

CAN THE EU BE A SOURCE OF IDEAS AND SOFT POWER IN ASIA?

Jörn Dosch

Unlike the USA, when it comes to issues of security policy the EU and its individual Member States cannot traditionally be viewed as major players in Asia. However, the role of European actors in the Asia-Pacific region is significant in that they are said to exert a decisive influence on a wide range of politically relevant – and often controversial – activities and issues. These include trade and investment, democracy and human rights, migration, the environment, food and energy security, to name but a few. So the argument goes that the EU exerts normative or soft power in Asia. Soft power describes the normative influence exerted by states or groups of states in the international system by non-military means.¹ As far as the EU is concerned, soft power has two main aspects. Firstly, Brussels has the benefit of its largely positive experience of European integration. There may have been periodic crises, but these have not had a permanent effect on this positive perception. Therefore the EU is in a position to make use of this experience to actively contribute to deepening integration processes in other regions. By promoting regional cooperation, the EU hopes to achieve a prosperity dividend for the countries involved through increased regional trade, but above all it aims to have a positive effect on their peace and stability. And secondly the EU is keen to contribute to the global spread of democracy, the rule of law, human rights and other liberal values. In this process of providing and implementing ideas, the EU leans heavily on development cooperation and traditional diplomacy, which in the case of Asia involves a multi-layered and complex dialogue. The following comments on the role, success and limitations of the EU's soft power in Asia mainly refer to the conceptual approaches and policies of the European Commission. Unless otherwise noted, these findings are based on personal interviews with government



Prof. Jörn Dosch is Chair of International Politics and Development Cooperation and Coordinator for International Relations and ERASMUS at the Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences, University of Rostock.

1 | Cf. Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York, 2004.

officials at a number of foreign ministries across East/Southeast Asia, staff at the European Commission and international and regional organisations in Asia, NGO representatives, academics and journalists.

EUROPE'S SOFT POWER

Consideration of the extent to which the EU can generally exert soft power in international policy is largely based on the debates that have been ongoing since the 1970s about the EU's characterisation as a civilian power.² In contrast to traditional powers, the EU has relied on the primacy of diplomatic cooperation as a solution to global problems. From this, we can deduce that the EU is a normative power. Richard Rosecrance described this very succinctly when he wrote: "It is perhaps a paradox to note that the continent which once ruled the world through the physical impositions of imperialism is now coming to set world standards in normative terms."³ Before the concept of soft power became common in international relations, Johan Galtung had already come close to it with his phrase "the power of ideas".⁴

The EU has drawn up a number of treaties that officially oblige it to pursue a normative approach in its external relations – for example the Treaty of Lisbon.

Why is the EU unique in being so strongly focused on pursuing an explicitly normative direction when establishing external relations with Asia and other regions of the world? The

answer is that, firstly, the EU has drawn up a number of treaties that officially oblige it to follow this course. The normative power of the EU as a source of ideas is strengthened by the fact that, in its case, constitutive and regulative norms have a mutually reinforcing effect. Constitutive norms, for example international law, create actors and contribute to their identity – this applies to sovereign states and international organisations alike. Regulative norms determine the behaviour of actors in specific situations. In the case of the EU, the normative foundations of European integration also serve to define expectations and perceptions of the EU's actions in its external relations. The Treaty of Lisbon is a good

2 | Cf. François Duchêne, "Europe's Role in World Peace", in: Richard Mayne (ed.), *Europe Tomorrow: Sixteen Europeans Look Ahead*, London, 1972, p. 31-47; Knut Kirste/Hanns W. Maull, "Zivilmacht und Rollentheorie", *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 1996, p. 283-312.

3 | Richard Rosecrance, R., "The European Union: A New Type of International Actor", in: Jan Zielonka (ed.), *Paradoxes of European Foreign Policy*, Den Haag, 1998, p. 22.

4 | Cf. Johan Galtung, *The European Community: A Superpower in the Making*, London, 1973, p. 33.

example of this. It stipulates that the EU's international relations should be governed by the following basic principles (or constitutive norms): democracy, human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law. At the same time, the EU must make every effort to propagate and implement these basic principles (now as regulative norms) around the globe.⁵



In December 2012, the European Union was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize – for their contribution to peace, reconciliation, democracy and human rights. It endeavors to internationally promote and to implement these values as regulatory standards internationally. | Source: Georges Boulougouris, European Union, flickr ©1133.

