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ASEM at Ten: Reflections from Singapore

I. Introduction

The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) was established in March 1996 with the aim of creating a stronger partnership between two regions. The ASEM story began with an idea inspired by Singapore and was welcomed by the Europeans. This later on crystallised into a proposal for an informal dialogue between East Asian states—ASEAN, China, Japan and Korea—and the EU member states guided by the principles of mutual benefit and mutual respect. From a realist worldview, ASEM provided the missing link in the trilateral concert of regions—Asia, North America and Europe. For East Asians, ASEM would balance its transpacific links seen through the establishment of APEC and PECC, while for the Europeans, ASEM would balance its transatlantic relations through NATO (Hanggi 1999; Ruland 2001).

A decade down the road with 5 Summits held in Bangkok (1996), London (1998), Seoul (2000), Copenhagen (2002) and Vietnam (2004), ASEM finds itself at a crossroads. Its success in initiating dialogue and cooperation between Asia and Europe in economic, political and socio-cultural fields, reflected in a plethora of ministerial meetings and activities, has created its own challenges and rising expectations. ASEM at 10 finds itself under pressure to revitalise the slackening momentum of moving the process of enhancing Asia-Europe relations to a new phase. Beyond the characteristically slow-paced informal dialogue process on a host of issues, the challenge for ASEM as it enters a new decade is to be able to demonstrate its ability to translate dialogue into concerted action, and in specific areas that speak to the wider interest of its stakeholders.

The push to make ASEM relevant has been high on its agenda since the holding of the Third ASEM Summit in Seoul in 2000. This had been reflected in several ASEM reports, including the consecutive reports prepared by the European Commission (2000 and 2001) that highlighted the need to reform ASEM's informal processes due to concerns over “forum fatigue”, and the Chairman's Statement of the Fourth ASEM Summit (2002) that stressed closer cooperation in identifying and addressing common areas of interests in order to add substance to ASEM's informal dialogue process. When ASEM moved to enlarge its membership in 2004 with the entry of 3 new ASEAN members and 10 new EU members and the European Commission, the pressure on the 39-member ASEM to be a significant actor in the international arena has become more acute.

This report examines the record of, and prospects for, ASEM as it embarks on a new decade of meaningful transregional engagement. In this report, we seek to address the following questions:

1. How has the ASEM process evolved?
2. What are the perceptions of the political elites and other actors, particularly those that are residing in Singapore, on ASEM?
3. What are the current challenges facing ASEM, both regional and global?
4. How should ASEM respond to these challenges?
5. Does ASEM need to re-invent itself in order to be a relevant actor in improving Asia-Europe relations?

The report proceeds as follows. Section II provides a brief review of ASEM and examines how the ASEM process has evolved since its establishment. The review also revisits the motivations behind the creation of ASEM and discusses the geo-political and economic considerations that had defined ASEM's modalities. Section III proceeds to assess the progress of ASEM and examines how it has served the interests of its member states to some extent and its institutional growth. The assessment provides a summary of the observations on ASEM based on available literature and data. It also includes the views and perspectives of the respondents in informal interviews and participants in a workshop conducted in Singapore in September 2005. Drawing on the findings and observations on ASEM, section IV presents 10 recommendations to strengthen the ASEM process and section V is the conclusion.

II. ASEM in Review

ASEM has been described as an ambitious 'experiment' on transregional relations. It is ambitious in that for the first time in the history of regionalism, two distinct regional groupings had been brought together to work out a common agenda for improving inter-regional relations. Given the geographical reach of ASEM, it can therefore be described as a *sui generis* trans-regional institution with no precedent to follow — a salient feature that must be noted in any realistic assessment of ASEM for the following reasons.

Firstly, ASEM as is presently constituted, comprises two vastly different regional groupings. On the one hand, is the European Union with 26 member states coming from both Western and Eastern Europe; on the other, is East Asia with the 10 members of ASEAN together with China, Japan, and Korea. Secondly, the diversity of ASEM membership is so stark, reflecting not only

a much wider geographical footprint, unparalleled in its expanse, but also the motley mix of cultural, ethnic and ideological differences that characterised this grouping. Thirdly, while the EU is a highly institutionalised organization with a full-fledged Secretariat, as well a number of Commissions and institutions that have supranational authority, ASEAN in contrast has managed to operate with the minimum of institutions with hardly any supranational authority (Caballero-Anthony, 2005). Last but not least, is the striking asymmetry in power configuration that defines the geo-politics within and between the two regions. In the post post-Cold War era, intra-European relations is longer defined by the East-West ideological divide nor driven by the dynamics of major power politics. The geo-politics in Asia, however, presents several complexes. It brings together two major powers—China and Japan—whose bilateral relations are punctuated by patterns of competition and rivalry, not to mention the intractable bilateral disputes over territory and others. Moreover, while some Asian members have bilateral defence pacts with the United States – the only superpower in the world—they have also been carefully calibrating their relations with their largest neighbour China, whose emerging role as a global actor power is already weighing on the reconfiguration of power (strategic, political and economic) within and outside the region.

