

Towards a Dynamic Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM)?

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ABSTRACT

The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) launched in 1996 is into its 17th year, and has expanded from a membership of 26 to 51. ASEM membership is made up of 10 ASEAN countries, the ASEAN Secretariat, China, Japan, South Korea, Mongolia, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Australia, New Zealand and Russia on the Asian side, and the 27 EU member states, the European Commission, Norway and Switzerland on the European side. Yet, with such impressive and diverse membership accounting for around 60% of the world's population, 50% of global GDP, and up to 60% of world trade, it remains relatively unknown in the public domain. There is also a palpable sense that not all is well as interest in ASEM (particularly among the leaders) may wane without adequate follow-up actions, concrete deliverables and improved visibility.

The challenges faced by ASEM were discussed in a recent Symposium in Yangzhou organised by the Chinese government and co-sponsored by Laos, India, Poland and the Asia-Europe Foundation (AEF).

Into its 17th year, ASEM remains essentially a forum for dialogue. After an initial euphoria following the launch of the inaugural summit in Bangkok in 1996, symbolising Asia's and Europe's commitment to step up engagement with each other, ASEM has since been plagued by the perennial questions of its lack of effectiveness, efficacy and visibility, and doubts about sustained interest by its political leaders in light of the lack of concrete deliverables. This paper drawn in part from an earlier article on The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in the Palgrave Handbook on EU-Asia Relations (2013), and from the discussions at the above ASEM Symposium, will begin with an examination of the on-going debates with regards to the challenges faced by ASEM and the various suggestions to address some of these challenges. The paper will conclude with some observations on the real issues behind these debates and a prognosis on the future development of ASEM.

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TOWARDS A DYNAMIC ASIA-EUROPE MEETING (ASEM)?

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Introduction and historical overview

In April this year, the Chinese government, with the support of Laos, India, Poland and the Asia-Europe Foundation, organised a Symposium to look into how to revitalise the ASEM process. Entitled “Towards Peace and Prosperity in Asia and Europe: The Need of a Dynamic ASEM”, the Symposium gathered about 100 participants, including ASEM senior officials, policy makers and researchers from 40 ASEM members to brainstorm on ASEM’s future development in light of the various challenges that it faced.

The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) was conceived in the mid-1990s in an era of great optimism with regard to regionalism, international cooperation and institution building, as answers to growing interdependence and globalisation. The global economy then was also seen as being driven by three engines powered by a rising East Asia, a revitalised European Union (EU) with its single market and a triumphant US that had just created the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) with Canada and Mexico. Using this imagery, Singaporean leaders Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong underlined the need for strong links among these three engines to ensure a strong and stable global economy.

While transatlantic ties are strong and the transpacific links has been established with APEC, there was deemed a missing link between East Asia and Europe. Hence, Goh Chok Tong, then Prime Minister of Singapore, went to Europe to seed the idea of establishing an Asia-Europe leaders’ meeting to bring about closer dialogue and cooperation between East Asia and Europe. The EU was receptive having just published a paper on the need for a “New Asia Strategy” (1994), and probably seeing ASEM as an EU response or answer to APEC. Therefore the idea was quickly transformed into reality with the inaugural summit being held in Bangkok in 1996.

Since then ASEM Summits have been held biennially and besides the Summits, foreign ministers meet regularly supported by the Senior Officials meeting. There are also ministerial meetings of different

constellations (trade/economic, finance, environment, transport, and so on) and other technical and experts meetings touching on a broad range of issues under the three pillars – political, economic and socio-cultural – of cooperation. These issues include human rights, inter-faith dialogue to cultural and heritage preservation to traditional medicine and health.

ASEM initially comprising 10 Asian members (ASEAN 7 + China, Japan and South Korea) and the 15 EU member states and the European Commission, have grown into a trans-regional dialogue forum of 51.¹ The enlargement was in part a result of the enlargement of the EU from 15 to 27, and ASEAN from 7 to 10. But interestingly, new members ranging from the Northeast (Mongolia) to the South of Asia (Bangladesh, India and Pakistan) and the Pacific (Australia, New Zealand) and a Eurasian behemoth, Russia, have been accepted as new members on the Asian side. Norway and Switzerland in turn have joined the ranks of Europe, diluting the idea some EU members had sought to portray – that ASEM was a meeting of the EU and its Asian counterparts.

