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Looking Back and Looking Ahead:
**The ASEM Education Process –
History and Vision**
(2008 – 2018)

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THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

ASEM – (more than?) a forum of dialogue between Asia and Europe

Sebastian Bersick/Julia Schwerbrock

The idea of an Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) has Asian roots. At the most fundamental level ASEM's rationale is to connect Asia and Europe. ASEM was established in 1996 to provide Heads of State or Government from both regions a platform for informal dialogue and exchange of views and to enable cooperation on an equal basis, and to achieve consensus in order to develop common ground and interests. By now, ASEM has developed into the central forum for dialogue and cooperation between Asia and Europe.

EVOLUTION AND RATIONALE OF ASEM

During 1994 and as a consequence of the end of systemic bi-polarity in international relations, Singaporean Senior Officials in the Prime Minister's office developed the idea of a regular meeting between Asian and European leaders. An "Asia-Europe Summit" was proposed as a new forum for dialogue and cooperation between interested Asian and European countries with the aim to deepening economic relations specifically. In addition, the then seven members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, had the ambition to engage the emerging People's Republic of China (henceforth China) at both an intra- and inter-regional level through engagement with Europe. Facing both strong American-European relations (e.g. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO) and deepening American-Asian relations (e.g. Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum, APEC), but also weak Asian-European relations, ASEM was expected to become the "missing link" in a newly developing post-cold war trilateral international environment. A mixture of economic, geo-economic, geo-political and politico-security motives thus triggered the start of the ASEM process. In addition, it was felt by all participants that the evolution of stronger Asian-European relations would contribute to preventing the "Clash of Civilizations" hypothesised by Samuel Huntington in his 1993 Foreign Affairs article.

The first ASEM Summit was held in Bangkok in 1996. Participants considered the Summit as the start of a process – the ASEM process. The framing of ASEM as a process demonstrates

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*First
ASEM Summit,
Bangkok 1996*



Photo: Asia-Europe Foundation

the evolutionary approach of this new initiative. ASEM was established as an inter-regional forum including the ASEAN Member States, China, Japan and the Republic of Korea on the Asian side as well as the then 15 EU Member States (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Ireland, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom) and the European Commission on the European side. ASEM Summits are held on a biennial basis ever since with venues alternating between Asia and Europe (London 1998, Seoul 2000, Copenhagen 2002, Hanoi 2004, Helsinki 2006, Beijing 2008, Brussels 2010, Vientiane 2012, Milan 2014, Ulaanbaatar 2016). The twelfth ASEM Summit will be held in October this year in Brussels. ASEM Summits are complemented by Ministerial Meetings on foreign affairs, finance, economy, culture, education, labour, environment and transport. Furthermore, various Senior Officials' Meetings as well as seminars and meetings on a broad variety of topics are organised. Because ASEM was originally conceptualised as a top-down process, only government representatives participated in the first ASEM Summit. Yet, there has been a steady pluralisation of ASEM's actor structure and as a consequence, the private sector (Asia-Europe Business Forum, AEBF), parliaments (Asia-Europe Parliamentary Partnership Meetings, ASEP) as well as civil society (Asia-Europe Foundation, ASEF, Asia-Europe People's Forum, AEPF, Asia-Europe Young Leaders Summit, ASEFYL) have been incorporated into ASEM to various extents and limitations. As Gilson puts it: "[T]here is a lot of rhetoric about [the] inclusion of [civil society] that is not backed by serious commitment."¹

ASEM CHARACTERISTICS

Over time, ASEM has grown from 26 to currently 53 members. The number of members has more than doubled within two decades which is a clear sign of the attractiveness of this forum. Today, the European side comprises all 28 members of the EU plus Switzerland and Norway. On the Asian side, all ten ASEAN members (the original seven plus Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar), India, Australia, New Zealand, Mongolia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Russia and Kazakhstan have joined ASEM. Besides these 51 countries, also two regional organisations participate in ASEM: the EU, since 1996, and ASEAN, represented by the ASEAN Secretariat since 2008. ASEM members combine approximately 60% of the world's population, 60% of global GNP and 60% of global trade.

While the Heads of State or Government, the Presidents of the Council of the European Union and of the European Commission as well as the ASEAN Secretary General represent the highest level of decision making, the responsibility for steering the overall ASEM process lies within the Foreign Ministers' Meeting. In addition, ASEM affairs are managed by four coordinators, two from each region. The coordinators represent the inter-regional structure of ASEM. Whereas the European External Action Service (EEAS) is the only permanent member, the second European coordinator is the country holding the presidency of the Council of the EU. Consequently, the second European coordinator changes every six months. On the Asian side, ASEAN is represented by one coordinator (presently the Philippines) and the non-ASEAN countries by the other coordinator (presently Pakistan), both rotating every two years.

