

## *Original Paper*

# European Union's Asia Policy in the Context of Normative Connectivity

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Received: October 26, 2019 Accepted: November 20, 2019 Online Published: November 23, 2019

doi:10.22158/assc.v1n2p234

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/assc.v1n2p234>

### ***Abstract***

*Asia is a region of vital interest for the European Union (EU) in economic and in security sector. The European Union (EU) Asia policy focuses on strengthening the economic relations with the Asian Partners. European Union's Asia strategy towards can be interpreted as a balanced pursuit of strengthened political, economic cooperation and rules based connectivity with Asia. The European Union has to reinforce the mechanism in decision making with regards to the adoption of consistent strategy towards Asia. The European Union (EU) is a norm entrepreneur and exporter in such a way as the application of the norms with the international community is considered to be necessary for global governance under the spirit of inter-regionalism. The European Union is a model of regionalization in Asia and a model for promoting "normative multilateralism".*

### ***Keywords***

*European Union, Asia strategy, institutional multilateralism, normative connectivity*

## **1. Introduction**

The emergence of Asia has global significance in the European external policies. In particular, Asia covers countries stretching from Afghanistan in the west to Japan in the East and from China in the north to New Zealand in the South, plus all points between. It covers therefore those countries in South Asia, South-East Asia and North-East Asia, which would meet any common definition of Asia. This paper does not however cover certain other regions or countries which might geographically be considered as part of the wider Asia and Asia-Pacific region-Pacific Russia, Central Asia, the developing countries of the Pacific, nor the countries of the Gulf or the Near East.



**Figure 1. EU's Asia Strategy Covered Area**

*Source: europa.eu.*

This paper reviews the trend of EU's strengthened strategic approach towards Asia by examining its background factors—positive and negative—underlying EU's ambitions to move towards Asia, and discusses recently observed developments.

The main purpose is to demonstrate the effectiveness of the EU strategy towards Asia in terms of intensive influence in the area. The analysis focuses on the empirical objectives of the EU strategy in the framework of theories of International Relations. The intended outcome of the analysis is to demonstrate ways of improvement of the effectiveness of the EU Asia strategy.

In security sector, the US remains the key player in the region and the current situation is characterised by a web of bilateral security arrangements between the United States with a number of Asian countries. The EU Asia strategy is focus more on economic benefits in its approach to Asia. Moreover, from the main objectives of the EU Asia Strategy we can observe that EU's main concern is to promote the “EU social model” which is based on democracy, human rights and in general on normative issues. More theoretically, the EU as a normative power in global arena uses soft power in order to succeed economic in principal benefits through its strategy to Asia.

## **2. European Union's Engagement with Asia: Historical Background**

The post-World War II bilateral relationship between Europe and Asia has undergone several structural changes. Until the end of the Cold War at the end of 1980s the European countries, gathered in the European Community first and then in the European Union since 1993, had been predominantly preoccupied with their integration agenda, which left little energy and resources to pursue more active external relations. In the beginning of the 1990s several coincidental developments led European countries to develop a common strategy of European countries towards Asia. Having successfully completed the Single Market Program by the end of 1992, Europe was in a position to devote the necessary energy and resources to pursue more active external relations, and there is evidence of a high

priority being given to Asia. Also, the successful completion of the Uruguay Round trade talks by the beginning of 1990s, in which Europe had been clinching with the US on the liberalization of its agricultural sector was an additional motivation for Europe to pursue market expansion and strengthened presence of European firms in growing Asia. Asia, in fact, had been acknowledged as the most dynamic economic region with the potential for becoming the centre of world economic growth, which made Asia's strategic value to increase continuously since the mid-1980s.

Historically, the record of Europe has been mixed, producing imperialism and militarism by creating and spreading values such as liberty, justice, human rights, democracy, the spirit of scientific enquiry and development cooperation with the developing world. The European Union (EU) has achieved stable democratic institutions, the rule of law, respect for human rights and respect for minorities and is keen to promote a modern liberal version of democracy in countries beyond its borders—in its own interest and in theirs.