Rhetoric and reality

ASEM’s supporters see the rapid enlargement as a reflection of ASEM’s attractiveness, while critics respond that the enlargement is taken to hide the lack of achievement. Instead of deepening its dialogue and cooperation, ASEM has broadened its dialogue and membership, leaving ASEM essentially a forum for formal statements and shallow exchange of information and ideas. Though ASEM has “faithfully” held its biennial summits (nine have been held so far with the 10th summit to be held in Brussels in 2014), each Summit preparation is plagued by concerns about the actual turnout by the leaders and the process has become more bureaucratic rather than embracing a more spontaneous exchange of views and dialogue

¹ ASEM members comprise on the European side - the EU 27 (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and United Kingdom), European Commission, Norway and Switzerland and on the Asian side – ASEAN 10 (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam), ASEAN Secretariat, China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Australia, New Zealand and Russia. The membership of ASEM will be 52 when Croatia joins the EU in July 2013.

amongst the leaders in the spirit of equality, informality and flexibility.

When ASEM was first conceived, it was, in all modesty, meant only to be a platform for informal dialogue among the leaders. It was not conceived as a platform for negotiations or an institution for governance or collective problem-solving. The Asia-Europe Cooperation Framework 2000 tried to underline this fact by emphasising that the ASEM process need not be institutionalised and it should instead stimulate and facilitate progress in other fora.

However, the AECF while reiterating the informality also raised expectations by listing a number of key priorities for ASEM – from intensifying high level dialogue to addressing global issues of common concern ranging from political to economic affairs and also to promote dialogue and cooperation in the socio-cultural arena. The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) was also founded in 1997 to promote exchange and interactions beyond the official realm.

Expectations on what ASEM should do and could deliver were further fuelled by official rhetoric by some leaders professing the desire for ASEM to contribute to strengthening multilateralism and global governance.

Yet the reality is that ASEM which begun with a simple political ambition to get East Asia and Europe (seen then as two of the three engines of growth) to reconnect and increase opportunities for trade and investments, has turned into a bureaucratic process where more efforts are placed on drafting chairman's statement and crossing the "t's" and dotting the "i's". What are the reasons for this development, and how can ASEM face up to the challenges to bring back some vigour and dynamism to the ASEM process?

During the discussions at the ASEM Symposium in Yangzhou, participants surfaced the usual criticisms and challenges that have long been brought into attention – the unbalanced development of the three-pillar cooperation of ASEM, inadequate follow-up actions and lack of concrete deliverables, inefficiency and ineffectiveness in current working methods as ASEM enlarges and the low level of public awareness and visibility. There were calls therefore to revive the Economic Ministers meeting and strengthen in particular the economic pillar of ASEM's cooperation, and to improve ASEM's working methods by introducing "retreat format" at ASEM's summits and foreign ministers meeting for more intensive and

interactive dialogue and streamlining the agenda to focus on one or two key issues. There were also calls for the Chair's statement to be shortened and be made more accessible to the media and a list of other recommendations.

Many of the challenges and the suggestions and recommendations for addressing these challenges were raised during the 10th year review of the ASEM process done in 2006, and have been raised at many other occasions since then. Yet, not much progress has really been made. To appreciate the difficulties in engendering changes within ASEM, one need to be cognisant of the vastly changed environment in which ASEM now operates.

Challenges in the face of changing regional dynamics and global developments

The alacrity with which the suggestion for an Asia-Europe leaders meeting in 1994 was taken up and the success of the inaugural summit in 1996 suggested that this was perhaps an idea whose time had come. The immediate post-Cold War era of optimism in global cooperation and institution-building; the rise of new regional groupings such as APEC and NAFTA and idea of open regionalism; the increased economic competition, the East Asia miracle and opening up of China and other emerging economies all provided the backdrop for ASEM to emerge.