These multi-faceted factors have essentially shaped and influenced the nature of ASEM 's modalities since its establishment a decade ago. Thus, ASEM's preference for informal dialogue processes have largely been characterised by regular meetings conducted at four levels, i.e. Summit of Heads of States, Ministerial Meetings (Economic and Finance) and Senior Officials' Meeting (from trade and investments) and Coordinators' Meetings (Yeo 2002a: 59). These regular meetings are held biannually, alternating between the capitals of the two regions. The meetings essentially managed the ASEM process, although it is at the summits where the pace and direction of ASEM are set. As there is no Secretariat serving as the main depository of ASEM documents, it is mostly from these summits where the bulk of information about what ASEM has done, its future activities and the kinds of issues being discussed can be had, usually from the Chairman's Statements that follow every meeting.

Much has already been written about ASEM and its modalities (Reiterer 2004, 2002; Yeo 2000 and 2002; Gilson 2002; Dent 2003). In many of these writings, the observations and assessments about ASEM differ. These could range from the neutral/ ambivalent views to the more critical opinions that regard ASEM as a meaningless exercise, 'thick on dialogue, but thin on action'.

What follows is a short summary of these observations that are culled from the available literature on ASEM. For a more organised presentation, these observations will be divided into

themes. Also included in these observations are the current perceptions on ASEM which are drawn largely from the discussions and deliberations at the *Roundtable on Re-Assessing Ten Years of ASEM*, organised by the Institute of Southeast Asia Studies (ISEAS), Singapore on 27th September 2005. In the presentation of these findings, the reflections at the Roundtable are interspersed with the observations found in the writings about ASEM. Juxtaposing the findings from the writings on ASEM against the discussions at the meeting in Singapore would allow for a good barometer in gauging perceptions, knowledge about and interest in ASEM. It also provides for a better feedback coming from non-state actors who are often not involved in ASEM activities but would arguably have a stake in its progress and success.

III. The ASEM Scorecard: Observations on Selected Themes/Issues

1. Improving Asia-Europe Relations

ASEM had set modest goals when it was established in 1996. The aims were essentially to improve relations between these two regions which once shared deep historical ties but had been separated in the course of history. The inception of ASEM was “a historic re-engagement of two ancient region and civilisations” (Koh, 1997). As mentioned earlier, the underlying strategic motivations from both regions were also clear. To Asia, particularly East Asia, ASEM was the “missing link” in their view of a global triangular relations (Asia-US, Asia-Europe). The same was true for Europe which had strong transatlantic links but had yet to develop strong transpacific relations. Moreover, for their part, Europeans regarded themselves as latecomers on what was then a booming Asian market. At that time, ASEM provided a suitable vehicle to regain what was then perceived in Europe as lost economic and political ground. Having ASEM would also prevent the Europeans from being excluded from the economic dynamism that was taking place in the ‘emerging Pacific Rim’ (Ruland 2003, 1996; Dent 1997).

ASEM began as a summit and since then been a regular event. The institutionalisation of the summitry is indicative of the closer engagement between political leaders of these two regions and has been viewed by respondents as a positive development in Asia-Europe relations. As emphasised by Yeo Lay Hwee (2002), a Singaporean scholar who has closely followed the ASEM process, there is an intangible value to the frank and open exchange among political leaders on a wide range of issues covering political, economic, and socio-cultural areas. And,

like in many other multilateral fora, regular dialogues help to build confidence and trust among like-minded and non like-minded states.

The Summits are particularly important for smaller member states. As pointed out by Yeo, ASEM provides valuable diplomatic spin-offs to smaller states like Singapore in Asia and Denmark in Europe since it is one of the few diplomatic platforms where opportunities to interact with others in a much larger grouping are available. Reflecting on the Singapore experience, for instance, Yeo observed that while fora such as the ASEAN+3, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and APEC enables Singapore leaders to engage with their counterparts in Asia and North America, ASEM has opened the avenue for them to meet regularly with 25 other leaders of the EU member states and the European Commission in a more intimate setting (Yeo, 2002:61). The same opportunities are also made available to other countries in Asia that are not only small but also resource-constrained like Laos and Cambodia. Similar opportunities apply to smaller states in Europe.

