

Three Decades on: Still a Capability–Expectations Gap? Pragmatic Expectations towards the EU from Asia in 2020

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Abstract

This paper uses Hill's seminal 'Capability–Expectations Gap' framework (CEG) to analyse EU capabilities and expectations of the EU, from the perspectives of four key Asia-Pacific states, China, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea. Intensive analysis of domestic print media shows that all four states have low perceptions of EU capability, particularly EU ability to reach agreement on common action. Indonesia and South Korea also have low overall expectations of the EU. Japan has some expectations of the EU, but mostly related to EU internal and neighbourhood action, confirming findings of previous research identifying a Japanese 'expectations deficit' regarding EU external action. China however had many expectations of EU external action, on bilateral relations, but also multilateral governance and management of the international economy. Therefore, from the Chinese perspective a significant EU capability–expectations gap is identified.

Keywords: European Union (EU); international actor; capability–expectations gap; EU-Asian relations; Asia-Pacific; media analysis

Introduction

2020 heralded the beginning of another challenging decade for the European Union (EU); 31 January marked the first reduction in EU membership with the United Kingdom's official exit. From March 2020, the spread of Covid-19 led not only to hundreds of thousands of EU citizen deaths but also caused severe social and economic disruption – just a few months after the new President of the European Commission announced her ambition to create 'A Union that strives for more' as well as 'A Stronger Europe in the World' (von der Leyen, 2019). While the EU has continued to strive for a greater role in the international arena, whether and to what extent this is acknowledged and accepted by other key global players matters greatly. The analysis presented here draws on extensive empirical research conducted in 2020 that assesses external perceptions of EU capabilities, and also expectations towards the EU in China, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea, four leading Asia-Pacific states.¹ Using Hill's (1993) seminal Capability–Expectations Gap (CEG) framework, we address the following three central research questions:

¹This article draws on data collected for the Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Grant supported 'Renewal versus Global Disruption – Asia's Expectations of the EU (EXPECT)' project led by Martin Holland of University of Canterbury. The data were collected and coded by a multi-national team comprising Lai Suetyi and Huang Yijia of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Zhang Li, Zhang Xiaoxu and Wang Yuhuan of Tsinghua University, Muhadi Sugiono and Nurina Aulia Haris of Universitas Gadjah Mada, Paul Bacon, Shao Jingkai, Hinako Yasui and Lisa Hayami of Waseda University, Sunghoon Park of Korea University, as well as Saewon Chung of Pukyong National University. For more detail, see <https://jeanmonnet.nz/renewal-versus-global-disruption-asias-expectations-of-the-eu-expect>.

- Which EU *capabilities* are recognized by China, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea?
- What do China, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea *expect* from the EU?
- Is there any Capability–Expectations Gap between the EU and, respectively, China, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea?

A theoretical literature review on debates and applications of the CEG underpins this paper, supported by a methodological overview focused on how empirical data was collected and analysed within Hill's CEG framework. In conclusion we present key findings as well as identify directions for further research.

I. State of the Art: Debates on the Capability–Expectations Gap

The CEG has been an enduring approach underpinning studies of the EU's international role. A keyword search in major databases of academic publications identified some 30 relevant journal articles,² including four published in 2019 or 2020, indicating the continued contemporary analytical relevance of the CEG conceptual framework. The European Community's failure to respond adequately to international crises – namely the Gulf War and the Balkan wars in the 1990s – caused Hill to question what actual functions the Community could fulfil (Hill, 1993). He emphasized the need to look at reality rather than become immersed in normative debates. As Hill observed in the early 1990s, the EU's 'capabilities have been talked up'; capabilities of the EU refer to the ability to reach decisions on common action, and the resources and instruments at the Union's disposal (Hill, 1993, pp. 306, 315). Hill argued that the EU possessed insufficient capabilities to respond to such demands and warned that the consequent gap could 'lead to excessive risk-taking by supplicant states and/or unrealistic policies on the part of the Twelve [EU Member States]' (Hill, 1993, p. 315). Figure 1 therefore conceptualizes CEG as a causal relationship: after comparisons between the degree of expectation and degree of capability, the resultant gap is the independent variable that impacts on the foreign policy outputs of the EU and/or of its external partners.

The EU was not seen as totally incapable in international affairs; Hill listed four functions which he suggested the EU had performed and another six which he believed it might fulfil in the future (Table 1).

These ten functions as well as the aforementioned three elements of EU external action capability have been adopted as the analytical framework for data analysis in this article. Using the most up-to-date perceptions of the EU found in four Asian countries, we identify which functions are delivered by the EU, which capabilities are recognized by these major global powers, as well as which functions are expected to be performed by the EU. This kind of empirical study of the demand side (*demandeurs beyond the EU's border* in Hill's words) has been largely missing in past CEG research. The difficulties in collecting the corresponding empirical data to gauge concepts like capability and expectation have typically proved problematical. A methodology to overcome this research gap is proposed in the next section.

²The authors searched for 'Capability AND Expectation' in the title, abstract or keywords of academic journal articles in the ProQuest, Springer, Taylor and Francis and Wiley-Blackwell databases.

Figure 1: Visualization of Capability–Expectations Gap as Proposed by Hill in 1993

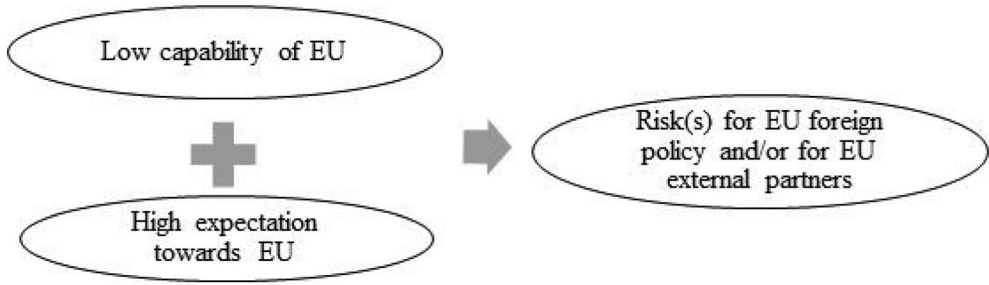


Table 1: Functions of the EU Listed by Hill in 1993

	<i>Delivered functions</i>	<i>Potential functions</i>
In European politics	A stabilizer of Western Europe	A regional pacifier in Europe
In the global economy	One of the crucial managers of world trade (along with the US and Japan)	A joint supervisor of the world economy
In global development	A principal interlocutor in North–South relations	A bridge between North and South
In international diplomacy	An alternative western voice to the American perspective in international diplomacy	i) A substitute for the USSR in the global balance of power ii) A global intervenor iii) A mediator of conflicts among third parties