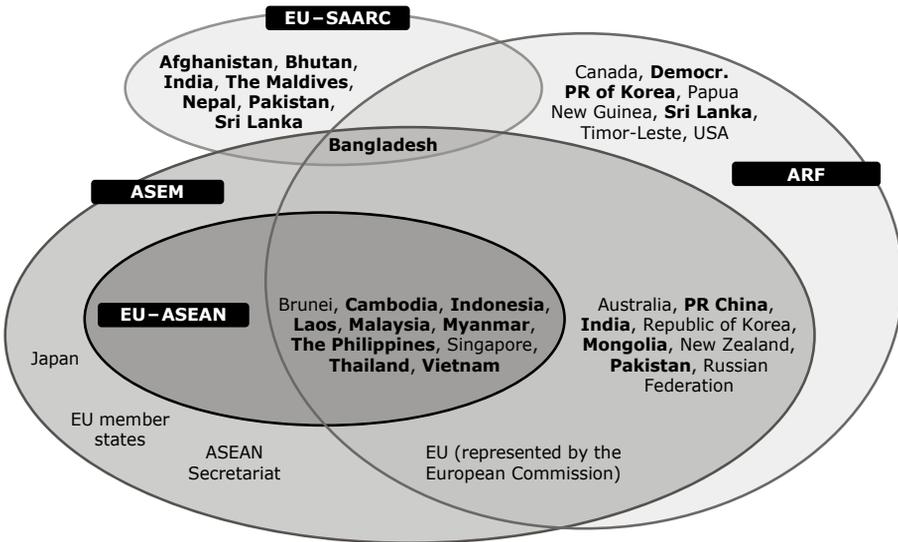
It seems likely that the idea of Europe's normative influence and soft power in Asia will strike a particular chord in places with similar institutional structures. In other words, the EU is more likely to have an effect as a provider of ideas when it works with other regional organisations. Here the focus particularly turns to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which was founded in 1967. But this is not a matter of course. In the early 1990s European actors reacted nervously to predictions of an imminent "Pacific century", in which relations between the USA and the Asia-Pacific region would become the main axis of global power. This scenario left little room for Europe to play a prominent and proactive role in 21st century international relations, and meant that Europeans had to accept responsibility for their difficult situation. It suggested that Europe was to blame for failing to place its relations with Asia on a solid institutional basis. The idea of a Europe in decline was far removed from reality, but

5 | See Article III-193(1), Article I-2 and I-3.

the ensuing intensive debate about the post-bipolar world order certainly had an effect. Since the mid-1990s, the EU and leading Asian actors, including ASEAN, have made major quantitative and qualitative improvements to their relations by setting up new mechanisms for cooperation.

Fig. 1

EU-supported regional and inter-regional organisations and dialogue mechanisms in Asia



Note: The highlighted countries are those covered under the EU-Asia Regional Strategy Paper (RSP) 2007-2013. | Source: Own and amended illustration based on: Particip, n. 14, p. 11.

Indeed, the foundations for these mechanisms had already been in place for some time. In 1977 the European Economic Community (EEC) and ASEAN formalised relations and went on to sign a widely acclaimed Cooperation Agreement in 1980. This was the first international agreement that the EEC had negotiated with another regional organisation. It included the important statement that the cooperation was between "equal partners".⁶ This cooperation was expanded and enhanced in 1996 with the establishment of the ASEAN-Europe Meeting (ASEM). This aimed to strengthen

6 | Cf. Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), "Cooperation Agreement between Member Countries of ASEAN and European Community Kuala Lumpur, 7 March 1980", <http://asean.org/asean/external-relations/european-union/item/external-relations-european-union-nuremberg-declaration-on-an-eu-asean-enhanced-partnership-nuremberg-germany-15-march-2007> (accessed 11 Jun 2015).

relations and increase understanding between the two regions in the spirit of mutual respect and equal partnership. The EU is also a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), founded in 1994, which meets on an annual basis to discuss security issues in the Asia-Pacific region. The latest addition to the dialogue with Asia occurred in 2006, when the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) granted the EU observer status.

