Competing normative powers and challenges for the EU's normative power in Asia

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**Abstract:** This article contends that, in order to understand global affairs, not only crises and conflicts need to be examined, but also long-term processes which result from the competition between normative powers. These normative powers have the potential to set or influence the organizing principles and the rules of the game in other countries and regions as well as the international system in general. The article focuses on the European Union's potential as a normative power. Examining where the EU has succeeded and where it has failed to behave as a normative power, it argues that the EU is losing the normative power game against China, the US and the ASEAN in Asia, specifically in Greater China including Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, East Asia including Japan and South Korea and South East Asia including ten ASEAN countries.

**Key words:** European Union, normative power, normative foreign policy, Asia, China

**Introduction**

In international politics, the most eye-catching topics are crisis and conflicts. The results of wars and confrontations are determined by hard power. A glance at the list of wars and confrontations happened in recent years such as the Russian annexation of Crimea, the invasion to Libya, the conflicts between Sudan and South Sudan, the Islamic movements in the Middle East and the maritime conflicts on the South China Sea could prove the correctness of this point of view.

However, from the author’s perspective, the hard power or military power is not the only determinant in international politics. In order to understand the current world, other elements are equally important, if not more, such as the competition between normative powers to shape the regional situation via non-military methods. These normative powers include not only the USA, China, the EU, Russia but also those emerging normative power such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). They are “normative power” because they have the ability to shape the norms on regional or international level, which may not directly influence the result of wars and conflicts but is a long-term and deeply rooted effect. They influence international affairs via a more elegant way or “normative” way.

It is no doubt that the EU is one of the most successful normative powers in current international politics. Its core values are affecting neighbouring regions such as North Africa, Central and
Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Its integration and enlargements have been effective method to help transform Central and Eastern European countries from post-soviet nations to modern and democratic nations. Meanwhile, as the world largest donor, its normative power is also expanded through humanitarian aid and funding delivered to various regions. No matter whether the EU is satisfied with its normative power, a Nobel Peace Prize is endorsing its normative power rather than military power.

Yet, has the EU become a global recognised normative power? The answer is negative if we take a look as the situation in East and South East Asia. There are already three major competing normative powers in this region, China, the US and the ASEAN. All of these three normative powers have their targets and want their normative power become exclusive at least in its priority targeting countries or regions. As a new comer, the EU is very difficult to challenge the status of these three powers due to the lack of effective tools as it used in Central and Eastern Europe. This article argues that the EU is losing the competition with other normative powers in East and South East Asia, which limit its capability to become a global normative power.

This article has the following parts: 1) the normative foreign policy; 2) The EU as a normative power in Asia; 3) China as a traditional competing normative power in Asia; 4) USA as an outside-in competing normative power in Asia; 5) ASEAN as an emerging competing normative power in Asia. The focus of this article is the three competing normative powers in Asia along with the EU, China, USA and ASEAN.

**EU as a normative power**

The idea of normative power in international relations is not new. Carr made the distinction between economic power, military power and power over opinion (Carr 1962, p. 108). Duchene was also interested in the normative power of the European Community as an idea force, starting with the beliefs of the “founding fathers” and extending through its appeal to widely differing political temperaments (1973, pp.2, 7). Elements of this normative power can also be found in the critical perspective of Galtung when he says that “ideological power is the power of ideas” (Galtung 1973, p.33). Galtung argues that ideological power is “powerful because the power-sender’s ideas penetrate and shape the will of the power-recipient” through the media of culture. He differentiated between channels of power (ideological power, remunerative power and punitive power) and sources of power (resource power and structural power), a distinction he argues is “fundamental, because it is on the latter that the European Community is particularly strong, even more so than the United States” (Galtung 1973, p.36).

Based on previous research, Manners claims that “the developments of the 1990s in international relations lead us to rethink both notions of military power and civilian power in order to consider the EU’s normative power in world politics”. (Manners 2002, p. 236) He argues that “[t]he constitution of the EU as a political entity has largely occurred as an elite-driven, treaty based, legal order”.