To date, the vast bulk of existing CEG literature has focused at the conceptual level (for example Ginsberg, 1999; Helwig, 2013; Larsen, 2020). Only nine of the 30 articles identified above have tested or applied the CEG (be it as framework, metaphor or theory) using empirical evidence. Six of these are structured around a single case-study, while only three were based on systematically collected empirical data. For CEG to be developed into a more fully-rounded approach, new cases – like the four-country study of this article – that employ empirical data are needed.

Case study analysis was predominant in these earlier works. Holland (1995) applied CEG as a framework to examine the EU joint action on South Africa during the transition from European Political Cooperation to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). He argued that expectations and capabilities did coincide in this example, whilst the EU on the supply side successfully improved its effectiveness as a foreign actor. Holland showed that the EU had fulfilled four of the extended functions listed by Hill: as a global intervenor, a mediator of conflict, a bridge between the rich first and poor third world, and a joint supervisor of the world economy, with the Union setting the parameters for South Africa’s reincorporation into the global trade system.

Writing a decade later Dover (2005) duplicated Holland’s approach in his case study of the 1992–95 Bosnian War. He noted strong expectations from inside the EU, and that expectations that were economic in nature were matched by the Union’s economic prowess. In contrast, he highlighted how expectations of the EU’s action in political and military

terms far exceeded its ability, and that consequently a CEG existed. However, the Anglo-French Saint Malo Accords, as well as the codification of European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), were credited as positive outcomes from the EU's intervention in the Bosnian crisis.

Tsuruoka (2008) chose the case of EU–Japan relations in his attempt to revise CEG as a concept to understand the EU's external relations. He argued that instead of high expectations on the EU as an international partner, Japan rather held low expectations which he labelled an 'Expectation Deficit' or 'reverse Capability–Expectations Gap'. He suggested that similar expectation deficits also existed in EU–US and EU–Russia relations. Putting the labelling of the concept aside, Tsuruoka shared Hill's view that the existence of any gap between capability and expectation would be detrimental to EU foreign policy. Camroux and Srikandini's (2013) book chapter shared a similar viewpoint. Their CEG case study of EU–Indonesia relations argued that no such gap existed because of low expectations from Indonesia. It is noteworthy that these two papers were the first to extend CEG-related research to assess the *demandeurs* in Asia.

Toje (2008) also attempted to revise Hill's concept, arguing that the EU had improved its resources and instruments for external action but had not addressed the consensus decision-making problem, which is the first of Hill's three capability criteria. Toje, subsequently, labelled this as a 'Consensus–Expectations Gap'.

Between 2012 and 2016, three CEG papers involving more substantial empirical data collection and analysis were published. Wong's research on EU perceptions from elite interviews conducted in three ASEAN countries started from Tsuruoka's premise that the EU was facing an 'Expectation Deficit' in Asia (Wong, 2012). He demonstrated that Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam had a 'large expectation deficit' towards the EU in the political and military realms, especially when contrasted with the high expectations placed on the EU in economic fields. Wong did not reject Hill's CEG but rather showed a co-existence of CEG and an Expectation Deficit which varied in relation to different issue areas, a conclusion that broadly echoed that of Dover.

Chaban and Holland (2013) used media analysis and public survey data from seven Asian countries to test Hill's CEG and Tsuruoka's Expectation Deficit. They showed that Asian media and the general public held high expectations towards the EU far beyond the actual capabilities of the Union. As Japan and Singapore were included in this research, this conclusion contradicted the aforementioned findings of Tsuruoka and Wong. Further empirical clarification is therefore needed.

Zhang (2016) has been critical of both Hill's CEG and Tsuruoka's Expectation Deficit. Applying media analysis data from China, she proposed the idea of 'Reflexive Expectation' developed from social constructivism. Her longitudinal comparison of media reports of the EU by China's biggest newspaper, *People's Daily*, demonstrated how changes in self-identity and interest within China led to changes in the Chinese government's expectation of and policy towards the EU. However, the concept of 'Reflexive Expectations' does not necessarily contradict but rather supplements the CEG, as it demonstrates how the expectations of third countries are shaped, and might vary over time.

Five of the seven articles summarized in this literature review focused on the expectations of *demandeurs* external to the EU. We would like to underline that, although we are using the CEG framework, our emphasis is also on the perceptions and expectations of

non-European actors; we avoid focusing on the EU powers debate, or engaging in other types of ‘navel-gazing’ or ‘EU-centrism’ (Keuleers *et al.*, 2016).

In summary, these empirical analyses of the EU’s external relations in different countries and across different decades have produced competing conclusions with regard to the CEG (see Table 2). Although Hill (2004) argued that the gap can be reduced, he insisted that expectations towards European foreign policy would always be high. Obviously, as the EU evolves and the international context changes, new empirical evidence is needed to test whether expectations placed on European foreign policy are greater than the EU’s capability. The data used in the following analysis draw on a 2020 four-country comparative research project (see footnote 1). The research methodology is described in the next section.