The first official Asia Strategy of the European Union was adopted in 1994. During the period 1993-1996 when the European Union had presented a number of strategic concepts to strengthen political and economic ties with East Asia, before its attention was redirected to other Asian countries: Beginning with the adoption of the Korea Strategy in 1993, the European Union (EU) successively adopted strategic policies towards Asia (1994), China (1995) and Japan (1995), as well as Southeast Asia (1996). This series of strategic concepts coincided with the two diversification needs perceived by East Asian countries, which was instrumental in launching the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in 1996. (Note 1)

With their minimal bureaucracy, avoidance of legalist mechanisms and strong commitment to the non-interference principle, Asian regional organizations present a contrast to the European Union, which is known for its extensive institutionalization and the Brussels bureaucracy. So, some Asian policymakers and analysts have generally rejected the European Union (EU) as a suitable model of Asia; instead, they have presented the ASEAN as an alternative form of regionalism, as captured in the phrase "ASEAN way" (Acharya, 2008, p. 190) (Note 2).

### **3. European Union's Asia Strategy Objectives**

The adoption of the New Asia Strategy (NAS) by the European Union (EU) was an example of this new development in the 1990s. It is also noteworthy that the European Union (EU) in its New Asia Strategy (NAS) strategy paper acknowledges the unique and predominant role of the US in the field of regional security in Asia. The 1994 Strategy paper covered South, South-East and North-East Asia and it emphasized the rapid economic changes that had taken place in the region over the previous decades, and the need to ensure an effective and proactive EU presence in the region. (European Commission 2008) (Note 3). It set the key objectives of strengthening the European Union's economic presence in the region, contributing to its political stability through a broadening of European Union (EU) political and economic relations with the region as a whole, promoting the development of the less prosperous

countries, and contributing to the spread of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. It put forward eight key priorities to be addressed, including the continued strengthening of the European Union (EU) bilateral relations, a raised profile of the European Union (EU) in Asia, support for regional cooperation (with a view to enhancing peace and security), encouraging Asia to play a greater role in multilateral fora, ensuring open markets and a non-discriminatory business framework, encouraging the integration of state economies into the free market, contributing to sustainable development and poverty alleviation in the least prosperous countries, and the importance of ensuring a coordinated approach.

This Strategy was subsequently elaborated further for specific countries or sectors in a number of more targeted Communications, such as for example on EU's relations with China, India, ASEAN, Indonesia, the ASEM process, and on the energy and environment sectors.

The focus on EU's New Asia Strategy (NAS) is important in order to examine the changes which are taking place in EU external relations with Asia and on EU's emphasis on Asia. So, the EU's New Asia Strategy (NAS) which was first adopted in 1994 it was revised and updated in 2007, provided a timely and welcomed additional impetus to intensified EU approach towards Asia.

The original EU's New Asia Strategy (NAS) strategy identifies the Asian region as a group of most dynamic countries that have the potential to lead the 21st century world economic growth and development. Categorizing the Asian countries into three subgroups—Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia and Asian Regional organizations—the strategy paper of the European Commission (1994) elaborates on ways and modalities to promote the presence, profile and influence of Europe in Asia (Note 4).

Concerning *Regional fora*, the European Union (EU) has a longstanding relationship with South-East Asia, through partnership with ASEAN dating back to the late 1970s. The European Union (EU) seeking to be a far more comprehensive actor in Asia-rather than being limited to pure economic pursuits. The European Union (EU) could use existing channels, such as its participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) to engage in this policy exchange. The ARF in particular, with its focus on preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention, is an ideal platform for the EU to be engaged with ASEAN on these issues. (Note 5) In South Asia, the European Union (EU) has a strategic partnership with India and bilateral agreements with five major South Asian countries. Although the European Union (EU) intends to focus on bilateral relationships with South Asian countries, it considers SAARC to be a factor for internal stability in South Asia. The European Union (EU) has worked to intensify its relations with SAARC since the 1990s. The European Union (EU) has observer status since 2006, and greatly values co-operation and regional integration in South Asia. (Note 6) The European Union (EU) is convinced that ASEAN and SAARC could play a useful role in regional co-operation and dialogue. In East Asia, the ASEM process has evolved rapidly since its beginnings in 1996. The ASEM process has offered an excellent example of inter-regional cooperation,

it is within EU's overall Asia strategy to ensure that it can make progress in each of its "three pillars" (political, economic and social).

Therefore, in the region of Asia the EU considers major developments in global politics. More specifically, tensions in the transatlantic relationship between Europe and the United States arising during the Trump administration; the fragmentation caused by internal splits within the European Union, especially from Brexit; the rise of China not only as the second largest global economy the dynamics in the China-U.S. relationship and pressures to adopt positions in binary contentions over trade and security; the increasing importance of other Asian powers, notably Japan, India, and to a lesser extent ASEAN; the economic realignments driving Europe toward Asian markets; and the changes taking place in global connectivity, industry, and digital governance.