However, the global and regional environments in which Asia and Europe operate have changed dramatically since the first ASEM summit. The Asian financial crisis, the launch of the euro, the global war against terrorism unleashed by the US following the events of 9/11, the entry of China into WTO and its dramatic rise as an economic power, the global financial crisis of 2008, and the sovereign debt crisis in the euro zone – all these conspired with other regional dynamics and domestic forces to impact the development and significance of ASEM.

ASEM is now one of the many multilateral forums that have sprung up in the last decade where scholars such as Rüländ sees as a manifestation of a broader trend towards "diminished multilateralism". According to Rüländ, diminished multilateralism denotes "a type of short term and low intensity cooperation that resonates more with realist paradigms such as power, balancing, hedging and relative gains orientation" rather than "with the liberal and constructivist vision of

a functionally driven or reflexive process of global institutional deepening” (Rüland, 2012: 258). With “diminished multilateralism”, many of the forums and institutions become arenas for contest over membership and representation, norms and decision-making procedures rather than forums for actual global problem-solving. Together with the rise of diminished multilateralism is the phenomenon of “forum shopping”, a strategy in which actors “pick and choose” whichever forum or mechanisms that best fit their individual political agenda (Rüland, 2012:256).

Way back in 2002, the United Nations also made the observation that:

The number of meeting held under the auspices of the various inter-governmental organs has increased dramatically over the years. (...) It must now be clear to everyone that the international agenda has become overloaded with such meetings. Summit fatigue has set in, both among the general public and in many governments (UNGA, 2002: 9)

With the proliferation of summit meetings and talk shops and the increased phenomenon of “forum shopping”, some of the challenges faced by ASEM are actually not unique. From APEC to the Commonwealth Heads of Governments and States Meeting (CHOGM) there is the perennial sense of a lack of concrete deliverables.

Working Methods

However, ASEM does face genuine challenges in its working method and coordination, and a serious problem with regards to visibility and awareness that are unique to its set-up. ASEM does not have a Secretariat, and currently the coordination of meetings and other such tasks are done through four coordinators – on the European side, the coordinators are from the EEAS and the EU rotating presidency; and on the Asian side, one from Southeast Asia and the other from the countries in Northeast and South Asia. The coordinators from the Asian side are also being rotated on a two or three year basis. This is certainly not ideal, particularly on the Asian side. With the enlargement, the Asian side of ASEM now includes members of ASEAN, the ASEAN Secretariat, China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Australia, New Zealand and Russia. With such a disparate group not conforming to any single regional entity, there is a real need to rethink the coordination

on the Asian side since there is no consensus with regards to the setting up of an ASEM Secretariat.

It is perhaps more realistic to have four coordinators on the Asian side (rather than two) – with one coordinator from ASEAN, one representing the South Asian countries (Bangladesh, India and Pakistan); another representing the Northeast Asian group (China, Japan, Korea and Mongolia) and the final one representing the Pacific group (Australia, New Zealand and Russia). This would hopefully mean better representation, but there is still the need to work on improving continuity and communication among them.

The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) has been tasked to manage the ASEM Info-board, an online platform for depository of documents. With the reluctance to create new institutions such as a Secretariat, some additional resources could be allocated to make the ASEM Info-board not only a platform for providing information and maintaining the institutional memory of ASEM, but upgraded to become an active platform for ASEM Senior Officials and coordinators to communicate with one another.

Visibility

The issue with regards to visibility has been raised during the evaluation carried out in 2006 at the 10th anniversary of ASEM. A series of surveys conducted in several ASEM countries confirmed that public awareness of the ASEM is extremely low, and that media coverage of the ASEM process has also been paltry. In response to the need to raise the visibility of ASEM, the European Union has established an ASEM Dialogue facility and put aside some funding since 2007 to raise the profile of ASEM. Yet if the latest survey² done in 2011-12 is of any indication, awareness and profile remains low. Media coverage of the ASEM process going by the number of articles in newspapers have also shown a downward trend in several ASEM member states.

