EUforAsia Briefing

“How should the EU package itself to Asia?”

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This Policy Brief is based on the discussions of the ‘EUforAsia Stakeholders Roundtable: How should the EU package itself to Asia?’ held at the European Policy Centre, Brussels, Belgium on the 9th of April 2010. The Roundtable brought together opinion leaders drawn from Academia, the EU institutions, the Media sector and Brussels-based think tanks to discuss the visibility of the EU throughout Asia and examine the current external relations policies.

As the European Union is struggling with the political and economic dangers of the ongoing financial and economic crisis, the importance of the Asian region for EU policy-making is becoming ever more evident. The crisis only highlights the ongoing power shift from the West to the East and the need for the EU to react to the structural changes that have taken place in the international political economy with the end of the Cold War. The EU will have to take Asia’s rise seriously as well as re-define and strengthen its complex relationship with the region if it wants to stay competitive in a globalized world. In order for the EU-Asia relations to prosper, the focus must shift towards a more reflexive relationship.

With dramatic difficulties that the European project is currently facing, Asian officials like Surin Pitsuwan, the Secretary General of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), are feeling increasingly discouraged by the European model of integration. Moreover, a sense of pride has developed amongst Asians: While member countries of the European Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) are risking bankruptcy Asian countries learned their lessons from the financial crisis in 1997/98 and are less affected by the ongoing economic and financial turmoil. At the same time the successful

1 The recommendations in this Policy Brief reflect the results of the discussions among the participants of the “EUforAsia Stakeholders’ Roundtable Meeting” that took place on 9th April 2010 at the European Policy Centre in Brussels.

2 Hein, Christoph, Interview with Surin Pitsuwan, “Ihr Europäer seid selbstgefällig geworden” [You Europeans have become self-complacent], in Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung, 23.05.2010, p. 33.
economic development of emerging countries like China and India reinforces the cooperation and integration processes among the countries in the region.

Against these structural changes in the set up and governance of the international system on the national, regional and global level, the question of “how the EU should package itself to Asia” stimulates reflection that address material and perception based issues. These were discussed on the occasion of the “EUforAsia Stakeholders’ Roundtable Meeting” that took place on 9th April 2010 in Brussels. It offered a group of European and Asian experts the opportunity to critically assess the current state of EU-Asia affairs. The broad thematic range of the discussions was indicative of the undergoing changes in the overall EU-Asia relationship. The discussions dealt with the policies and perceptions of the EU in Asia, the perceptions that Europeans hold vis-à-vis Asia and the outreach of the EU in East Asia, South Asia and the ASEAN.

Following detailed presentations from experts looking at EU-Asian relations from a number of vantage points and in depth dialogue between the participants, a number of key policy issue areas were identified. The below list contains the ten issue areas and the respective policy recommendations, gleaned from the Roundtable:

1. **Issues of Common Interest**

According to media research that was conducted by the research project “The EU in the Eyes of Asia” the EU is considered as a marginal power actor in Asia, i.e. when acting outside of its own region in 3rd countries. Tackling issues of mutual interest can help the EU to shift this perception and can assist in building a profile of the EU's work in specific areas. There was consensus among the participants that issues which are of common interest to the EU Member States presented opportunities for greater EU-Asia cooperation. These issues included climate change and energy security, population growth and migration, development policy (inclusive of the issue of remittances), international crime and terrorism. According to the media research, the EU as an environment and development actor is almost invisible and the creation of a profile was recommended. Yet, it was argued that even positive stories on development aid are not very newsworthy.

2. **The Use of Symbols to Promote the EU**

Symbols illustrate a positive “visible face” of the EU as an area of free movement and of unity. Symbols should reach out to capture the imagination of the wider Asian public. The European Single Market represents a unique symbol of unity that should be leveraged. Public opinion and elite research conducted in Asia displayed that the symbols of the EU (namely the Euro, the Flag, culture and sports) featured highly. A common recommendation amongst participants was to promote the symbols of the EU to heighten its profile throughout the Asian public. It was argued that these easily-identifiable images of the EU provided a positive message among the public and promoted the ideals of the

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3 In the following the regions of Europe and Asia are defined according to the participation pattern of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) process. ASEM has evolved into the central platform for communication between Asia and Europe. Currently ASEM consists of a total of 45 partners, 28 partners on the European side and 17 partners on the Asian side. A distinctive feature of this dialogue is that ASEM partners meet as part of their respective region. ASEM brings together Austria, Belgium, Brunei, Bulgaria, Cambodia, China, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Laos, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Malta, Mongolia, Myanmar, The Netherlands, Pakistan, The Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, United Kingdom, Vietnam, the ASEAN Secretariat and the European Commission. http://www.aseminfoboard.org.

