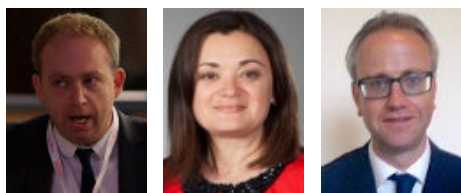


## The EU tells a good story about itself, but its Asian partners may not be hearing it

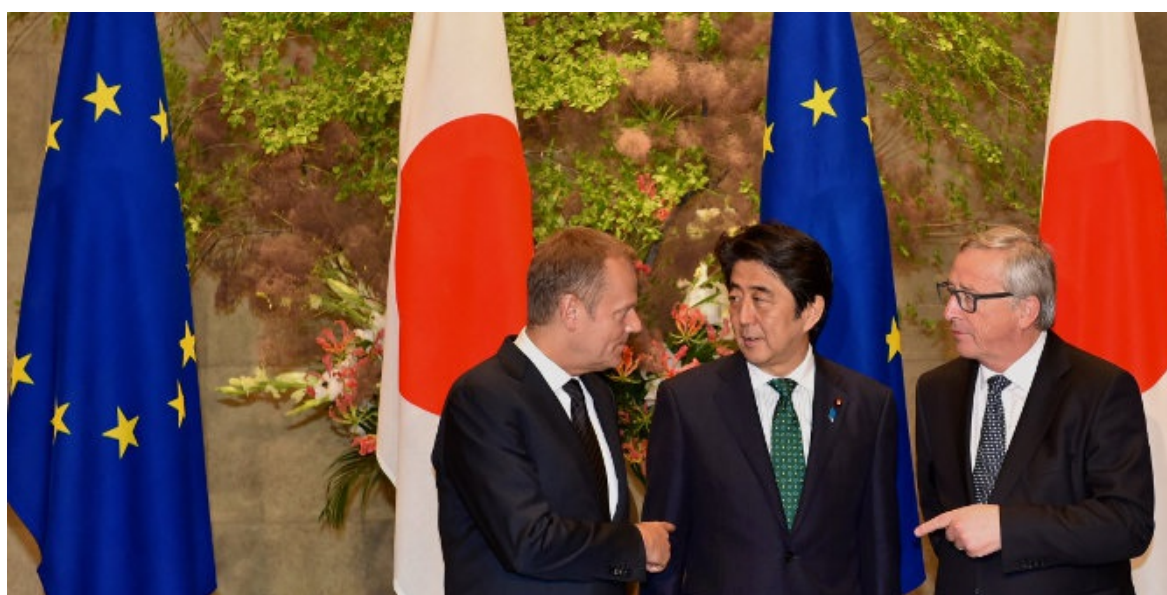


*How do countries in Asia view the European Union? Drawing on a new study, [Ben O'Loughlin](#), [Natalia Chaban](#) and [Alister Miskimmon](#) show that Asian elites see the EU as an important partner, but do not buy into the EU's own narrative that Europe is a peaceful continent whose ability to overcome war offers a model for others.*

The European Union is widely suspected of having a recognition problem. It offers soft power at a time when Russia, Turkey and the US offer hard solutions. It believes in trade cooperation at a time when walls are going up. A narrative has caught hold that Europe is mired in internal crises – who can see the end of the migration and refugee catastrophe, Eurozone inequalities, or terrorism? But it is not enough to *suspect* how the EU is viewed: what does the evidence actually say? In a [new study](#) of elites in Asia we found that the EU is well-regarded, but that it is certainly not viewed the way the EU sees itself.

The EU tells a story about forging its own moral character by overcoming world wars and building harmonious union between traditional enemies. It tells a story about EU actions stemming from values, interests, but also from its unique identity as a collection of previously warring states. In contrast, some Asian elites still see Europe as a historical place of war, and even as a potential source of war. The EU also sees Asia in part through a security lens. The [2016 EU Global Strategy](#) first mentions Asia in terms of 'security tensions' that are 'mounting'. Yet, peace and stability in Asia are seen as essential to prosperous economic ties between the two regions. The EU sees itself deepening its security role in Asia. It matters, however, if Asia does not take the EU seriously in matters of security or sees it as a potential risk. But it also matters because these differences tell us about wider divergences in EU and Asian narratives about where the international system came from and where it is heading.