ASEM activities and initiatives cover a broad variety of issue areas ranging from security challenges and climate change to trade and investment and fall into three thematic clusters, the so called ASEM pillars: the economic pillar, the political pillar and the cultural, social and educational pillar. The economic pillar had been severely weakened by the fact that the Economic Ministers' Meeting (EMM) had been suspended for more than a decade until last year when a ministerial meeting took place in Seoul.² The EMM is now to be held on a biennial basis.

European and Asian ASEM participants are quite unlike regarding their approaches to regional integration: the EU is a self-proclaimed normative power *sui generis*, partially pooling national sovereignty via EU structures whereas Asian state actors refrain from pooling sovereignty. The latter results in a preference for inter-governmental rather than supra-national forms of governance. Consequently, potential tensions with regard to the normative-institutional asymmetry between Europe and Asia need to be addressed. Consensus and equality are key concepts of ASEM in order to ensure a basis for dialogue. Furthermore, informality and openness (open regionalism) are key features. This implies that statements and declarations issued within the scope of ASEM are non-binding. Cooperation within ASEM, therefore, shall not compromise national sovereignty and shall not be institutionalised. According to the Asia-Europe Cooperation Framework (AECF) "as an informal process, ASEM need not to be institutionalised. It should stimulate and facilitate progress in other fora"³. ASEM's only institutionalised, legally binding structure is the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) founded in 1997 and located in Singapore. The founding of ASEF and the formation of the ASEM Trans-Eurasia Information Network (TEIN) launched in 2000, which is the world's largest research and education network connecting over 50 million academics, are considered to be key achievements of the ASEM process.

ASEM exhibits eight essential characteristics, each of which incorporates its own respective strengths and weaknesses⁴:

1. Enlargement: On the one hand, the doubling of participants since 1996 signals ASEM's attractiveness and relevance. On the other hand, the enlargement is accompanied by an increased problem of collective action which impedes on the development and implementation of common interests or collective goods as well as their potential enforcement outside of ASEM, e.g. in the UN, WTO or G20.

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2. Exclusion of the USA: On the one hand, the exclusion of the USA provides ASEM with a comparative advantage, because ASEM allows for discussing policy issues detached from US interests. On the other hand, ASEM lacks political importance, because it functions without the political weight of the USA.

3. Informality: On the one hand, informality shall allow for non-binding exchanges and prevent from an institutionalisation of ASEM. On the other hand, there is no agreement on how the flexibility resulting from informality could be transformed into an advantage by generating tangible and concrete results.

4. Open regionalism: On the one hand, the concept of voluntary and unilateral trade liberalisation and legally non-binding regional economic integration constitutes an alternative model to the legally binding approach to regional economic integration as it is practiced in the EU. On the other hand, ASEM has not succeeded in fostering inter-regional economic integration, neither based on the Asian, nor based on the European approach.

5. Political projects: On the one hand, ASEM provides participants with a framework for dialogue and cooperation as well as for increasing the awareness of Asia-Europe relations in the public perception by means of a joint political project. On the other hand, ASEM has so far not developed an appropriate political project.

6. Pluralisation: On the one hand, the ASEM process has opened up to also include non-state actors. On the other hand, civil society actors have so far been denied an agenda-setting function.

7. Broad agenda: On the one hand, it is ASEM's core objective to enhance dialogue and cooperation of state and non-state actors from both Asia and Europe. On the other hand, ASEM's broad agenda results in a lack of focus.

8. Non-institutionalisation: On the one hand, non-institutionalisation was a *de facto* precondition for ASEM's launch as there was no interest among the original participants to establish a more formal institution and – probably even more important – the USA would have prevented ASEM in the first place because Washington feared that a formal institution could provide a stepping stone for an East-Asian economic bloc to evolve.⁵ On the other hand, by now the international environment has changed quite fundamentally and so have the functional and managerial issues that are dealt with in the ASEM context.

THE ASEM EDUCATION PROCESS

One important policy field ASEM members deal with is education. The ASEM Education Process, which is part of ASEM's cultural, social and educational pillar, started in 2008. As early as the year 2000, it was noted in the Asia-Europe Cooperation Framework (AECF), that in the social, cultural and educational fields, "[...] **key priorities** shall include enhancing our contacts and exchanges in the field of education, including student, academic and

information exchanges, inter-university cooperation, [...], exploring the possibilities for mutual recognition of degrees and licenses between our educational and related institutions, and substantially increasing student exchanges between our two regions, [...] [emphasis added]". The ASEM Education Process has a political level, i.e. ministerial meetings, as well as a stakeholder level comprising, inter alia, ASEF, the ASEM Lifelong Learning Hub, the OECD, the UNESCO as well as several European and Asian institutions.⁶