The EU’s normative basis has five “core” norms, peace, liberty, democracy, rule of law and
respect for human rights. All of these five norms are expressed in the Treaty of the European Union (TEU), the development cooperation policy of the Community (TEC art. 177), the common foreign and security provisions of the Union (TEC art. 11), and the membership criteria adopted at the Copenhagen European Council in 1993. Manners also argues that there are four “minor” norms, social solidarity, anti-discrimination, sustainable development and good governance. These four norms are based on TEU (art. 2 and 6), TEC (art. 6 and 13), Copenhagen criteria and Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

Table 1: The EU’s normative basis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Founding Principles</th>
<th>Tasks and Objectives</th>
<th>Stable Institutions</th>
<th>Fundamental Rights</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberty</td>
<td>Social solidarity</td>
<td>Guarantee of democracy</td>
<td>Dignity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>Anti-discrimination</td>
<td>Rule of law</td>
<td>Freedoms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms</td>
<td>Sustainable development</td>
<td>Human rights</td>
<td>Equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rule of Law</td>
<td>Protection of minorites</td>
<td>Solidarity Citizenship</td>
<td>Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treaty base – set out in art. 6 of the TEU</td>
<td>Treaty base – set out in art. 2 of TEC and TEU, arts. 6 and 13 of TEC</td>
<td>Copenhagen criteria – set out in the conclusions of the June 1993 European Council</td>
<td>Charter of International Rights of European Union</td>
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</table>

Source: Manners (2002).

But how does the EU diffuse its norms? There are six factors. 1) Contagion which is the diffusion of norms resulting from the unintentional diffusion of ideas from the EU to other political actors. 2) Informational diffusion which is the result of the range of strategic communications and declaratory communications. 3) Procedural diffusion which involves the institutionalization of a relationship between the EU and a third party, membership of an international organization and enlargement of the EU itself. 4) Transference refers to diffusion which takes place when the EU exchange goods, trade, aid or technical assistance with third parties through largely substantive or financial means. 5) Overt diffusion occurs as a result of the physical presence of the EU in third states and international organizations. 6) Cultural filter which affects the impact of international norms and political learning in third states and organizations leading to learning, adaptation or rejection of norms.

The EU is quite successful in diffusing its norms through these channels especially using contagion, procedural diffusion and transference. The examples include the EU’s enlargements in Central and East Europe which has diffused its norms in this region; the EU’s endeavour in Iran’s nuclear issue negotiation which uses its procedural diffusion as well and human rights diffusion in Turkey which is a prerequisite for Turkey to join the EU. Past experience has proved that the EU has already become a dominant normative power in Europe and its neighbourhood including
Africa and the Middle East. However, can the EU diffuse its norms further? How about its performance as a normative power in other regions in the world, especially in the Asia which is the most dynamic and prosperous market nowadays?

**Political and societal levels’ norms in Asia**

The EU is faced with different situation in its neighbourhood and Asia. Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) has long been the focus of the EU's foreign policy. The countries in Eastern Europe, Middle East and North Africa are the priorities to the EU. However, since the EU has the ambition to become a global power, its existence in other regions is vital to its status improvement. In Asia, the EU has several strategic partners such as China, Japan, South Korea and India while its influence on the region is far from the one it has on neighbourhood countries. The most important reason is that the EU’s normative power meets competitors in Asia and the role as a challenger belongs to the EU rather than other countries. This is a different situation to its status in its neighbourhood where the EU is the dominant normative power with Russia and Islamic movement and other forces as challengers.

Due to the history of colony and WWII, many Asian countries or regions have inconsistent political and societal normative structures. It is easier to change the political structure and political culture than changing the societal culture. Constitutions, legislations, structure of governments and elections can be easily implanted into those post-colonial regions in the 20th century. However, those societal cultures which deeply root in people’s mind and affect their decision-making cannot be changed in several decades. As a result, these societal cultures, combining with political culture, are influencing the country or region’s ideas, policies and actions.

Examples are Hong Kong, Singapore and Japan. Hong Kong was governed by the British from 1842 to 1997 when the People’s Republic of China formally took it back and re-established government. Afterwards, it has become a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China with autonomous power except national defence, military and diplomacy. Hong Kong SAR inhabits the government structure and public servants system which is exactly following the model of the UK. It runs well in the past twenty years. However, this is the political level. On societal level, the people in Hong Kong are as traditional as people in Mainland, if not more. Growing up in such a traditional Chinese culture and society, elites of Hong Kong are not fully equipped with British norms, even if they have studies abroad in the UK. In fact, Hong Kong is a traditional Chinese region with a fancy British facade as its appearance.

