

Understanding the EU's changing trade policy strategy towards the Asia-Pacific region from a role-theory perspective

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Abstract

The past decade has witnessed an increasing nexus between the European Union's trade and foreign policy toward Asia. On the one hand, the EU has sought to deepen economic cooperation with its key Asian partners since this region has become central to the EU's economic growth. On the other hand, the EU has increasingly used its trade policy as a foreign policy tool to pursue its geopolitical interests in Asia. Against this background, the paper seeks to examine the dynamics of trade relations between the EU and its Asian partners by adopting the role theory. Using this theory, this paper aims to provide a holistic understanding of how the EU's changing role in the EU-Asia trade relations has affected its pursuit of economic as well as geopolitical interests in Asia.

Keywords: EU–Asia relations, EU trade policy, EU foreign policy, role theory

Introduction

The Asia–Pacific region is home to some of the world's fastest growing economies, such as China and ASEAN countries. In recent years, the EU has worked to deepen its economic cooperation with key economic actors in the region by negotiating a number of interregional and bilateral trade and investment agreements. Beyond its economic interests, the EU is also using its trade policy as a foreign policy tool, to reinforce its political influence in Asia. Therefore, in parallel with trade negotiations with its partners in the region, the EU has pursued political agreements, GSP schemes, as well as various trade-related assistance programmes which cover political, security and normative issues including human rights, good governance, and the rule of law.

Against this background, this article investigates the dynamics of trade relations between the EU and its Asian partners and discusses how the EU uses its trade policy as a foreign policy tool to strengthen its political influence in Asia. To that end, we adopt role theory to answer the following question: how can the changing role of the

EU in EU–Asia trade relations, ascribed to it by internal and external expectations, affect its pursuit of economic interests as well as wider foreign policy goals Asia?

The article is structured as follows: the first section introduces the role-theoretic approach and presents the analytical framework. The second section applies the analytical framework to analyse the role of the EU in trade relations with its Asian partners and the way this role influences the EU's pursuit of economic interests and political interests in the region. The third section outlines the findings of the article and discusses policy implications. Adopting a content analysis approach, the article draws on a variety of primary data and secondary sources, including EU official documents, media reports, and more than 30 semi-structured interviews with EU and Asian policy makers conducted between 2017 and 2020.

Theoretical framework

Over the past few decades, there has been much academic discussion of the EU's role in global politics (Tonra & Christiansen, 2004). Within this, a group of scholars have studied the EU's significance in various international contexts by adopting the concept of *actorness* (Carbone, 2013). The term 'actorness', according to its early proponent Sjøstedt (1977, p. 16), can be defined as a political actor's 'capacity to behave actively and deliberately in relation to other actors in the international system'. As Klose points out, the existing literature on the EU's actorness pays insufficient attention to understanding the relative significance of, as well as interaction between, different determinants of Union's actorness, as well as the social process underlying the EU's emergence as a key international actor (Klose, 2018).

In order to address this gap in the literature, Klose (2018) introduced a new approach, theorising the EU's actorness from an interactionist role theory perspective. This approach reconceptualises the EU's international emergence as a process of role-making. Specifically, this approach perceives the EU's actorness as its 'capacity to imagine and realise roles for its "self" in (specific contexts) of international affairs' (Klose, 2018, p. 1146). In addition, this capacity should be considered as deriving from the complex interplay between domestic and external role expectations, creative actions, and (social and material) resources available to the EU (Klose, 2018, p. 1146). Central to this interactionist role theory is the idea that political actors express themselves in international society through the development of two intertwined dimensions of agency: 'me' and 'I'. Whereas the 'me' refers to a political entity's capacity to understand its 'self' through the perspectives of others (role-taking), the 'I' can be understood as its capacity to develop creative impulses in reaction to the 'me' (Klose, 2018). The interaction and dialogue between these two dimensions play a crucial role in enabling a political actor to realise its 'self' in a given context of international society, as well as reflecting on the roles it plays within the wider international community. This interaction ultimately results in a learning process wherein an international actor gains a new understanding of its self-positioning in world affairs (Harnisch, 2012).