The European Union (EU) tends to extend to the rest of the world the governance through norms that it experiences within its own borders. (Note 7) Implicitly, the European Union (EU) makes the assumption that the global governance through norms is the most suitable political model for an independent world, since it constitutes a factor of equalization of power. (Laidi & Lamy, 2002). The European Union (EU) wants to exert its power through norms. As a normative power is not only a norm-making power but it is also a norm-taking power. In practical terms the European Union (EU) supports the normative basis of global governance, which could be defined as international law and at the same time European preference to norms is expressed by its commitment to multilateral institutions.

The EU Asia Strategy has an integrated, comprehensive and balanced view of the relations between the European Union (EU) and its Asian partners. This strategy has helped considerably in re-focusing on European Union's (EU's) relations with the region, but should take account of the substantial changes in both regions since then, and of the further changes which are already on the horizon. (Note 8)

In 2018, the European Union (EU) steps up its strategy for connecting Europe and Asia. The European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy adopted a Joint Communication that sets out the EU's vision for a new and comprehensive strategy to better connect Europe and Asia. (Note 9)

As a part of EU's Global Strategy, the EU Asia policy, with sustainable, comprehensive and rules-based connectivity combines a principled approach to connectivity and recognition that Asia encompasses different regions, diversity in terms of economic models and level of development. The actions of the EU Asia policy are based on Creating transport links, energy and digital networks and human connections; Offering connectivity partnerships to countries in Asia and organisations; and Promoting sustainable finance through utilising diverse financial tools. Efficient infrastructure and connections create growth and jobs and enables people and goods to move. From transport links to energy networks, people-to-people contacts to digital webs. The EU's Trans-European Transport Networks (TEN-T) are being extended to countries bordering Asia. The EU should now connect the TEN-T with networks in Asia. The EU's digital single market provides a blueprint for enhancing trade in digital services, while its

Digital4Development strategy fosters socio-economic development. The EU is willing to share experiences of creating regional, liberalised energy markets with a focus on market-driven transformation towards clean energy. EU promotes human exchanges and mobility, for example in education, research, innovation, culture and tourism. (Note 10) With a track record of a rules-based, fair and transparent internal market, the European Union is engaging with partners beyond its borders in order to promote similar approaches to sustainable connectivity.

The EU pursues bilateral connectivity partnerships such as the EU-China Connectivity Platform. At a regional level, the EU is able to draw on its experience of contributing to the enhanced connectivity and integration of various regional cooperation structures, for example in the Baltic and Black Seas, as well as with ASEAN and as part of the ASEM process. Fostering increased region-to-region cooperation in connectivity would enable the European Union to extend its sustainable and rules-based connectivity model. Finally, the EU engages with international organisations in determining the legal frameworks and concrete forms of connectivity, for example to set international standards. The World Trade Organisation, the International Energy Agency, the International Maritime Organisation and United Nations bodies are just a few examples where the European Union is working and will continue to work for sustainable and fair global practices. (Note 11)

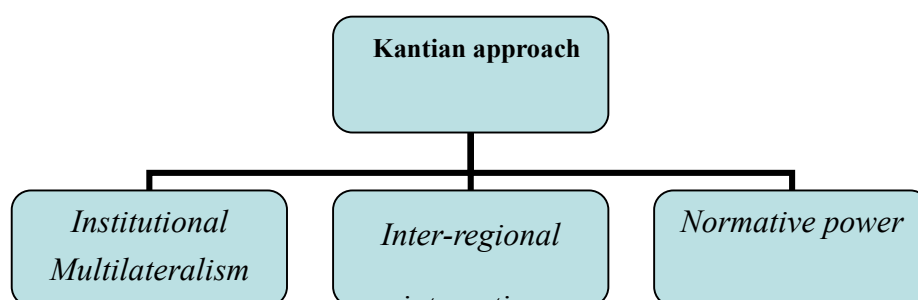
The EU focus on combining financial sources from international financial institutions, multilateral development banks and the private sector to ensure sustainable domestic and international finance for connectivity, while ensuring transparency and a level playing field for businesses. A comprehensive approach to investment financing, pioneered in Europe by the European Fund for Strategic Investments, as well as outside the EU through specific geographical investment facilities, has successfully leveraged investments for infrastructure and connectivity. Combined with the EU's proposals for reinforced external action under the next EU Multi-annual Financial Framework (2021-2027), the potential for additional intelligent, innovative and multi-dimensional investment financing in and towards Asia is significant. (Note 12)

A better connected Europe and Asia through transport links, energy, human and digital networks will strengthen the resilience of societies and regions, facilitate trade, promote the rules-based international order, and create avenues for a more sustainable, low-carbon future. (Note 13) (Acharya, 2008).