ASEM has therefore managed to bridge the vast geographical distance that separates Asian and European leaders. More significantly, the institutionalisation of the ASEM summitry and other related meetings have brought political elites from these two regions together in a regular pattern of dialogue that engenders its own “climate of confidence” (Santer, 1998). In brief, ASEM has been regarded as a good confidence-building framework that fosters a certain level of comfort among the participants coming from disparate political systems and in some, vastly different economic systems and levels of development.

More significantly, ASEM also provides the platform for both Asian and Europeans partners to get their voices heard in the international arena on common areas of interest. In the current international climate where there is a shared concern about American unilateralism, ASEM has provided that space where interest on multilateralism as a framework for interstate relations can be sustained and the commitment to international institutions and global governance can be upheld for regional and international peace and security. Given that both Asia and Europe have a stake in advocating multilateral approaches to important economic and security-related issues, the ASEM dialogue processes therefore have become extremely important avenues to articulate inter-regional convergence of views on issues of global significance.

These ‘meeting of minds’ are well reflected in the series of Chairman’s Statements coming from the I-IV ASEM summits. Among the issues where there is convergence of views are: fighting international terrorism, commitment to an open and fair multilateral trading system, protection of the environment and sustainable development, as well as the promotion of

dialogue on cultures and civilisations (Asia Europe Cooperation Framework 2000; ASEM Chairman's Statements 2002, 2004).

With the positive side to this transregional relation also comes the downside. Despite what has been described as 'deepening political dialogues' on a number of issues, relations between Asia and Europe have been strained over a number of intractable issues, like the Burma issue, human rights and democratisation. This divergence was evident at the last Summit in Hanoi in 2004 when Asian and European partners took different stance on the admission of Burma to ASEM. The Europeans had pushed for the establishment of political criteria on Burma's admission, while the Asians argued for non-conditional membership. It did not help that when the Europeans finally agreed to the accession of Myanmar, it set the condition that it would be represented at a lower level than that of Head of State and government. Moreover, at the EU Foreign Minister's Meeting that followed soon after the Hanoi ASEM summit, the decision to tighten existing sanctions on Burma was announced that included the expansion of the visa ban and banning of new investments in state-owned Burmese enterprises (Pereira 2005, BBC 10/2004).

Reflections at the Singapore Workshop

This particular aspect of the ASEM relations was highlighted at the Singapore workshop. It was noted that since political dialogue is an essential part of ASEM's 3-pillar approach, the latest developments on the Burma issue have shown how prospects for closer Asia-Europe partnerships can unfortunately be held hostage by a single issue. Not only has this issue clouded relations between two partners but, as described as by former Singapore Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, has also 'come to disproportionately preoccupy Asia-Europe political exchanges and has become an obstacle to seeking common ground on other strategic issues' (The Straits Times, 2004). In the scheme of things, it appears that this issue will remain unresolved and will be a salient factor in Asia-Europe relations for some time to come.

Another issue that has a bearing on intra-ASEM relations is the 'asymmetric' participation from both sides. As observed by one participant, it was much easier for any new country of the EU to participate in ASEM while it was much harder for Asian countries to do so, as seen in the delay that the three new ASEAN members (Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam) faced. In terms of attendance at ASEM meetings, there was also an imbalance. While Asian countries often tended to send their heads of state to attend, the participation of their European counterparts at the

highest level was often uneven. This trend could have implications on the nature and progress of the ASEM process.

There was also the impression that the European's interest on East Asia was heavily skewed toward its largest member, China, than in other countries in the region. This could consequently affect intra-ASEM ties given the pre-occupation with one country.