In Klose's interactionist role theory framework, several elements determine the EU's international actorness. The first element is internal role expectations, which are established by 'individual constituent units seeking to convince each other of supporting specific EU roles' (Klose, 2018, p. 1148). That is to say, negotiations among member states and various EU institutions will shape the type of role that the Union

seeks to play in a given context. The second element, cohesion – internal agreement among different EU actors – will not only shape the Union’s ability to mobilise resources but will affect the expectations of others about the Union’s roles (Klose, 2018, p. 1148). Additionally, Klose (2018, p. 1148) stresses that social and material resources (e.g. economic and military capabilities, knowledge) and creative action will shape the EU’s actorness in the sense that these elements will ultimately determine what action should be taken based on available resources and the capability to use these resources in accordance with the imaged roles.

In order to operationalise the interactionist role theory framework, three steps have been outlined by Klose (2018) to inform empirical research:

- Step one: analysing the EU’s (re)imagination of an international role in response to problematic situations

Problematic situations can be understood as ‘moments of uncertainty’ that potentially challenge established role-playing routines (Klose, 2018, p. 1149; see also Harnisch, 2012). Specifically, problematic situations may occur when established roles are challenged by domestic role contestation, changes in the role expectations of other actors, or shifts in relative material and social resources (Harnisch, 2012, pp. 50–51; Klose, 2018). In response to these problematic situations, the EU’s international roles will be (re) imagined, which results in a dynamic process wherein the EU’s constituent units (member states or intra-EU institutions) assess possible courses of action. This phase of analysis will examine the impulses generated by EU internal actors to express their expectations of the EU’s role in the given context of international relations. It also evaluates how external actors cast EU constituent units into roles commensurate with their own vision of the EU’s role in international affairs (Klose, 2018, p. 1150).

- Step two: analysing the EU’s attempts to realise its desired role in social interaction

This step investigates the Union’s attempts to implement its imagined roles in relation to significant others in the context of international relations. Specifically, it examines how the EU utilises creative means to mobilise social and material resources in order to cast significant others into specific counter- or commensurate roles. In addition, this phase looks into the reactions of significant others in response to the EU’s role-making (Klose, 2018, p. 1150).

- Step three: analysing the implications of this role-making process for the EU itself and for others within a specific social structure of international affairs.

This step examines the implications of the EU’s role-making process. Specifically, it investigates whether the Union has succeeded in convincing other actors to take up roles that are commensurate with what the EU has imagined for its ‘self’. In other words, it examines the extent to which the EU is effective in asserting its ‘self’ as an international actor via *the* process of realisation of a specific role. In addition, this step evaluates whether the Union’s attempts have shaped or changed the social structure in the specific context of international politics (Klose, 2018, pp. 1150–51).

An analysis of EU trade policy towards its Asian partners

Using the framework outlined above, this section seeks to investigate the EU's desired role when trading with its Asian partners, as well as the extent to which the EU has managed to solidify this role in practice. The first part of this section analyses the EU's desired role in the field of trade as well as other roles that it can achieve through its trading activities in the regional context of Asia. Part two explores how the EU has used its resources to realise its *desired* role. The final part discusses the extent to which the EU has succeeded in solidifying this desired role.

1. The EU's desired role in Asia in the field of trade

In light of the economic weight that Asian countries represent for the EU, and vice versa, the EU sees itself as a regional actor that exerts significant influence on Asian countries' economies. As long ago as 2001, in *Europe and Asia: A Strategic Framework for Enhanced Partnerships*, the EU emphasised the significant contribution it had made to Asian countries' rapid economic recovery from the 2008 financial crisis (European Commission, 2001). In particular, the EU stated that "keeping our markets open and building on the 'trade and investment pledge' made at the second ASEM Summit in London in April 1998" was of crucial importance for Asian countries' economic recovery (European Commission, 2001, p.8). In the 2012 *Guidelines on the EU's Foreign and Security Policy in East Asia*, the EU again stressed that the level of economic interdependence between the EU and East Asia was of significance for 'the future growth prospects of both sides' (Council of the European Union, 2012, p.5). Furthermore, these guidelines stated that the EU should deepen its engagement with economic reforms in Asia (Council of the European Union, 2012, p.12). The above-mentioned statements in the EU's policy papers demonstrate that the EU believes that it is an important economic power in Asia due to its economic weight in this region.