II. Research Methods

From the supply-side, the EU has continued making efforts to increase its capability in its external action. Most recently this includes the establishment of Permanent Structured Cooperation on Security and Defence (PESCO) and the prioritization of creating ‘A Stronger Europe in the World’ by the von der Leyen European Commission, both in 2019. However, any such measures taken by the EU cannot be presumed to translate automatically into an increased capability. From the demand-side, this research examines whether our *demandeurs* recognize the ten functions identified by Hill (see Table 1). Any other new capabilities we identify could, of course, supplement this list. To further assess why some capabilities are recognized but not others, the three criteria listed by Hill can be employed: (i) the ability to agree; (ii) resources and (iii) instruments at the Union’s disposal. In his original article Hill listed these criteria without elaboration. This article takes ‘the ability to agree’ as the ability of EU Member States and institutions to reach decisions on common action. It differentiates between ‘resources’ and ‘instruments’ as stocks of assets and institutional tools respectively. Expectations can come from internal or external actors. This analysis focuses on the latter and begins by checking which, if any, of Hill’s ten original functions are present in the perspectives of our four case study states, or whether other functions are evident. Subsequently, an assessment can be made of whether expectations are greater than perceived capabilities (a positive gap), perceived capabilities are greater than expectations (a negative gap), or that no gap exists.

Table 2: Comparison of Existing Empirical Research on CEG

<i>Author(s)</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Any CEG?</i>
Holland (1995)	CFSP in South Africa	No
Dover (2005)	Bosnian War	Yes (politics, military) & No (economic)
Tsuruoka (2008)	EU–Japan relations	Yes (Reverse gap)
Camroux and Srikandini (2013)	EU–Indonesia relations	No
Wong (2012)	EU relations with Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam	Yes (politics, military) & No (economic)
Chaban and Holland (2013)	EU–Asia relations	Yes
Zhang (2016)	EU–China relations	Variable

This paper uses empirical data collected from news media in China, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea to identify: (i) the EU functions recognized by the *demandeurs*; and (ii) expectations towards the EU. It should be noted that these data constitute 2020 snapshots of a complex reality. The four Asian countries may well recognize other functions of the EU and have more varied expectations, but the analysis and data here are those found in our press analysis. China, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea were selected as they are leading powers in the Asia-Pacific, and all bar Indonesia are among the EU's top ten trading partners. China and Japan have been the world's second and third largest economies, both active contributors to key international organizations such as the UN and WTO. South Korea has been the third largest economy in Asia and a leading global information and communications technology centre. Indonesia is a key member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), ranks fourth in population size (and has the world's largest Muslim population) and the world's tenth largest economy in terms of purchasing power parity. All four countries are members of G20 with the EU. Within Asia, China and Japan are the actors who give the greatest attention and importance to the EU (Lai *et al.*, 2019).

A comprehensive overview of all four major and multi-faceted bilateral relationships is beyond the scope and purpose of our article. Rather we instead pursue an inductive interpretative approach by following lines of inquiry created by the data we produce. For a substantial and comprehensive overview of EU–China relations see Christiansen *et al.* (2019) and Zhou (2021). For a wide-ranging discussion of difficulties in the EU–China relationship, from the 2019 reset following the European Commission's framing of China as a 'systemic rival', to recent difficulties with the bilateral comprehensive agreement on investment, see Small (2020). Gilson (2019) offered comprehensive coverage of recent developments in EU–Japan relations, including the 2018 ratification of an Economic Partnership Agreement and a Strategic Partnership Agreement. Casarini *et al.* (2021) offered a survey of the most important developments in EU–South Korea relations over the past three decades. Finally, for the most recent comprehensive treatment of the EU–Indonesia relationship, see Camroux and Srikandini (2013), which remains valuable, and has the additional benefit of framing the relationship in terms of the CEG.

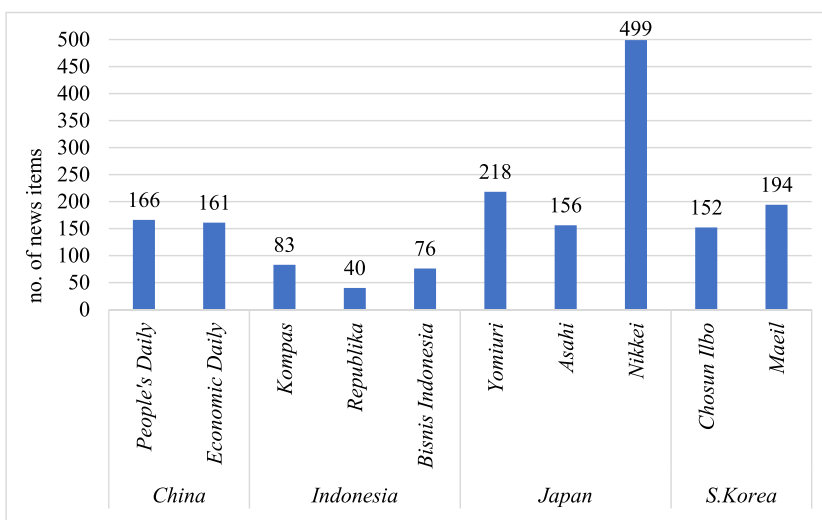
Ten daily newspapers were monitored over the four months from March to June 2020. This contemporary data consequently reflects both the final Brexit transition phase and the first wave of Covid-19 in Europe. Unsurprisingly, the Covid-19 pandemic, which first broke out in Europe in March, featured heavily in reporting; 72.1 per cent of the EU-related news also mentioned Covid-19. In contrast, Asian interest in Brexit was low. A mere 4.5 per cent of the EU-related news items collected in China, Indonesia and South Korea mentioned Brexit, and more than half of these news stories brought up Brexit only as a footnote. In Japan 19.8 per cent of the EU-related news items mentioned Brexit, but again three-quarters of them mentioned Brexit only as a footnote. Japan's relatively higher interest in Brexit was related to its own negotiation of an FTA with the UK.