Ever since the early days of Southeast Asian regionalism, there has been a strong belief that ASEAN does not view the European integration process and the EU as an organisation as a model that it wishes to emulate. This belief has become so entrenched that the region's politicians almost ritualistically refute any comparisons with the EU, as they do not want to allow the impression to arise that ASEAN could develop into a supranational organisation. Most of the relatively young nation states in Southeast Asia are not keen to see the institution evolve in this way. Indeed, the huge differences in the economic growth and political systems of the various nations mean that such a development is unrealistic at the present time. But the picture is very different when we leave the sphere of political rhetoric and look at the everyday activities of this regional association. Today, the EU is viewed by the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta and the foreign and trade ministries of its member states as being an important source of experience on specific integration issues. ASEAN does not necessarily see the EU as providing a blueprint for its own integration project, but it realises that it can learn from Europe's experiences. The ongoing financial crisis in the EU has done little to change this view. A high-ranking official at the Secretariat simply states: "We are trying to follow what the EU does and also what the EU's Member States do." A number of high-level ASEAN decision-makers, including two former Deputy Secretary Generals, have also confirmed that ASEAN could not exist without the substantial financial support provided by international donors and above all the EU.

EU-ASEAN COOPERATION

Between 1996 and 2013 the European Commission provided the ASEAN nations with almost 200 million euros as part of its development cooperation work. This funding was used to support a range of integration projects, particularly in the economic sphere, but also latterly in a number of other areas. For 2014 to 2020, Brussels has budgeted 320 million euros for the promotion of regional integration in Asia. 170 million euros of this is destined

for ASEAN, an average of 24 million euros per year.⁷ The relevance and scale of this financial support is particularly revealed when we realise that ASEAN's annual budget is just 16.2 million U.S. dollars (as at 2013). This sum is made up of ten equal contributions by the ASEAN member states and basically only covers the Secretariat's operating and staff costs. Without outside assistance, ASEAN is simply not in a position to finance the implementation of projects such as the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), which should be at least partially in place by the end of 2015. The funding for amending the legal and regulative frameworks, training the officials involved, creating the necessary physical infrastructure and other key measures has been almost totally provided by international donors and particularly the EU.

A number of large projects funded by the European Commission are of particular significance here: the multi-million ASEAN Program for Regional Integration Support (APRIS, 2003 to 2010) and its successor ASEAN Regional Integration Support from the EU

The Bandar Seri Begawan Plan of Action to Strengthen the EU-ASEAN Enhanced Partnership (2013-2017), adopted in April 2012, aims to intensify cooperation areas.

(ARISE, 2013 to 2016); the EU-ASEAN Project on the Protection of Intellectual Property Rights (ECAP), which has been running since 1993; and the Regional EU-ASEAN Dialogue Instrument (READI), which has been ongoing since 2011 and addresses non-economic issues such as disaster preparedness and management, energy security and human rights. The current initiatives form part of the Bandar Seri Begawan Plan of Action to Strengthen the EU-ASEAN Enhanced Partnership (2013 to 2017), adopted in April 2012. This broad agreement aims to intensify cooperation in the areas of policy and security policy (including human rights), business and trade, socio-cultural and civil society issues and institutional cooperation.⁸

7 | Cf. Dimitri Vanoverbeke/Michael Reiterer, "ASEAN's Regional Approach to Human Rights: The Limits of the European Model?" in: Wolfgang Benedek et al. (eds.), *European Yearbook on Human Rights 2014*, Antwerpen, 2014, p. 186; European Commission, *Regional Programming for Asia Multiannual Indicative Programme, 2014-2020*, p. 8, http://eeas.europa.eu/asia/docs/rsp/regional-asia-mip-2014-2020_en.pdf (accessed 11 Jun 2015).

8 | Cf. Federal Foreign Office, "Bandar Seri Begawan Plan of Action to Strengthen the ASEAN-EU Enhanced Partnership (2013-2017)", <http://auswaertiges-amt.de/cae/servlet/contentblob/630156/publicationFile/173526> (accessed 11 Jun 2015).



EU-funded projects have influence on the establishment of new standards by the ASEAN member countries in fields such as cross-border transport of goods and customs. | Source: Hans Hillewaert, flickr [©1133](#).

