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# Discovering the Icebergs of EU Interregional Actorness in Asia: The EU “Unique” Regional Integration Model in the Eyes of China and India<sup>1</sup>

Roza Smolinska  
United Nations University - Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies,  
College of Europe

## Abstract

The European Union is likely to differentiate itself from other international actors. It claims to be unique and characterized by several distinctive features such as for example the EU's model for regional integration. In the process of defining itself, the EU mainly focuses on self-perception. Recently, the study of external perception has been claimed as an essential missing element in the EU identity building process. At the same time, the EU's interregional actorness in Asia suffered lately from relevant weakness. This was reflected, for example, in the EU's switch to bilateral negotiations following unsuccessful region-to-region negotiations to establish the Free Trade Agreement with ASEAN, the rejection of the EU in its attempt to join the members of the East Asia Summit or by the observable fatigue within the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM). This research tries to understand the puzzle of the EU's efforts as an interregional actor in Asia, while it aspires to become one day a global power. The author does so by analysing the way in which two Asian emerging powers, China and India, perceive the EU's regional integration model. The recent surveys conducted among the Chinese and Indian elites and media constitute the bases of the analysis. The paper establishes also an important, very often missing, link between perceptions and their role in foreign policy-making.

## Keywords

actorness, distinctiveness, perception, regional integration

As “[t]he regional factor is an indispensable element of the further evolution of the international order” (Vasconcelos 2001, 136) one cannot omit a role of the example of the European Union (EU) in this respect as it may serve as a successful example of regional integration to similar processes elsewhere in the world (Acharya 2004, 102). The EU itself perceives its own regional integration model as one of distinguishing features illustrating its “distinctive” nature as an international actor.

The EU also considers itself as “more than ever a reference model” of regional integration that is worthy of being followed by Asian states in fulfilling their wish for stability and prosperity within the region (Petchsiri 2007, 49; Jain 2007, 126; Anderson 2007, 90). This EU self-perception as a model is broadly recognized when referring to it as a “successful example”, “reference point”, “the best model” or simply to its “attractiveness” (Joffé 2001, xiv; Vasconcelos 2001, 136; Wang 2007, 93; Zhu 2007, 145, 147). Asia acknowledges this importance to the EU's regional integration as well: “the success of internal European integration has led [... Asians] to see the EU as a *leader by example* [emphasis added]” (Chaban, Elgström and Holland 2006, 261).

In reflecting on the above mentioned, one may attempt to predict some kind of receptiveness of Asia while taking into consideration the EU's regional integration model. However, one may realize that all expressions of interest are simultaneously accompanied by a noticeable level of precaution as an example of ASEAN shows (Petchsiri 2007, 50). Furthermore, the EU has recently experienced several failures in its interregional relations with Asia: the switch to bilateral negotiations following unsuccessful region-to-region negotiations to establish the Free Trade Agreement with ASEAN (Camroux 2010, 68–69), the rejection of the EU in its attempt to join the members of the East Asia Summit (Parello-Plesner 2010; Islam 2010) or by the observable fatigue within ASEM (Bello 2010, 64).

## Perception-Distinctiveness-Actorness

“Europe does not exist without non-Europe. Europe can only be realized in the mirror of Others” (Holland et al. 2007, 25). The way in which the role of this mirror appears in Asia-EU relations was labelled as “iceberg-issues of intercontinental cooperation” because they reflect unspoken rules of an interregional dialogue that is largely about perceptions, images, views and stereotypes: “[they] can lead to serious collisions of policies, values and assumptions if they are, wilfully or unintentionally, neglected” (Anderson and Wiessala 2007, 15).

Moreover, in an interdependent and globalized world, the EU necessitates external partners to “get things done” and the achievements of its policies may be either facilitated or constrained by other international players, so it becomes clear that external perceptions matter and need to be seriously taken into consideration (Lucarelli and Fioramonti 2010, 1-2; Tsuruoka 2008, 8). Their studies can serve not only as “an early warning system”, but also as a way of identifying the potential opportunities for the EU’s effective international appearance (Lucarelli and Fioramonti 2010, 2; Fioramonti and Lucarelli 2010, 222). As such, their examination becomes a crucial factor in determining the EU’s efficient implementation of its policies.

