EU's strategic partnership with Asian countries: an introductory article for the special issue

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Introduction

The European Union has struggled for a long time to increase the international profile of its foreign policy. The intensity of the EU's foreign policy has been a function of the speed and efficacy of its own internal integration programs. For instance, the Single European Market (SEM) program pursued during the period of 1986–1992 took a substantial amount of time and resources of the EU policy makers, thereby leading to a temporary vacuum of EU's foreign policy especially vis-à-vis countries geopolitically remote to the EU, including the Asian region. The adoption in 1994 of the New Asia Strategy (NAS) was a welcomed move by the EU to reinvigorate its relationship with Asian countries that had been showing an increasing strategic value since the mid-1980s. The USA also adopted an aggressive Asia Strategy under the name of Big Emerging Markets (BEMs) strategy around the same time, through which the US administration designated 17 big emerging markets as priority economic (and political) cooperation partners. In fact, 12 of 17 BEMs were Asian countries, which signaled that Asia was rediscovered and the USA and the EU started competing for a strategic leverage in the Asian region.

Stimulated by the earlier US move to engage with Asia more affirmatively and relieved by the successful completion of SEM programs in the early 1990s, the EU started paying attention to more coherent foreign policy, which should, in addition to the one conducted by member states' separately, improve the profile of the EU and increase its influence in the international arena. The EU has taken a few important steps for this purpose. First, the adoption of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) as one of three pillars of the EU through the Maastricht Treaty in the early 1990s has been a significant policy initiative in this direction. Second, the implementation of the CFSP was supported and even strengthened by the further and incremental development in the 1990s of the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), which had originally been put in place based on the Treaty of Brussels adopted in the 1940s.

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The Security Strategy for Europe, announced and adopted in 2003, marked an important turning point in this regard (European Commission 2003). In this new strategy, the EU suggested to develop strategic partnerships with a few major countries in the world politics and some international organizations, including China, Japan, Russia, and the NATO, in addition to the USA, EU's long-standing ally since the end of the WWII. Over the past 15 years since the practical application of the more serious Security Strategy, the EU has entered into a Strategic Partnership with 10 countries in the world, of which four are Asian countries—China, Japan, India, and Korea. The EU was able to develop a plethora of diplomatic relations of different depth and intensity based on the strategic partnership.

This present special issue of the *Asia Europe Journal* contains six academic articles that address topics related with EU's Strategic Partnership with Asia. The articles are an outcome of the Jean Monnet Networks Project awarded by the European Commission in 2016 with the lifetime of September 1, 2016–August 2019. Managed and coordinated by the KU-KIEP-SBS EU Centre of Korea University, the project team—composed of EU experts from China (Fudan University), Japan (Keio University), India (Jawaharlal Nehru University), Korea (Korea University), and New Zealand (University of Canterbury)—has been set up to conduct a cooperative research on the grand theme of “A New Dimension in Asia-Europe Relations: Exploring EU's Global Actorness and Strategic Partnership in Asia (China, India, Japan and South Korea)—NEAR”. This introductory article provides an overview of the project and summarizes main arguments of the six articles included in this special issue.

EU's basic approach toward strategic partnership

Among the three poles of the world economy and politics—North America, Europe, and Asia—the bilateral relationship between Asia and Europe is most underdeveloped. In fact, the Transatlantic alliance between the US and EU, which was developed as a consequence of the World War II and has been cultivated with strong care and attention by both parties, has long been a dominant force in the global economic and political, as well as security relations. Both the NATO, the security arm of this strong bondage, and the Transatlantic Economic Partnership constitute the main vehicles of this bilateral relationship. Between North America and Asia, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) established in 1989 and bilateral security alliances between the USA and a few Asian countries have been the backbone of the bilateral relationship. Between Europe and Asia, however, the bilateral relationship has shown a missing link until the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) was established in 1996. As ASEM did not generate meaningful results yet and therefore could not place itself as an influential mechanism in the international community, the Asia-Europe relations have been more driven by bilateral relations between the EU and its member states on the one side and Asian countries on the other.