In addition to the desired role as a power in trade in Asia, the EU also sees itself as a regional power that exerts significant political influence through its trading activities. The EU's desired role as a regional power through trade can be understood from three perspectives. Firstly, the EU sees itself as a norm promoter through its trade power in Asia. Over the past decade, the EU has increasingly used its trade policy to promote its norms and values, which is the core objective of EU foreign policy (Chen & Gao, 2020). The European Commission has pointed out that trade policy must be consistent with other instruments of the EU's external actions because 'EU Treaties demand that the EU promotes its values, including the development of poorer countries, higher social and environmental standards, and respect for human rights, around the world' (European Commission, 2015, p. 22). In a 2017 Communication – *A Balanced and Progressive Trade Policy to Harness Globalization* – the EU again emphasised its policy of non-compromise on its core values and norms (European Commission, 2017, p. 4). In Asia, the EU's aspiration to be a norm promoter through its trading activities is increasingly visible. For instance, in the 2019 paper *EU-China – A Strategic Outlook*, the EU noted that "[t]o preserve its interest in stability, sustainable economic development and good governance in partner countries, the EU will apply more robustly the existing bilateral agreements and financial instruments" (European Commission, 2019a, p. 5). Similarly, one EU official from the DG TRADE pointed out that trade policy was a very important instrument to reinforce EU values in Asia (*Interview*, 2017a). This view was shared by another EU official, who contended that

the EU's trade policy towards its Asian partners was increasingly value-based (Interview, 2017b). Discussion above demonstrates that the EU's trade policy towards its Asian partners acts as a crucial instrument to achieve the EU's desired role as a norm promoter in the region.

Secondly, the EU seeks to act as a standard-setter through exploiting its trade power in Asia. In recent years, the EU has proactively engaged in global regulatory cooperation, in particular in the field of digital trade. In its 2015 communication *Trade for All: Towards a More Responsible Trade and Investment Policy*, the EU pointed out the necessity of reinforcing international regulatory cooperation (European Commission, 2015) and stated that it would prioritise regulatory issues in international negotiations (European Commission, 2015, p. 13). In a similar vein, in a recent communication, the EU emphasised its desire to 'spearhead the development of new global norms, international standards and cooperation frameworks in areas such as digital, including Artificial Intelligence and other new technologies' (European Commission, 2021, p. 2). When developing bilateral relations with its Asian partners, the EU seeks to provide leadership in setting standards through exploiting its trade power. In its 2016 *Global Strategy*, the EU explicitly pointed out that pursuing comprehensive free trade agreements with its Asian partners, such as Japan, ASEAN and India, can promote international regulatory standards (EEAS, 2016, p. 41). Another example can be found in an EU report on building stronger digital cooperation between the EU and ASEAN. In this report, the EU stated that ASEAN countries were highly *interested* in the EU's approach to the digital economy and that the EU was willing to share its experience in measuring the digital economy (European Commission, 2019b). The above examples demonstrate the EU's commitment to playing a leading role in addressing regulatory issues in Asia.

Thirdly, the EU believes that it can act as a security provider through its trading activities. The EU's desired security role in Asia is primarily driven by its broader foreign policy goals. In recent years, the EU has increasingly used its trade policy as a powerful foreign policy tool when pursuing a role as 'a global security provider' (EEAS, 2016, p. 3). In *Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, published in 2016, the EU emphasised that to address security threats within and beyond EU borders, the EU must make full use of its economic potential (EEAS, 2016).

The EU's desired security role in Asia can also be understood as a response to the multiple security challenges in the region, including the DPRK's nuclear programme or territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Being aware of the direct connection between European prosperity and Asian security, the EU 'will deepen economic diplomacy and scale up our security role in Asia' (EEAS, 2016). As the EU's 2012 policy guidelines noted, 'the EU's economic presence in the region, and its unique experience of post-war reconciliation and political and economic integration, position it well to play an important role in helping to bolster regional security' (Council of the EU, 2012, p. 8). These official documents reveal the EU's ambition of acting as a security provider in Asia through its trading activities in the region.

2. EU attempts to realise its desired role in Asia

Following the analysis of the EU's desired role in the field of trade and other roles that it can achieve through trading activities in Asia, this sub-section seeks to examine how the EU has used its resources to realise its aspirations.