For representative sampling, in each country, the most prestigious popular daily newspaper and the most influential business daily were monitored. All included dailies are nation-wide publications. In China these were *People's Daily* and *Economic Daily*, both of which are owned by the Chinese government. Zhang (2016) argued that these state-mouthpieces were representative of the view of the Chinese government. For Indonesia, *Kompas* (a secular newspaper), *Republika* (a newspaper targeting the Muslim

community) and *Bisnis Indonesia* (the leading business daily) were chosen. In Japan, *Yomiuri Shimbun* (a right-wing popular daily), *Asahi Shimbun* (a left-wing popular daily) and *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* (*Nikkei*, the leading business daily) were monitored. In South Korea, *Chosun Ilbo* and *Maeil Business News Korea* were studied. Lai *et al.* (2019) have previously demonstrated that public opinion towards the EU in China, Japan and South Korea was largely consistent with the respective media portrayal.

Based on the content of the published hardcopies of these selected newspapers, all news items which mentioned one or more of the EU keywords (European Union, European Central Bank, European Commission, European Council, Council of the EU, European Court of Justice, European Parliament, Eurozone and Brexit) were collected to form the database for our research. Each news article became a single unit of analysis and these were subsequently analysed and coded with respect to their source, centrality, focus of domesticity, thematic area, as well as action, evaluation and expectation of the EU. Domesticity indicates where the news story is based. Centrality refers to the importance of the EU in the news story. Thematic area refers to the policy field in which the EU's actions belong. Evaluation is the positive, neutral or negative tone used when the EU is mentioned in a news item. An expectation refers to an explicit demand or wish expressed towards the EU. The coding is nominal in nature. All coders received identical training, and all news items were double-coded by two coders, among which at least one had to be a native speaker from the relevant country, to safeguard reliability. During the March to June 2020 four-month period, a total of 1745 news articles were identified, and form the database for our article (see Figure 2). The coding generated from content analysis and framework analysis are analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively in the following section.

Figure 2: Sample Sizes of Each Monitored Newspaper for March–June 2020 [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



III. Empirical Findings

Perceived EU Presence in the International Arena

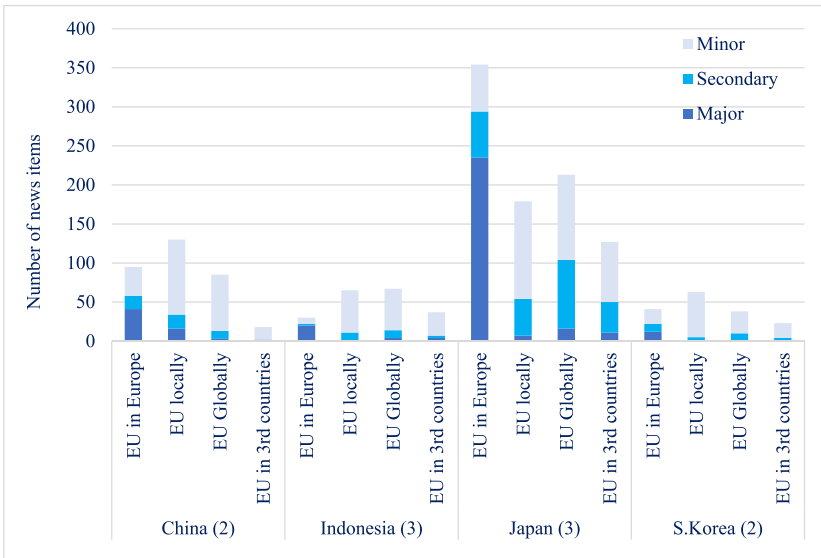
To address the first research question on EU capabilities, this section analyses the domesticity of news stories which featured the EU. Domesticity maps the presence of the EU. As Figure 3 displays, the EU had an international presence in the eyes of Asian presses, and hence in the eyes of their readers. In ten dailies, 70 per cent of the EU-related news stories were reported happening outside Europe. The Japanese press showed the highest interest in reporting the EU's internal issues compared with their Asian counterparts, with Indonesia the least interested in the EU's internal affairs. These findings were consistent with those from previous perception studies in Asia.³ Among the ten monitored newspapers, the *Nikkei* and *Yomiuri* recorded the highest attention on the EU (displayed in Figure 2). The daily average appearance of EU news stories was 4.1 news items/day and 1.8 news items/day respectively. When excluding intra-European news stories, the EU was mentioned in 2.4 news items/day and 1.0 news items/day respectively. Notably, these numbers were even lower in the other monitored newspapers. Overall, the general visibility of the EU was not high, and the recognized presence of the Union as an international actor was even lower.

In China and South Korea, the most common news item mentioning the EU was 'local news'; national newspapers are normally most concerned with issues related to their respective countries. In the monitored Chinese press, 39.8 per cent of EU-related news items featured the Union in a local, Chinese context. Similar ratios – of 32.7 per cent and 41.3 per cent – were found in Indonesia and South Korea respectively. In Japan, only 20.5 per cent of EU news items were local, while 24.4 per cent of the EU-related news featured the Union as an actor in global affairs. Notably, the Japanese media portrayed the G7 as an important multilateral platform in which Japan and the EU cooperated with other major global players. Such news items therefore had a local hook. Recognition of this platform was absent from the Chinese dataset (probably because China is not a member of G7). The G7 as an EU platform did appear in the Indonesian and Korean datasets, but only rarely. This point corresponds to Zhang's 'Reflexive Expectations' concept – namely, that Asian countries regard cooperation with the EU as important only in the multilateral platforms in which they themselves play a key role. A total of 12.8 per cent of EU-related news concerned stories that took place in a third country.⁴ Among these, EU news stories located in the US were the most common in all four countries, South Korea in particular. The Chinese media also recorded the presence of the EU in the Middle East, while the Indonesian media reported the EU in the context of both the Middle East and China. The Japanese media also paid significant attention to EU actions in China. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in three-quarters of the EU news stories inside Europe, the EU was reported as either a major or secondary actor (see Figure 3). In contrast, the EU was typically featured as a minor actor in news stories with domesticity outside Europe. No matter whether the EU was dealing bilaterally with an Asian country or with global affairs, it was rarely recognized as a major actor.

³For the results of previous perception projects since 2002 see www.canterbury.ac.nz/ncre/research/euperceptions/.

⁴Third country refers to a place which is outside Europe, non-local to the respective Asian country and not global level.

