

Images of the EU as a Political Actor in Asia Pacific Media

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The European Union has increasingly become an important political force in the international arena. The combination of the political weight of its member states ensures that the internal politics of European integration inevitably have global impact. The EU is also forming a complex network of relations with countries, regions and international organisations, in order to meet its aspiration--as well as expectations from other countries--of becoming one of the prominent world actors.

This essay is a part of the ongoing project 'Public, Elite and Media Perceptions of the EU in Asia-Pacific Region: A Comparative Study.' It aims to see how the press in four Asia-Pacific (AP) countries, i.e. Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and Thailand, capture the role of the European Union as a political actor by comparing and contrasting the volume of news items, propositions and prototypical frames of the EU in the four country. The data for the analysis comes from the sampled press of the project, which are:

Australia: *Herald-Sun; Sydney Morning Herald; The Canberra Times, The Australian, The Australian Financial Review*, from January – March 2004

New Zealand: *The New Zealand Herald, The Waikato Times; The Dominion Post; The Press; The Otago Daily Times*, from January – June 2004

South Korea: *Cho-sun, Dong-A, Joong-Ang, Metro, Korea Times*, from January – April 2004

Thailand: *Thai Rath, Matichon, Manager, Bangkok Post, The Nation*, from January – June 2004

Since the project is still at the early stage, this essay is not going to try discussing every aspect of the hitherto findings. Instead, it narrows the scope of analysis to three questions. Firstly, how much importance does the AP press give to political affairs of the EU? Secondly, how do the AP press present the political dimension of the EU?

Lastly, who are the most frequently appearing actors of the EU’s political affairs? Hopefully, these questions will help establish preliminary findings as well as the direction of further background research.

I Degree of Visibility of EU Political Affairs

I.I Political Visibility

The degree of attention the AP press gives to political affairs of the EU can be seen from the volume of news coverage on the EU’s political affairs in the press of the four Asia-Pacific countries. This amount also indicates the volume of EU news domestic readers are exposed to. The degree of visibility carries a lot of importance, because the more readers are exposed to the EU political news, the more they tend to recognise the EU as a prominent political actor. Since the data are from different periods of time, an average number of EU news coverage per month will be presented in order to make the comparison easier.

	Average numbers of articles per month
Australia	53
Thailand	51
NZ	27
Korea	5

Table 1: Monthly average of EU political news in four countries

At this stage of the project, in term of real figures, the EU as a political actor is the most visible in Australia, closely followed by Thailand and least visible in South Korea¹. In case of Thailand, the high number of EU news may not necessary mean that Thai people are well exposed to the political dimension of the EU, as the majority of news coverage is from *The Nation* and *Bangkok Post*, two international newspapers targeted at elite and educated locals, and foreign readers.

¹ It should be noted that at the later stage of the project, other characteristics of news items, i.e. length, placement, sources, and leading topics as well as the degree of centrality and the focus of domesticity will be taken into account.

In order to see how much importance and interest the local press give to political news of the EU, not only the real figures but also the proportion of news that features the EU as a political actor should be considered.

	% of all EU news
Thailand	63%
NZ	47%
Australia	40%
Korea	20%

Table 2: Percentage of EU political news in four countries

When considered as a proportion of the total EU news presented in the press of each country, in Thailand, the EU is most visible as a political power, as opposed to social or economic, whereas the proportion of EU political news is more balanced in New Zealand and Australia and very low in Korea.

The preliminary findings raise three interesting points. Firstly, does this imply that the press in Australia and New Zealand see the EU as equally significant in its political and economic roles? Secondly, do the Thai press regard the EU primarily as a political actor? Lastly, do the Korean press regard the EU primarily as an economic force? It is hoped that interviews with journalists and editors in the second stage of the project will help shed the light on these matters.

I.II Internal vs. External Affairs

The political affairs of the EU have two dimensions: internal and external affairs. It is interesting to investigate which one is given more interest and more importance.

	External	Internal
Australia	43%	57%
NZ	43%	57%
Korea	40%	60%
Thailand	36%	64%

Table 3: Percentage of external affairs vs. internal affairs

The table reveals that the press in all four countries are more interested in the EU's internal affairs. The proportion of EU internal affairs news is around 60% in each country. Does this imply that for AP press, EU internal affairs are more interesting for, or have more impact on, their countries than the external affairs? The timing of the research may be a factor, as this is the year when the EU has experienced significant internal changes such as the fifth enlargement and the adoption of an EU constitution.