4 For more information on “The EU through Eyes of Asia”, visit http://esia.asef.org
EU, such as unity, prosperity, strength, security and culture. Consensus among the participants was that it had been a mistake to take out provisions for symbols in the Lisbon Treaty.

3. EU Immigration and Visa Policy

The participants’ discussions centred on the prioritization of immigration policy as it was argued that the EU needs to be more open and accommodating to Asian tourists, students and skilled labour. Currently certain member states’ policies on immigration hinder/restrict necessary access to the EU. The EU should promote greater harmonisation of immigration policy among member countries. It was argued that the EU was not addressing potential demographic and labour shortages by denying access to Asian citizens. The EU is letting go of the opportunity to attract highly skilled Asian labour in key sectors such as science and technology to offset its worsening demographic profile. Instead Asian demands regarding greater access to the EU in terms of mobility, immigration and Visa facilitation are not addressed and EU resources are focused on penalising rather than rewarding those with an interest in the EU.

4. Education

Education was identified as an aspect of the EU’s relations with Asia that offers a major opportunity for the EU to reach out to a wider Asian audience. Discussions focussed on the opportunity to promote people-to-people exchange through teaching programmes and exchange programmes. It was recommended to provide greater support for the Erasmus Mundus programme in order to increase and assist student mobility. Corresponding shifts in EU immigration policy were needed to support education exchanges. In addition specific “EU modules” should be promoted in secondary school curricula throughout Asia. At Thailand’s Chulalongkorn University structures are already in place to train secondary level educators on specific “EU modules” and could provide a benchmark.

5. The Role of EU Member States

It was discussed that the role played by EU Member States can hinder the ability of the EU to communicate a clear strategy to Asian partners as e.g. bilateral summits with EU Member States are given higher profile in the media because heads of states or government are more newsworthy public figures. In that sense the EU Member States undercut EU attempts to build a consolidated image throughout the Asian region. Furthermore, in the Indian context the parallel engagement of the British Council, the Alliance Française and of the Goethe-Institut deflects attention from the EU, making it difficult to communicate the EU as a coherent actor. It was also felt that existing member states’ cultural/educational institutes should promote the EU in unison. The establishment of an EU Cultural House to complement the member states institutes was recommended.

6. Coherence

As the EU cannot speak as one entity the EU is not easily communicable and it is difficult for the EU to raise its visibility. Discussions focussed on the apparent lack of a coherent strategy and communicative processes of the EU throughout Asia. With the help of the European External Action Service (EEAS), EU-Asia relations need to be simplified and consolidated. It was recommended that the EU should create clearer sub-regional strategies to enhance its image in the region. The coherence of the EU’s relations with ASEAN is unclear in terms of the strategy towards ASEAN (preference for bilateral relations) and the mechanism to deal with ASEAN. In addition a coherent strategy needs
to be put in place in relation to South Asia in order to create the mechanisms for greater co-operation.

7. The Role of the European Delegations

The discussions centred on the challenges facing the European Delegations and especially the lack of a coherent mechanism to reach out to local media and stakeholders in a given Asian country. Furthermore, Member States see the Delegations as serving their needs abroad and thus do not adequately support the Delegations’ work. Often the outreach is poor as it centres on English language media, which is read mostly by expatriates and elites in some cases. Research on elite opinion showed that many Asian elites were simply not aware of the existence of the delegations. Those familiar with the delegations urged them to do more to promote cooperation in the areas of commerce and education to increase their profile. Media elites expressed an interest in the Delegations’ work should they offer tailored news to them. As each Delegation now has a local language website and also does provide local language press releases the role of the Delegations is expected to increase the visibility of the EU. Yet, it was argued that some Delegations are too small and under-resourced and do not provide sufficient analysis on the EU and news for media agencies. In other cases, the Delegation press office may be inefficient in reaching out to the media or media seminars are organised but are poorly attended as the vernacular press has little interest in foreign affairs.

