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Bridging Asia-Europe Relations

Shared Challenges and Opportunities

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Assessment of EU Perception in East Asia: 2006–2022



Suetyi Lai and Jiewen Ye

Abstract This chapter includes horizontal and longitudinal comparisons of the external images of the EU in three Northeast Asian countries, China, Japan and South Korea, in pre-crisis as well as in-crisis periods. It identifies the impacts of the various crises hitting the EU in the past one-and-a-half decades on the external image of the EU, hence, on the Union’s strategic partnership with its three East Asian strategic partners. The findings included a deteriorated image of the EU as an economic powerhouse and international actor during the Eurozone debt crisis years which has recently regained in the 2021/2022 data. Among the three Asian partners, Japan holds a more in-depth and acknowledging perception of the EU, while South Korea shows relatively more indifference. Meanwhile, the EU perception in China is complicated by the various frictions in the recent years.

Keywords EU perception · Crises · EU-China · EU-Japan · EU-Korea

1 Introduction

2024 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of “Towards a New Asia Strategy” by the European Union (EU). This strategy, NAS, signified the EU member states’ attempt to re-engage with countries in Asia under a new collective identity as the EU, so as to distinguish from the colonial past. Its interests lied first on economic relations, followed by politics and security, which served as an indication of the importance attached to Asia by the then EU. This chapter determines to, first, identify changes in the EU’s relations with three major Asian countries in the past three decades. Second, it takes an outside-in approach to assess the result of the EU’s

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engagement with Asia. This analysis also took note of the changing geopolitical context which has influenced the EU-Asia relations especially in the recent decade.

Regarding the approach, NAS noted that the EU had engaged in bilateral cooperation with individual countries in Asia as a traditional practice, while advocating for the complementary use of regional and multilateral approaches. It identified Japan as the most established and like-minded partner of the EU. Japan was the first Asian country to establish official diplomatic relations with the then European Communities (EC), in 1959. An EC delegation was opened in Tokyo in 1974, also the first one in Asia. Moreover, Japan has been the first Asian country to hold annual summit with the EC, since 1991, as well as to attain strategic partner status with the EU. Therefore, this chapter examines how Japan, as a crucial partner of the EU, perceives and receives the EU, as a benchmark for the Union's relations with Asia.

In 2001, the EU released its second Asia policy paper as an update to the NAS. In this document, the concept of "Asia" was broadened to include "Australasia" (Australia and New Zealand), although it received significantly less attention compared to the "traditional" Asia regions especially Northeast Asia. Among individual countries, Japan, China and India were the top three focal points. Although the document noted that Japan was the EU's second-largest export market and political partner, it was no longer indicated to be EU's closest Asian partner. Section 4.3 outlined the EU's action plans in different Asian regions, devoting an entire page to China, whereas only a half page was dedicated to Japan and another half page to the Korean peninsula.

Apart from the aforementioned policy papers addressing Asia as a whole, the EU has issued a considerable number of documents focusing on individual Asian countries. For example, it published its first two policy papers on China in 1995 and 1998 respectively. Then, from 2001 to 2019, the EU issued another seven policy papers on China, including "A maturing partnership – shared interests and challenges in EU-China relations" (COM (2003) 533 final) which established the bilateral strategic partnership, as well as the "EU-China Strategic Outlook" (JOIN (2019) 5 final) which re-defined China as a simultaneously a partner, an economic competitor and a systemic rival. There has yet been any new China policy after this "Strategic Outlook" published by the EU since 2019.

In the past decade, some observers have criticised the EU for focusing too much on China in its Asia relation, therefore overlooking other important actors in the region (van der Geest, 2006; Small, 2010; Youngs, 2015). Unlike the case of China, very few policy documents of the EU were found devoted to its policy towards Japan or South Korea. The only two such policy papers found by the author of this book chapter were "Europe and Japan: the next steps", a communication from the Commission to the Council released in 1995, and a Commission Working Document on Japan (SEC (99) 524 final) issued in 1999. The only such policy paper on South Korea (COM (98) 714 final 1998.) was published in 1998. Meanwhile, it was South Korea which was the first in Asia to sign a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the EU, in 2010. The EU-Korea FTA was also the first new generation FTAs of the EU. Accordingly, this chapter employs comparative approach and compares the EU-Japan relationship with the Union's relationship with China and South Korea.

Since the publication of NAS and the proliferation of exchanges between the EU and its Asian partners in the 1990s, research on EU-Asia relations has also multiplied. Dent (1999) analysed the EU-East Asia economic relationship. Ravi et al. (2004) recorded the social-cultural interactions between Asia and Europe. Robles (2004) explored the inter-regional EU-ASEAN interactions from political and economic perspectives. Also from an inter-regional perspective, Bersick et al. (2006) investigated the Asia-Europe Meeting process in a global context. Wiessala (2007) provided an analysis of EU-Asia cooperation through the lens of human right issues. Balme and Bridges (2008) discussed the EU-Asia interactions at bilateral, multi-lateral and inter-regional levels.