As for which issues of the EU internal affairs are the most exposed to readers, the press in four countries seem to share the same interests. Predictably, 'enlargement' comes the first, followed by 'terrorism and security' (probably due to the timing the Madrid bombing) and then 'EU summits,' including constitutional summits. It may be worth noting that although the dynamics of MEPs election is often claimed to be underrepresented by the media, the issue turns out to be the fourth most focussed issue by the media of all four countries. Again, this may due to the timing, since the recent EP election happened shortly after enlargement and coincided with a constitutional summit.

When it comes to the EU's external affairs, the issues become more diverse. Middle East conflicts such as the Iraq War and the Israeli-Palestine conflict are issues which

the media in all four countries share the same interest, probably due to the prominence of the news. The Australian, New Zealand and Korean press also have certain interests in EU external aid whereas the Thai press is strongly interested in the ASEM process and the related Myanmar problem.

This may be a reason for the low visibility of EU external affairs--news about aid may not attract readers attention like news about conflicts and war. The EU is presented as only a player in the Middle East conflict, and not as a major player like the US. In addition, despite high volume of ASEM news in Thailand, there is no news concerning ASEM in Korea during the first four months of 2004. This may imply that Korea is not very enthusiastic about the ASEM process or that Korea may be more interested in other actors, like Japan or China.

II Conceptual Presentation: Evaluation and Metaphors

II.I Evaluation

It is not only the quantity that matters; it is also the quality. The amount of news may correlate with the extent to which the press recognise the importance of the EU's political power but it does not show their attitudes towards the EU and the impression they make on readers. The second part will discuss the conceptual presentation and metaphors used in the EU political news, in order to see how the AP press present the political dimension of the EU.

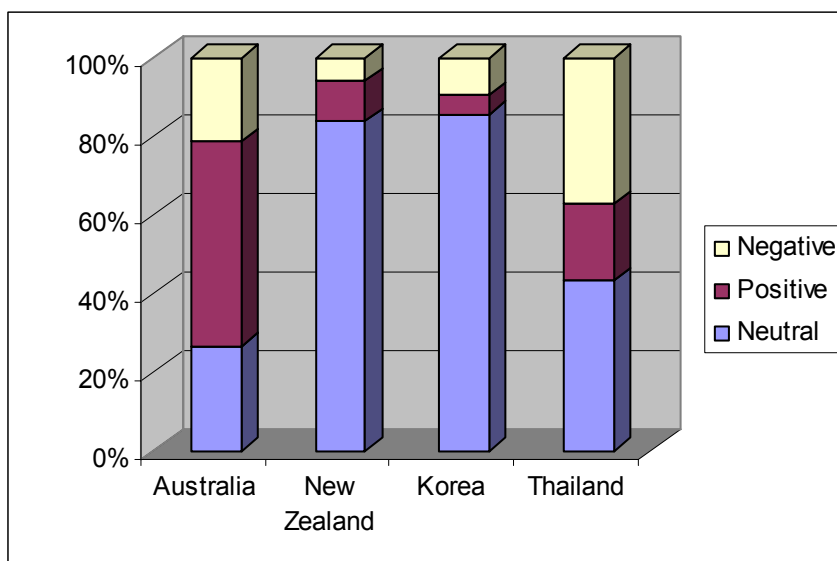


Table 4: Overall Evaluation on the EU by the media in four AP countries

This graph shows the overall evaluation of the EU in each country. The categorisation of the character of each news items is done by observing the tone with which the EU's actions are depicted—whether it is a tone of approval, criticism or neutrality. Once the media stage is completed, 'journalistic attitudes' and 'sources of news' will also be taken into account, in order to make a better and more accurate picture.

The table demonstrates that there is high visibility of positive evaluations of the EU in the Australian media whereas in Thailand, the level of negative evaluations is very high. New Zealand and Korea media seems to remain neutral in their evaluation. This observation leads to three questions: why is there a relatively large number of news items in Thailand that present the EU in negative ways? Why do the positive images of the EU prevail in the Australian media? And why do the press in other two countries, one Asian and one Pacific, remain of neutral opinion on the EU?

Regarding the first question, my hypothetical answer is that the prevalence of negative news items may be due to the importance the Thai press gives to the news concerning ASEM, particularly problems concerning ASEM enlargement and Myanmar. Indeed, the issue is the second most exposed after enlargement. Also, as the nature of the news features differing views and conflicts between ASEAN², of which Thailand is a member, and the EU, negative images of the EU are inevitably rendered.

The prevalence of positive images of the EU's political role in the Australian media may correlate to the fact that the most prominent EU news in the country is terrorism and security issues. Having experienced the horror of terrorist attacks as well as finding itself as one of the main targets, Australia should be very understanding and feel sympathetic towards the EU and its anti-terrorist actions.