Figure 3: Centrality of the EU by Domesticity (in different locations), in the four Asian countries (the number of newspapers included in each case was bracketed) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



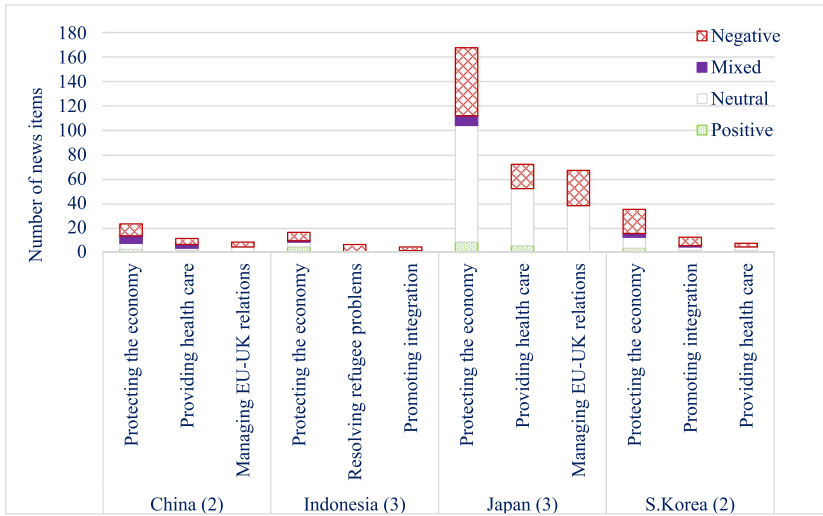
For a horizontal comparison, Japan gave the EU the greatest prominence, while Indonesia gave it the least. The Japanese media devoted relatively more time and space to reporting the EU, and their reportage featured a bigger role for the EU in news stories both inside and outside Europe. Among the four analysed countries, China ranked second – the EU was more likely to be reported as a major actor in either a European or a local context. In the Korean case, the EU was seldom featured as a major actor. Indonesia, the only country in this study which is not an officially recognized strategic partner of the EU, showed the lowest interest in reporting on the EU. Even when the EU was featured in a local story, it mostly played a minor role.

Recognized (Dys)Functions of the EU inside Europe

This section examines whether the ten functions listed by Hill (Table 1) were recognized in the media reporting by the four Asian countries, by examining the EU’s reported action. Concerning the ‘European politics’ category, the most frequently reported role⁵ of the EU was as a protector of the EU economy, in all four Asian countries. Notably, a majority of these news items recorded the EU’s struggle in stabilizing the economic consequences of Covid-19. The Union was more often featured as incapable of delivering such a function, while the lack of solidarity among EU Member States was emphasized. As Figure 4 demonstrates, actions taken by the EU in protecting the economy were viewed

⁵Actions of the EU were analysed and coded only for those news items which featured the EU as either a major or secondary actor. In any one news article, the EU could take more than one action, and each separate action would be coded in terms of policy field.

Figure 4: Evaluation: Top Three Most Reported EU Intra-European Actions by Country [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



negatively by China, Indonesia and South Korea. In Japan, a majority of the news items were neutral (reflecting the normal tone of Japanese professional journalism). Nonetheless, negative reports easily outnumbered positive ones. In China and Japan, there were a significant number of news reports on the (lack of) progress on post-Brexit negotiations, with the EU presented as unable to harmonise its relationship with the UK. In his 1993 article Hill suggested that the EU may play a role of a regional pacifier. However, no such EU involvement was mentioned in the ten monitored newspapers from March to June 2020. The European neighbourhood policy was hardly reported, whilst lingering tensions with the UK, Turkey and Russia were recorded in all four Asian countries.

These perceived dysfunctions were attributed frequently to the inability to agree among EU Member States, and to a lesser degree to a lack of sufficient resources. Notably, a wide variety of instruments, namely the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, the Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme and the rescEU stockpile of medical equipment of the European Commission, were reported in all four Asian countries. There were several instances in which the EU was able to reach agreement, but they were outnumbered by reports on divergence between EU Member States. For instance, among the 41 news items from the Chinese dailies in which the EU played a major role inside Europe, 46.3 per cent recorded conflicts of opinion or interest among the Member States, while 19.5 per cent recorded that agreement was reached. Of these news stories 65.9 per cent identified instruments available to the EU, and 26.8 per cent identified available resources. In contrast, 22.0 per cent and 17.1 per cent of news stories identified a lack of instruments or resources respectively. The picture was particularly negative in the Indonesian and Korean media. The limited space devoted to reporting on the EU's efforts in putting its house in order was mostly seen in a negative light. The Korean case saw a lack of consensus, resources and instruments.

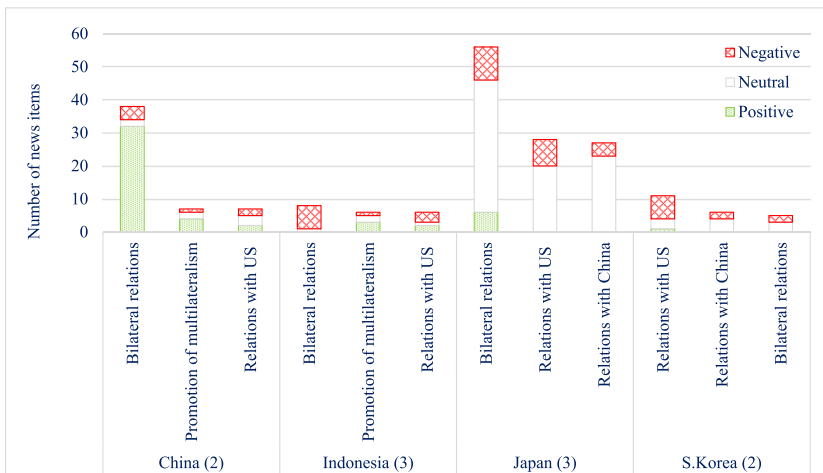
In sum, the EU was characterized as performing the function of housekeeper inside the Union. By this we mean that across all monitored newspapers, there were consistent reports of conflicts of interest and views among EU Member States; frequently the EU was presented as a coordinator or a guardian of the Union, albeit often with limited success. Connecting these findings directly back to Hill’s three capability criteria, we can see that the inability of the EU to reach decisions on common action has been repeatedly reported in the Asian media, and hence communicated to their readers. Although less dominant, stories concerning the lack of resources or instruments at the EU’s disposal, such as the absence of a supranational border control competence and staff, as well as any communal financial instrument to fuel economic recovery, were also reported. Finally, and importantly, our findings here support the argument of Toje (2008) that an inability to reach agreement on common action was the core problem identified in the analysis of the EU’s Capability–Expectations Gap, which he called a ‘consensus–expectations gap’. This concept can be thought of as a supplementary sub-variant of CEG, rather than a criticism of or a rival to it.