The scope of research expanded to the EU perception in Asia. Since 2002, the research team of National Centre for Research on Europe at University of Canterbury has explored how the EU is perceived externally (Chaban et al., 2007; Chaban et al., 2009; Holland & Chaban, 2014; Chaban & Holland, 2019).¹ The team's "EU in the eyes of Asia-Pacific" project has identified and traced changes of the EU's external images in third countries, including China, Japan and South Korea. Until 2022, the project built a substantial and unique primary dataset which enables the research of this book chapter.

From the project's substantial dataset, Chaban et al. (2009) used the media analysis and public survey data from Japan and South Korea. They showed that in the 2000s Japan and South Korea only regarded the EU as a distant and marginal international actor, whose prominence was far lower than the US. Moreover, the Japanese and Korean general publics valued mainly the importance of the EU as a big market and trade partner to their respective country.

Lai and Zhang (2013) focused on the data from China. Through comparison between the 2006–2007 and 2011 dataset, they found that China's media and national elites perceived the EU mostly as an economic and political actor both prior to—and after—the outbreak of the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis. Nevertheless, their longitudinal comparison showed that the Eurozone debt crisis had jeopardised the image of the EU and Eurozone in China.

Yoon and Lai (2015) conducted also a cross-country comparison among China, Japan and South Korea, which was an identical choice with this book chapter. From the data collected in 2011 and 2012, they found that the East Asian media portrayed the EU firstly as economic and secondly as a political actor. Its perceived economic might was discounted after the outbreak of Eurozone crisis, while internal divisions among the member states on how to handle the crisis were underscored.

Another example of cross-country comparative study using the "EU in the eyes of Asia-Pacific" project was Elgström et al. (2013) which demonstrated the leader and great power roles of the EU in a number of policy areas, while pointing out that its image varies between regions, and even from one country to another. They argued that different experiences in individual countries contributed to the different image of

¹ About the research of the National Centre for Research on Europe, see also <https://www.canterbury.ac.nz/research/about-uc-research/research-groups-and-centres/national-centre-for-research-on-europe/ncre-research>.

the Union. Chaban et al. (2013) further followed up this argument and examined the EU's external perception in the energy domain in the BRICS countries. They showed that the BRICS countries were mainly interested in the EU's actions and norms in the energy field which was related directly to their internal policies. The article of Lai and Shi (2017) also focused on the external image of EU's energy actions. Yet, they limited their focus to one case-study of China. They found that the EU had not been seen as a key partner by China, while the Union's role as a norm-exporter in advocating sustainability in the use of energy was recognised.

The most recent published work from the "EU in the eyes of Asia-Pacific" project included an examination of how four strategic partners of the EU in Asia (the three Northeast Asian countries in this chapter plus India) perceived the EU as strategic partner by Lai et al. (2019), as well as an assessment of any capability-expectation gap in the EU's relations with four Asian countries (the three Northeast Asian countries in this chapter plus Indonesia) by Lai et al. (2023). Both articles included the three cases of China, Japan and South Korea, yet, they did not compare across time. Hence, this research carried further such research to include data from 2006 to 2021.

Following this introduction section of the research background, questions and purposes is the explanation of the research methods. Then, an overview of the Union's relations with each of China, Japan and South Korea helps contextualising this research. The key add-value of this chapter is the cross-country comparison of the EU perceptions in three East Asian countries as well as a comparison across time. Lastly, the conclusion section summarizes the key findings.

2 Research Methods

The abovementioned "EU in the eyes of Asia-Pacific" database provides rich first-hand data for this research to conduct an empirical analysis of how China, Japan and South Korea have perceived the EU in the past one-and-a-half decades. The horizontal comparison across three countries and longitudinal comparison across time are mainly qualitative, but would be complemented by some descriptive statistics.

China, Japan and South Korea are notably the EU's most important partners in Asia, as well as significant powers in today's world. They are active members of multilateral cooperative platforms and international organisations namely the G20, APEC, UN and WTO. These East Asian countries are not only major economies in the world but also growing in global political prominence, amid the raising geo-political importance of the Indo-Pacific.

The timeframe is set to cover the most recent one-and-a-half decade from 2006 to 2022. This period witnessed a list of big events in the EU namely the Lisbon Treaty from its discussion to implementation, the Eurozone debt crisis, the further worsening of relationship with Russia after the Crimea Crisis in 2014, the refugee crisis in 2015, the Brexit referendum and actual Brexit in 2016 and 2020 respectively, the outbreak of Covid19, as well as the Russia-Ukraine hot war since February 2022.

While 2006 was a rather “uneventful” year for the EU, it served as a snapshot of the pre-crisis EU.

For the media analysis part, the most popular and influential daily in each of China, Japan and South Korea were monitored in 2006, 2011, 2015, 2020 and 2021 (Table 1). To balance the interval for comparison across time, the 2020 data will be excluded. As research design and human resources varied in different research phases, the exact monitor time length differed and are listed in Table 1.

These nation-wide popular dailies are not only selected for their wide readership and high representativeness, but also for their agenda-setting and education roles for the publics. In their examination of the agenda-setting function of mass media, McCombs and Shaw (1972) distinguished newspapers from other mass media like television or magazine. They pointed out that newspaper had more space than television and timeliness than magazine, yet dailies still could only filter out over four-fifths of the collected materials. Accordingly, the news stories included in the publication inform what the public is told to learn about, especially for foreign news as most of the general public lack direct oversea access. For this research, news stories which mentioning at least one of the set keywords—European Union, the five core EU institutions, Euro and Brexit (in the 2021 round)—were collected and formed that EU-related news dataset. These news items collected from the popular dailies showed what stories of the EU were considered important or interesting enough for the respective public. In other words, such selected information shaped the external perception of the EU. The sample size was 3214 news articles.