The bilateral relationship between the EU and Asian partners is cultivated in a variety of ways and dimensions and with different intensity and depth. As a substantial amount of foreign and security policy is still in the hands of the national governments of EU's member states rather than the European External Action Service (EEAS), the member states have maintained their bilateral relationship with Asian countries,

sometimes overlapping with EU's own foreign policy and security-related actions. Therefore, there is a potential for confusion on the side of Asian partners and conflict between the EU and its member states. Of the complex dimensions and facets of Asia-Europe relations, the NEAR project addresses exactly the strategic partnership between the EU (and not its member states) and its Asian partners, in order to highlight both the EU's bilateral relations with and global actorness in its strategic partners in Asia.

First article co-authored by Pan and Michalsky (2019) sets out the basic conceptual framework for the whole research project on the EU's strategic partnerships with Asian countries. The paper investigated the emergence and widespread use of the strategic partnership of major powers and provided a detailed analysis of differences and commonalities observed in their practical applications. The authors suggested that there have existed three contending logics of action in strategic partnership implemented by the major powers—the USA, China, and the EU. In a comparative analysis, the authors argued that the three different logics observed in strategic partnership of the world's major powers are closely associated with the purposes and dominant orientations of their foreign policy, as well as their self-perceptions as major poles of power in the world. Therefore, the different logics appear to be inevitably related with the interests and values they accord when setting up strategic partnerships with other countries. Based on the relative importance of interests and values applied by the three major powers when devising and executing their own strategic partnership, the authors came up with and presented four distinct patterns of strategic partnering: the homogeneous, marriage-of-convenience, come-in-hand, and heterogeneous strategic partnerships. It is one of the main conclusions of this article that these ideal forms of strategic partnerships have distinct but contrasting implications for the structure of the international system. In their efforts to identify the characteristics of the three powers' strategic partnerships, the authors argued that the USA, China, and the EU have adopted the conventional, relational, and functional approaches in developing and implementing their respective strategic partnership. Especially in the pursuit of fostering the functional logic in its strategic partnership, the EU tends to use the strategic partnership as a diplomatic tool to achieve specific aims rather than social and relational values in itself and therefore as an instrument to influence partner countries' foreign policy. In addition, the authors compared the EU's application of strategic partnership vis-à-vis China and Russia and concluded that the EU with its functional logic of action is poised to maintain “a normatively contentious partnership as long as the partner does not overstep the fundamental principles of international law.”

Main features of EU-Asia strategic partnerships

Along the line of its logic of action described in the previous section, the EU so far has practiced strategic partnerships with 10 major partners—the USA, Canada, Mexico, and Brazil in the Americas; South Africa in Africa; Russia in Eurasia; and China, Japan, India, and Korea in Asia. Based on the functional approach, EU's strategic partnerships are different from partner country to partner country in basic directions, depth, width, and cooperation programs. The NEAR project attempted to investigate and highlight the differences and commonalities of EU's strategic partnership with four Asian countries, especially with the final view of scrutinizing the global actorness of the EU in the region.

The article by Geeraerts (2019) in this special issue has been devoted to investigating the main features of EU's strategic partnership with China, which started as early as 2003. The author found that the EU and China have shown "deep-seated conceptual differences concerning norms, visions of society, modes of international engagement and the organization of the emerging world order" and argued that these differences lie at the heart of the bilateral relationship. The author identified the co-existence of divergence and convergence as the main feature of the EU-China bilateral relationship. He presented the changing global context of the bilateral relationship, corresponding changes in their relative positions in the global power structure and the creeping economic security dilemma between the two parties as diverging signals. Also, the author scrutinized the converging trends in their bilateral relationship, such as the high level of institutionalization of the partnership, its potential for reciprocal socialization and signs of mutual accommodation, and their mutual efforts to adapt themselves to the changing international system. Based on this reality check, the author defined the EU-China relationship as an "associative-antagonistic" one and drew one important conclusion that the strategic partnership would take the form of "an intricate equilibrium between diverging and converging trends – at best an enlightened calibrating of national interests and global governance ambitions within a complex and transforming international environment."