Recognized Functions of the EU outside Europe

In addition to their similar perceptions of the internal functions of the EU, Asian medias also shared similar views regarding the EU’s external roles (Figure 5). The most prominent actions of the Union found in the ten Asian dailies were as a partner in bilateral relations, an alternative voice vis-à-vis the US, a promoter of multilateralism, and as a power standing up to China.

Unsurprisingly, all four countries were interested in their own bilateral relations with the EU. This was particularly so in China where 56.7 per cent of reported EU external actions concerned bilateral interactions with China, focusing on dialogue between leaders and cooperation amid the Covid-19 outbreak. A remarkably high figure of four-fifths of

Figure 5: Evaluation of the Three Most Frequently Reported EU extra-European Functions [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



these news reports were positive in tone (Figure 5). In contrast, one-tenth of Japan's news reports of EU–Japan relations was positive, with a larger portion, two-thirds, deemed neutral (again demonstrating that the Japanese media tends to report in a factual and neutral manner). Indonesian media reports of bilateral EU–Indonesian relations were overwhelmingly negative (70.0 per cent) reflecting the conflict around Indonesian palm oil exports. Two-fifths of the news articles on EU–Korea relations in Korea's media focused on the decrease of bilateral trade, and were negative in tone.

Although the EU was recognized as a bilateral partner in all four Asian countries, only the Chinese media emphasized constructive diplomatic and political exchanges – in stark contrast to the Indonesian and Korean media which highlighted their own country's trade problems with the EU. Building on the media's projection of the EU having limited capability in reviving the pandemic-hit economy, this negative image was compounded by findings highlighting its role as a problematic trade partner of Indonesia and Korea.

Another prominent aspect of EU external action was confrontational relations with the US. These reports focused on the Union's opposition to various unilateral actions of the Trump administration – the travel ban on EU citizens from entering the US in March 2020, the US withdrawal from the World Health Organization, and tariff wars. The reporting was more detailed in China and Japan with a number of articles mentioning that the EU was seeking strategic autonomy from the US. Overall, the transatlantic relationship was regarded as exhibiting more conflict than cooperation. It is noteworthy that, apart from China, the other three countries reported conflictual transatlantic relations negatively.

Across the four countries, the only external role of the Union which was evaluated positively was its promotion of international cooperation. Importantly, the Chinese media conditioned this function of the EU as part of broader EU–China cooperation, that is, the EU was reported promoting multilateralism together with China. In Japan, there were also some reports of joint work between the EU and Japan in upholding international cooperation, however the EU was reported more as a promoter of multilateralism independently. Moreover, Japan, as a member of G7, was the only country whose media regularly referenced the G7 as well as the liquidity-swap cooperation among central banks led by the Federal Reserve Bank as important international mechanisms. There were only a few news items from Indonesia and South Korea about the EU's efforts in multilateralism; where these existed, the EU was framed as acting independently. On balance, the four Asian countries' media did recognize the Union's capability in promoting international cooperation, but it was not regarded as without limitations.

Apart from the EU's disputes with the US, the Japanese and Korean media were also concerned with the Union's conflicts with China. The EU was reported expressing its concerns on the 'One Country Two Systems' principle of Hong Kong, China's increasing influence in Europe (which was worsening European divisions), and disinformation spread by China and Russia. These issues rarely appeared in Indonesia or China. In all four countries, there was also some reporting of the EU confronting Russia. In sum, the EU was portrayed as an independent voice against global powers, namely the US, Russia and China, either neutrally or negatively. The framing was an image of the EU having to react to problems generated by other powers, not one of the EU acting proactively to shape global dynamics.

The above snapshots of the EU's functions are not identical to the ones listed by Hill (see Table 1). Unsurprisingly, the intervening three decades have reshaped the international context within which the EU has to operate. While the EU was reported working hard to recover the Covid-19 damaged economy and promote solidarity, there was no mention of the Union as manager of global trade and the Union was only occasionally listed as one of the biggest economies in the world. Only in Japan were there a small number of reports of the European Central Bank's effort with other central banks to stabilize the international financial markets. Although there were some reports on the EU as a humanitarian aid donor, there were no references to the Union as an interlocutor or bridge between the Global North and Global South.

The Asian press recognized the Union's role in upholding multilateralism despite American unilateralism, as well as the EU's insistence on expressing its own views against the US on various issues. As such, the EU was recognized as an alternative western voice in international diplomacy. Yet this did not equate to the EU being seen as a new superpower. While the EU was regarded as one of the global players, its prominence ranked significantly behind the US, China, Russia and India in all media outlets we analysed.

The EU's interventions into domestic problems in Cambodia and North Korea were reported by the Japanese and South Korean media, but not the Chinese or Indonesian. Conversely, the Union's efforts in mediating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Iran nuclear deal appeared only in the Chinese and Indonesian newspapers, and not in the Japanese or Korean media. By and large, for the period between March and June 2020, the capabilities of the EU in external aspects recognized by each of the four Asian counties were limited.