Also notable is that these collected news articles were not only written for their respective local readers, i.e. the Chinese public in the case of *People’s Daily*, the Japanese public and the South Korean public in the case of *Yomiuri Shimbun* and *Chosun Ilbo* respectively, a large majority of them were also written by “local” writers. Between 70% and 99% of the collected news items were signed by local journalists, columnists, scholars, or news agencies. This high dependence on local sources further confirmed the outside-in approach of this research (Table 2).

For the elite level, another research method was employed. In-depth interviews with key-informants in the three Northeast Asian countries were conducted in 2007,

Table 1 Newspapers and no. of EU-related news articles collected in different years

Country	Daily	Pre-crisis	In-crisis		
		2006	2011	2015	2021
		January–December	January–June	April–June	March–June
China	<i>People’s Daily</i>	690	497	138	134
Japan	<i>Yomiuri Shimbun</i>	247 ^a (July–December)	269	178	311
South Korea	<i>Chosun Ilbo</i>	342	38	121	249

^aDue to human resource problems in 2006, the Japanese data collection started only in July

Table 2 Percentage of the EU-related news written by local writers or local news wires

	2006	2011	2015	2021
<i>People's Daily</i>	70%	99%	96%	99%
<i>Yomiuri Shimbun</i>	74%	78%	75%	81%
<i>Chosun Ilbo</i>	76%	97%	93%	77%

Table 3 Number of elites interviewed in each country in different years

	Pre-crisis	In-crisis		
	2007	2011	2015	2022
China	31	60	11	20
Japan	32	40 ^a	11	20
South Korea	27	40	11	20

^aSome of these interviews in Japan were conducted in early 2012

2011, 2015 and 2022. The interviews were conducted in semi-structure and face-to-face formats. The interviewees were trained native-speaking. As conditions varied across different phases of the research project, the target number of respondents were not identical (see Table 3). The 323 interviews provided comprehensive and informative which were analysed qualitatively in this chapter. They covered from a pre-crisis time (in 2007) to various crises of the EU (in 2011, 2015 and 2022).

3 Overviewing EU's Relationship with China, Japan and South Korea

In Asia, the EU has identified Japan as the first partner to establish official relationship as well as strategic partnership with. The then European Communities (EC) established official diplomatic relations with Japan in 1959, with South Korea in 1963 and with China in 1975. Its external presence, the European Commission delegations, also opened first in Tokyo, in 1974. It was not until another decade later that the Commission opened such delegation offices in Beijing and Seoul (in 1988 and 1989 respectively). Accordingly, Japan was a nature first Asian partner of the EU to hold annual summit. The EU-China annual summit started in 1998. The first EU-South Korea summit did not take place until 2002. Japan, along with Russia, the US and Canada were the first countries to be granted "strategic partner" status by the EU. China received such status in 2003, while South Korea was upgraded to a strategic partner of the EU in 2010.

Notably, from the perspective of these three Asian countries, the relationships with the EU have been incomparable to those with the US. Japan and South Korea are treaty allies of the US, which has run military bases in both countries for decades, and

perceive the US as security provider. For China, relationship with the US is also core but not as allies. The two world's largest economies and powers has been in strategic competition, if not rivalry, since 2018. The China-US relationship is regarded as the most consequential bilateral relationship in today's world.

Regarding institutionalisation, cooperation and dialogue mechanisms of the EU are more advanced with Japan and China. Yet, South Korea stood out as the first FTA partner with the EU in the whole Asia, the EU-Korea FTA was signed in 2010 and applied since 2011. Only in 2013 that the EU began its FTA negotiations with Japan FTA and the negotiations of a comprehensive agreement on investment with China. The EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) was formally signed in July 2018 and entered into force in February 2019. It covered close to 30% of global GDP, representing one of the biggest FTAs which the EU has achieved. In January 2024, the EU and Japan, after a year of negotiation, signed the protocol to include provisions on cross-border data flows in their bilateral EPA. Similarly, the Union and South Korea launched the negotiations for a digital trade agreement in October 2023. In relative terms, China lagged behind Japan and South Korea. The EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment was concluded in December 2020, after 35 rounds of rather difficult negotiation. Shortly after such conclusion, the EU imposed sanctions on China in March 2021. China reacted by imposing counter-sanctions on the Union. Subsequently, the European Parliament, in May 2021, passed a resolution to pause the ratification of the bilateral investment deal with China.

Additionally, in the Japanese case, in parallel to the EU-Japan EPA, the EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) was also signed in 2018 and entered into force in 2019. This binding agreement does not only serve as the first-ever SPA between the EU and Japan, but also the EU's only one in Asia thus far. Japan was also the first partner to sign a green alliance with the EU, in May 2021. South Korea had signed a Framework Agreement with the EU in 2010. It entered into force in 2014 and was the first agreement of this kind between the EU and an Asian country. Yet the EU-Japan SPA surpassed it in terms of political weight.

