensive and coherent toward Asia, the EU must clearly identify what it wants to achieve from its relationship Asian countries and the region as a whole.

In drawing on interviews conducted with European Commission officials, Associate Professor Philomena Murray's paper highlighted that the major inconsistencies within the EU itself are underlying factors behind its inconsistent approach towards Asia. Not only is there a lack of focus regarding outcomes and objectives within the EU, there is a failure among policy makers within the EU to understand the diversity of the Asian region, both political and ethnic, and the problems this presents in dealing with the region as a cohesive regional grouping. This failure on the part of the EU is often perceived among Asians to represent arrogance on the part of the EU.

Both speakers concluded that the EU needed to review its approach to Asia and establish a more consistent and coherent strategy.

Session 2: How Asia looks at Europe

This session dealt with Asian perceptions of Europe and focused in particular on how the EU is perceived in the region. Ms Nicole Alecu de Flers argued that the perceived image of the EU in Asia has been neglected in Europe. Europeans therefore do not fully

understand that while it is projecting the EU an international actor across a multitude of areas, the EU is still primarily as an economic power among Asians. Dr Natalia Chaban noted in her presentation that the internal divisions in the EU and consequently inconsistent approaches to Asia have contributed to creating this image. The Asian media portrayal of the EU has generally been pessimistic, showing little growth in the EU's involvement in the region which is in part due to a their lack of understanding of the EU.

Further, the EU-Asia relationship is often contrasted with the US-Asia relationship, which has historically been given precedence in Asia. The EU has been regarded as weak with its use of soft power in contrast to the US' military presence. However Dr Chaban predicted a growing role of the EU in the region to counteract US dominance. There is also a growing recognition among Asians of the EU as a model for integration and conflict resolutions, and an increasingly important environmental actor

Overall, both speakers found the EU to be an important player in the region. While primarily an economic power, there are increasing opportunities for the EU to play a bigger role in the region.

Session 3: Regionalism, Governance and Cooperation

Session three dealt with issues of regionalism, global governance and the EU-Asia cooperation. The first speaker, Professor Kennedy Graham, assessed EU and Asian approaches to global governance and concluded that there is a potential for regionalism in Asia and for the EU to strengthen its position globally through its own model of regionalism. Professor Graham also argued that future global stability requires the shared commitment of the EU and Asia.

Ms Tânia Felício examined the normative power of EU's foreign policy and concluded that the EU's normative means of interaction were of limited value to Asian regional integration.

Dr Dimitrios Konstadakopulos suggested that as a result of increasing attention and priority to the effects of global warming, future global economic leadership will be determined by advances in environmental technology. Dr Konstadakopulos predicted a 'third industrial revolution', based on small-scale electricity generators, in which the EU has the opportunity to play a major part. The EU is well ahead of the rest of the world (especially in comparison to Asia) in environmental technologies. There is considerable scope for the EU to secure a major role in the region – this requires that the EU invest in science and technology in Asia.

On the whole, presentations in this session suggested that the EU has a role to play in influencing regionalism in Asia even though its normative behaviour has had little impact on the region to date. Further investments in science and technology might facilitate a deepening of the EU-Asia relationship as it is predicted to become a major element of future global economic leadership.

Session 4: Asian Integration – Going Nowhere?

This session tackled how and in what direction Asian integration is going. Professor Douglas Webber found three main obstacles to political integration in the region. Firstly, the integration process presupposes a close and cooperative relationship between Japan and China in which other states would want to partake. However, the Japan-China relationship is far from close or cooperative; it is, rather, viewed as one of the most hostile relationships in the region as they regard each other as mutual security threats. Therefore, the intra-regional tensions between the two dominant powers in Asia prevent the developing of deeper integration in the region. Secondly, one of the fundamental aspects to a deeper integrated region is economic interdependency within the region. Professor Webber argued that such an economic interdependency has not yet been reached in Asia. Thirdly, the lack of economic interdependency in the region is caused by the great regional divergence in terms of political systems and levels of economic development in the region.

Dr Yeo Lay Hwee emphasised that regionalism in Asia is in marked contrast to the EU experience. The idea of political union is not part of the Asian design of integration. The ASEAN community building was initiated as a means to maintain a peaceful neighbourhood by sharing a common market and customs. Dr Yeo referred to the European blueprint of integration as a house while the Asian blueprint of integration is more representative of a bunker.

On a whole, both speakers agreed that Asian integration is progressing, though it does not follow the EU model of integration – each region requires different sets of integration blueprints.