One principal tool adopted by the EU to achieve its desired role as a power in trade in Asia is conducting trade negotiations with its Asian partners. Tracing back to the 2006 paper *Global Europe: Competing in the World*, the EU identified Asia as among its main trade interests (European Commission, 2006). In this communication, on the basis of the key criteria for selecting new FTA partners, ASEAN and South Korea were chosen as priority candidates with which the EU would conduct FTA negotiations (European Commission, 2006, p. 9). In the 2010 *Trade, Growth and World Affairs: Trade Policy as a Core Component of the EU's 2020 Strategy*, the EU again stressed that it should take advantage of fast-growing regional trade in Asia by expanding and concluding bilateral FTA negotiations with Asian countries such as Singapore and ASEAN (European Commission, 2010, p. 10). In its 2015 *Trade for All: Towards a More Responsible Trade and Investment Policy*, the EU identified the EU–Japan free trade agreement and the EU–China investment agreement as priority projects (European Commission, 2015, p. 5). In addition to bilateral trade negotiations with individual Asian partners, the EU has also sought to conduct negotiations for region-to-region trade agreements. Although negotiations for a trade and investment agreement between the EU and ASEAN were paused in 2009 to give way to a bilateral negotiation format, an EU–ASEAN agreement remains the EU's ultimate objective (European Commission, 2020).

Moving on to the EU's efforts to realise its desired role as a power through trade in Asia, the EU seeks to fulfil its role as a norm promoter by including core EU values (such as sustainable development, democracy and rule of law) in its trade agreements. In recent years, the EU has established a legally binding link between FTAs and bilateral political agreements, including the Political Cooperation Agreement (PCA), the Framework Agreement (FwA), and the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA). These agreements are all designed to link political and normative components to the EU's external trade agreements. Observers have pointed out that the inclusion of provisions on human rights, democracy, the rule of law and other recognised core EU values is now a common feature in recent EU FTAs in Asia (Bungenberg, & Hazarika, 2019).

This close link between EU trade agreements and its promotion of norms is exemplified by EU–Thailand trade talks. The EU started FTA negotiations with Thailand in 2013, but these were suspended in 2014 in response to Thailand's military coup of May 2014. One EU official from DG TRADE pointed out that, despite being aware of the economic cost due to the suspension of negotiations, promotion of norms such as human rights and democracy was a priority in trade negotiations with Thailand (Interview, 2017c). The European Parliament emphasised that there was no possibility to resume the FTA negotiations until democracy was restored (Vandewalle, 2016). Another example is the EU's trade talks with Vietnam. The EU stressed that this trade agreement was significant because of its strong commitments on fundamental labour rights, environmental protection and respect for human rights (Delegation of the EU to Vietnam, 2019, p. 24). These examples show that the EU has attempted to promote norms, such as democracy, labour rights and environmental protection, by including commitments on them in its trade negotiations with Asian countries.

With regard to the EU's desired role as a standard setter, the EU seeks to achieve this role by including regulations regarding data flow and protection in trade negotiations with its Asian partners. For instance, the cross-border flow of data is a crucial component of the EU–Japan Economic Partnership Agreement. The European

Commission emphasised that data protection, which is a fundamental right in the EU, is ‘not up for negotiation’ (Kanetake & de Vries, 2018). Dutch MEP Marietje Schaake stated that ‘the European Parliament will not ratify an agreement that undermines data protection in the EU’ (Ibid.). To close the gap in data protection between the EU and Japan, the Japanese government revised its regime on privacy protection, which led to a significant outcome. On 17 July 2018, the EU and Japanese delegations agreed to recognise each other’s data protection as ‘equivalent’. On the same day, the EU and Japan signed their EPA. This example reveals the EU’s ambition to provide leadership in setting regulations in the field of digital trade through conducting trade negotiations with its Asian partners.

Moving on to the EU’s efforts to fulfill its desired role as a security provider in Asia, one principal tool adopted by the EU is providing development aid funding, in particular to ASEAN countries. The EU is a major development aid donor for ASEAN. In recent years, the EU has significantly strengthened its development cooperation with ASEAN: for 2014–2020, more than EUR 170 million has been devoted to funding ASEAN regional integration agenda—more than doubling the amount allocated for 2007–2013 (Delegation of the European Union to Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam, 2016). In addition, over EUR 3 billion has been pledged to address poverty in ASEAN countries (Delegation of the European Union to Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam, 2016). Observers have pointed out that these recent Trade-Related Assistance (TRA) projects interact closely with the EU’s geopolitical considerations in Asia (Chen & Gao, 2020). Concretely, the EU views an intensifying relationship with ASEAN as a significant step towards its further security engagement in Asia.