Interestingly, all conducted surveys reveal that the EU, contrary to its self-perception, is not seen by Others as a “distinctive” actor at the international scene (Fioramonti and Lucarelli 2010, 222.).<sup>2</sup> Albeit not the only one, certainly one of the very few exceptions to this external image of the EU is its model of regional integration (Lucarelli 2007b, 269). As being also highly appreciated in Asia, this model may constitute a solid basis for the EU to build upon its interregional actorness<sup>3</sup> in Asia, if only properly identified and well exploited.

By analysing perceptions of two Asian emerging powers, China and India, on the EU’s regional integration model, it will be explored whether such a promising opportunity for the EU as an interregional actor exists in Asia, why does EU interregional actorness in Asia suffers from weakness and to what extent it is determined by Chinese and Indian perceptions. All by analysing to what extent China and India agree with the distinctiveness of the EU’s regional integration model and with the appropriateness of the model’s application to Asia’s regional reality.

As such, the analysis of perceptions is going to create an opportunity for the EU to improve the conduct of its foreign policy and to efficiently build its actorness interregionally and, in the longer term, also globally.

## In the Dragon’s Eyes

In its quest to become the global player, “China perceives the European example as a source of *inspiration* [emphasis added] for enhanced regional economic integration in Asia” (Lisbonne-de Vergeron 2007, xvi, 8). Moreover, it is often commented that “the story of old European enemies coming together still *inspires* [emphasis added]” (Islam 2005, 59). In case of China a parallel is most often made to its relations with Japan” (Lisbonne-de Vergeron 2007, 35). However, it is also frequently denied that both countries will become the “France and Germany of Asia” in the anticipated future, even if it is agreed that analysing the French-German path may become a useful starting tool in forging a common regional integration plan (Jora 2007, 75-76).

### *The perceptions of Chinese elites*<sup>4</sup>

When asked about spontaneous images of the EU, Chinese elites, as one of three most often given answers cited the EU as an on-going regional integration (Holland and Chaban 2010, 12-13). A positive assessment of diverse dimensions of the European integration encompasses aspects such as economic, significantly overtaking others, but also enlargement, Euro and development of ESDP (Bingran and Shuangquan 2007, 59-60; Holland 2007, 243; Peruzzi, Poletti and Zhang 2007b, 150). The EU is also seen as a “model for integrative efforts in other areas of the world.” but without explicitly mentioning its relevance for Asia (Peruzzi, Poletti and Zhang 2007b, 16).

Worth mentioning are the results of more complex research among Chinese elites:

- Civil elites described the EU as a “strong regional power”;
- Media elites regarded it as a “good model for the world” and a “new model for other countries”; they also stressed the possible risk of the EU’s expansion;
- Political elites did not explicitly refer to the EU’s regional integration, the only implicit reference concerned the very imprecise category of “integrity”;
- Only business elites directly referred to the EU as a “good model for Asia” (Bingran and Shuangquan 2007, 64-65).

The same survey asked about ASEM to verify whether it is seen as a tool of Europe-Asia interregional interaction:

- Business elites stated that ASEM is “an example of cooperation between two great regional powers which would ultimately serve to balance the United States’ superpower status”;
- The majority of political elites view ASEM as “a good platform for mutual communication between two regions”;

- The majority of civil society elites referred to ASEM as “a positive event which provides a platform for mutual communication between the regions so as to remove misunderstanding and to enhance interaction” (Bingran and Shuangquan 2007, 62).

One may notice that only business elites recognized ASEM’s importance in a broader international context.

Particularly attention-grabbing is a reference to the EU as a model in relation to China’s own aspirations in Asia, pointing out that the EU’s achievements are “undoubtedly” perceived by Chinese strategists as a “significant *potential* source of *inspiration* [emphasis added] for regional cooperation” (Lisbonne-de Vergeron 2007, 8, 12).<sup>5</sup> The elites also underlined the similarity of China’s potential role in the regional Asian integration, as compared with the role played by the EU in the West (Lisbonne-de Vergeron 2007, 10-11). This kind of reference is specific for China.

### *Perceptions of Chinese media*

The surveys conducted in Asian countries revealed rather modest coverage of EU-related topics in media (Holland 2007, 236). However, when compared with other Asian countries, China represents an exception having the highest coverage in television (Holland 2007, 230-236; Bingran and Shuangquan 2007, 45-46). The tendency for the EU to become “an issue in Chinese media” has been recognized by several scholars (Peruzzi, Poletti and Zhang 2007a, 317; Zhang 2010, 165; Chan 2010, 136) as the amount of EU-related items was assumed to constitute about 10% of total international coverage (Xiaoping 2007, 106-107, 116).