Hill's three capability criteria offer a useful lens through which to understand Asian media interpretations of the EU's extra-European functions. For instance, the inability of the Union to take strong measures against China's imposition of the security law in Hong Kong or to impose sanctions against Israel's attempt to annex the West Bank was attributed to internal divisions. The EU was reported as a victim of disinformation from China and Russia which had more forceful resources and instruments in cyber activities. Nevertheless, there were also cases in which the EU was reported as able to reach a common decision to act. It was also reported that the EU was not short of resources or instruments, such as setting a high benchmark for global efforts to reduce carbon emissions, initiating and hosting the Coronavirus Global Response International Pledging Conference, as well as providing humanitarian aid to third countries. Whilst this assessment with endogenous criteria produced a mixed picture, the inductive research here discovered new perspectives. Exogenous factors, namely pressures from other players like China and the US, were identified as difficulties facing the EU. Once again, as with our analysis of reporting on intra-European affairs, our findings support the argument of Toje (2008) that an inability to reach agreement on common action was the core problem, indicating a further international 'consensus–expectations gap', with reference to the first of Hill's three capability criteria.

Pragmatic Expectations from Asia

Nevertheless, certain expectations from Asia towards the EU emerged from our data. Notably, these expectations came mainly from China, and to a lesser extent from Japan. In

the two Chinese dailies, 31 news items contained expectation(s) towards the EU from China. In the Japanese case, 23 news items contained expectation(s) on the EU from Japan, while four pieces of news in Indonesia expressed an expectation from Indonesia with just one such news item from South Korea. In the Chinese case, 91 expectations were identified and coded (many of the 31 news items featured multiple expectations). A large majority (87.9 per cent) were towards the Union's relationship with China (an extra-European issue). Many of these expectations were in the reported political discourses from national leaders, namely Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang; a mere 5.5 per cent of the expectations were from leading journalists on EU affairs in China.

Regardless of origin, the content of expectations of the EU were similar. They all called for deepening the EU's partnership with China. These included expectations of stronger and more constructive EU–China bilateral cooperation (58.2 per cent), as well as joint action with China in promoting international cooperation, improving global governance, and aiding third parties in need. Notably, the Chinese side did not expect the EU to champion multilateralism on its own, nor to become any sort of superpower. Expectations regarding EU internal affairs (5.0 per cent) mainly urged the Union to be united and prosperous. Recognizing that the EU had been struggling to stabilize the Covid-19 hit economy and protect public health, the Chinese side rarely articulated expectations regarding the EU as a protector of the EU economy and EU public health (just twice and once respectively). These three expectations were all expressed by journalists not government officials.

It is clear that the expectations expressed from China reflected the perceived actions and functions of the EU. It could also be argued that China's view on and expectations toward the EU were indeed China-centric. Where the EU was reported frequently as a bilateral partner of China, the Chinese side expected an even closer partnership. China's focus on the bilateral EU relationship, and emphasis on international cooperation can also be read as encouraging greater EU strategic autonomy from the US, which would be welcomed by China, but not by the other three states in this paper. Acknowledging the Union as one of the world's key economies and key promoters of multilateralism, Chinese leaders repeatedly invited the EU to jointly contribute to global peace, stability and prosperity. Compared to the other states, quantitatively there are many more expectations from China, and qualitatively these are also higher than those from the other three cases. China expects the EU to: uphold multilateralism and perfect global governance; promote global prosperity and facilitate economic recovery; co-ordinate macroeconomic policy; and promote WTO reform. Although China does not expect or want the EU to become a superpower, when the Chinese government does express economic and regulatory expectations to the EU, it is expressing expectations that the EU should and could become a joint supervisor of the world economy, even if China does not recognize the EU as having done so yet.

Despite these positive expectations, there are significant well-documented recent problems in EU–China relations (Small, 2020). In a March 2019 Communication, the European Commission reframed the relationship by identifying China as simultaneously a cooperation and negotiation partner, an economic competitor and a systemic rival. High Representative Borrell accused China of abusing the 'politics of generosity' with regard to the Covid crisis. Commission Vice-President Jourova openly claimed that China had been

involved in influence operations within the EU. China is often criticized for pursuing a divide and rule strategy towards the EU via its ‘16 + 1’ mechanism with CEE states. Furthermore, although such concerns and criticisms appeared in the Japanese and South Korean media surveyed, they did not feature in the Chinese print media. (In Japan, the number of reports on EU–China relations was actually higher than that for Japan’s own bilateral relationship with the EU). Chinese print media coverage of bilateral relations with the EU is markedly more positive than that found in other Asian print medias writing about their own countries’ respective bilateral ties with the EU, despite these well-documented problems in EU–China relations. This constitutes something of a research puzzle and points to a gap between ‘what’ is expressed and ‘why’ it is expressed, a gap that cannot be addressed by inductive frequency analysis methodologies alone. Such approaches cannot evaluate what is not written down. To address this, our analysis employs a mixed-methods approach combining a substantial quantitative dimension allied with a deductive, qualitative interpretation of what is, and what is not, covered, through discourse analysis.

China is concerned at problems in the relationship, and also that the EU might align itself more closely with the US; it is therefore committed to encouraging the EU to pursue ‘strategic autonomy’. For this reason, China has sought to downplay the negative, accentuate the positive, and manifest this in the form of expectations that the EU will play a more independent multilateral role, partnering China on a number of global governance initiatives. The Chinese framing of the EU relationship in terms of heightened expectations is a subtle form of diplomatic communication conducted through the media. Indeed, a very high proportion of expectations featuring the EU were produced by high-ranking Chinese governmental officials. This can be contrasted with the high prevalence of expectations written by journalists/columnists in other Asian dailies in the study. A cynical assessment of the capabilities of the EU might suggest that the high level of expectations expressed in the Chinese media is an instrumental attempt at flattery. But more positively, it shows that China is concerned with problems in the relationship with the EU, and the possibility of the EU being drawn closer to the US, thereby acknowledging that it considers the EU to be a significant international actor.