The ASEM Education Ministers' Meeting (ASEMME) alternates between Asia and Europe and takes place on a biennial basis. ASEMME6 was held in the Republic of Korea in 2017. Previous ASEMME were held in Germany (2008), Vietnam (2009), Denmark (2011), Malaysia (2013) and Latvia (2015). The next meeting is scheduled for 2019 in Romania. ASEM Education Ministers proactively shape the structure of their cooperation. In 2009, during ASEMME2, Ministers decided to establish a rotating ASEM Education Secretariat with the Asian and the European side taking turns in hosting the Secretariat.⁷ The first such Secretariat was hosted by Germany (2009–2013) before Indonesia took over (2013–2017).⁸ Currently, Belgium is hosting the Secretariat (2017–2021).⁹

Over the past decade a variety of different initiatives emerged within the scope of the ASEM Education Process, like a summer university that is annually organised by ASEF and the biennial ASEM Rectors' Conference and Students' Forum to strengthen the role of civil society actors in the ASEM Education Process and to provide policy recommendations for the ASEMME. The creation of an ASEM Curriculum Development Project and the establishment of an ASEM Education Task Force are both German initiatives. The latter was announced in 2016 and aims at fostering transparency and strengthening the visibility of the ASEM Education Process.¹⁰

The pattern of involvement showcases that Asian countries appear to have a stronger interest in the Process than their European counterparts. Three out of ASEM's current twenty so-called tangible cooperation areas are education-related: Higher Education, Vocational Training & Skills Development and Education and Human Resources Development – with Finland, India, Indonesia and the Republic of Korea, i.e. one European and three Asian members, being the only countries that have signed up as participating partners for all three education-related areas. Whereas almost half of the Asian ASEM members signed up for the Vocational Training & Skills Development, only one third of the European ASEM members did so. Regarding Higher Education as well as Education and Human Resources Development the Asian participants outnumber the European ones by far¹¹ – despite the fact that ASEM has only 21 Asian member countries and 30 European ones.

The results of a study on European perceptions of Asia point to the important role of the ASEM Education Process. There is sound reason to invest in an Asia-Europe Knowledge Community and to enlarge and strengthen ASEM's educational activities and research collaboration further. There is a need to share both regions' "epistemological strength by linking and integrating the production and communication of knowledge". Investment in research and education is seen "as the key to promote enhanced mutual understanding and development of the two regions' peoples [...]"¹². In this context the importance of the

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bottom-up dimension in Asia-Europe relations is demonstrated by the demand from civil society actors to become stakeholders and play an active role in the broader process of Eurasian integration. An example is the new initiative of the Young Eurasian Forum (YEF) for junior academics from Europe and Asia. The first YEF, themed “Transboundary Energy Relations: Promoting Cooperation and Addressing Conflict” was held in July 2018 at Ruhr-University Bochum (RUB) in Germany.

ASEM, CHINA AND THE “BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE”: TOWARDS EURASIAN INTEGRATION

ASEM is increasingly challenged by the question of whether or not it is suited and able to have a shaping influence on the growing cooperation and economic integration within and between Asia and Europe. The latter is for instance becoming evident in the increase of bilateral free trade agreements as well as China’s “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), also known as “One Belt, One Road” initiative or the “New Silk Road”. The initiative is, arguably, the boldest and most ambitious foreign policy strategy in China’s history. Civil society actors emphasise that ASEM plays an important role in this context. In the framework of AEPF 2016, NGOs have for example urged ASEM to establish a joint “ASEM Masterplan for Asia-Europe Sustainable Connectivity”.

BRI was announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 and provides China’s diplomacy with a new framework including institutions such as the Belt and Road Forum as a platform intended to be held biennially. By highlighting the topic of connectivity, BRI adds new impetus to intra-regional integration and inter-regional integration across the Eurasian landmass and beyond. Yet, BRI is not only an infrastructure initiative, but also aims at economic and financial integration and comprises so-called people-to-people bonds with academic and student exchanges being explicitly named.¹³ BRI even reaches far beyond Eurasia, spanning Africa to a significant extent and thus providing prospects for cooperation.¹⁴ China has started to provide leadership in regional economic and financial governance by creating new financial institutions that support the development of BRI. Within the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) Asian, African and European actors are cooperating upon a Chinese initiative. The AIIB receives technical support from the European Investment Bank (EIB). The EIB also allows for future co-funding of AIIB projects. Furthermore, the EU-China Connectivity Platform was established and experts from the European Investment Bank (EIB), the EU Commission and China’s Silk Road Fund formed a joint working group in 2015.