3. The extent to which the EU has succeeded in realising its desired role in Asia

Moving on to the third step of analysis, this section discusses the implications of this role-making process in the context of EU–Asia relations and argues that the EU has partially realised its desired role in its trade relations with Asia. Specifically, the EU has been successful in convincing its Asian counterparts to accept the EU’s role as a key ‘power in trade’. Nevertheless, the EU has encountered various challenges which limit its capability to realise its desired role as a ‘power through trade’, as its trade policies have had limited impact on changing or shaping the political and social structure in Asia.

The EU’s role as a crucial economic power or trading power has been widely acknowledged by its key Asian partners, although this role has been increasingly contested and undermined following the Eurozone crisis, the migration crisis and Brexit. Generally speaking, the EU’s key Asian partners, including China, Japan and South Korea, share similar views concerning the EU’s economic and trade power. For instance, existing research reveals that for decades, the EU has been regarded by China as an ‘economic superpower’ as a result of the success of European economic integration as well as of the power the EU and its member states have enjoyed in global economic institutions (Chen, 2012). Recent analyses show that, as a result of various crises and challenges facing the Union, China’s longstanding favourable view of the EU is increasingly contested, resulting in a polarised and confrontational debate within Chinese academic and policy communities over the EU’s role (Chang & Pieke, 2018). Nevertheless, from a Chinese perspective, the EU is still the world’s largest regional trading bloc with ‘the highest level of integration’ (Chang & Pieke, 2018; Ministry of

Foreign Affairs of China, 2018). Existing research suggests that, unlike China, Japan tends to view the EU as a global rather than a regional power. In particular, Japan considers the EU to have strong economic power, despite a growing belief that EU power has declined since the financial crisis (Oshiba, 2012). South Korea views the EU as a 'trade giant' and an 'economic powerhouse' (Yoon et al., 2010). In a similar vein, the EU is a 'recognized trading power' in the eyes of ASEAN (Devadason & Mubarik, 2018) as it is currently ASEAN's second largest trading partner and largest investor (European Commission, 2020). The EU's role as a key economic actor and trading power has been consolidated in ASEAN through the recently adopted EU–ASEAN Strategic Partnership, which attaches great importance to economic cooperation and the EU's ongoing support for ASEAN economic integration (EEAS, 2020). This evidence suggests that, despite increasing contestation and criticism of the EU following various internal crises over the past decade, Asian countries still view the EU as a crucial economic power and key trading partner.

While the EU has arguably succeeded in convincing its Asian partners to accept its role as a leading economic power or 'power in trade', it has encountered numerous challenges to its desired role as a 'power through trade' in Asia. First, the EU's role as a norm-promoter through its trade policies has been severely contested and criticised by Asian countries. In other words, the EU's desired role as a normative power through trade has generated little receptiveness among Asian actors. Nor has the EU's promotion of socio-political norms (e.g. human rights, democracy, rule of law) resulted in substantive social and political changes in the Asian region (Balducci, 2010; Chaban et al., 2017). For instance, the past few years have witnessed the Chinese government's strong resistance to the EU's criticism of China's handling of protests in Hong Kong, and of the Union's proactive promotion of human rights concerning the Tibet and Xinjiang issues. This is evidenced in China's decision to announce sanctions on relevant EU entities and personnel (Mission of China to the EU, 2021). Similarly, the EU's attempts to promote its sociopolitical norms through trade with ASEAN have been ineffective. For instance, the EU's promotion of environmental sustainability through its resolution on palm oil sparked strong criticism in Indonesia and Malaysia, which viewed the EU's policies on palm oil exportation as interventionist approaches, deserving the strongest condemnation (Tan, 2018). In addition, although the EU defines South Korea and Japan as 'like-minded' actors sharing similar political norms, such as democracy and rule of law, the EU's promotion of other norms, such as labour rights and abolition of the death penalty, have been resisted and contested in South Korea and Japan (European Commission, 2019; Johnson, 2019).