Development agencies in other countries, such as America's USAID or Australia's AUSAID, are also trying to strengthen ASEAN as an institution, but there are a number of areas where central new norms have clearly been established as a result of EU projects. For example, the ASEAN member states went against the U.S. by adopting the EU norm of geographical indications in the protection of intellectual property (Champagne, Serrano ham, etc.). The U.S. does not recognise geographical indications in patent law and relies exclusively on trademarks in this respect. In addition, almost all ASEAN states have adapted the legal foundations of their patent laws and the administration of their patent approvals and processes in line with the EU model and have introduced the same software as that used by the European Patent Office. A number of other norms have been adopted as a result of EU projects. These include standards for electronic and cosmetic products and foodstuffs and the harmonisation of customs norms and procedures, such as important certificates of origin. The ARISE Project, which has received 15 million euros in funding, has a vital role to play in the gradual implementation of the AEC. EU support is particularly important in the creation of a single goods market, the ongoing harmonisation of technical standards, the improvement of cross-border goods transportation and improved cooperation on customs matters. A pilot project funded by ARISE lies at the heart of the process of implementing

the ASEAN Customs Transit System (ACTS). More specifically, it involves the creation of a North-South corridor from Thailand through Malaysia to Singapore, including harmonised export and import procedures for greater efficiency and effectiveness. In the second phase, an East-West corridor is planned to run through Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam.

The projects that receive funding from the EU budget are supplemented by initiatives on the part of individual EU Member States. Germany is prominent in this respect, with the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) running four of its own ASEAN-wide programs in the region: Capacity Building for the ASEAN Secretariat and Capacity Development for the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (AIPA) (funded by the German Foreign Office) and two projects of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Competition Policy and Law in ASEAN and Support to ASEAN Supreme Audit Institutions. Across all the EU Member States, GIZ is the only actor in the area of development cooperation to have a presence at the ASEAN Secretariat. Germany's political foundations are also making major contributions to ASEAN integration as part of European/Asian cooperation in economic, social and security-related fields. The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) has offices in eight of the ten ASEAN countries and runs projects co-funded by the EU in a number of countries, including Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines. According to Asian dialogue partners, the largely EU funded "EU-Asia Dialogue" that has been implemented by the KAS Regional Programme Political Dialogue Asia (based in Singapore)⁹ has contributed to the transfer of European ideas and concepts with regard to issues such as climate change, eco-cities, migration and food security.

NORMATIVE INFLUENCE ON THE HUMAN RIGHTS DISCOURSE IN ASIA

In this way, the EU is not only exerting soft power with regard to trade policies and the institutional framework for regional integration but EU actors are also clearly having a normative influence – above and beyond ASEAN – on the human rights discourse in Asia. This first became evident in 2000 during the ASEM summit in Seoul, when the majority of participating Asian nations

9 | The full project title is "Shaping a Common Future for Europe and Asia – Sharing Policy Innovation and Best Practices in Addressing Common Challenges".

moved away from the previously postulated approach of localised Asian human rights and began to accept and agree on a European understanding of human rights. In her detailed analysis of the European-Asian human rights discourse, Maria-Gabriela Manea points out how the dialogue that the EU and ASEAN had been conducting for so many years at so many levels finally led to a radical rethinking.¹⁰ This process concluded with the codification of human rights norms in Southeast Asia, firstly in the form of the ASEAN Charter of 2007 and later and most importantly culminating in the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration of 2012. It is true that the EU did not directly influence the creation of these two documents, but an attendee at the AICHR meetings reports that the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), which was responsible for formulating the Declaration, used the European Convention on Human Rights as a model during certain difficult situations that arose during the negotiations. As the world's most comprehensive mechanism for protecting human rights, the European approach provides "a reference point and source of inspiration for ASEAN in the gradual process of constructing its own system".¹¹ However, the normative power of the EU rests not only in its role as a model (to a certain extent at least), but is also the result of its active promotion of human rights.

In 1991 the European Commission decreed that all new international agreements should include a human rights clause as an indispensable component. In 1992 the Treaty on European Union (known as the Maastricht Treaty) stated that the spread of democracy,

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human rights and basic freedoms was a key goal of development cooperation and created an appropriate legal framework in this respect. In 1994 the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) was set up as a funding instrument for the worldwide advancement of participatory and representative democracy, political pluralism, the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms. The EIDHR's budget has grown steadily and is now in the region of 1.3 billion euros for 2014 to 2020 (since 2006 the I stands for Instrument). Also in 1994, the EU announced its first Asia Strategy, stating its aim was to work on

10 | Cf. Maria-Gabriela Manea, "Human rights and the interregional dialogue between Asia and Europe: ASEAN-EU relations and ASEM", *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 2, 2008, No. 1, 2008, p. 380.