In New Zealand, however, news concerning terrorism come the third, lagging much behind enlargement and the integration process/model, which usually concerns factual matters. This may account for the prevalence of neutral opinions of EU political news.

² With regard to the relationship with the EU, Thailand conducts its foreign policy through ASEAN. See <http://www.mfa.go.th/web/59.php> and <http://www.aseansec.org/7209.htm>

The reason why the EU's political news in Korea is mostly in a neutral voice may be due to its distinctive journalistic culture. Korean journalists try to confine their work to reporting only 'fact' and refrain from making 'leading' comments for their readers.

II.II Metaphors

The evaluation of a piece of news can be made by making direct comments as well as using metaphors. Indeed, metaphors are a very powerful tool in influencing the perception of readers. They are a primary conceptual construction and play a central role in developing thought. Metaphors can leave strong and long-lasting impression on readers because they sink into the mind unconsciously. Readers usually do not recognise them. Metaphors are often used by public media and public policy and they can influence or manipulate the public perception and communication³. Recognising the power of metaphors, an aim of this research is to find what images the press frequently use to represent the EU's political dimension and whether the images differ across the four countries.

The preliminary finding is that images on the EU internal affairs presented throughout the four countries are quite similar but that the Pacific countries sometimes add metaphors which indicate their cultural proximity to the EU. Images become more varied in the context of the external relations, particularly bilateral relations.

Since there are a large number of sets of metaphors used in different issues, this paper will give examples from only three issues: enlargement (the most prominent internal issue), Middle East conflicts (the most prominent external issue) and bilateral relations between the EU and each four Asia Pacific country.

II.III.I Enlargement

There are various metaphors in the news on EU enlargement. Those most frequently used by the press in all four countries are:

³ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1980

- **Organism**

Various kinds of *creatures* are used to describe the EU. A Thai-language newspaper describes the process of enlargement with the phrase: ‘*the EU is spreading its wings,*’ giving the image of the EU as an eagle soaring into the sky (Thai Rath, 2 May). A New Zealand newspaper argues that the enlargement will make the EU become *a behemoth* (New Zealand Herald, 28 April).

The EU is also often attributed certain emotions and behaviour as if it is *a human being*, for example, old members are portrayed as *being fearful, worried and feeling uncomfortable* whereas new members are also *worried and feel exhausted* from trying to close ‘the economic gap.’

Enlargement is also described as *forward movement*, like being a *big or giant step* for the EU or the EU is *opening the door* or the applicants are *waiting at the door, ready to enter*. Movement can be either good or bad but forward movement usually has a positive connotation. Sometimes the EU is depicted as embarking on *a journey*, i.e. enlargement. Interestingly, enlargement can be as either *a destination after a long and difficult journey* or just *a part of a long journey*.

- **Substance/Nature**

During the process of enlargement, The EU is frequently referred to as *expanding or swelling* or being a substance with big impact, i.e. *big bang*. Sometimes, enlargement is also a desirable thing such as *a utopia* or *a dream come true*.

Enlargement is also associated with the concept of *space*. The space, on the one hand, is sometimes described as being closed, for example, *the end of the division* of Europe where *borders are melted*. On the other hand, the gap is sometimes being widened, for example, the press points out *the economic gap* between new and old members and new members are *lagging behind* and *have to catch up*. The description gives an impression of an image of ‘a division within unity’.

The enlargement is also described as *natural forces, for example, a flood of immigrants* coming in and wrecking the rich union or *eroding* national sovereignty of

new members. Here we also have an example of a metaphor indicating cultural proximity between New Zealand and Europe.

*'If I was a New Zealander, I would say this is brilliant, **we will not be sucked** into any more intra-European civil wars.'* (Dominion Post, 29 April)

The EU or Europe is presented as a force that sucks New Zealand into undesirable situations, that is, the two world wars. Although the press in Thailand and Korea agree that enlargement helps overcome intra-European conflicts and makes another war impossible, they do not insert metaphors referring to the two world wars as a shared history with Europe.

Last but not least, the enlargement is also seen as *a moment in time*--a point of departure from the past. Sometimes the past is described as undesirable such as *horrible* or *bloody*; sometimes it is pleasant such as a prosperous past to which enlargement will put an end.

II.II.II External Affairs

In the area of external affairs, images in the news concerning the EU's relationship with third countries are still often similar, although sometimes there is a striking departure. The Middle East conflicts provide an example. The EU is often described as a stage performer or a member of the 'Quartet,' which comprises of the US, the EU, Russia and the UN. It is worth noting that the role usually attributed to the EU is that of an active, yet non-aggressive actor, such as a fixer, a builder or a housemaid who comes to clean the area after the US has finished its business. These metaphors go with the idea of the EU as a 'soft power,' which is often used to describe the actions of the EU in the international arena.