The article by Hosoi (2019) investigated the strategic partnership between the EU and Japan. The author took stock of the recent developments in the EU-Japan bilateral relationship, including the parallel process of the negotiations on the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) and Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA). The author argued that these developments have been largely influenced by the commonly shared basic values, such as liberty, democracy, the rule of law, human rights, the market economy, and free trade. Despite these new developments, the author observed that Japan is much more interested in fostering stronger and closer relationship with the EU in the economic fields than any other fields. The author found it as an encouraging signal that the overall environment for EU-Japan cooperation in politics and other fields has improved both substantially and substantively over the past few years since the two parties have agreed in 2011 on negotiating the two abovementioned agreements. The author analyzed the economic and political aspects of EU-Japan relationship and drew a temporary conclusion that the EU-Japan strategic partnership is significant for Japan. This rather positive assessment notwithstanding, the author pointed to some tasks to be tackled in the bilateral relationship. For instance, considering the relatively insignificant involvement of the EU in the peace-building process in the Northeast Asian region confronted by the nuclear weapons development program of North Korea, the author called for EU's more active and affirmative role in this field.

The article co-authored by Jain and Sachdeva (2019) is devoted to EU-India strategic partnership. The authors have scrutinized the two parties' perspectives on global governance, normative divergence, and security cooperation and attempted to figure out and crystallize their respective perceptions on the strategic partnership. It is observed that the EU-India strategic partnership contributed to an expansion of bilateral contacts and consultations through establishing regular and irregular dialog forums, thereby enabling the EU and India to sensitize one another with each other's expectations and perspectives. Also, the authors suggested that the strategic partnership has contributed to greater mutual understanding in their respective positions in and

priorities on an increasing number of bilateral, regional, and global issues. However, the authors assessed the potential of a “long-term strategic glue,” which was hoped for by the Indian side when entering into a strategic partnership with the EU, to have unraveled due to a number of unexpected unfavorable developments, such as the more inward-looking EU caused by a series of its own crises, the EU's and member states' stronger attention to China that distracted their interests away from India, and the risk of the EU to lose its significance as a global actor as a consequence of the upcoming “Brexit.” From the Indian side as well, the traditional attitude of the policy makers to directly deal with individual member states rather than the EU still overshadows the bilateral relationship. In fact, the authors confirmed the co-existence of convergences and divergences in the bilateral relationship. As a consequence, one important conclusion was drawn in this article: confronted with the instabilities in the international order, especially caused by the erratic behavior of the US Trump administration and the continuous aspiration of China to secure an international leadership to compete with and against the USA, the EU, and India feel the necessity of a stronger mutual engagement. On their road to achieving this goal, however, they have to make enormous efforts to overcome hurdles that stand in the way—the different geographical and geopolitical priorities and different levels of socio-economic development that have long prevented the shared values from transforming into shared interests and shared priorities.

The article co-authored by Chung and Lee (2019) looked into the EU-Korea strategic partnership. In fact, Korea as the strategic partner for the EU represents a unique status, as the partnership is not only backed up by the “Framework Agreement” that is normally a cornerstone of the EU's strategic partnership with other countries but also has been supported by two additional agreements covering the economic and security sides. In the economic field, the EU and Korea successfully negotiated and brought into force the Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which will celebrate its 8th anniversary of implementation in July 2019. The Framework Agreement on Korea's Participation in EU's Crisis Management Operations (Framework Participation Agreement; FPA) constitutes the basis for mutual engagement in the field of security cooperation. Among the EU's four strategic partnerships with Asian countries, the one with Korea is the youngest and most underdeveloped. However, as the two parties share most of the basic values and interests, the partnership also shows the biggest potential for a further expansion. Along this line of thought, the authors investigated three pillars of this relatively young strategic partnership—political, security, and economic pillars—and evaluated that the EU-Korea bilateral relationship has reached a stable and mature status. Considering the areas of shared values and interests of the two partners, the authors recommended broadening the pillars of bilateral cooperation to include the global agenda, such as climate change, science and technology, and culture and education, in order to increase the significance of the strategic partnership.