11 | Cf. Vanoverbeke/Reiterer, n. 7, p. 195.

“the development and consolidation of democracy and the rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” as a direct contribution towards security and stability in Asia.¹² Since then, this approach has been steadily intensified and differentiated. The establishment of the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI) in 2006 provided its chief impetus. It replaced all the EU’s previous geographical and thematic approaches to development cooperation and brought them together in a single funding instrument. Under the DCI, the EU agrees to promote good governance, democracy, human rights and institutional reforms.¹³ The target countries in this respect are those listed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development’s (OECD’s) Development Assistance Committee (DAC).

THE EU’S NATIONAL AND REGIONAL STRATEGIES

As part of the EU’s regional strategy from 2007 to 2013, which received 618 million euros over the same period, a particular focus was placed on providing support for uprooted population groups and demobilised former fighters.

The EU set out its cooperation with developing nations in Asia for the period from 2007 to 2013 in 18 national strategies and one regional strategy for the whole continent (excluding Central Asia, which has its own strategy) and made available funding to the

tune of 5.2 billion euros. As part of the regional strategy, which received 618 million euros over the same period, a particular focus was placed on providing support for uprooted population groups and demobilised former fighters (Aid to Uprooted People, AUP). One third of the funding was earmarked for this area. AUP is closely linked to human and civil rights in that the program aims to achieve the integration and reintegration of uprooted people in order to strengthen their basic rights and provide an opportunity to curtail forced labour and human trafficking. An independent evaluation of the 2007 to 2013 regional strategy concluded that – despite the enormous challenges it faced and the fact that it was not always able to achieve its goals – the AUP had made an effective contribution to improving the lives of uprooted people and former fighters, particularly in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran,

12 | Cf. European Commission, “Mitteilung der Kommission an den Rat: Auf dem Weg zu einer neuen Asien-Strategie”, KOM (94) 314 final, Brussels, 13 Jul 1994, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/DE/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:51994DC0314&from=EN> (accessed 11 Jun 2015).

13 | “Finanzierungsinstrument für die Entwicklungszusammenarbeit – DCI (2007-2013)”, in: *Europa. Zusammenfassung der EU-Gesetzgebung*, 20 Oct 2010, http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/development/general_development_framework/l14173_de.htm (accessed 11 Jun 2015).

Myanmar, Thailand, Bangladesh, Nepal, India, the Philippines and Sri Lanka. In Myanmar the EU is the largest source of aid for uprooted people such as the Muslim Rohingya.¹⁴

Equally, the (also independent and publicly accessible) evaluations of the cooperation with individual Asian countries provide further evidence of the EU's soft power. By combining diplomacy with targeted support for Philippine human rights organisations (within the EIDHR framework), in 2006 the EU made a major contribution to the abolition of the death penalty in the Philippines.¹⁵ In Nepal the EU "has directly contributed to expanding the outreach of human rights monitoring in the country and, to some extent, to the reduction of human rights violations and discrimination against women and vulnerable people".¹⁶ In Vietnam the situation of ethnic minorities was improved by a number of EU-funded projects, particularly those which provided access to education and health services in highland regions. However, the poorest and most disadvantaged population groups often still gained little or no benefit from the projects.¹⁷ In India the government worked on joint initiatives with the EU to involve people and institutions at village level in rural development planning. This led to democratic structures being strengthened at local level.¹⁸ Taking the situation in Thailand as a final example, in June 2014 the Council of the European Union reacted to the country's military coup with an official statement that included two key measures: firstly, it suspended official visits to and from Thailand; and

14 | Cf. Particip, "Evaluation of the European Union's regional cooperation with Asia. Final Report. Volume 1", Mar 2014, p. 52-58, http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/how/evaluation/evaluation_reports/reports/2014/1326_vol1_en.pdf (accessed 11 Jun 2015).