Nevertheless, the piece of news below is an example of a set of metaphors referring to the idea of 'soft power' but conveys a completely different image and, hence, departs from the above metaphors.

'The EU foreign policy is an illusion, appeasement, creates ugly political climates, poisons Middle East politics and EU-US relations'.

(The Nation, 12 June)

II.II.III Bilateral Relations

It can be said that the context of bilateral relations is the area where the images can be the most varied. This is probably because of the characteristics of the news, as they are usually country-specific and are domestically written.

Thailand's relationship with the EU is conducted at the regional level through ASEAN. EU-ASEAN relations are usually described by the Thai press either as *a battle* or *a gap* or *a rift* (which indicates a space unable to close). If not, it is a kind of *a lukewarm* or *passive* relationship which *lacks of energy, needs revitalising* and *requires a mechanism to propel both sides*. The EU is portrayed as the antagonist in the relationship. Metaphors describing the EU's behaviour are, for example, the EU is *blocking* Myanmar from participating in ASEM (which indicates that the EU is an obstacle for ASEAN), or the EU has a *double standard* and *is discriminating, pressing, demanding and crossing the line*.

Although the EU-NZ relationship also has some conflicts, the metaphors used do not carry hostile feelings like those used in the Thai case. Instead, the relationship concerning the Pacific region is described as *a sport game* or *a show* where both New Zealand and the EU are *competitors* and where the former is the major player and the latter is trying to steal the show.

Interestingly, there are no metaphors appearing in the news concerning the EU's relationship with Korea or Australia. This is simply because there is still no news on the bilateral relations between Korea and the EU and only one in Australia and it is largely about Australia's relation with Britain in which the EU as a minor focus. The absence of news may reflect the foreign policies of both countries. Korea may not yet include the EU as one of the prominent political actors in the Korean region like China, Japan and Russia. In the Australian case, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs states that, in the political context, the country prefers to deal bilaterally with EU member states, rather than with the EU as one entity⁴.

⁴ Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Europe Branch Statement', www.dfat.gov.au/geo/europe/bstatement.html; accessed 07/05/04.

In all four cases, it seems that there are certain correlations between the perceptions of the EU by local media and the country's foreign policy. The interaction between the two components is rather interesting. It is the question of who is influencing whom and how.

III EU Political Actors

The final section will explore who the important EU actors are in the AP media's views. Due to time constraints, the analysis is not yet finished for New Zealand and Korean parts. Nevertheless, the result from the Thai and Australian press, one Asian and one Pacific example, have already revealed a lot of interesting points.

In Thailand, most prominent actors are member states, their officials and candidate countries. Britain appears the most. France comes the second, closely followed by Germany. Ireland comes the forth. As for member state officials, Tony Blair is the most visible actor, followed by Bertie Ahern, Gerhard Schroeder and Jacques Chirac. All ten candidate countries are usually mentioned together as a group and Poland as the most frequently mentioned applicant country.

In Australia, the case is almost similar, for member states and their officials are the most prominent players. Spain, however, supersedes France and Germany and comes the second after Britain. (This may due to a strong interest in terrorism and security issues, particularly Madrid bombing.) Ireland is again the forth most mentioned country. EU officials, particularly Javier Solana, Romano Prodi and Chris Patten, turn out to have somewhat high visibility, but this may due to the fact that Australia's database does not cover the period from April to June, when the enlargement process was at its peak.

It can be concluded from the preliminary findings that firstly, member states are the most prominent actors and Britain and her officials are the most represented, even though the country is perceived as the odd one out of the club. It is also worth noting that France and Germany are often mentioned as doing things together as if they are the same entity. The role of EU Presidency seems to be able to generate rather high visibility.

Secondly, EU officials are lagging behind member states. It is also interesting to see that in both Thailand and Australia Romano Prodi, Javier Solana and Chris Patten are almost equally mentioned. The balance of representation is likely to create confusion for outsiders and confirms the validity of the old question of ‘who speaks for Europe?’

Last but not least, the EC Delegation in each country has very low visibility. In the political context, the Delegation is referred to only four times in Thailand and not at all in Australia

In conclusion, the preliminary findings raise a lot of interesting points that help crystallise the area of further background research and navigate the later part of the project. In addition, it is worthy to note that many of the findings support common ideas and theories of the EU political affairs whereas some raise a number of new questions from new angles.

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