A briefing published by the Library of the European Parliament (Cîrlig 2012) identified five categories of the EU's strategic partners. China (along with India, Russia and Brazil) were recognised as "pivotal partners", whereas Japan and South Korea (alongside Canada) as "natural allies". Japan and South Korea were considered also as like-minded countries with which the EU has reached a high level of cooperation in multilateral fora (such as the UN). The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, released in 2021, aimed to deepen the cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners amid intensifying geopolitical competition and other rising challenges in the region. Japan was mentioned 22 times in this document, while China and South Korea were mentioned 18 times and 14 times respectively. By and large, among the Northeast Asian countries Japan has been a closer strategic partner of the EU in terms of both length and depth.

While the EU's relations with its East Asian partners have always been economic-oriented, it has pertained a place among the top three trade partners and major sources investment for China, Japan and South Korea. In recent years, the EU has become a key destination for investment from China and Japan. All three Asian countries

have enjoyed a trade surplus in trade with the EU for a long time, except the Korean case in which the trade has been rather balanced one since 2011, the year when the EU-Korea FTA came into force. In recent years, the EU-Japan trade also became more balanced. The huge trade deficits of EU in merchandise trade with China have caused frictions, namely EU's anti-subsidy tariffs against electric vehicle imported from China.

As shown in this section, the relationships of the EU with the three Northeast Asian countries have similarities, such as their trade-oriented debut and shadow of the US, clear differences exist, namely the EU-Japan relationship has been longer and more institutionalised. Moreover, Japan and South Korea are listed by the EU as like-minded partners while China was sometimes listed by the EU as a systemic rival due to differing values. The following empirical analysis examines whether these three external partners of the EU converge or diverge in perceiving the EU.

4 Empirical Analysis

4.1 How Important Is the EU?

This empirical analysis starts with the 3214 pieces of news articles collected from the three Asian popular dailies in four different periods between 2006 and 2021. Figure 1 displays the monthly average appearance of the EU. Although *People's Daily* of China paid the highest attention in the EU in 2006, such attention has deteriorated across time. In the 2021 period, its reportage of the EU was the least. In Japan, there was a stable increase of interest in reporting the EU by *Yomiuri*, the case of *Chosun Ilbo* of South Korea was similar to *Yomiuri* except in 2011.

For the decade between 2006 and 2015, the popular dailies in China and Japan both paid more attention to follow news about the EU than their South Korean

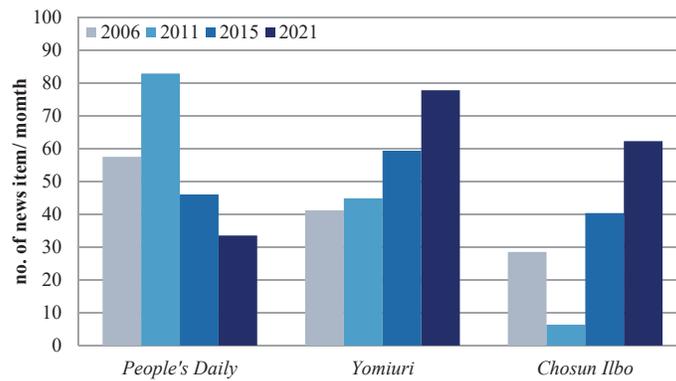


Fig. 1 Monthly average of EU appearance in the three Asian popular dailies

counterpart. In the most recent round of the media analysis, *People’s Daily* only paid half as much attention to the EU as its Japanese and Korean counterparts. The data collection period of 2021 ranged from March to June. On 22 March 2021, the EU, alongside the US, Canada and the UK, imposed sanctions on China for Xinjiang human right issues. Within a day, China returned with counter-sanctions, contending that the accusation was founded on lies and false information. This marked a tough of China’s relationship with the EU. As Lai et al. (2023) pointed out, *People’s Daily* preferred reporting achievements and positive stories of China, applying also to China’s relations with the EU. The 2021 data collection period was first occupied with the sanction-exchange saga, then with the European Parliament’s decision to halt the ratification procedure of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment. These were not achievements or positive stories for the *People’s Daily*. High-level leader visits, which would contribute to the reportage in *People’s Daily*, also paused.

Overall, the EU has secured its visibility in the three East Asian countries, appearing at least more than one news item in each popular daily every day. In the most recent sample of 2021, it sustained two appearances in South Korea’s *Chosun Ilbo*, and almost three in *Yomiuri*, reflecting a stronger international presence of the EU.

Japan has not only increased the reporting space for the EU but also increased the depth (Fig. 2). One-third of the news in 2021 framed the EU as a major actor, while another quarter presented it as a secondary actor. On the contrary, three-fifths of the 2006 news items featured the EU merely as a minor actor. In comparison, the centrality of the EU pertained similar level in South Korea, with half of the news articles featured the EU only in the sideline, except the case in 2015. In *People’s Daily*, the proportion of the EU as a major actor increased steadily from 2006 to 2015. Yet, it dropped visibly in 2021.