2. Promoting Inter-regional Cooperation

A review of ASEM's programmes and activities reveal quite a comprehensive list of issues being covered within the framework of ASEM's three pillars for cooperation: political dialogue, economic cooperation and socio-cultural and intellectual exchange. Indeed, official documents show a plethora of activities and programmes undertaken by ASEM to promote inter-regional cooperation over the last ten years. These activities can be grouped following the 3-pillar approach, and some are highlighted below:

1. *Political Dialogue:*

- Regular meetings among ASEM's ministers of foreign affairs, economics and finance, environment and internal affairs;
- Regular meetings of senior officials, customs' director-generals/commissions, as well as expert-level working group meetings.
- At the track-two level, establishment of the Council on Asia-Europe Cooperation (CAEC) which comprise experts from 12 leading institutes from both Asia and Europe.
- Holding of informal dialogues on human rights
- Adoption of Joint Declarations on:
 - ASEM Copenhagen Declaration on Cooperation Against International Terrorism
 - ASEM Copenhagen Declaration for Peace on the Korean Peninsula
 - ASEM Declaration on Multilateralism

The list of activities above indicates a robust political dialogue process despite the deep differences over Burma. This balances the perception that ASEM is a one-issue forum. But while much ground has been covered in pursuing a number of salient issues, the concern raised has been more about content and substance of these political exchanges. More importantly, a pertinent question that needs to be asked is how much of these dialogues have had an impact on addressing the political and security issues affecting the broader region?

2. *Economic Cooperation:*

Aside from the regular meetings of economic ministers, concrete programmes include the following:

- Adoption of the Trade Facilitation Action Plan (TFAP)
- Adoption of the Investment Promotion Action Plan (IPAP), including the establishment of an Investment Experts Group
- Establishment of Asia-Europe Business Forum (AEBF)
- Establishment of ASEM Invest Online
- Establishment of ASEM Connect

It has been observed that it is in the economic pillar of ASEM where the potential for improving Asia-Europe cooperation is greatest. This is also an area where more concrete results can be assessed since specific areas for cooperation had been identified and clearer targets had been set. An example is in the area of trade facilitation with the adoption of the TFAP. The TFAP was endorsed by ASEM in 1998 with the aim of “reducing non-tariff barriers, increasing transparency and trade opportunities between the two regions while complementing and considering work being carried out in bilateral and multilateral forum” (European Commission 2004).

In this regard, although the TFAP has set concrete deliverable for 2002-2004 in specific areas, including: customs procedures, standards, testing, certification, accreditation and technical regulations, public procurement, intellectual property rights, and mobility of business people, so far information on the delivery of these goals is yet to be available. While it had earlier been reported that work in this area is ‘progressing’ (Yeo 2002), there is not much information available on what progress has been made, except the statement that “evaluations are still in progress”. (European Commission 2004). Moreover, in contrast to the enthusiasm that accompanied the launching of the first Asia-Business Forum in launching, its numerous meetings and activities have yet to make a definitive impact on how business links between the two regions have improved.

Nevertheless, a cursory review of statistics on trade and investments between Asia-Europe show a positive trend in flows of transactions. In 2003, for instance, 15.7% of Asia’s total merchandise exports were destined for the EU while 22.5% went to the US (Chart 1). The EU’s exports to Southeast Asia have grown from Euro 6.5 billion in 1980 to Euro 39 billions in 2002 (Chart 2). Meanwhile, EU-ASEAN trade represented 5.1% of total world trade in 2002. The EU is ASEAN’s third largest trading partner, accounting for 14% of ASEAN’s total trade. As shown

in Chart 3, 16% of ASEAN’s exports are destined for the EU, making it ASEAN’s second largest export market after the US. From these charts, it is also quite clear that the EU has made great progress in catching up with the US as a trading partner of East Asia.

Chart 1: Share of Asia’s Total Merchandise Exports in 1995 and 2003.