Singapore shares the same history as part of the colonial world of the British. Used to be part of Malaysia and the British colonial territory, Singapore was established by Lee Kuan Yew following the model of the UK where he spent his college years. The political system of Singapore has a lot of similarities to the UK. Elites are encouraged to learn English and work for the government. Public servants have high salary and self-disciplined. Thus, on political level Singapore follows the British norms. However, on societal level, since South East nations have long been influenced by Chinese culture, China and Malaysia both contribute to the current situation of Singapore’s society. Migrants from China and Malaysia dedicate themselves to Singapore’s economic miracle.
Therefore, Singapore appears to be a British-like polity but a mix society with Chinese and Malaysia culture and norms.

In contrast to Hong Kong and Singapore, Japan has never been colonised in its history. In the 9\textsuperscript{th} century, Japan started to send envoys to China in order to learn its culture and technology. Since then, the Japanese society had long been followers of China until the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. But unlike Singapore which consists of migrant people from China and Malaysia, most Japanese are local born. During the development, Japanese people have formed its own norms on societal level as well as on political level. In the middle of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, Japan was forced by the US to open up to the outside world. It then turned from China to the US and learnt modern technology and strategic ideas from it. The learning from the US led Japan to the direction of expansion. It started wars against China and Russia and became a major military power in the Pacific until it was defeated by the US, China and Russia in WWII. Afterwards, Japan has become followers of the US on political level while maintain its societal level’s norms as usual.

Table 2 Political level and societal level of Hong Kong, Singapore and Japan

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hong Kong</th>
<th>Singapore</th>
<th>Japan</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Level</td>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>US</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Societal Level</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>China, Malaysia</td>
<td>Japan, China</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In sum, examples of Hong Kong, Singapore and Japan proves that in East and South East Asia countries and regions have two levels to be affected by normative power. One is political level and the other is societal level. It is worth to point out that the norms of two levels are not always consistent. Many countries and regions take Western model on political level while still take Asian norms on societal level. This inconsistency of norms on political and societal levels gives normative powers the opportunity to intervene. Normative powers outside of Asia have been existing in the region for more than one century. Meanwhile, regional normative powers such as China are still affecting the neighbourhood. Emerging competitors have also appeared such as the ASEAN.

China as a traditional competing normative power

Speaking of Asia, China is the most eye-attracting country on international platform nowadays. Since its Opening and Reform Policy at the end of the 1970s, China has experienced economic boom in the past thirty years with little reform taking place in its political system. The Communist Party of China is still the governing party of the world’s largest population. A growing middle class has appeared and become the characteristic and major class of the Chinese society. China’s achievements also lie in the fields of technology and military. In addition, China’s contributions to the international society are increasing. For example, China initiates the Six Party Talks for the negotiation of North Korea nuclear issue while participates in Iran Nuclear Summit. Another example is China’s involvement in the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operation all over the world including Sudan, Mali and Somalia.
China is a traditional normative power in Asia, especially East Asia. As a civilisation which has lasted for more than five thousand years, China is no doubt the largest normative power in Asia. In the Greater China circle including Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, Chinese culture and norms are the standards for everything. If take Confucius’ cultural into consideration, Japan, Korea and many southeast Asian states are followers of Chinese norms. During the Culture Revolution from 1966 to 1976, the Anti-Confucius movement destroyed numerous Confucius temples and archives. Teachers and students were banned from teaching or learning Confucius’ thoughts. This is a disaster for the younger generations. Chinese people who were born during or after the Culture Revolution are generally unfamiliar with Confucius’ ideology. In recent decades, the Chinese government has been struggling to rejuvenate the Chinese culture among its people, especially the younger generation.

China’s normative power is not only influential in Greater China region and Asian countries but also approaching other parts of the world through various diffusion channels. In the past several years, China has also established institutions connecting China with Russia, Central Asian countries and Southern Asian countries. In 2001, China initiated Shanghai Cooperation Organization including China, Russia and four Central Asian countries. In 2015, China established the BRICS Bank headquartered in Shanghai after three years’ negotiation among the BRICS countries. Besides, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) will soon be formally established. The AIIB consists of around 50 member states ranging from Russia to Australia, from the United Kingdom to Germany. Through these political and economic international institutions, China could diffuse its norms further in the coming years.