This increased recognition of the EU in the Japanese and Korean media were echoed to some extent in their elite interviews. In the 2007 dataset, when asked to

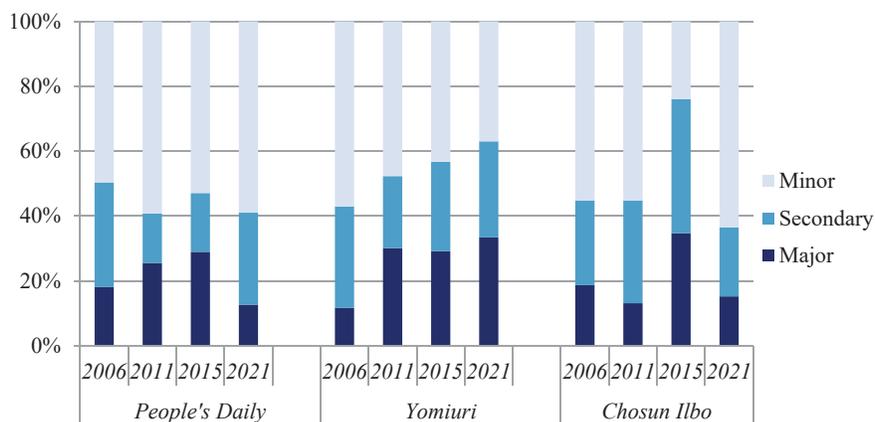


Fig. 2 Centrality of the EU in new stories

Table 4 Asian elites' rating of importance of the EU

	Pre-crisis	In-crisis		
	2007	2011	2015 ^a	2022
China	4.2	4.2	–	4.1
Japan	4.0	3.8	–	4.1
South Korea	3.3	3.7	–	3.5

^aDue to different research design in the 2015 phase, this question was not used

rate the importance of the EU to their respective countries on a scale from 1 to 5, the result in Japan was 4.0 and that in South Korea was 3.3. In the 2011 round, the average in Japan dropped to 3.8 and then rose to 4.1 in 2022. In South Korea, 2011 was the year when the EU-Korea FTA entered into force, which witnessed the highest rating (3.7) of importance of the EU by the Korean elites. Although it dropped to 3.5 in 2022, this was still higher than 3.3 as in 2007. In comparison, Chinese elites had given the EU higher rating of importance than their Japanese or Korean counterparts. Despite the Chinese elites echoed *People's Daily* in viewing the prominence of the EU to China to decrease, it was a slight one from 4.2 to 4.1 (Table 4).

As a follow up question, the interviewees were also asked to rate the prominence of other key global players namely the US, China and Russia. In all three countries, in every phase of this project, the rating of the US topped. For instance, in 2022, Japanese elites gave the US a full mark of 5, while their Chinese and Korean counterparts gave the US high marks of 4.7 and 4.9 respectively. The Chinese elites also regarded the Russia as more important than the EU with a rating of 4.3. The Korean elites and Japanese elites rated China higher than the EU, with ratings of 4.6 and 4.5 respectively.

A business elite from China interviewed in 2007 precisely summarised, “I think that to China, the relationship with America is definitely the most important one. After that comes the relationship with Russia, the EU and Japan. Those four are all influential parties in the world political and economic fields”.

A business elite from Japan interviewed in 2015 expressed, “From a geopolitical viewpoint, it is the US, not the EU, that matters the most for Japan”. He added that the EU itself was part of the reason, “it does seem to me that the EU is much more interested in China than in Japan”. His Korean counterparts listed the EU's weakness in military and security terms as reasons, “the EU has less influence on Asia in the global political and security context, because it does not have military bases”.²

² A Korean civil society elite interviewed in Seoul in 2015.

4.2 Where Is the EU?

Concerning the whereabouts of the EU, all Asian countries naturally prioritised their respective bilateral relationship with the EU, the Chinese case even more so than the Japanese and Korean ones. Its attention to the EU had high local-hook, i.e. *People’s Daily* published news stories of the EU dealing directly with China, or doing something in China. *Yomiuri* stood in the opposite end, reported the EU more “at home”, i.e. inside the EU. Only in 2021 that *Yomiuri* reported more about the EU “in third place”, which meant the domesticity of the news story was neither in Japan nor inside the EU. Indeed, all three popular dailies reported more of the EU in third places in 2006, for instance in the Middle-East as a conflict mediator. The outbreak of various crises drew attention to internal EU problems namely debt crisis in 2011 and refugee crisis in 2015 (Fig. 3).

In 2021, the EU was released from its internal crises. The episode of sanction-exchange with China drew a lot of attention not only from China, but also China’s neighbours. This contributed to the “local” news in *People’s Daily*, and “EU in a third place” news in *Yomiuri* and *Chosun Ilbo*. Japan and South Korea showed growing concerns about regional stability, amid North Korean resumption of missile tests, cross-strait tensions and strained China-US relations. They do recognise a role for the EU in the region. As in the 2022 round of interviews, there were expectations from the Japanese elites on the EU’s Indo-Pacific Strategy, while some Korean elites called the EU to help maintaining peace in Korean peninsula.