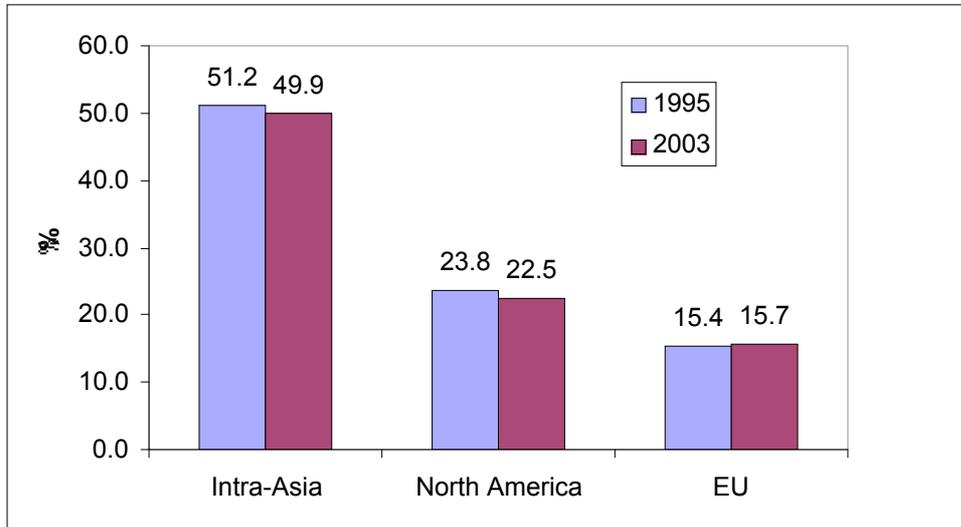


Chart 2: EU Trade with Southeast Asia

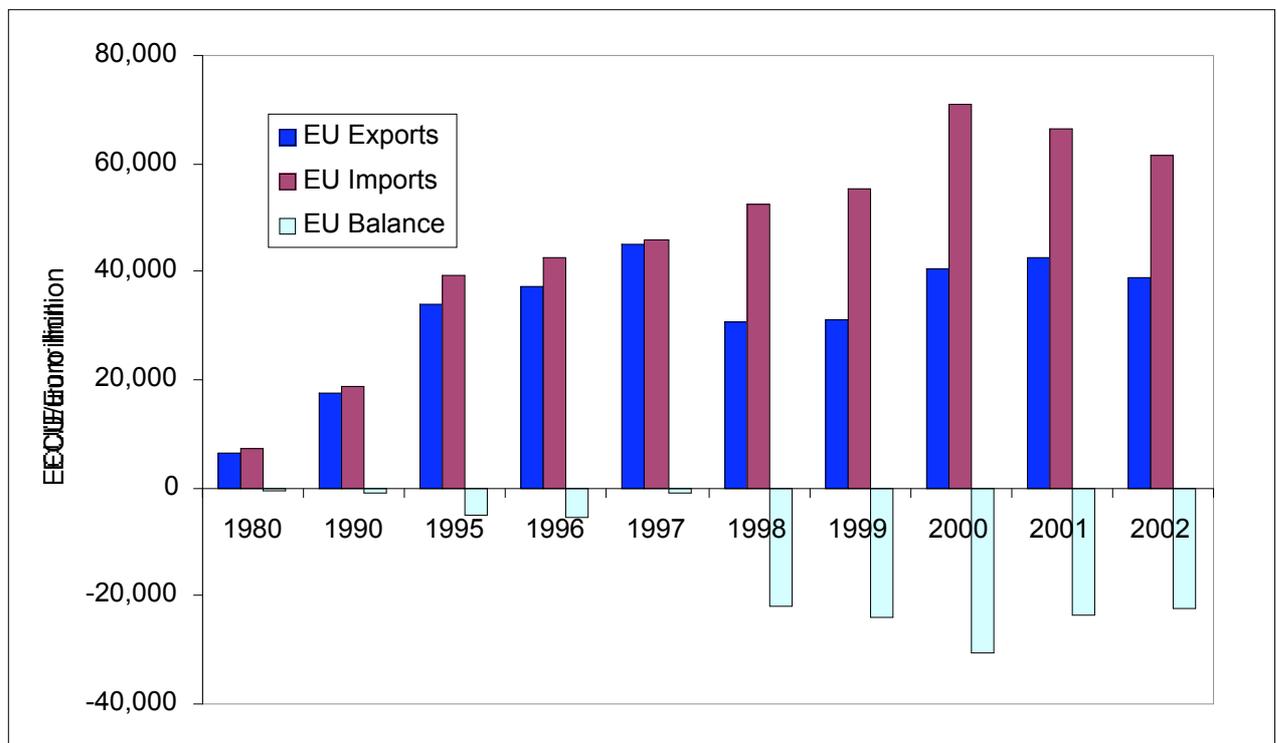