Given that 84% of media reports concerning the EU are externally focused, the EU is viewed in China mainly as an international actor (Holland 2007, 236). The statistics again places China at the head of all Asian countries surveyed for both press and television coverage (Bingran and Shuangquan 2007, 49). However, the EU is viewed as an external actor engaged elsewhere in the world (i.e. Iran, the Middle East or the bilateral EU-China relations), and “not necessarily locally relevant [...] in the region” (Bingran and Shuangquan 2007, 45-46; Holland 2007, 232-233, 236).

Li Xiaoping’s study provides a relevant example (Xiaoping 2007, 106-107, 116). In 2004 provincial television station broadcasted a program encouraging Chinese and Asian scholars to discuss the European experience and its implications for Asia. The opinions presented by guests included among other: “the European Union had so far made a good showing in terms of regional integration and, in doing so, has provided a model for other regions, especially Asia” (Xiaoping 2007, 105, 108). Even if taking into account that such programs do not appear daily in Chinese media, it should be acknowledged that the mere fact of issuing such coverage reveals a certain degree of relevance of this topic for Chinese media.

Analysing the results of different surveys, one may notice perception of the EU integration in individual terms, (in relevance to China), as opposed to regional one (in relevance to Asia). The same finding can be retrieved from a study of major journals consulted by Chinese leaders, as “the study of the EU’s development may offer a valuable experience for the Chinese in search of an optimal way for China’s development” (Men 2006, 789).

Chinese media affords growing attention to the EU. The only concern, in terms of the EU’s integration model, might be that not enough attention is given by media to the regional usefulness of this model for the whole of Asia.

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Two main features characterize the Chinese perception of the EU’s regional integration. On the one hand, a declared proximity between China and the EU. The question should be posed whether the EU is able to translate this certain openness on the part of China towards EU integration, as an opportunity to promote its regional integration model.

On the other hand, the wording used by different groups while referring to the EU’s regional integration model should not be undermined. Often used words such as “potential” or “inspiration” should cause the EU to reflect about the way in which it presents its own model to China. As expressed by means of perceptions, the China’s expectations of inspiration and not imposition or a ready recipe to be directly implemented in the Asian region should be appropriately recognized and adequately taken into consideration by the EU.

## **In the Elephant’s Eyes**

India’s point of view on the EU in Asia might be characterized in following phrase: “the EU has very limited leverage in the region” (Jain 2005, 64). This absence of the EU in India’s perceptions of regional integration has its roots in the India’s cautious attitude towards Asian region as a whole. At the same time, India has its own agenda as it perceives itself as “a key player in Asia” (Lisbonne-de Vergeron 2006, 17). However, India acknowledges

the importance of the prospect of closer relations with China and recognizes that Southeast Asia may become an important “trade bridge” between the two partners (Lisbonne-de Vergeron 2006, 25).

India’s focus of perceiving the EU mainly in the global, as opposed to the regional context, is the main difficulty of studying the image of the EU’s regional integration model. Nevertheless, even if not numerous, these perspectives are present in the Indian point of view.

It was found that “India can learn [much] from European experiences in regional *economic* integration [emphasis added]” (Jain 2005, 64). Nevertheless, another opinion, presented just next to the former one, should be taken into consideration as well: “[t]he EU, however, does constitute a “*low-key* role model of regional trade integration” *for India* [emphasis added]” (Lisbonne-de Vergeron 2006, 28). These examples indicate that even if the relevance of the EU regional integration model was acknowledged, it was admitted as such in terms of its relevance to India and not in the context of the Asian region as a whole.

Interestingly, “the story of old European enemies coming together” (Islam 2005, 59). still inspires also India. The use of economic integration to overcome political difficulties (e.g. dispute with Pakistan over Kashmir, tensions over the Tamils in Sri Lanka) is much admired” (Lisbonne-de Vergeron 2006, 29).

Even if Europe is perceived in India as “a satiated power” trying to define itself “as being more sophisticated in its understanding of the world” (Lisbonne-de Vergeron 2006, 9), one can still come across perceptions that view the EU regional integration as a model.

### *Perceptions of Indian elites*

Indian elites, if discussing the EU at all, identify the EU mainly in the global, and not the regional, context. The very few views related to the latter context might be found after a scrupulous investigation of different surveys. As this analysis must be confined to a fairly small sample, the findings should be treated with relevant caution, avoiding overvaluation of their conclusions.