In general, the EU had been presented as a global actor by the East Asian popular dailies. Despite it had to “stay home” more in 2011 and 2015 owing to various internal crises, its external image became international again in the 2021 sample. The interviewed elites shared such view that the EU had been a recognisable international actor. A Japanese diplomat interviewed in 2022 gave a representative quote, “the EU

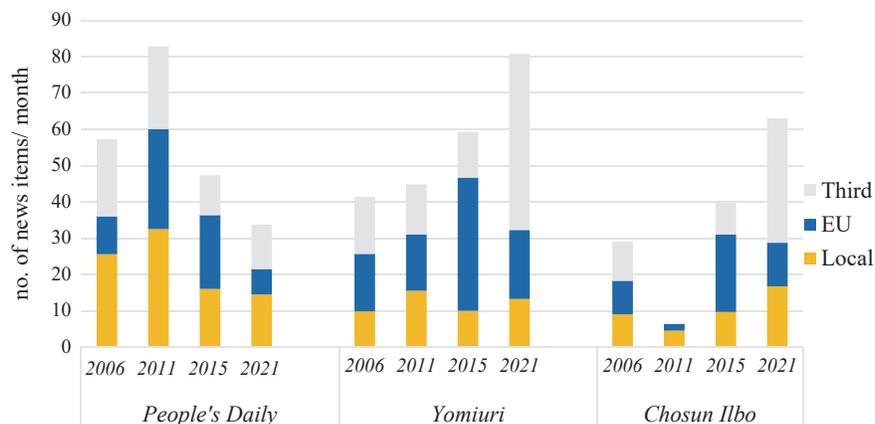


Fig. 3 Domesticity of the EU-related news

is one of the global powers, in the sense that it represents a high proportion of global GDP. And in that sense, I think the EU is a global power, but this share is also decreasing. Now, the EU is being tested". Apart from the physical presence of the EU, this media analysis went further to examine the actorness of the EU.

4.3 What Does the EU Do?

For the news items in which the EU took a major or secondary actor, the dataset recorded also the EU's actions in the news stories as well as how they were evaluated by the Asian newspapers. The news items framed the EU as a minor actor were usually sidelining the EU in one or two sentences unrelated to the main story line of that news. In these cases, the EU was either not mentioned as taking any action or any action with significance. Therefore, this part of analysis filtered out these cases.

Four leading action-frames from our empirical research have always been political, economic, social and environmental. For easier illustration, this chapter grouped the EU's news stories in other policy fields such as development and technology into "others" in Fig. 4. Overall, *Yomiuri* framed the EU the most frequently as political actor, while *People's Daily* had balanced between politics and economy. The framing in *Chosun Ilbo* varied rather greatly over the different research phases.

In 2006, the EU appeared most frequently as a political actor in all three Asian popular dailies. In *Yomiuri*, two-thirds of the EU's action was about politics, especially external politics. The EU was reported as an active peace promotor in the Middle-East, in issues namely the then Iran nuclear crisis. In *People's Daily* and *Chosun Ilbo*, half of the EU actions in 2006 were also in politics. They as well focused on external political actions much more than internal EU politics. While the

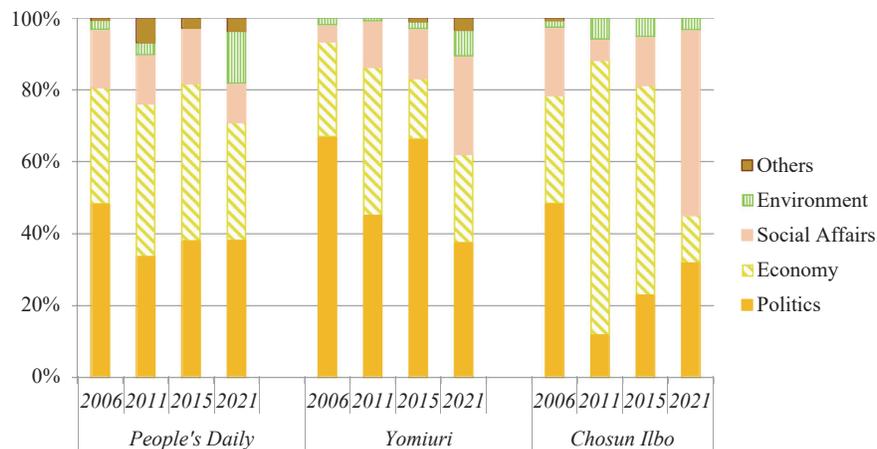


Fig. 4 Framing of the EU's action in news stories

EU's activeness in peace promotion in the Middle-East was one of the foci, *People's Daily* and *Chosun Ilbo* paid high attention on EU's diplomatic interaction with China and the Union's actions against North Korean human right issues respectively.

In 2011, more attention was given to the Eurozone debt crisis and the divisions between the EU member states in how to overcome the financial turmoil. This resulted in dilution of the internationally active political actor role of the EU. The once economic powerhouse Europe was then reported as a declining economy. In 2015, Greek financial problems still attracted attention of the three Asian newspapers, especially *Chosun Ilbo*. While *People's Daily* and *Chosun Ilbo* continued to report the Greek debt crisis in economic frame, *Yomiuri* had taken another angle. It focused on the conflicts and conflict-resolution within Greece, between Greece and other EU member states, as well as between Greece and Brussels. Another political issue attracted attention of *Yomiuri* was the preparation of Brexit referendum in the UK in 2015. The Japanese popular daily paid higher attention on internal EU crises than its Chinese and Korean counterparts. A significant part of reporting space of *People's Daily* was devoted to the EU-China relationship, as the two celebrated the 40th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic tie in 2015 and there were numerous high-level meetings and visits. The Japanese case, again, stood out in the three monitored dailies here with the highest recognition of the EU's activeness in politics.