EU's perceptions in Asian strategic partners

The EU has long struggled to increase its profile in the international arena, especially in the fields where its competences are shared with the member states. For example, the EU is a sole actor in implementing the trade policy under the name of the Common

Commercial Policy (CCP) participating in international trade negotiations representing the interests of all the EU member states, so that the profile of the EU is omni-present and its influence felt broadly by the counterparts. In the foreign and security policy, however, the actions of the EU are either coming later than those of the member states or overshadowed and not easily visible, due mainly to the stronger impacts exerted by its large member states, such as France, the UK, and Germany. The case study of EU-India strategic partnership in this special issue clearly shows that some partner countries still would like to deal directly with individual member states when it comes to fostering international relations in fields other than economic.

In addition to the case studies on EU's strategic partnership with four Asian countries, the NEAR project team conducted a comparative research on the perceptions of the EU in these four countries. In fact, the observed perception of the EU in the four Asian strategic partners of the EU can be used as an indicator to measure the effectiveness of the policies adopted by the EU. The article co-authored by Lai et al (2019) attempted to revisit the EU perception studies conducted in the past 10 years (2006–2015) in the four Asian strategic partners of the EU, with the purpose of identifying the evolution of EU's global actorness in the region, trends of perception changes, and the similarities and differences in the perceptions of the EU among the four countries. The authors argue that there is a certain degree of gap between the expectations of the EU in its pursuit of foreign policy in the Asian region on the one side and perceptions on the EU in the mindset of Asians on the other. Based on the wide-accepted thesis that “the perceptions that Asians have with regards to the EU and its future standing in the world are an important determinant for the effectiveness of the EU's Asia strategy,” the authors argued that the gaps mentioned above could signal a negative development in the future of the EU-Asia bilateral relations. A more inward-looking policy focus of the EU since the Eurozone crisis and the Brexit decision is quoted as an additional factor that has burdened and shows the potential to weaken the perceptions of Asians on the significance of their bilateral relationship with the EU. The authors identified, however, a few encouraging signals in the Asian's perceptions on the EU, as well, including the strategic partnership being increasingly viewed as more than just about a trading relationship for the countries involved and having contributed to the expansion of areas of bilateral relations beyond the traditional pillars of economic and political cooperation.

Evaluation and conclusion

As mentioned in the previous sections, the strategic partnerships devised by the EU in its relations with four Asian countries is an outcome of EU's continued policy efforts to strengthen its profile in and ties with fast-growing thus strategically important Asian countries. Though practiced based on the same functionalist logic of actions (Pan and Michalsky in this special issue), the EU's approaches toward the individual Asian strategic partners reveal some differences, in addition to the expected similarities. The differences observed in EU's implementation of the strategic partnership can be regarded as the result of a number of country-specific factors, including (i) the duration of the partnership, (ii) the extent and depth of the shared values, and (iii) the potential of the country in question to grow as the regional and global power.

These differences notwithstanding, it is clear that the EU will continue to engage with Asia more strongly in the future. For example, the Europe-Asia Connectivity (EAC) initiative of the EU (European Commission 2018), which was adopted in September 2018, is a clear manifest of the EU to reinvigorate its relationship with Asia. The EAC initiative, which is focusing on the “sustainable,” “comprehensive,” and “rules-based” connectivity, also shows EU’s intention to play a leadership role in global development issues, especially by using its own strength as a normative power. This can be interpreted as the EU’s rediscovered interests in Asia. Twenty-five years after the adoption of the New Asia Strategy in 1994, which was the first-ever conceptual framework of EU’s approach toward Asia, the EU now wants to upgrade and substantially strengthen its economic and political engagement with Asia.

Even though the EU’s 2016 Global Strategy (EEAS 2016) does not specifically mention about the importance of the strategic partnership, the NEAR project team strongly believes that the EU would inevitably make use of its network of strategic partners, especially those located in Asia, whenever they are in need of supports in the detailed design and implantation of the EAC initiative.

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