Although the EU has tried to use different factors to diffuse its norms to China, the result is not satisfied up to now. After 1989, the EU sanctioned China for almost two years in order to punish China’s response to the Tiananmen protest. But it did not last long because of the pressure from member states. Since the 1990s, the EU holds human rights talk with China annually in order to influence China’s human rights situation. China’s human rights condition has been improved in recent years but it could hardly owe to the EU’s efforts. Democracy is one of the EU’s normative basis and another norm it wants China to accept. However, lack of diffusion methods and China’s successful economic development prevent the world’s largest economy to transfer from authoritarian to democracy. China’s large economic volume, strong political leadership, stable social structure and splendid national culture make the EU’s diffusion in vain.

**USA as an outside-in competing normative power**

“Outside-in” is a tennis term referring to a player hits the ball from outside of the pitch back to counterpart’s side in the pitch. Here the author borrows this term to describe the USA’s normative power in Asia. Up to date, international powers outside of Asia have no substantial normative impact on Asian countries with one exception, the USA. After WWII and the Korean War, Japan and the Republic of Korea have been allies of the USA for more than half a century. Owing to the relations with the USA, both Japan and South Korea experienced economic boom after 1960s and became the only two developed countries in East Asia. There are US army bases in both countries with tens of thousands American soldiers residing. These three countries also have a regular
trilateral platform called USA-Japan-Korea Summit attended by the national leaders, which help the USA align its allies to deal with various problems in East Asia and Asian Pacific.

However, due to historical and political reasons, the USA uses its normative power as a tool to affect Japan and South Korea differently. In Japan, since the Constitution was drafted by the USA, it always asks the Japanese government to obey the Constitution when there are different opinions between them. Freedom of speech, respect of the Constitution and power of the Parliaments are characteristics of Japanese political culture which is exactly the same as the USA’s. Through the legislation in the 1950s and supervision until 1970s, Japan has been altered substantially in politics. The similarity of political cultures between the two nations is obvious. The USA has established a model of democratic politics in Asia which is the result of imitating itself. Nonetheless, Japan was forced to accept all these norms by its “supervisor”. There has never been guarantee that Japan will always obey directions by the USA. Recent amendments of the Constitution by Prime Minster Abe is a signal that the normative power of the USA is not only decreasing globally but also in East Asia.

As for South Korea, the USA holds a disparate attitude. Unlike Japan, South Korea has a relatively favourable relation with neighbouring countries including China and Russia. It enables South Korea to have more freedom to decide its domestic and foreign policy, yet it still needs to serve the USA’s strategic goals in Asia. Freedom of speech, Constitution and power of the Parliament are existed in South Korea but not the key of its political culture. The President of South Korea has larger decision-making power than the Japanese Prime Minister from the perspective of the Constitution. The normative power of the USA are applied by attracting South Korean intellectuals to the America to study and research and developing strong economic ties with South Korea’s multinational corporations (MNCs). Since the elites of the South Korea choose the USA as major overseas study destination, the participants of decision-making are more likely to propose pro-USA options than any other countries. Another difference between South Korea and Japan is that South Korea has several huge MNCs regarded by its people as pillars of national economy. USA encourages its MNCs to develop strong relations with their counterparts in South Korea to ensure they take the USA as major overseas market. The USA’s normative power is imported through economic products. In sum, the USA’s normative power affects South Korea gradually but effectively.

The newly launched “Pivot Asia” policy provides evidence that the USA will never give up its status as a normative power in Asia. After more than one decade’s endeavour in the Middle East and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the USA changed its international strategy from the Middle East to Asia, especially the Asian Pacific. This move aims at tackling the rising of China and its increasing economic as well as military powers in the region under the title of “protecting its allies”.

Facing such situation, although the EU is strategic partners with Japan and South Korea, its normative power has little chance to substitute the USA’s in political areas. Besides, Japan and South Korea are deeply affected by China especially Chinese culture, the EU is also impossible to catch up China in societal culture. Thus, two of the most developed countries in Asia are partners.
to the EU, but will not be normative followers of the EU.

**ASEAN as an emerging competing normative power**

The ASEAN is an emerging normative power in South East Asia consisting of ten countries which are extremely diverse. For example, Thailand is a Buddhism country while Singapore is a democratic polity. Vietnam used to have good relations with China. However, since the South China Sea situation gets tenser, its public’s anti-China emotion has been aroused.