#### **4. EU Asia Strategy: Theoretical Perspective**

In the region of Asia there had been the dominance of the United States which Europe was either unwilling or unable to challenge. The European approach can be defined as "institutional multilateralism". Even the history of Europe's presence in Asia demonstrates that Europe always focuses on economic benefit rather than security issues in Asia. However, nowadays, EU's main focus is on normative issues on Asia such as the protection of human rights and the promotion of democracy. Inter-regionalism's assessment in different dimensions provides deeper insights into the external role of EU and the role of inter-regional interaction as a tool for EU foreign policy. It is clear that

inter-regionalism has become an increasingly important element in global governance system in response to growing interdependence and the forces of globalization. It is also accepted that inter-regionalism has grown into a “pragmatic strategy” (Soderbaum, 2005, p. 373) underpinning the EU’s external policies. The EU’s predilection toward inter-regional cooperation stems from its own positive experience with regional integration, which has created peace and prosperity. Inter-regionalism has been seen as the EU’s internal logic and its “natural answer” to managing global interdependence. (Note 14) (Regelsberger, 1990, p. 13). More specifically, the EU uses soft power under the framework of neo-liberalism by focusing on low politics and normative issues. This strategy is based on EU’s main objectives of foreign policy for a multi-polar and a normative world order.



**Figure 2. EU Asia Strategy**

Theoretically, the Europeans, according to Kagan, are Kantians who have entered a post-historical paradise of peace and relative prosperity. (Note 14) (Weisgerber, 2011).

The world in which Asians live, and the view of it that most Asian leaders have, appear to be more Hobbesian than Kantian. Unlike Europe, Asia is rife with conflicts. It lags far behind Europe’s level of regional integration and commitment to liberal democracy. Kagan holds that Europe’s lack of power has led it increasingly along a path of multilateralism. In the case of Asia, it has led to strategic dependence on larger players, in particular in US. (Note 15)

However, in Asia the role of culture matters, while EU’s commitment to regionalism and the rule of law in international affairs emerged from a determination to transcend the sovereignty-bound system of the nation-state, Asia’s recent move toward regional multilateralism came primarily from a desire to preserve the existing rules of international relations, especially those related to sovereignty. Europeans promote the post-sovereign system, but Asia remains beholden to sovereignty.

## 5. EU Asia Strategy: The Way Forward

The EU-Asia relationship is undergoing change as a product of shifts within the EU itself, with Brexit effectively removing the United Kingdom as the important gateway to Asia, and the rise of populist pressures within Europe shaping policy responses. Arguably, there are fewer consensus within the EU on Asia policy. The EU’s role in Asia has grown in importance with the decline of the United States and

rise of multipolarity. There is the momentum for the EU to move away from a focus on trade and to focus on issues of connectivity and governance.

The question is how the EU can improve effectiveness in its Asia strategy. So, firstly, EU should raise the profile of Europe in Asia. Secondly, EU should continue supporting efforts by Asian countries to cooperate at the regional and sub-regional level such as the ASEAN Regional Forum with a view to enhancing peace and security in the region and generally to strengthen the Union's relations with regional groups such as ASEAN or SAARC. In addition, EU could associate Asian countries in the management of international affairs and in particular to encourage them to play a more active role in multilateral actions with a view to maintaining international peace and security and strengthen links with Asian countries in multilateral fora, and further encourage Asian participation in multilateral organizations. Moreover, EU can pursue all actions necessary to ensure open markets and a non-discriminatory business environment conducive to an expansion of Euro-Asian trade and investments. In this standpoint, the EU should build global partnerships with key Asian partners, to address the global opportunities and challenges and to strengthen joint efforts on global environmental and security issues. Finally, EU needs to integrate into the open, market-based world trading system those Asian countries which are moving from state controls to market-oriented economies and contribute to sustainable development and to poverty alleviation in the least prosperous countries of Asia. EU needs to increase its role and its image in Asia to focus on strategic issues and to focus on the adoption of an overall and consistent policy to Asia. The EU needs a common and dynamic foreign policy in the general framework of inter-regionalism which can be mechanism for developing EU-Asia relations and for improving EU's role in Asia.

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## Notes

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