In [our study](#), we analysed interviews with 180 elites across four of the EU's strategic partners – China, India, Japan and South Korea. Interviewed elites were asked about their experiences with European organisations, businesses or individuals, about their visions of their country's relations with the EU, and about their images of the EU. We hoped to find differences in the four countries and we did. Explaining those differences lets us begin to understand how perceptions of the EU form and could potentially be shifted.



Donald Tusk, Shinzō Abe and Jean-Claude Juncker, Credit: [EEAS \(CC BY-NC-ND 2.0\)](#)

The EU was seen by Asian elites as an important actor in principle, but whose lack of action in the security field reduced its relevance. The US was recognised as the primary security actor, Asian countries viewed themselves as increasingly taking a central role, and certain EU member states were seen as offering more security clout than any common EU force. Interviewees in South Korea did not express any idea of the EU as an important, values-led actor in the security field. Elites in China and India, in particular, appeared especially torn. When asked about their images of the EU, they spontaneously mentioned 'peace' but then began to offer diverse and sometimes ambivalent narratives about Europe. They saw Europe as the 'cradle of world wars' that still launched damaging actions in Libya, for instance. At the same time, many recognised that if European states could overcome ethnic, religious and cultural differences to function as a democracy then this offered a model to India or other large political communities. In short, compared to the US or to their own nations, for these Chinese and Indian elites, the EU's security actions were insufficient and its identity was ambiguous and contested.

Japanese respondents offered a different perspective. They welcomed a connection between values and actions and believed the EU's peace-building know-how and hybrid identity lent it relevance and credibility in the security field. They pointed to EU-Japanese cooperation in peacekeeping operations and affinities on issues of non-traditional security like climate and energy policies. They also suggested the EU and Japan shared values concerning human rights and democracy. This common ground may be due to the shared experience of Japan and West Germany after World War II. Each conceded security protection to the US and built a new cultural and political identity and economic base. It is less incongruent for Japan to look to the EU for a model of a good, productive identity in the international system.

Above all else, Asian elites understand power in terms of nation-states acting visibly and decisively. A hybrid entity like the EU that relies on norm-shaping, development aid and multilateral coordination has difficulty fitting with that image of power, especially in the field of security. This tells us much about how these countries see themselves and, perhaps, how they expect international order to function. Despite regional integration on many issues, they expect an inter-state system to be at the core of the 21<sup>st</sup> century story. Even Japanese elites who felt shared values with the EU and positioned Japan as Asia's 'normative power' still saw Asian security through a national lens.

Our [conclusion](#) is that 'the four powerful Asian actors have created their own image of the EU as a peace and security actor, negotiating the meaning of Europe's actions via narratives that reflect their *own* cultural filters, rather than accepting norms or images that the EU has produced.' Whatever the EU says or does, how it is perceived is in the eye of the beholder. Eliciting the narratives people hold about the EU and their own country teases out what past events shaped their views and what future hopes they have. This offers traction for diplomats seeking to build points of common ground through which cooperation can be forged.

It is easy to study what the EU says and what the EU does, but less easy to study what difference those words or actions make. In EU studies, most research is about how policy is made; [only 23 percent of research articles look at the effects of EU policies](#). Moreover, [scholarship of EU foreign policy remains largely Eurocentric](#), keeping the "outside-in" perspective largely on its periphery. Our study of Asian elites stresses that progress in diplomatic relations can only be stronger by listening to what the other has to say – not least what they say about you. The 2016 EU Global Strategy signalled that the EU expects itself to play a greater security role in Asia. Our study shows that this signal may resonate externally only if the EU shifts from a one-way transmission to the negotiation of narratives and the broader processes of persuasion. This entails listening to and factoring in country and issue-specific reception among its global partners.

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*Note: For more information, see the authors' accompanying study in the [Journal of Common Market Studies](#). Data for this research were collected within the framework of the transnational project "EU Global Perceptions" led by the National Centre for Research on Europe (NCRE), University of Canterbury, New Zealand, and the research was supported by the Jean Monnet Programme of the European Commission and Asia Europe Foundations (ASEF). This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.*

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