Secondly, while the EU has set itself the ambitious objective of being a standard-setter through digital trade with Asia, the overall impact of EU policies remains limited. Admittedly, the EU's regulatory power in the digital economy has played a role in reshaping regulatory frameworks in certain Asian countries. For example, South Korea's recent amendment of its Personal Information Protection Act (PIPA) was partly driven by the desire to meet General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) standards in order to obtain an adequacy decision from the EU (Lexology, 2020). Over the past five years, the EU has also increasingly used its digital trade policy to achieve wider recognition of EU standards in areas such as the free flow of data and data protection. These objectives have been embedded within the negotiation of the EU's trade arrangements with its key Asian partners, exemplified by the EU–Japan Economic Partnership negotiations. Although the EU and Japan managed to adopt a data movement agreement that allows free data flows between the two countries, it is

observed that such an agreement has limitations: recognition can be unilaterally withdrawn by either side. Meanwhile, the EU and Japan decided to postpone the provision on the free flow of data until three years after the EPA entered into force in 2019 (Kanetake & de Vries, 2018). A lack of full integration of the data agreement into the EU–Japan EPA reveals the EU’s limited capability to translate its ambition to become a leading digital regulatory power into reality. In addition, while the EU intends to expand the ‘Brussels Effect’ in the digital sphere through unveiling a set of new regulations such as the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act, it is noteworthy that key Asian players such as China have also actively consolidated its regulatory capacity in digital areas through other means, exemplified by the provision of critical technological infrastructures (Kuo, 2021). These Chinese strategies imply that the EU’s desired role as a global regulator through digital trade is likely to encounter increasing competition and challenges from other rising powers aiming to play a greater role in shaping the international regulatory framework in the digital sphere.

Thirdly, as mentioned earlier, although the EU has sought to leverage greater influence on Asian security affairs and to contribute to Asian regional stability through trade relations, empirical findings reveal that the EU has not been regarded as a key security player or a security provider in Asia. In the past decade the EU has actively engaged in security cooperation with its key Asian partners, especially in non-traditional security areas such as border security, disaster relief, climate change and maritime security, and it has projected its image as a key security provider in the wider Asian region. Nevertheless, empirical studies show that Asian countries such as China, Japan and South Korea have developed their own view of the EU instead of accepting the narrative projected by the EU (Chaban et al., 2017). Specifically, while China, Japan and South Korea tend to regard the EU as an ‘actor’ in the arena of peace and security, the Union’s ‘actions’ are held to be less relevant than those of the US (Chaban et al., 2017). In other words, the EU is still viewed as a weak security actor. Asian countries do not expect the EU to play a leading role in security affairs in the Asian region.

Conclusion

In an attempt to explore how the changing role of the EU in EU–Asia trade relations affects its pursuit of economic interests and wider foreign policy goals, this article adopted role theory to investigate the EU’s desired role when trading with its Asian partners, as well as the extent to which the EU has managed to solidify this role in practice.

This article demonstrates that the EU seeks to achieve a desired role in Asia not only as a ‘power in trade’ but also as a ‘power through trade’. In light of the economic weight that Asian countries represent for the EU, and vice versa, the EU sees itself as a significant economic actor or a ‘power in trade’ in Asia. To fulfil its aspiration, the EU has proactively conducted bilateral as well as region-to-region trade negotiations with its Asian partners. Despite a number of constraining factors, such as the Eurozone crisis, the migration crisis and Brexit, the EU’s role as a crucial economic power in Asia has been widely acknowledged by its key Asian partners.

In addition to its desired role as a ‘power in trade’, the EU’s aspiration to act as a ‘power through trade’ in Asia can also be observed. Concretely, the EU seeks to act as a norm promoter, a regulation setter as well as a security provider through its trading

activities. To achieve its aspiration to be a norm promoter and a regulation setter, the EU has included core EU values, such as democracy, human rights and environment protection, as well as regulations concerning digital trade, in its trade negotiations with Asian partners. Meanwhile, in order to fulfil its desired role as a security provider, the EU has proactively provided development aid funding to its Asian partners, in particular ASEAN countries. Nevertheless, in comparison to the EU's widely acknowledged role as a trade power in Asia, the EU's desired role as a power through trade has been contested. Firstly, the EU's promotion of core values has been criticised by a number of Asian countries, such as China, Indonesia, and Malaysia, and even the EU's 'like-minded' actors, Japan and South Korea. Secondly, the EU's ambition of providing leadership in the field of digital trade is challenged by other rising powers in this field, such as China and Japan. Thirdly, Asian countries tend to view the EU as a weak security actor in Asian.

Overall, the EU seeks to act not only as a significant economic actor, but also as an influential political and security actor in Asia. Although the EU's aspiration to act as a significant economic actor has been widely acknowledged by its Asian partners, its role as a norm promoter, regulation setter as well as a security provider has been contested in Asia.

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