The picture from Japan was different. Of the 36 expectations identified, over three-quarters related to the Union’s internal affairs. Most of them urged the EU to better coordinate the actions of its Member States, especially as many of them prioritized national interests and put the solidarity of the EU at risk. The other key expectations were for the Union to protect the EU economy as well as to protect the free movement principle, two perspectives that were found to be minimal in the Chinese case. In addition, there was a strong call for the Member States to unite to tackle the crises facing them. Unlike the Chinese case (in which expectations centred on EU–China bilateral cooperation) the Japanese media did not pay much attention to EU–Japan bilateral relations. In the few expectations focused on extra-Europe action, the Japanese media called for the EU to jointly promote multilateral cooperation. Also (and again differing from China), all but one of the expectations were from editors and journalists of the newspapers (the one exception being from a government official). The Japan data also showed a link between the perceived functions of the EU and expectations attached to it. In March–June 2020, the attention of Japan towards the EU was on its intra-European actions and the leading roles the EU was expected to play were as a coordinator of EU countries and as a protector of

the EU's economy. These findings can be explained by the fact that Japan believes there is a crisis in the multilateral order, and that the liberal international order itself could be under threat (Gilson, 2019). Further, Japan pays great attention to events within the EU because it believes that the EU is a key partner in the survival of liberal multilateralism, and is anxious that internal disharmony and populist dissent could undermine the EU's credibility as a key stakeholder.

The one expectation found in the Korea case concerned the EU as a union with solidarity in handling the economic crisis. As shown in the Japanese and Korean media which had repeatedly reported divisions among EU Member States and the economic instability of the EU, a capability–expectation gap exists.

The Indonesia case, despite having only five expectations identified, also showed a clear link between expectations towards, and perceived functions of the EU. Indonesia is a leading member of ASEAN as well as an important state in its own right, and there is a possibility that Indonesia might perceive its relationship with the EU through an inter-regional lens. However in our data, similarly to the Chinese case, the EU was conceived mostly as a bilateral partner, especially as a trade partner, and Indonesia expected the bilateral relationship to improve (three out of the five identified expectations). The other two expectations called for greater unity and less Islamophobia in the EU, something the EU had in neither case achieved. Thus, gaps between perceived capabilities and expectations were evident in all four Asian countries, although these gaps differed in scale and significance.

Conclusions

China, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea are prominent Asia-Pacific states, and crucial to the world economy and international relations. And yet this empirical study found that the EU received only limited media attention from these Asian partners. None of these four Asian countries saw the EU having a strong global presence. Although they regarded the EU as one of the key players in the international arena, this did not extend to being a superpower replacement of the former USSR as foreseen by Hill in 1993. Concerning expectations, this research demonstrated considerable variation across the four countries in terms of frequency, content and intensity.

Our analysis of domestic print media shows that all four states have low perceptions of EU capability, particularly EU ability to reach agreement on common action, the first of Hill's three capability criteria, both inside and outside of Europe. This is consistent with Toje's (2008) assertion that the EU has a 'consensus–expectations gap'. Indonesia and South Korea also have low overall expectations of the EU, yet such low expectations still exceed recognized EU capabilities. Japan has some expectations of the EU, but these are mostly related to EU internal and neighbourhood action, confirming findings of previous research identifying a Japanese 'expectations deficit' regarding EU external action (Tsuruoka, 2008). China however had many expectations of EU external action, on bilateral relations, but also on multilateral governance and management of the international economy. We can therefore identify a significant EU capability–expectations gap from the Chinese perspective, while this gap was smaller in scale in the other three countries. These low expectations of the EU's role outside Europe, again, reflected the perceived capabilities of the Union. Indonesia and South Korea showed low

recognition of the international presence of the EU, and their expectations of the EU were therefore also low. Japan continues to have greater interest in and recognition of the international role of the EU, yet it was more interested in reporting intra-European affairs. Meanwhile, its major expectations of the EU also focused on intra-European functions of the EU. The Chinese case was the only one which ticked both boxes, as there was recognition of the EU's international role and also substantial expectations towards the Union.

This empirical study showed clearly that these four Asian states only held expectations towards the EU on actions where the Union has been perceived to be making an effort. These were the pragmatic evaluations of four leading Asian states who have interacted with the EU over decades, and learnt and formed their own judgement on the perceived (lack of) capability of the EU. While Hill argued in 1993 that external expectations towards the EU were high, this research has found that this was not the case in three of our four case study countries in 2020, three decades after CEG was first proposed. Despite the EU's continuous public diplomacy around its ambitious foreign policy, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea as *demandeurs* appeared unconvinced in their expectations regarding the role of the Union in international politics. Asia-Pacific states, as international actors, can indeed learn. They form their expectations and policies towards other international actors, in this case the EU, after considering its capabilities. They formed their own judgements based on their own perceptions of the limited capabilities of the EU. Consequently, this research demonstrated that exogenous factors, namely the learning ability of external counterparts, should be added beside the three endogenous criteria listed by Hill.

We have also demonstrated that the CEG framework remains relevant in helping us to conceptualize and evaluate the dynamic relationship between capabilities and expectations on a case-by-case basis. Hill's three capability criteria can be meaningfully quantified, and expectations can be extrapolated, based on rigorous comparative newspaper analysis. Toje and Zhang in their different ways offer useful complementary approaches that sharpen the CEG framework. Ultimately, we have been able to identify variation in case study expectations and therefore variation in terms of capability–expectation gaps by allying Hill's framework to our data analysis methodology.

As this empirical study has only provided a snapshot of EU media coverage for the March–June 2020 period in four selected Asia-Pacific states, further studies on the Capability–Expectations Gap across time and in other locations are needed. This also acknowledges the reflexive capacities of *demandeurs* to change their expectations of the EU in a fluid international environment. Ideally any such future studies can apply the three endogenous capability criteria of Hill, together with a consideration of the exogenous factors suggested by this research, not only to the same external partners with a different timeframe but also to other partners, within and beyond the Asia-Pacific region.⁶

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⁶The corpus of materials examined predates the Russian invasion of Ukraine and a potential repositioning of the EU. An examination of Asian perceptions of the EU in March–June 2022, by returning to the same media outlets examined in this article, could potentially provide insights as to impacts on the CEG of a rapidly evolving geopolitical context.

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