8. The Role of the European External Action Service (EEAS)

The Treaty of Lisbon opens the way for the establishment of a European diplomatic service. The impact of the incoming EEAS was discussed in terms of strengthening the message of the EU throughout Asia with specific reference made to the use of existing expertise and relationships to heighten EU visibility and the outreach of the Delegations. The EEAS can provide a toolkit for more consolidated diplomatic relations but the Action Service will need to put in place the right strategy and mechanisms across the Asian region. For this to happen it will be crucial that experienced Member States’ ambassadors with country/region specific expertise will be selected.

9. Inter-regional Relations

The participants’ discussions focused on the role of the EU in supporting regional mechanisms for cooperation and integration in Asia. The potential of the EU to assist regions in Asia with the tools for further integration was indentified as a common trend. However, the EU needs to be more sensitive to the specific requirements of the different subregions. South Asia represents one of the least integrated regions in the world and presents a major challenge to the EU in promoting the development of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The EU should make use of its observer status, which should be in turn recognised more appropriately by SAARC. The EU should furthermore become more engaged in supporting the integration of East Asia, e.g. via the East Asia Summit in which the EU is seeking observer status, and of North East Asia as greater regional integration among China, Japan and Korea presents huge potential in terms of the region’s stability and trade development. At the same time it was argued that seen from an ASEAN perspective the EU is too forceful and does not listen to the specific requirements represented by the diversity within ASEAN. The EU should take a different approach in order to overcome the “stumbling blocks” of human rights, democratisation and development. The role of ASEM was highlighted as a unique platform for both regions (and sub-regions) to promote closer ties and deeper integration between the EU and Asia.
10. EU-Asian FTAs and PCAs

Discussions centred on ongoing and potential EU Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) with its Asian partners, citing that these mechanisms were not flexible enough and would need to reflect EU strategy towards specific countries/regional bodies. EU negotiations with ASEAN on PCAs/FTAs were discussed, in particular the need for the EU to change tactics from a bi-regional to a bilateral approach as the EU strategy towards ASEAN became hindered by the debate on human rights and democratic values (as well as intractable trade-related differences). Discussions with regard to South Asia centred on the failure of the EU in not focusing its strategy on bilateral agreements and mechanisms to build on the opportunity presented by the existing strength of trade, investment and technological transfers from the EU in the region. In the East Asian context, the FTA between the EU and South Korea was hailed for meeting the shared interests providing export growth, whereas Chinese and Japanese expectations were not met, neither in a region-based nor bilateral FTA. It was recommended that the EU should simplify potential FTAs and PCAs taking a stronger network diplomacy stance while focusing on regional agreements rather than bilateral agreements. The EU should also consider more flexible mechanisms, as PCAs are standardised templates, they do not fully reflect specific EU strategies and the needs of its Asian partners.

Key Recommendations

- The EU should concentrate its relations with Asia on issues of high mutual interest such as climate change and energy security, population growth and migration, development policy (including remittances), international crime and terrorism
- The EU should promote the symbols of the EU to increase its profile to the Asian public
- The EU should promote greater harmonisation of immigration policy among member countries to improve potential mobility of skilled labour and students from Asia.
- The EU should provide greater support for the Erasmus Mundus programme and implement “EU modules” in secondary schools in Asia
- EU member states should promote information on the EU through existing cultural/educational institutions such as the British Council, Goethe-Institut and Alliance Française
- The EU should create clearer sub-regional strategies to enhance its relations within Asia
- EU delegation should focus primarily on promoting commerce and education cooperation with the continued use of local language resources in order to heighten their profile.
- The incoming European External Action Service (EEAS) should incorporate experienced member state ambassadors/diplomats with strong country/region specific expertise to promote the EU throughout Asia.
- The EU needs to be more sensitive to overcome various sub-regional “stumbling blocks” such as human rights, democratisation and development.
- The Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) and Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) of the EU should be more flexible, reflect specific EU strategies and focus on the regional aspect rather than bilateral agreements.
About the Europe-Asia Policy Forum

The Europe-Asia Policy Forum (EUforAsia) is designed to target relevant stakeholders in Asia-Europe affairs and policy-making with information on contemporary issues regarding EU-Asia. The briefing series is part of the EU-Asia Policy Forum that aims to enhance EU-Asia cooperation and awareness on issues of mutual interest such as sustainable development, regional integration, governance and other hot topics. Main partners are the International Institute of Asian Studies (IIAS), the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) and the Singapore Institute for International Affairs (SIIA), in cooperation with the European Policy Center (EPC).

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