Chart 3: EU and ASEAN Trade Flows, 2002

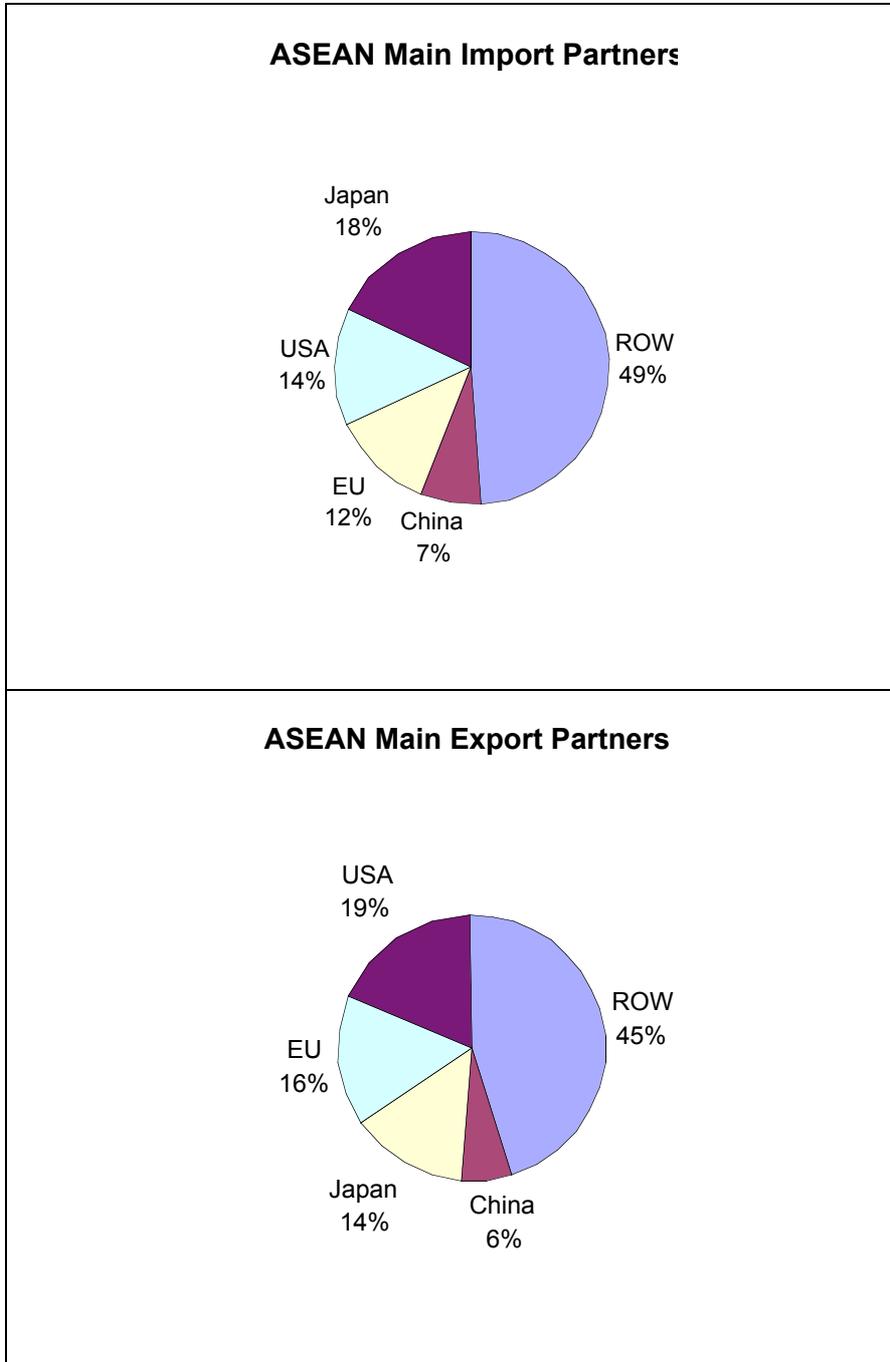
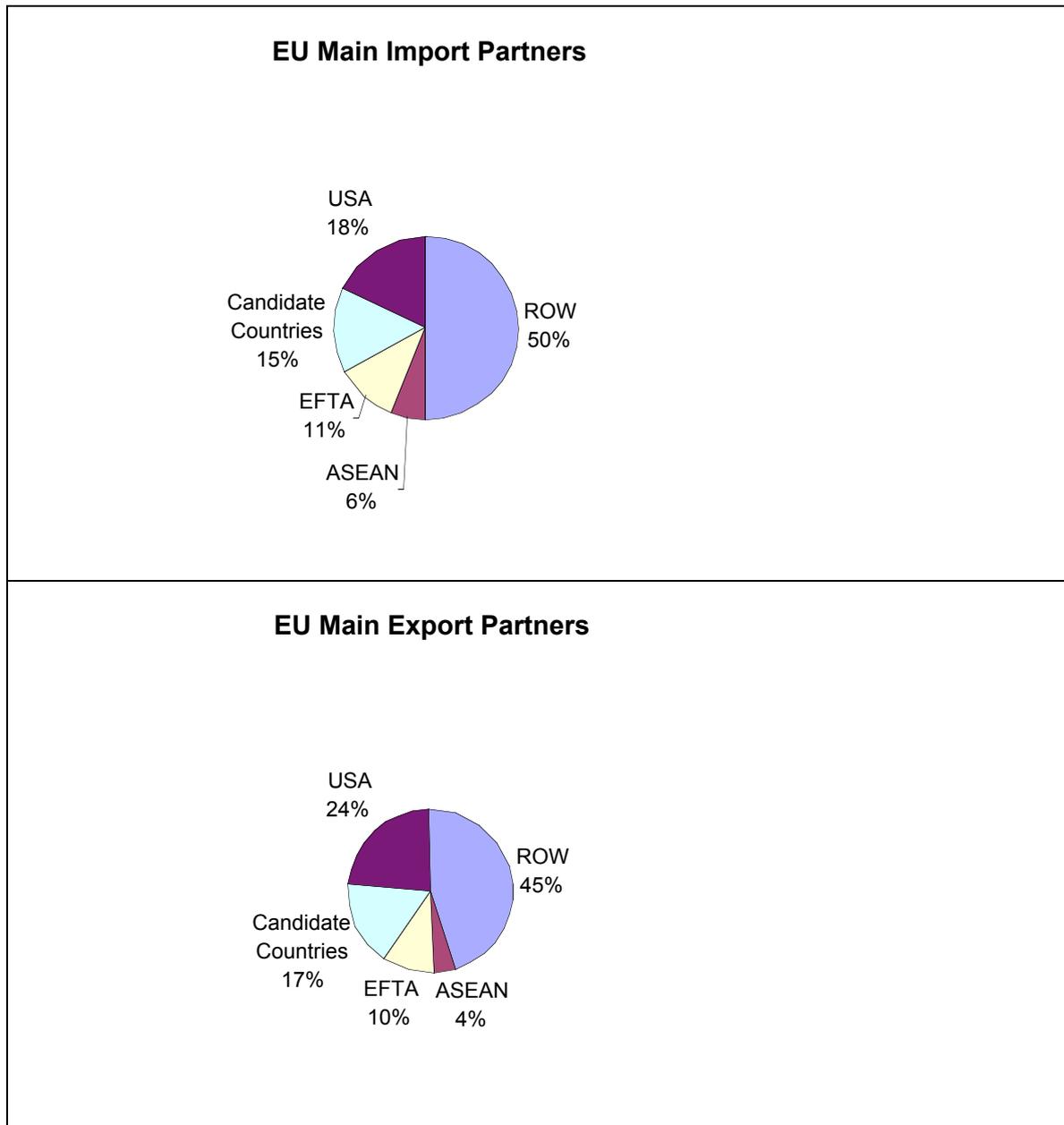


