

## ASEM: A Window of Opportunity

In this article, co-authored with Wim Stokhof, director of the IIAS, Paul van der Velde introduced and situated in their proper context a series of papers published by Kegan Paul International on the future prospects and developments of ASEM, the Asia-Europe Meeting.

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The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is a unique interregional forum which consists of six members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), along with China, Japan, South Korea and the 15 members of European Union (EU). ASEM officially came into being at the first summit, held in Bangkok in 1996. It was born out of the necessity, felt as much in Europe as in Asia, of improving the dialogue between both continents, which had been neglected since the end of decolonisation. Although there had been contacts at the level of foreign ministries between ASEAN and the EU dating from the late 1970s, they were of a rhetorical nature and lacked substance. This changed with the inauguration of ASEM. In general the process was considered by both parties involved as a way of fortifying the relations between Asia and Europe, a necessity to balance the triangular world (US, Asia and Europe) of the 21st century. We can begin to distinguish its main components which were, by far, more substantial than the talks between Europe and Asia before the inauguration of ASEM.

The main components of the process included political dialogue, security, business, education and culture. Since the first meeting of heads of state in Bangkok there were a number of follow-up meetings on all of these topics. Political bodies generated some of the meetings, but others spontaneously came into being. A number of the participating countries, realising the importance of the process, created ASEM sections within their respective ministries of foreign affairs in order to closely monitor the multi-faceted ASEM process. This was increasingly propelled by the many new opportunities for communication offered by the rapidly developing information technology boom.

Notwithstanding this positive start, ASEM remained a loosely organised process, making it an easy target for sceptics who often pointed to its non-focused nature. They were of the opinion that only the creation of a more formal body could secure the momentum of ASEM. Steps in the direction of formalisation led to, for example, the creation of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) in Singapore in 1997. The ASEF aimed to increase dialogue between Asia and Europe at all levels of society. Other initiatives such as the Asia-Europe Business Forum (AEBF) and

the Senior Officials Meeting on Trade and Development (SOMTI) also offered the possibility of developing into more formalised bodies. Still the meetings of a more informal nature far outnumbered the formalised ones and could be viewed as a token of the enthusiasm which the process generated.

The articles considered here are a clear reflection of the more informal side of the ASEM process, although not uniquely so. They were written by Asian and European politicians and academics involved in the process from its very beginning and all share the most important belief underlying the ASEM process, namely that it was based on partnership and equality. The contributions deal with a variety of topics such as security, economy, politics, education, culture, exchange of information and so forth. Of course these articles do not cover the whole spectrum of the ASEM process but they do give us an idea of what was not only an exciting experiment but a development which could also be construed as the beginning of a new era in the relationship between Asia and Europe.

The articles were loosely grouped around four themes: The Politicians' View of ASEM; Improving Mutual Contact between Asia and Europe; Challenges and Problem Areas; and the Future of ASEM. The first three articles were concerned with the political dimension of the ASEM process as considered by a Minister of State, a Director for Relations with Far Eastern Countries of the European Commission, and a Euro-parliamentarian. Their contributions touched upon the various levels at which the political dialogue took place.

### The Politicians' View of ASEM

Derek Fatchett, in his article "Setting the Agenda for ASEM 2: From Bangkok to London via Singapore", reflected upon the Agenda of ASEM 2, held from 2-4 April 1998 in London. He clearly saw a special role in the ASEM process for the United Kingdom in bridging the gaps between Asia and Europe since it had been a long-time trading partner of Asia and because its economy enjoyed much Asian investment. One of the aims of the British government was to further increase the level of collegiality among the countries of ASEM, which was already high during the Bangkok meeting. This became known as the "Spirit of Bangkok".

According to Fatchett, ASEM was unique because of the strong involvement of the business committees of Asia and Europe, as exemplified in AEBF. The involvement of business in the process would increase the prosperity of both regions and, in a roundabout manner, also stimulate political dialogue (including on sensitive issues such as human rights) which in Fatchett's eyes was at the heart of ASEM. Another cornerstone of the future success of ASEM would be the broadening and deepening of educational exchanges between Asia and Europe. This was the most

effective way of challenging existing prejudices and nurturing new relationships. In this context Fatchett pointed to ASEM as a catalyst in stimulating cultural, educational, intellectual, and people-to-people contacts.