Social issue had been a far-behind third visible action-frame in the 2006, 2011 and 2015 samples. In 2021, the Covid19 pandemic boosted the number of stories in which the EU acted in health care issues, particular in *Chosun Ilbo*, then followed by *Yomiuri*. The fourth most visible action-frame of the EU was found to be environment. In spite of environment protection concerns and green transition being top priorities of the EU, the three monitored dailies only reported occasionally on the Union's green action.

In terms of the prominence and international presence of the EU, the above sub-sections showed convergence between the media portray and elite perception. Yet, in this sub-section about policy fields, there were divergences. Among the interviewed elites, economic rather than political role of the EU was in lead. The Asian elites were asked in which area did they view the EU as a great power, the most common response was the EU was economically great. A Japanese media elite said, "Globally in terms of economic power, yes, it's true that the EU is a great power. But regarding political unity, I'm a little bit in doubt. There's no strong political power, as is the case with the US, or China, and Russia". Many interviewees shared the view that the EU has been the most successful in the area of economy as coherence among the member states had been high, while in divergences in politics weakened the Union.

The elite view of the EU also differed from the news media portrayal that the EU's actions in environment protection, promotion of values as well as regulation and standard setting were more visibly and praised. A civil-society elite from Japan told in 2015, "In overall terms, Europe has a good image: 'good Europe'. In socio-economic terms, it represents equality, caring, and social-democratic values. Protecting environment is also part of such values. Perhaps peaceful as well – not militaristic, solving conflicts in peaceful manners".

Table 5 The most frequently named area in which EU's power lied

	Pre-crisis	In-crisis		
	2007	2011	2015	2022
China	Economic			
Japan	Economic			Economic = Normative
South Korea	Economic	Economic = Environmental	Economic	

The elites had much more direct contact and experience with the EU and/or its member states than the general publics, the main readers of the popular dailies. Therefore, what the elites saw were not filtered by the news makers and were closer to the official agenda of the EU (Table 5).

4.4 How Was the EU Evaluated?

For the news articles which framed the EU as major or secondary actor, the analysis covered also the tone of the report on the EU's actions. As a general observation of the "EU in the eyes of Asia-Pacific" project, Japanese media has always maintained a neutral-tone while reporting the EU. Staying factual and objective in news reporting are professional practice in journalism. Furthermore, expressing strong personal emotion in public is considered impolite in Japanese culture, accordingly news writers would avoid as much emotion as possible. Japanese media embraced such emotionless prudence while making news. The EU-related reportage in *Yomiuri* from 2006 to 2022 were no exception. Similarly, the South Korea media have been found being the most critical of the EU than its other Asian counterparts. As displayed in Fig. 5, negatively toned EU news reports outnumbered the positively toned ones in all sampling years in *Chosun Ilbo*.

Contrary to *Yomiuri*, EU-related reportage in *People's Daily* were highly polarised, especially in 2015 and 2021 (Fig. 5). *People's Daily* does not only serve as an information provider but also opinion-leader for the Chinese society, therefore, it has not been apprehensive to hiding its evaluations. Such evaluations of the EU tended to be more positive than negative, even though in 2021 the EU and China had exchanged sanctions, *People's Daily* published more news items which reported the EU in positive tone. Apart from the inevitable report of the existence of those sanctions, *People's Daily* chose to write more about China's relation with individual EU member states or the private sectors in the EU, and underlined that these constructive relations would subsequently serve as a bridge to foster EU-China partnership. This friendly attitude towards the EU contrasted to the critical South Korean media.

The criticalness was also found among the Korean elites. For instance, when asked if they view the EU as a great power or as a leader in international politics (Fig. 6), responses in South Korea were the most reluctant compared to the Chinese and Japanese cases. The answer of a civil-society elite interviewed in 2015 was

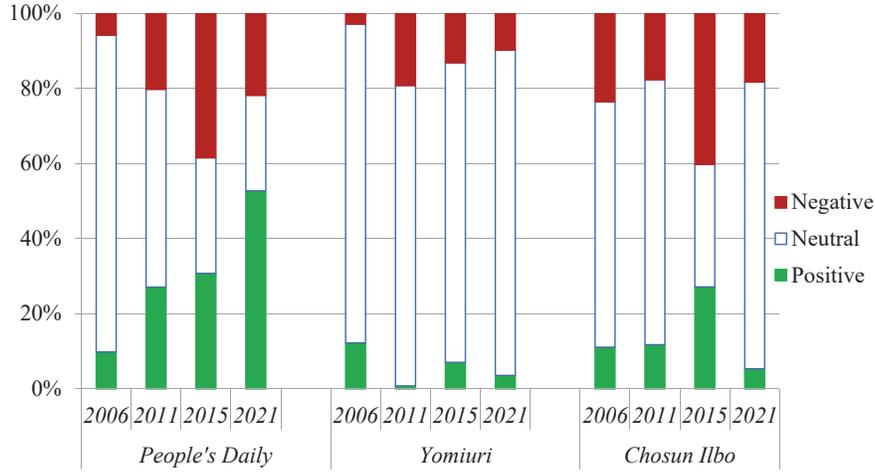


Fig. 5 Authors' tones when reporting the EU in three Asian popular dailies

representative, he said “EU has less influence on Asia rather than expected in the global political and security context, because the EU does not have military bases”. He felt that the EU has been focusing on soft security issues, such as environment and human rights and called the Union to improve “ability to be coordinated”.