Chart 3 (continued)



Source: Eurostat.

In spite of these positive trends, however, there is the question of how to draw causal linkages. For instance, should we attribute the increase of trade linkages between Asia-Europe to ASEM's TFAP or AEBF or from the ASEAN-EU framework? First, it is difficult to process-trace how much of the growing trade is more a function of market forces rather than due to government activities. Second, it is also hard to ascertain whether this growth in trade has been facilitated by ASEAN-EU framework or ASEM. And, in this regard, how does one realistically separate the facilitation efforts done by ASEM from that of ASEAN-EU? It can be recalled that an EU-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (FTA) had earlier been proposed by the Asia-Europe Visions Group (AEVG) in 1999, which was aimed at broadening the horizons for freer trade between the two regions (Park 2005). However, this idea has yet to feature in the agenda of the EU-ASEAN framework.

The attempt to draw a distinction between progress done under ASEM and under ASEAN-EU is driven by the need to assess the value-add of the former. In view of this, it has been suggested earlier that ASEM should focus on broader economic issues. For example, Koellner (2000) recommended that ASEM should address issues like reforms of international financial architecture or the international role of the Euro in enhancing interregional financial cooperation. The latter is particularly pertinent in light of the Asian financial and economic crisis of 1997. The crisis not only highlighted the kinds of financial challenges faced by both developed and developing economies that were brought on by insidious effects of globalisation, but also the need for closer regional and inter-regional cooperation.