Percy Westerlund brought out the European Commission's perspective on how links between Europe and Asia could be intensified in his article "Strengthening of Europe-Asian Relations: ASEM as a catalyst". Although clearly optimistic about ASEM, he saw three possible traps: the setting of unrealistic goals; proliferation of follow-up meetings; and holding summits too often. Of these three he considered the risk of proliferation the most dangerous because he felt the process would then run the risk of losing its focus. In this context, Westerlund pleaded for a structural approach along the lines of the comprehensive framework programmes applied by the EU, in which priorities are clearly delineated. The establishment in 1997 of the Vison Group, which consisted of resource persons from both continents, was designed to lead to the formulation of such a programme, to be presented during ASEM 3 in Seoul in the year 2000.

Although not necessarily in order of importance, Westerlund saw three priority areas: trade and investment; culture, education and personal exchange; and political dialogue. In the field of trade and investment there were two main forums: the AEBF and SOMTI. Their task was to forge a Euro-Asian alliance in support of a more ambitious and global approach, and to advise the ASEM leaders and governments on how to improve economic ties. The SOMTI in turn would be fed by two advisory groups, which would report on a Trade Facilitation Action Plan (TFAP) and an Investment Promotion Asia Plan (IPAP).

While the articles of Fatchett and Westerlund were written from a perspective of international politics, Michael Hindley, in his article "Involving Politicians in the Political Dialogue: A Parliamentary Perspective", dealt with the question of how politicians should translate the ASEM process to the voters and subsequently generate enthusiasm for a fairly abstract phenomenon. Politics which seems to be rational and explicable at an interregional level did not necessarily always translate into positive scenarios at a local level. The lifting of measures restricting imports from Asia might well be conducive to the ASEM process but if in practice it boiled down to, for example, the foreclosure of a plant with hundreds of workers in a parliamentarian's constituency, it was very difficult for the politician involved to explain the grander political scheme and even more difficult for him to be re-elected.

While such eventualities might diminish popular support for ASEM, Hindley was also aware of the possibilities of democratising the ASEM dialogue and commercial relationship by involving Europe's population of Asian extraction in that dialogue. The European-Asians could play a key role in widening the ASEM dialogue, as could the politicians who represented them. Notwithstanding the fact that Hindley clearly understood the role of European-Asians in the process, he was not convinced that

the advantages of a deeper understanding of each other's cultures was bound to improve the economic ties between Asia and Europe. However, many other people involved in the dialogue attached great value to the role culture could play in bridging the existing gaps between Asia and Europe. Wim Stokhof was one such person.

### Improving Mutual Contact between Asia and Europe

In his contribution, "Bringing the Communities Together: What More Can Be Done?" Stokhof focused on the mediating role culture can play in increasing mutual understanding between Europe and Asia. Cultural rapprochement could only enhance economic growth and deepen the political consensus. Knowledge of each other's culture would augment our capacity to recognise prevailing stereotypes and to replace them by ideas and images more deeply rooted in contemporary realities. In order to be able to measure the impact of the process to some extent, Stokhof called for a (permanent) survey executed across both regions which could fine-tune the process of cultural rapprochement.

Stokhof emphasised the critical role education plays in cultural sensitisation. Thus exposure to each other's culture should, he considered, begin at the secondary school level through the teaching of language and culture, with the introduction of one-year exchange fellowships for secondary school students in Asia or Europe. At the university and institutional level, long-term joint research programmes on matters of interregional importance needed to be carried out by mixed groups of Asian and European researchers with disciplinary backgrounds in the Humanities, Social Sciences and technological fields. The formation of strategic alliances between European and Asian research institutes was one means to pave the way for such a development.

András Hernádi, in his article "Increasing Opportunities for Greater Contact: Asia and Eastern Europe", looked at various possible ways to improve contacts between Asia and Eastern Europe. He drew a parallel between ASEM and Central Europe in the sense that ASEM was the missing link in a triangular power equation. In turn he considered Central Europe to be the missing link in ASEM itself. Central European countries were by no means the only countries interested in becoming members of ASEM. More than twenty Asian and European countries also wanted to join in. Hernádi pleaded for the inclusion of what he considered to be the core group of Central Eastern European countries: the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary.

Hernádi particularly looked at Hungarian relations with Asia. He predicted a shift of Asian investment from Western to Central Europe, which was more attractive in view of its low wage costs. Added to that, Hungary was a regional centre for tourism, banking and finance. Hernádi quoted three other assets of Hungary:

its openness and multicultural set up; the Hungarian diaspora feeding back to Hungary; and the Hungarians' entrepreneurial and hardworking attitude. He was strongly in favour of increasing bilateral contacts with Asian countries by setting up centres in Asia, which would combine diplomatic, commercial, educational and cultural efforts.