Across time, there were more negativity about the EU in 2011 and 2015, in all three dailies, owing to the lingering Eurozone debt crises and related internal divisions. The refugee crisis, and discussion of the Brexit referendum in a lesser extent, in 2015 furthered heightened such negativity. Meanwhile, the celebration of the EU-China 40th anniversary in 2015 contributed to the consider amount of positively toned news articles in *People's Daily*. Positive reports about quantitative easing of the European

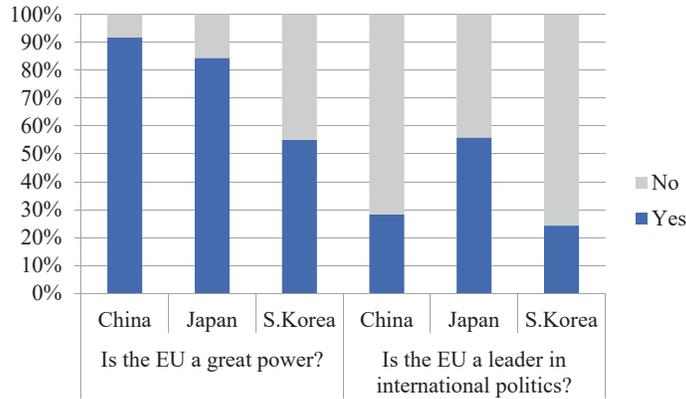


Fig. 6 Asian elites' responses about the power of the EU in 2011

Central Bank by the *Chosun Ilbo* contributed to the other end of the polarity in 2015. In the most recent phase, unsurprisingly, news about Covid19 added to the negative connotation, especially saga about the low and/or slow supply of Covid19 vaccine to the EU citizens. As mentioned above, *People's Daily* was an exceptional case in focusing more on China's exchanges and cooperation with the EU.

In terms of elites' impression of the EU, the crises also left some negative influence. In 2007, when asked to list three leading spontaneous images when thought of the EU, the top one in China was an economic power, while Euro topped in both Japan and South Korea as well as seconded in China. It had only been 5 years after the physical launch of Euro then, while not all EU member states adopted it, yet it had already become a symbol of the EU. Other images related to the integration process namely unity, union, regional integration were also high in the list.

In 2011, the answers changed. While less respondents related the EU immediately to an economic success, integration related image topped the list. In Japan and South Korea, debt crisis was the third most frequently named image. Also noteworthy was the rising attention of the Japanese elites on values like democracy and human rights in the EU. From 2011 to 2022, these values grew from the second to the first most frequently mentioned image of the EU in the eyes of Japanese elites. In China and South Korea, integration remained the leading image in 2022. Economic power returned as one of the top images of the EU, being second in China and Japan as well as third in South Korea. However, Brexit as a negative image lingered among the Chinese elites, it was the third most frequently listed spontaneous image of the EU in 2022.

In 2011 and 2015, the series internal crises from debt crisis, refugee crisis to Brexit had left an impression of an EU lacking in unity and consensus in the eyes of both news media and elites. In the 2021/2022 phase of research, this had faded.

5 Conclusions

Acknowledging that the EU's partnership with Japan has been the longest and the most institutionalised in Asia, this chapter employed empirical data in 2006, 2011, 2015 and 2021/2022 and compared the EU-Japan relationship with the Union's relationship with China and South Korea. It confirmed that as in 2021 and 2022, Japan did hold a more comprehensive perception of the EU than China and South Korea. This research also found that the interviewed Japanese elites paid more attention and resonance with the normative role and political actorness of the EU. Meanwhile, media and national elites in Japan and South Korea shared more similarities than they do with their Chinese counterparts.

China started as having the highest recognition of the EU's prominence which pertained until 2011. Such viewed importance decreased in 2015 and further so in 2021/2022. On the contrary, recognition of the EU's prominence in Japan and South Korea has increased between 2006 and 2022, especially in the Japanese case, which has been the only Asian partner of the EU with a Strategic Partnership Agreement.

A convergence among all three Asian countries was that the US has always been regarded as more important than the EU. In China, Russia was considered as more important than the EU, while Japanese and Korean perceived China as more prominent than the EU. In other words, the EU has been viewed by these crucial Asian countries at best as one of the key international players in the current world, at worst, a second-tier international player after US, China and Russia.

In terms of depth, both Japanese media and elite showed a more comprehensive understanding of the EU. They could easily recall concepts such as division of competence between the EU and its member states in different policy areas and the EU, and recent new regulations set by the EU. The EU's relation with Japan, being the longest and most institutionalised partnership in Asia, is found corresponding to the friendliness and comprehensiveness of the Union's perception in Japan when compared with the recently friction-laden EU-China relation and the economic-oriented EU-Korea relations.

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