With the onset of BRI the role of Russia, and the role of China-Russia relations, in contemporary processes of Eurasian integration is growing. Russia joined the ASEM process on the Asian side and the implications of Moscow’s general Asia-turn for the EU are considerable¹⁵, especially with regard to the China-Russia strategic partnership which is progressively deepened, e.g. within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The SCO is a regional institution, initiated by China and formally established in 2003. Its founding members are China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Pakistan and India acceded last year. The accession is surprising for two reasons: firstly because of the conflict between

Pakistan and India, and secondly because India perceives China as a strategic competitor in the region. India – like Japan – thus did not participate in the Belt and Road Forum in May 2017 in Beijing. At the same time, the development of the SCO, which is primarily dealing with security issues, demonstrates the potential for cooperation and for conflict in Eurasia and the political will of the involved actors to address the related challenges cooperatively in a regional organisation.

China-Russia relations do also extend to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which is considered to be an alternative approach to regional economic integration in what Stefanova calls wider Europe.¹⁶ China signed a trade and economic cooperation agreement with the EAEU in May 2018, that covers, inter alia, customs cooperation and electronic authentication.¹⁷ The EAEU comprises Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia, with Moldova having been granted observer status. Negotiations on an interim free trade agreement between the EAEU and Iran as well as negotiations between the EAEU and Israel, Serbia and Singapore are ongoing.¹⁸

ASEM leaders have only recently started to react to the changing geo-political and geo-economic Eurasian environment by strongly emphasising the importance of connectivity during the ASEM Summit in 2016 and, as Gaens holds, “officially turned the promotion of connectivity into ASEM’s main mission”¹⁹. As initial steps, the ASEM Pathfinder Group on Connectivity was founded in 2016²⁰ and ASEM Foreign Ministers in 2017 agreed on an ASEM definition of connectivity. ASEM leaders are thus reacting to China’s interest in connectivity and its impact on Eurasian economic integration. China is particularly active in organising connectivity-related ASEM events²¹ and is hosting four major diplomatic events in 2018/19, including the SCO Summit, the Bo’ao Forum, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), and the first China International Import Expo. With regard to ASEM, Beijing was also pushing for a restart of the Economic Ministers’ Meeting. Against the backdrop of China’s interest in the BRI and the further economic integration of Eurasia, its mid- to long-term goal of establishing a free trade agreement with the EU and the ongoing negotiations for an EU-China investment agreement, Beijing strongly advocated for the revitalisation of the EMM as it hopes to gain economically and strategically from strengthening ASEM’s economic pillar.

In view of the geo-political changes and due to the new regional and global dynamics the EU has also recently agreed to deal with the security implications of Eurasian connectivity and ASEM’s role in it more closely by endorsing the need for “Enhanced EU Security Cooperation in and with Asia”.²² Accordingly, “[t]he Council recognises the increasing importance of Asian security for European interests and emphasises that Asian countries, regional organisations and platforms, such as the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), are crucial to help secure a more stable and peaceful world. The Council stresses that efforts to enhance EU-Asia security cooperation on Euro-Asia connectivity should be reinforcing”²³.

The EU is thus increasingly taking into account that the geo-political and geo-economic context of ASEM has changed dramatically since the first ASEM Summit took place 22 years ago. Given the changing systemic environment as well as the rising focus on geo-politics,

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the importance of cooperation between Asia and Europe is increasing. In view of recent developments such as China’s BRI, the US’ unilateral turn, especially in matters relating to regional and global governance, as well as the worsening of EU-Russia and EU-US relations, the need for an institution that deals with the Eurasian dimension of Asia-Europe affairs is evolving. It remains to be seen though how the different Eurasian institutions and organisations will impact on the further evolution of the international political economy of Eurasia. Within this development, ASEM has the potential to play a pivotal role since major Eurasian actors are already involved. Nevertheless, it is an open question whether processes of Eurasian integration, like BRI, SCO, or the EAEU will complement the EU’s approach to regional integration or whether largely competitive patterns or even conflict will dominate.

Under these new systemic conditions ASEM is challenged to live up to its potential. Due to the informality, the principle of consensus, the legally non-binding nature of the cooperation, the lack of tangible results, the lack of a secretariat as well as institutional memory and because of a multitude of actors and their often diverging interests, ASEM is criticised for being a talking shop.²⁴ Nonetheless, further proposals for a reform of ASEM’s modus operandi were not addressed during the eleventh ASEM Summit in Mongolia in 2016.

ASEM’s institutional set-up needs to be improved in order to fully tap its potential by producing more tangible results. It is therefore time to enhance ASEM’s institutional capacities. The original reasons for the policy of non-institutionalisation and informality are losing relevance as the room for manoeuvre increases to develop a new balance between informality and effectiveness. During 1999, the Asia-Europe Vision Group²⁵ proposed a “lean but effective secretariat” and as such the establishment of the ASEM Education Secretariat has provided the overall ASEM process with a valuable example.

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