César de Prado Yepes, in his article "Connecting ASEM to the Global Information Society (GIS)", discussed a very important aspect of ASEM's future. The emergence of GIS created a much wider range of opportunities for contact than ever before. Furthermore, those opportunities did not involve great expenditure. De Prado Yepes, like Westerlund, pleaded for the adoption of EU-like framework programs to achieve more focus. For example, in the sphere of communications there were endeavours such as the Golden Bridge Infrastructure Project aiming at the informatisation of China using advanced fiber-optic satellite technologies. De Prado Yepes also strongly favoured the creation of more Internet gateways in Europe and Asia because most Internet traffic searching the fastest route to its destination found its way through the US when flowing back and forth between Asia and Europe.

### Challenges and Problem Areas

Dong Ik-Shin and Gerald Segal, in their contribution "Getting Serious about Asia-Europe Security Cooperation", sought a more engaged approach within the ASEM towards security if it wished to achieve a well-balanced global triangular relationship. Although Asia and Europe did not play an important role in each other's security context, they did need to work more closely together in this arena. Segal and Dong pleaded for a flexible understanding of the word "security": economic and military dimensions could not be separated from security in an increasingly interdependent world. They distinguished between "hard security" and "soft security with a hard edge".

After the withdrawal of the colonial powers from Asia there remained little that could be labelled hard security apart from a few remnants of French and British presence in the area of the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) in which the UK, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia and New Zealand cooperated. The sale of sophisticated weapon systems, training and transfers of intelligence also fell into the "hard" category. After 1992, the European market share in arms-related sales to Pacific-Asia hovered around twenty per cent. Dong and Segal saw a sensible arms-transfer strategy of vital importance to security building in Asia. Defending a stable Pacific-Asia that remained open and connected to the global economy was a vital interest of Europe, which it should want to defend in order not to continue free-loading on the US.

In the field of “soft” security they saw three possible fields of cooperation in the ASEM context. European countries had wide experience in Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) which they could easily share with their Asian partners. Also, European countries were very familiar with preventive diplomacy to help prevent the emergence or escalation of conflicts, which could be carried out in the context of the United Nations (UN), in which one-third of the budget and one-third of the personnel for such UN operations was from Europe, with Asia’s contribution rising. Peacekeeping within the UN framework could enhance the ASEM process.

Another problem area (but at the same time an opportunity) for closer cooperation was international corruption. Jong Bum Kim, in his article “Combating International Corruption: In Search of an Effective Role for ASEM”, described recent international movements to combat corruption against the backdrop of multilateral efforts to develop a framework for investment liberalisation. In the process, Kim argued that ASEM could play a unique role by filtering the discussion on combating corruption before it reached multilateral rule-making bodies such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Kim proposed that ASEM should first take up the issue of combating international corruption before tackling domestic corruption issues. This had the advantage that the international community could avoid pointing fingers at corrupt behaviour in one particular country. Thus ASEM could first provide a balanced forum for raising consciousness of the adverse effects of corruption in international business and then make concrete proposals to combat it.

Tetsundo Iwakuni, in his contribution “Developing the Business Relationship between Asia and Europe: Trends and Challenges”, made a clear distinction in the relationship between overall trends, trade related trends and capital market trends. He then focused in particular on the relationship between Europe and Japan, which he did not consider applicable to the rest of Asia. Iwakuni saw four major challenges affecting the future business relationship between Asia and Europe. These related to the environment, political culture, social ethics and education.

By far the biggest challenge lay in the field of education. Ikwakuni pointed out that it was of crucial importance that the opportunities for educational exchange between Europe and Asia be drastically enlarged. Educational exchange was essential in ensuring mutual understanding in the areas of language, culture, economy and plain people-to-people contacts. Without this two-way flow it would be impossible to improve the relationship. He considered it a challenge for non-English speaking countries in Europe to attract more Asian students. The number of Asians studying in Europe was a mere fraction of those studying in the US; while the number of European students studying in Asia was again a mere fraction of Asians studying in Europe. Not only the quantity but also the quality of the existing exchanges would have to be increased by including not only transfers of knowledge or technical skills but also the cultural background of the country

the students were living in. In sum, raising intercultural sensitivity by means of intercultural education was, in the eyes of Iwakuni, the paradigm on which the new Asia-Europe relationship should be founded.

### The Future of ASEM

Zao Gancheng, in his article "Assessing China's Impact on Asia-EU Relations", first examined China's domestic development over the previous two decades and secondly discussed its open-door policy. He also discussed the important role China should play in the ASEM process. With its huge population and fast-growing market, China not only had a big influence on developments in Asia as a regional power but also increasingly as a global player. Clearly China would benefit most from a stable Asia-Pacific as the EU does, but cautioned that configurations at a regional level could interfere with those at a global level.