Further recommendations have been made at the ASEM Symposium in Yangzhou on how to raise visibility and awareness of ASEM. These include the call to develop a comprehensive public communication

² A research project coordinated by the National Centre for Research on Europe (NCRE) and supported by ASEF on EU in the eyes of Asia and Asia in the eyes of Europe contained questions on visibility of ASEM and a majority surveyed are not aware of the ASEM process.

strategy; to utilise modern technologies and social media to strengthen the public communication; actively disseminate the outcomes of ASEM summits and other meetings and initiatives; facilitate public access to ASEM activities and to finesse ASEM messages so that they can better resonate with the public.

Yet the crux of the matter with regards to the visibility may be related to the bigger issue of ASEM's lack of substance and relevance. In an article entitled "Invisible Forum? The Public Outreach of the Asia-Europe Meeting", Brovelli et al, argues that visibility should not be an "end goal" itself and "that seeking more visibility just for the sake of visibility" may be counterproductive. Instead "visibility should be understood as an element in the construction of the Asia-Europe relations under the ASEM framework" (Brovelli et al, 2010: 536).

Indeed this assessment raises the question of whether it is more important to focus on "doing good" instead of worrying about "looking good". Of course ideally, these should be complementary, in that the starting point is to deliver on concrete benefits of cooperation, but at the same time paying attention that the efforts and what ASEM has achieved are well recognised and publicised. Applying this edict to ASEM, it means ASEM need to work on delivering good cooperation projects between Asia and Europe which could then be highlighted with a good narrative that can "resonate" with the public. Tangible results are indispensable if ASEM is to matter to the people and the media.

The real challenge in transforming to a dynamic ASEM

The issues of visibility, working method, coordination, have been discussed over and over for a number of years now, and solutions have been offered. Yet, there did not seem to be a genuine desire to address these issues resolutely. The diversities in membership and inability to reconcile the diverging interests of course hamper efforts to address many of the challenges that have been identified. But fundamentally, the real reasons for the inertia in ASEM are the lack of political interest and unwillingness to invest in the process leading to the "bureaucratic capture" of the ASEM process.

The lack of political interest is in part due to the fact that the need for ASEM is no longer as compulsive as it was in 1996. Then the idea of ASEM as the EU's answer

to APEC, and ASEAN's response to increased engagement with its Northeast Asian neighbours, in particular the emerging China, resonates with leaders with strategic foresight. Much of the underlying rationale for ASEM has shifted. APEC has lost its "lustre" in the last decade with focus now on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP); China has emerged as the second largest world economy and perceived as a possible contender or challenger towards American hegemony, leading to different reactions and responses from China's neighbours in Asia, and those from a distance in Europe, also close ally of America.

Underpinning all these changes is also the fact that the different strands of EU-Asia relations (the bilateral summits that the EU have with major Asian powers – China, Japan, Korea and India) and the revived EU-ASEAN dialogue are now gaining in importance. EU's first free trade agreement (FTA) in Asia with Korea, the launch of FTA negotiations with Japan this year, and the significant improvements in EU-ASEAN since 2012 will further weaken the "appeal" of ASEM for the EU.

We are also entering a very different global environment from the one envisaged in the immediate post-Cold War years. Then there was euphoria and great hopes for international institutions and rules underpinning the development of a global liberal order. However, much has been changed by the war against terror, by American unilateralism, but more importantly in recent years, by the rise of non-Western powers, in particular China. There is a perceptible shift of power from the West to the East, precipitated by the global financial crisis and the debt crisis in Europe.

However, more important than this perceived shift of power is the diffusion of power to many more actors with no clear power centre. According to some analysts, we are entering an international system that is fragmented by a multiplicity of actors where no single wealthy nation or group of wealthy nations can dictate the world stage. In this "polycentric world", as coined by some, there will be a proliferation of informal inter-state networks and groups and states will pick and choose different fora and platforms, and invest energy in new non-institutionalised trans-regional frameworks (ESPAS Report, 2012: 126). What would this mean for a forum like ASEM?