15 | Cf. Particip, "Evaluation of the European Commission's Cooperation with the Philippines. Final Report. Volume 2", Jun 2011, p. 218, https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/evaluation-cooperation-ec-philippines-1299-annex-201106_en_0.pdf (accessed 30 Jun 2015).

16 | Cf. Particip, "Evaluation of the Commission of the European Union's Cooperation with Nepal Country Level Evaluation. Final Report, Vol. 1 – Main Report", Mar 2012, p. 20, https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/evaluation-cooperation-ec-nepal-1302-main-report-201203_en_0.pdf (accessed 11 Jun 2015).

17 | Cf. Particip, "Evaluation of the European Commission's Cooperation with Vietnam. Final Report, Vol. 1", Oct 2009, <http://oecd.org/countries/vietnam/44652744.pdf> (accessed 11 Jun 2015).

18 | Cf. Particip, "Evaluation of the European Commission's Support to the Republic of India. Final Report", Aug 2007, p. 51, https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/evaluation-cooperation-ec-india-1091-main-report-200708_en_0.pdf (accessed 11 Jun 2015).

secondly it postponed the signing of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Thailand.¹⁹



The projects of the European Union extend to actions in the field of rural development. In this way, democratic structures and the participation of local populations and institutions can be strengthened. | Source: Lynhdan, flickr ©.

However, these examples of the EU's positive influence on human rights and democracy cannot detract from the fact that its normative power has not led to widespread, comprehensive change. Despite the fact that the EU has conducted a human rights dialogue with almost all its partners in Asia, the Human Rights Risk Index 2014 still rated the risk of human rights abuses in all Asian countries (with the exception of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan) as "high" or "extremely high".²⁰ This index is published annually by Reliefweb, an information service that is part of the United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. The only two ASEAN countries to have abolished the death penalty are the Philippines and Cambodia.

19 | Cf. Council of the European Union, "Schlussfolgerungen des Rates zu Thailand", Brussels, 23 Jun 2014, http://parlament.gv.at/PAKT/EU/XXV/EU/03/05/EU_30541/imfname_10477428.pdf (accessed 17 Jun 2015).

20 | Cf. Reliefweb, "World: Human Rights Risk Index 2014", <http://reliefweb.int/map/world/world-human-rights-risk-index-2014> (accessed 11 Jun 2015).

THE LIMITATIONS OF NORMATIVE INFLUENCE

There is other evidence that the EU's soft power has not met with universal success. Evaluations of the EU's development cooperation with countries such as China and Bangladesh and other regional associations in Asia such as SAARC show that in these cases the EU has played a minor role as a provider of ideas. The evaluation of cooperation with China that was carried out some years ago responded to the question "to what extent has the EU contributed to promoting transition to an open society based on rule of law, democratic processes, and respect for human rights?" by stating: "The EU has provided welcome technical advice, capacity-building, best-practice training, awareness raising, etc., but in the end the pace of progress is driven by Chinese policy priorities and politics."²¹ Regarding this point some might argue that any other result would have been unexpected. Of course the findings of a 100-page report cannot be summarised in a single sentence, but the evaluation still throws doubt on whether the EU is realistic about what it can achieve through soft power. Does the European Commission really think it can make a significant contribution to establishing a democratic and open society in China? The current strategy document titled "EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation" is less ambitious in its aims (unsurprisingly, as it is a joint European-Chinese paper). It simply refers to the desirability of deepening exchange on human rights "on the basis of equality and mutual respect".²² Since 1995 the EU has maintained a regular human rights dialogue with China, including discussions on issues such as the death penalty, the rights of ethnic minorities and political and civil freedoms, but there is little evidence that this has had an effect. Indeed, in her comprehensive study, Katrin Kinzelbach concludes that the EU has failed in its goal of having a positive influence on the human rights climate in China. She also believes that the EU has in fact achieved the opposite of what it is seeking. She claims that over the years Chinese government officials have become

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21 | Cf. Partcip, "Evaluation of the European Commission's Co-operation and Partnership with the People's Republic of China. Country Level Evaluation. Final Synthesis Report", Apr 2007, p.31, http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/how/evaluation/evaluation_reports/reports/2007/1077_vol1_en.pdf (accessed 11 Jun 2015).