It is always easier to impact single country than several countries or a regional polity such as the ASEAN. Unlike China, Japan and South Korea, Southeast Asian countries have already established its regional polity, the ASEAN. The ASEAN has its endogenous normative power. On the one hand, this normative power is based on the consensus of all the ten member states. On the other hand, this normative power influence its member states to share the ideas, gather closer and integrate deeper. ASEAN has established its institutions including the Annual Summit, ASEAN+1 (China) Summit and ASEAN+3 (China, Japan and South Korea) Summit. It also welcomes India, Pakistan and other neighbouring countries to be involved in relevant topics.

The most important factor for ASEAN to be a normative power in South East Asia is its free trade agreement. Owing to this agreement, ten member states of ASEAN can enjoy free trade with each other. Food, goods and technology can be shared by all the member states. Each member state could make its own decision to export and import. For example, Thailand could export rice to Singapore while Singapore could export high technology to Thailand. Also, ASEAN has signed free trade agreement with China which enables its member states to export to this largest market in the Asian Pacific. Since the development of trade and economy is the major task of most ASEAN member states, this free trade zone ensures them a prosperous future if they stay in ASEAN.

However, ASEAN is still far from an integrated polity as the EU has achieved. It faces three main obstacles. First is culture and language. The official language of ASEAN is English while only a few countries in the association take English as the official language. Unlike the EU which has more than twenty working languages, ASEAN’s documents are only in English which limits its popularity among its people. In countries such as Singapore and the Philippines people may know ASEAN well but in Vietnam and Cambodia few could understand what ASEAN is doing even if they intend to. Second is its internal relation among member states. If the association is united tightly it is easily recognised as a polity. EU has solved the problem between France and Germany which is the prerequisite for the EU to become a real entity. In contrast, among ASEAN member states conflicts appear from time to time. Singapore and Malaysia have historical problem between them. Thailand and Cambodia even fought for a temple several years ago. Third is its fragmented attitude towards China.

Although ASEAN still has a long way to go to become a fully integrated regional actor, it is extremely hard for the EU to expand its normative power into this region. The ten Southeast Asian countries have already formed one normative power which not only facilitate regional integration but also provide themselves an opportunity to expand its normative power into neighbouring
countries which is not yet in the ASEAN.

Conclusion

The EU has three major competitors in East and Southeast Asia, China, the US and the ASEAN. These three actors have unique channels to impact its normative powers on some of the regional countries. China acts as a traditional normative power dominating Greater China area including Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan. Although these areas have their own political culture, their societal culture and norms have long been the followers of China. The US is an outside-in normative power influencing Japan and South Korea differently. Japan’s political culture and norms are implant and supervised by the US while South Korea’s elites and MNCs admire the US most. The ASEAN is an emerging normative actor far from deeply integrated. Its normative power is based on the consensus among ten member states and affects the actions of the member states at the same time.

These three normative powers have already competing in East and Southeast Asia. Taiwan issue has always been a key topic between China and the US. Although the US formally admits that Taiwan is part of China, it never stops intervening Taiwan’s internal affairs ranging from general election to products import. US is also competitor to ASEAN since Singapore and the Philippines are allies of the US, it is quite difficult for ASEAN to establish its own integrated and independent military strategy. The competition between the US and ASEAN results in opportunity for China to win support from ASEAN member states on topics such as South China Sea. China resists negotiating with ASEAN but with relevant member states one by one. In the near future, the competition between these three normative powers in Asia will continue.

Unlike in Central and Eastern Europe, the EU is a challenger in Asia with few diffusion methods to choose from. The most powerful diffusion methods such as the membership of the EU are not applicable in Asia. Due to the two-level structure of Asian countries’ politics and society, the EU is hard to diffuse its core norms such as democracy, rule of law and human rights. Trade and economic tools are the major methods used by the EU in Asia. However, Asian economy is dominated by China, the US and Japan, the three largest world economies, which leaves the EU little space to surpass. Although the EU has several strategic partners in this region and delegations in almost all the countries in Asia, the presence of these methods diffuses little normative power to the countries.

In conclusion, the EU is left behind in the competition of normative powers in Asia. It has achieved success in its neighbourhood. But most of the methods it has used to diffuse norms in Central and Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa are not applicable in Asia. Meanwhile, since Asian countries and actors such as China, India and ASEAN are becoming more and more important on international platform, the EU’s lack of ability to diffuse norms to this region is the hurdle for the EU to become a real international power. If the EU wants to catch up with other competitors in Asia, it has to develop new methods to diffuse its norms and keep the two-level structure of Asian countries in mind.
Notes

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