Indian business elites continue to perceive the EU not as an entity, but as a “conglomerate of states” which results in very low attention paid to the EU as a whole (Jain 2005, 64). However, especially economic mechanisms are perceived as “quite relevant” for themselves” (Fioramonti 2007a, 356). Moreover, the use of economic integration as a tool to overcome political conflicts is even greatly appreciated (Fioramonti 2007a, 356). It also presents an individual approach to European integration, i.e. for India itself and no regional dimension can be observed. A similar focus was observed among Indian civil society elites which perceive the EU “as a valuable partner in the Indian quest for regional hegemony [...] because of strong historical ties [...] and common values” (Fioramonti and Poletti 2008, 175).

Political elite expressed “sympathy” towards the project of greater European unity and the prospect of Europe as a whole becoming a positive factor in global affairs” (Lisbonne-de Vergeron 2006, 5). The responses to questions focused on the EU’s international cooperation dimension were avoided by stating that e.g. the EU is “still at an xperimental level” (Jain and Pandey 2010, 204).

The only question providing some more insight into Indian elites perceptions of the EU, even if limited, asked about spontaneous images when thinking about the EU. Among the responses, one can find “Euro”, “brotherhood and unity emerging after the Second World War” and of the “EU being a unique experiment” (Jain and Pandey 2010, 207). Even if in very general terms, one can assume that the consciousness of EU regional integration project exists among Indian elites, albeit without strong basis.

A survey conducted among political, business, media and civil society elites soon after 2009 ASEM Summit posed several relevant questions (Jain and Pandey 2010, 206).<sup>6</sup> On first glance, the results are striving. Especially if taking into consideration that ASEM constitutes one of very few interregional framework, then findings might be interpreted as an expression of lack of Indian interest in interregional cooperation. However, in interpreting these results another factor should also be taken into account such as late Indian entry into the framework due to Chinese resistance. (Wagner 2008, 97). In this context it might be argued that within two years India was not yet fully socialized into the process, which disabled its completely effective participation as other members. One can assume that the situation has a chance to improve with time, as India gains more experience in taking an advantage of the ASEM process.

All in all, when compared to Chinese perceptions, Indian elites do not consider the EU as a relevant topic. It is stressed that it may be due to the fact that Indian elites’ perceptions are and will continue to be strongly influenced by Anglo-Saxon media (Jain and Pandey 2010, 207; Jain 2005, 64; Jain 2008, 21).

## *Perceptions of Indian media*

The very few surveys concerning Indian media coverage of EU-related topics most often used expressions such as “not particularly interested”, “rarely mentioned”, “marginally covered” or “clearly under-reported” (Fioramonti 2007b, 7, 17; Fioramonti and Poletti 2008, 175; Fioramonti 2007a, 353; Jain and Pandey 2010, 207).

The surveys, analysing the printed media, found that the amount of articles and space allocated to EU-related topics were both very limited due to “newsworthiness and marketability” playing a decisive role when choosing the subjects to be covered (Jain and Pandey 2010, 195, 203). High number of EU news with no attributed source of information was also revealed. Moreover, a dominance of Reuters as a newswire resulted in mainly Anglo-Saxon approach towards the EU (Jain and Pandey 2010, 197-198).

The survey conducted after 2009 ASEM Summit shown a complete absence of news concerning this event in the studied print media (Jain and Pandey 2010, 195). Only one positive story of the EU *supporting* regional integration within the SAARC was reported (Fioramonti 2007b, 18). Other study conducted in a different period and under different media titles, also reported several articles emphasizing the *support* given by the EU to regional integration processes within the SAARC (Fioramonti 2007a, 359, 361).

Moreover, the EU’s activities in diplomacy and human rights in the region were usually evaluated positively by media (Fioramonti 2007a, 360). Obviously, it does not present the EU as a model of regional integration, though it indicates Indian appreciation of the EU’s involvement in the region. Even if the EU is not yet perceived by Indian media as a relevant interregional partner, this fact may be interpreted as a first promising step towards such recognition.

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Two main features of Indian perception of the EU should be underlined. First, particularly compelling, especially when compared with China, difficulties with finding reference to the EU regional integration model. If such data is finally found, it is, similarly to the case of China, most often indicated in individual terms, meaning in relation to India itself and not Asian region. It may be concluded that the EU is treated by India as a model for its own rising power rather than as an interregional partner and regional integration model for Asia.