22 | Cf. European External Action Service, "EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation", p.4, http://eeas.europa.eu/china/docs/20131123_agenda_2020_en.pdf (accessed 11 Jun 2015).

experts in dealing with the human rights dialogue. Secret talks behind closed doors have become a diplomatic ritual. They have provided Chinese participants with intensive training on how to handle international criticism and recommendations about China's human rights policy and reject this in the most effective way.²³



In December 2014, the 33rd EU – China Dialogue on Human Rights took place. Katrin Kinzelbach, Associate Director at the Global Public Policy Institute, notes in a study that the EU did not manage to influence the human rights climate in China positively. | Source: Tashana Batista, EU Council/EEAS, flickr ©①②③.

Of course China is a complex case and cannot necessarily be seen as a representative example of the EU's soft power in Asia on the whole. However, the EU also has to deal with the criticism that it has failed to make the most of existing opportunities or in fact has knowingly wasted them. Its relations with SAARC provide a good example of this. The EU has observer status, which allows Brussels to take part in SAARC summits. This opened the door to stronger relations between the two organisations, but this potential has not been fully exploited. Unlike other observers, the EU has never sent any high-level representatives, a fact that is a source of some annoyance for SAARC and EU officials. An EU representative bemoaned the fact that so much time and effort was poured into gaining observer status only to waste it by not sending

23 | Cf. Katrin Kinzelbach, *The EU's Human Rights Dialogue with China: Quiet Diplomacy and its Limits*, London, 2014, p.214. For a summary in German cf. Katrin Kinzelbach, "Menschenrechtsdialog in der Krise", *Deutscher Studienpreis. Ergebnisse 2011*, http://koerber-stiftung.de/fileadmin/user_upload/wissenschaft/studienpreis/preistraeger/2011/pdf/1-DSP-2011_Kinzelbach.pdf (accessed 11 Jun 2015).

appropriate delegates to the meetings. Similar concerns have been voiced about ASEAN-EU relations and the ASEM summit. In both these cases, the Asian side has tended to send higher-level representatives than the EU, a fact that has been viewed with some incomprehension by Asian governments. A good example of this was the ASEAN-EU summit held on 22 November 2007 in Singapore, marking the 30th anniversary of the establishment of official relations. It was planned that the meeting should be attended by heads of state and government, but unlike the ASEAN nations, only a few EU Member States sent their heads of government. Today, observers still talk of the EU's embarrassment and the loss of face suffered by Singapore, which had a negative impact on subsequent diplomatic relations.²⁴

To be fair, when it comes to foreign policy the EU's institutional structure means it cannot act in the same way as an individual state. Coordination on foreign and security policy issues has increased, but the EU's external relations still represent the sum of the interests and strategies of the European Commission, the European Parliament and the 28 member states. They do not all consider relations with Asia to be one of their top priorities. Although the Union now has a High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy who looks after the day-to-day conduct of external relations, this has not necessarily increased the effectiveness of European diplomacy, at least with regard to Asia. The visit by former High Representative Catherine Ashton to the ASEAN Secretariat in November 2013 attracted little public attention, whereas Hillary Clinton's visit in September 2012 in her role as U.S. Secretary of State was reported in the media for weeks.

At the end of the day, high-level diplomacy only plays a minor role in building and expanding normative power. It is equally – or perhaps more – important to focus on the everyday reality of the bilateral and multilateral relations that develop as a result of communication and negotiation between the officials of the governments concerned. The EU's apparatus is characterised by multilayered decision-making processes, complex coordination procedures and the principle of rotation. This means that it often lacks the flexibility to make compromises during negotiations, and regular personnel changes make it more difficult to build mutual trust and understanding. It is an open secret that the free trade negotiations between the EU and ASEAN which began in 2007 and broke down in 2009 largely failed because the Brussels

representatives tried to push through the EU draft without being willing or able to respond to the specific requirements and wishes of ASEAN.

CONCLUSION

This all may give the impression that the EU has failed in its objective of exercising a normative influence on Asia, or at least that it has been less successful than Brussels would like to suggest. However, such a verdict fails to take into account the fact that diplomacy is only one side of the coin. There is little public awareness of the EU's development cooperation with Asia, but the above examples show that it does indeed play a role as an accepted source of ideas. There is clearly a European tone to Southeast Asian regionalism and the Asian discourse on human rights, democracy and good governance.