Session 5: Economic Relations between the EU and Asia

The fifth session looked at economic relations between the EU and Asia. The general theme of the papers in this session was that Asia consists of too diverse a group of states for it to be clustered into one group. Thus while the ASEAN states have been trying to gain the attention of the EU in order to secure an increase in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flow and access to EU markets, China, Japan and Korea continue to be strong individual actors.

The speakers concluded that the economic aspect of the EU-Asia relations continues to be the most important aspect of the relationship.

Session 6: Global Issues – Can the EU and Asia Cooperate?

This session engaged with the issue of whether or not the EU and Asia can cooperate on global issues. Mr Bertrand Fort stated in his paper that there was a need to acknowledge the misconceptions and misunderstandings that proliferate on both sides of the relationship. Mr Fort argued that there is a need for European policy makers to recognise the issues raised by globalisation and the Asian perception of a threat from the West. He argued that Asian policy makers need to develop a more nuanced approach when dealing with European powers, develop an understanding of the diversity within European cultures. It is also incumbent on Asian powers to take responsibility for their actions commensurate with their power.

Professor Georg Wiessala argued that there is a need to broaden personal and civil society links in interregional relationships and that the solution to greater understanding between the EU and Asia is education and the promotion of the understanding of the diversity of the cultures and civilisations involved.

On the whole European policy needs to be more flexible with a broader understanding of the sensitivities of Asia. This can be achieved by greater emphasis on education aiming at creating a greater understanding of diversity in both regions.

Roundtable: Towards a Comprehensive EU-Asia Strategy?

Key issues discussed during the closing roundtable table session with *Dr Fraser Cameron, Mr Bernard Fort, Dr Yeo Lay Hwee, and Professor Douglas Webber* included:

- There is a slight tendency among EU policy makers not to think outside the box. There is a consensus regarding the problems and attitudes that need changing on both sides.
 - While there is a great deal of diversity within Asia, Asia sees itself as a region. While the current EU approach is inclusionary, it means that, in practice, the effort is spread too thinly to the detriment of EU diplomacy in the region. It is not necessary to deal with every state.
 - There is also a clear need for the EU to co-ordinate its approach to Asia with those of its member states. The current focus on the maximisation of membership within the EU has also contributed to the weakening of the EU effort, meaning that, in the Asia region, the EU rarely ‘punches its weight’. This is further complicated by member states refusing to abdicate foreign policy to the EU.
 - It was also argued that the EU has simply followed the US lead in the region, especially with regard to the ‘war on terrorism’. There is a clear need to develop a separate approach, based on EU values. The main issues in dealing with Asia seem to require a shift in approach, so that the EU presents a more flexible, humble and cohesive union. In the development of a rules based international system the EU has to accept that there are other integrative models and this needs to be recognised in order to include both Asia and Africa as full partners.
 - There are areas in which the EU and Asia could influence global affairs if they were to combine efforts. Such efforts would be most effective in areas such as environmental protection and sustainable development.
 - To date, the development of the EU has been a domestic not a global process. It has had to mediate and develop internal instruments. There is no internal consensus on a global role, creating a disconnection between the perceived role and the institution. ASEM should be a peak body governing bilateral relationships. There needs to be a
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hardening of the process into relations between sub-regions and a need to work out functional relationships. The creation of a larger framework ensures continuing dialogue.

- On the whole the EU approach needs to be softened, with clear differences between the bilateral and multi-lateral approaches. While there may be problems of deadlock if too many institutions are created, it was remarked that institutions tend to focus on their own functionality and serve a range of purposes. Bodies such as like ASEM are important as they cover issues like human rights and human security issues.
 - Economic relations between the EU and Asia are strong. They are largely mediated by the demands of the market.
 - In the area of security, EU-Asia relations are weak for a number of reasons. The lack of proximity and shared regional interest are foremost. In addition both sides tend to see the US as the regional hegemon and guarantor of security, and the EU's emphasis on soft power does not have an impact in Asia, or is seen as counter-productive in its focus on issues sensitive to Asian states.
 - The normative divide is not nearly as deep as it may appear. Asia is a much freer, more open place than when the EU was developing. Problems in the region will diminish as development increases. The soft power and human rights emphasis of the EU has the potential to benefit countries in the region as they move toward democratic forms.
 - It is critical for Europe to be involved in Asia as the centre of power in the world is moving toward the Asia-Pacific.
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Delegation of the European Commission to Australia and New Zealand

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