Second, wording matters also in India’s case. The use of notions such as “inspiration” or “support” when relating to the EU is evidence of India’s precautionous attitude in considering the EU as a model. The vigilance of the Indian approach illustrates the well-held Indian belief that “[t]he EU model cannot be transplanted, but it can *perhaps* [emphasis added] be adapted to South Asia” (Jain 2005, 64).

## Conclusions

It has been confirmed, that divergent approaches of Asia and Europe, in considering the EU as a regional integration model, is a factor contributing to the EU’s relative weakness as an interregional actor in Asia. The EU’s understanding of its own model in terms of a “model to be followed” does not correspond with the perceptions of relevant Others, China and India, which both refer to the EU, using terms such as “support” or “inspiration”. This nuanced wording that has been observed in all surveys analysed here, constitutes a clue leading to the conclusion that the EU cannot and in fact is not entitled to set itself as an example and expect others to blindly follow or simply replicate its model. Instead, the EU should not only allow, but also encourage its partners to pursue their own path toward regional integration by learning from European experiences and adapting them, in consideration of the reality of their own region.

Both China and India highly appreciated this model and its usefulness as an inspiration. As such, it represents an element of solid basis on which the EU is capable of building upon its interregional actorness in Asia. Notwithstanding, both studied countries are more willing to consider the EU model as an inspiration in individual terms, meaning for their own development, and not so much in the context of Asia as a whole region.

The EU’s possible success in overcoming Chinese and Indian reluctance in taking on significant regional action depends on the EU’s ability to listen to what they think about its model. This is important in order to recognize the opportunity of effective influence that is based on an identified willingness to learn from the EU and to gauge what it is that China and India, as representative of the Asian region, actually expect from the EU. If the EU succeeds in taking into consideration such relevant perceptions, it will strengthen its international presence and improve the conduct of EU foreign policy while contributing in the same time to its greater interregional and global actorness.

Finally, the study of perceptions involves closer interactions between the parties concerned and involved in its conduct. Such intensified contacts present an exceptional opportunity for learning from Others. It offers an advantage not only in qualitative terms, as well explained by George Bernard Shaw: “[i]f you have an apple and I have an apple and we exchange these apples, then you and I will still have one apple. But if you have an idea

and I have an idea and we exchange these ideas, then each of us will have two ideas.” It also offers a chance to sustain, and perhaps even to create, an essential for further future human development diversity.

“We must know each other to improve each other. [...] Our goal is not, and must not be, that of eliminating the differences [...]. Our aim cannot be that of increasingly becoming alike, in a world made every day duller and duller by uniformity. The human adventure has more probabilities of perpetuating itself when its roots are deeply and firmly set in variety. [...] In this respect the expansion of contacts between Europe and Asia may lead to a better mutual understanding” (Susanna Agnelli cited in Wiessala 2002, xv).

Roza Smolinska holds M.A. in European Studies from the University of Warsaw, Poland and Master in EU International Relations and Diplomacy from the College of Europe in Bruges, Belgium. She was also an exchange student in the field of Political Science at the Institut d’Etudes Politiques in Rennes, France. Simultaneously to her studies at the College of Europe she conducted a research within the United Nations University - Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies. Her research interests covers topics such as EU external relations and diplomacy, EU as interregional actor with special focus on its relations with Asia and partnerships with emerging powers such as China and India, the role and influence of mutual perceptions in international relations.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper presents an overall summary of a research within a framework of a postgraduate master thesis presented by author at the College of Europe for the degree in EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies conducted simultaneously at the United Nations University - Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies.

<sup>2</sup> The so called “distinctiveness thesis”, unifying the underlined by many theories those EU features that differentiate it from other actors e.g. normative, civilian etc. is based upon the claim that the EU is a “new form of global player”, profoundly different (read *better*) from “traditional powers”, due to its self-declared goals. (Lucarelli and Fioramonti 2010, 3; Fioramonti and Lucarelli 2010, 222).

<sup>3</sup> Actorness, here and after, as an interplay between opportunity, presence and capability (Bretherton and Vogler 2006, 2). For purpose of this paper it accurately encompasses both the active and passive aspects, i.e. what the EU *is* (presence), as well as what the EU *does* (actorness). Interregionalism, here and after, as region-to-region relations (Söderbaum and Van Langenhove 2005, 251).

<sup>4</sup> Here and after, for a definition of “elites”, please refer to methodological remarks of Lucarelli 2007a.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. “Asian version of Euro”.

<sup>6</sup> The findings discussed in this paragraph may be found in Jain and Pandey 2010, 206.

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