According to Zhao, China would work towards improving its relations with other Asian countries and with the EU, which could be done effectively within the ASEM context. Therefore China would further open its markets and liberalise its domestic economy, which in turn would stimulate the economic relations between the EU, ASEAN, Japan and South Korea. Not only economic benefits would be reaped from this improved relationship: it would also create an environment in which security matters such as arms control and non-proliferation could be put on the agenda of ASEM. Furthermore, the new dialogue between Asia and Europe would help to balance the emerging triangular power structure of the 21st century.

In the last contribution, "The Future of the ASEM Process: Who, How, Why, and What", Jürgen Rüländ looked at the future of the ASEM process in practical terms. As to "who", it was no secret that a host of countries wanted to participate in the ASEM process for various reasons. Rüländ singled out six categories of future participants: Australia and New Zealand; India and Pakistan; Russia; Eastern European countries; European Free Trade Association (EFTA) members; Myanmar and Laos. As a yardstick for future inclusion in the process, he used the argument that the candidates should not introduce new lines of conflicts which could endanger the process. In analysing the above-mentioned categories he did not anticipate danger in including Eastern European countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, Australia and New Zealand, and even India and Pakistan because *détente* between the latter two countries would be in the interest of all existing ASEM members.

Rüländ continued pleading for a moratorium on membership until the year 2000. However, applicants should be given observer status and the secretary-generals of overlapping regional organisations should be unconditionally admitted to

AEBF and ASEF. Furthermore, task forces should be formed which concentrated on the different aspects of the process. These in turn should feed back to the summits and the foreign ministers' meetings. In order to coordinate all activities, a modest secretariat should be set up and soon the allocation of the budgets would have to be sorted out.

Rüland put forward a number of arguments both of a theoretical and practical nature as to why the process was functional and positive for all parties involved. As such, the interregional approach in international relations promised to be the most fruitful in terms of efficiency. Multilateral bodies with too many players and too widely diverging interests had become unmanageable, with rounds of negotiations which could stretch out over decades. ASEM in particular could be a stimulus for the emerging triangular global power structure. Furthermore, it could clarify intra-regional positions on all kinds of topics and increase the efficiency of international decision making.

Practical motives from a European point of view to actively stimulate the ASEM process were: making good lost opportunities and recapturing the initiative in global affairs against the backdrop of its unification: using ASEM as a platform for discussion on issues which could be solved at a supranational level; and shared security interests with Asia. From the Asian point of view, bolstering the ASEM process would increase its bargaining power with the EU, which could become increasingly inward-looking as a result of the unification of the "fortressed" Europe. Asia could use ASEM to press for a more open EU economic system.

As to what should be done in the future in the ASEM context, Rüland shared many of the ideas put forward by other contributors to this book. However, he clearly stressed that the involvement of civil society at all imaginable levels should be stepped up immediately because otherwise the ASEM process ran the risk of petering out. Needless to say, the media in Europe and Asia, which so far had paid remarkably little attention to this important process, needed to be more alert in picking up news that did not originate in the US but on our own doorstep in Eurasia. So the big question remaining to be answered was how popular ASEM really was.

### ASEM for the People!

There can be no doubt that a new interregional dialogue between Asia and Europe, devoid of either colonial or new value rhetoric, was not only useful in the global triangular context but also *per se* a means to boost the intraregional contacts of the Eurasian landmass and between two neighbouring cultures made to believe that they were completely different in nature and texture. Such sayings as the "East is East and the West is West and never the twain shall meet" were engraved not only

in the collective memory of Europeans but also in that of Asian peoples. In retrospect, a picture emerges of two cultures learning from and accepting each other. While this once occurred on a very small scale, we could not escape the conclusion looking to the future that a phase of cultural rapprochement was rapidly emerging, and on a more pervasive scale. Therefore the academic and cultural community should build on this new window of opportunity, which the ASEM process offered, by increasing communication at all levels.

Science and culture – the two most important cornerstones of the Eurasian civilisation that brought into being a meaningful transfer, not only of people, but also of human matters such as ideas, technology, services, goods and food – had to involve themselves across the board to integrate the challenge of the ASEM process. The process elevated the promise of a multicultural world in which twains stem from the same tree. It is not very likely that many people noticed the banner flying from Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square during ASEM 2. But the text written on it not only encapsulated the essence of the ASEM process but also its precondition for success: ASEM for the People!