ASEM would likely continue in its existing form, remaining broad, informal and shallow. It would co-exist with other different strands of EU-Asia relations, with overlap and redundancy and no clear value-add in

terms of actual problem-solving. In the words of one scholar, “with the proliferation of shallow, loosely institutionalised multilateral cooperation, many of them merely become dormant or degenerate into a low-profile existence” (Rüland, 2012: 260). While he may not be referring specifically to ASEM, this could indeed be the foreseeable future of ASEM. Is there therefore any hope of a truly dynamic ASEM that could help to transform the relations between Asia and Europe?

Taking into account the broader trends of the possible fragmentation of global governance, ASEM if it is to maintain any significance and relevance to its members has to rethink its modus operandi.

There will undoubtedly be much experimentation with regards to global and regional governance in the coming decades as we face a world in transition. ASEM with a diverse membership of 51 is unlikely to move towards further institutionalisation any time soon judging from the ongoing discussions. With little consensus on the need for an ASEM Secretariat, and the repeated chorus by ASEM officials that ASEM should remain an informal process, one cannot expect any significant institutional developments that would change the current character and essence of ASEM. It will probably continue with its current trajectory of meetings, ad hoc initiatives and declaratory statements on a board variety of issues. Yet within this framework, if there are members within ASEM who are willing to take ownership and show some genuine interest in the ASEM process, some experimentation with pragmatic outcomes in Asia-Europe cooperation can be envisaged.

What ASEM can try to forge and bring some added value to the multitude of forums and meetings is to develop and craft a networked approach revolving around issues and encouraging stewardship of these issues by different clusters of members. ASEM can remain an over-arching architecture in which a network of groupings centred on different issue areas can emerge. The idea of an issue-based leadership which was proposed during the 6th ASEM Summit if revitalised and pursued conscientiously could see players like China, Japan, Indonesia or ASEAN and new players like Russia, Australia or Norway competing to create and lead different clusters and networks in pursuit of concrete initiatives to address specific challenges from climate change, energy security to terrorism and organised crime. ASEM could then become an arena where healthy contestation among the emerging powers in Europe and Asia results in a somewhat

dynamic constellations of networked nodes. A certain amount of competition within the ASEM framework for influence and to project soft power could perhaps lead to a much more dynamic ASEM.

Conclusion

In less than two decades since the launch of ASEM, regional and global conditions have changed enormously. ASEM began in recognition of East Asia’s newfound confidence and its “miracle” development as coined by the World Bank then. Both the EU and East Asians were eager to explore better economic partnership for mutual benefit. However, just as ASEM was preparing for its second summit, the Asian financial crisis hit many of the tiger economies. A wave of anti-globalisation movements followed the Seattle WTO meeting in the wake of the crisis. Then the September 11 terrorist attacks on the US that led to a chain of events – war in Afghanistan and Iraq that “sapped” US energy and undermined the confidence of international institutions and norms and values upheld by the West as universal.

In response to all these changes, the ASEM agenda broadened from the initial economic underpinning to one that is focused on various political and security issues. The US unilateral behavior in its war against terror brought Asia and Europe closer together, at least in rhetoric, on the need for multilateralism. Yet, this multilateral, multipolar world has not quite appeared, and instead we have what scholars called “diminished multilateralism” and the fragmentation of the global order with the diffusion and shift of power.

In the meantime the membership of ASEM has continued to expand. ASEM with 51 members faced many challenges with regards to its working method which is seen as inefficient and ineffective, its lack of deliverables, the low visibility and profile and lack of public awareness. All these issues have been discussed in various meetings over the last few years, and many suggestions and recommendations have been made. However, without real political interest to invest more strategically in the process, many of these suggestions will remain suggestions at “official level”. With bureaucratic capture, only slow incremental improvements can be expected if any. A dynamic ASEM is possible only if some policy entrepreneurs or political leaders can see the value of using ASEM as a test-bed and platform for experimentation towards a more networked approach in international cooperation and strengthening Asia-Europe ties for mutual benefit.

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