

## **Re-Orienting the Fundamentals: Human Rights and New Connections in EU-Asia Relations**

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Economic matters such as trade and investment have dominated the studies of EU–Asia relations partly because it was only after 1987 Single European Act and 1993 Treaty of European Union that the EU’s competencies were extended beyond economic issues. Even the last decade and a half did not see much change in trend that both parties perceive each other as an economic partner/competitor. Consequentially, few studies have paid attention to non-economic interests in the diplomacy between EU and Asia. This tendency ignores much wider range of agendas between the two regions, such as human rights. This book focuses on EU foreign policy towards Asia, highlighting ‘the role and development of human rights matters within the EU’s dialogue with Asian partners’, which has a low profile in the studies of EU–Asia relations.

The book is divided into three parts: the first part provides a theoretical framework in order to explore how differently human rights issues are perceived in EU and Asia. Among various International Relations frameworks, the author argues that social-constructivist approach is most suitable in analyzing the human rights policies of the EU towards Asia. Examining theoretical perspectives, the author points out the limitations of Realism by saying that it is ‘increasingly inadequate to conceptualize the EU’s presence on the global stage.’ (p. 19.) Part Two consists of rich text-analyses of EU policy towards Asia that are categorized as ‘enabling’ or ‘inhibitory’ aspects of human rights diplomacy. From official documents the book carefully extracts the indicators of EU’s policies towards Asia, both towards the general region and towards individual countries within Asia. Part Three provides case studies to examine both enabling and inhibitory functions of EU’s human rights diplomacy. The author chose four foreign policies to examine: EU Common Foreign and Security Policy in Asia; foreign policy towards Burma; foreign policy towards China; and foreign policy towards Indonesia. Each case matches four distinct patterns of the EU’s foreign policy approach: Combined Co-ordination, Co-ordinated Coercion, Constructive Engagement, and Constitutional Cohesion (Consolidation). Beyond these case studies, the book studies further potentiality of EU’s Asia policy by focusing on ‘people-to-people’ exchanges in education.

It is somewhat ironic that this thorough and extensive study of the EU’s foreign policy towards Asia proves how ineffective human rights policy has been compared to the mission to establish economic relations between the two regions.

Inhibitory function of human rights diplomacy is clearly more tangible than the enabling function, even though the book spends more pages on the latter. Institutional frameworks such as ASEM and EU–ASEAN relations indicate certain level of sophistication of the relationship, while there are criticisms of the substance of the institutional contacts, namely ‘forum-fatigue’. The inter-regional relations between EU and ASEAN is handicapped when discussing human rights issues, due to the differences in organizational characters; while the EU is more supranational and ‘value-driven’, the ASEAN side insists that ‘human rights should remain ‘within the national sphere’ of each country.’ Furthermore, the question of Myanmar/Burma has been a thorny problem ever since the ASEAN accepted Myanmar as its member. The all-inclusive framework of ASEM (Asia–Europe Meeting) has so far marginalized human rights issues in order to maintain the framework itself. Case studies in Chapter 6 also provide more evidence of inhibitory aspects of human rights than of enabling aspects.

The book laments the scarcity of research in EU–Asia relations from the perspectives of human rights and it provides a holistic picture of inter-regional relations. Although it may be unintentional, the book seems to confirm the reason for the low profile of human rights in EU–Asia relations.

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