The Asian financial crisis was perhaps the first major test to ASEM's economic cooperation. Although it had been suggested that ASEM had failed to respond to the problems faced by their Asian partners during the crisis—in the same way as the other regional groupings like APEC and ASEAN had been criticised for lack of action—one could argue that it was rather unrealistic to expect ASEM to respond immediately considering that the crisis happened just a year after its establishment. However, it was the perceived lack of interest on the part of the Europeans to do more throughout the long-drawn period of the crisis that had dampened the enthusiasm for closer economic cooperation between the two partners. As Gilson (2005) had noted, the European response to the crisis articulated at the second ASEM summit in London was perceived by its Asian partners as “strong in words but slow in deeds”. Moreover, the anchoring of the ASEM Trust Fund in the World Bank rather than in the Asian Development Bank was seen as a lack of trust by the European in their Asian partners (Gilson 2005:276).

If one were to link this lack of financial assistance to the broader issue of the absence of development assistance in ASEM's agenda, more issues can be raised to assess the nature of

ASEM's economic cooperation. It is interesting to cite here the view from coming an a European official and scholar who attempted to put this issue in perspective. Reiterer (2005) had argued that ASEM was "conceived from the outset as a comprehensive and not only economic approach to international relations". He added that within the context of the principle of equal partnership, the granting of development assistance "is excluded on purpose from ASEM...[since] granting of development assistance is left to the bilateral relations of member states and the Commission with Asian partners" (Reiterer 2005:264).

Reflections at the Singapore Roundtable

Notwithstanding such assertion, perhaps of more significance in the lack of progress in inter-regional economic cooperation are the three salient factors that were highlighted at the Singapore workshop. First, is the preoccupation with the European partners with the enlargement process of EU. It was noted that there has been more introspective interest among the EU partners with the enlargement of the European community and this has diverted attention on ASEM. Second, and on the Asian side, there has also been this pre-occupation with sub-regional economic activities, e.g. promotion of ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA) and improving the current economic and financial cooperation mechanisms under the ASEAN + 3. Closely related to this is the region's keen interest in China and it is here where a lot of attention has been focused, which in the process led to less priority given to developing closer ties with the Europeans. Thus, the tendency to be more inward-looking in one's policies/ orientation is a feature actually shared by both regions.

3. Socio-Cultural-Intellectual Exchange:

In contrast to the two other pillars, one notes that it is in ASEM's socio-cultural and intellectual pillar where a lot of progress can be seen. These are reflected in a number of activities which had produced tangible projects. Among these, include the following:

- Establishment of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) in 1997.
- Establishment of an Asia-Europe Centre at the University of Malaya (1998)
- Institution of regular ASEM conference on Cultures and Civilisation
- Initiative on Asia-Europe Cooperation in Promoting Awareness in the Young Generation of the Drug Problem
- Establishment of the ASEM DUO (Educational) Fellowship Programme

The ASEM documents actually have a longer list of activities and programmes, but interestingly provide little information and updates on the projects that had been undertaken. A current literature search on these projects have also yielded scarce results, except the ones made available from the external relations link of the EU website, i.e.

http://europe.eu.int/comm/external_relations/asem. So far there is very little that can be sourced either from the ASEAN Secretariat or from the websites of the individual ASEAN states.

On the other hand, while the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) publishes quite an extensive amount of information on cultural and educational/intellectual exchanges, most if not all, of these pertain to ASEF activities. From the information available (edited books, journal, brochures, reports, newsletters, etc), ASEF has indeed been very active in promoting ‘people to people’ exchanges as reflected in the wide-range of activities organised under its auspices. Among these include ASEF’s conference on Cultures and Civilisation, Asia-Europe Workshop Series covering topics on History, Media and Communication, Environment, Asia-Europe Youth Cooperation programme, plus a wide array of meetings, workshops and seminars being organised almost on a monthly basis.

It has been observed however that despite the impressive list of ASEF activities (see www.asef.org), ASEF’s profile is yet to match up with the extent and reach of its activities and events. This impression has been well captured in the remarks by Yeo (2002) who observed that the mismatch might be due to “its [ASEF] lack of general lack of focus and the lack of a concerted and well-coordinated publicity campaign.”

Reflections at the Singapore Roundtable

This sentiment was also expressed by a participant at the Singapore workshop who described ASEF as Singapore’s ‘best-kept secret’. Notwithstanding this kind of perception, it still remains to be seen how ASEF’s extensive activities contribute to the promotion of the ASEM process. This was the general view that came out at the Singapore meeting. The issue that was unclear to most participants was the linkage between ASEM and ASEF, i.e.—how has ASEF helped to promote awareness of the ASEM process? Singapore is host to ASEF. Thus, in the Singapore context, it is puzzling that despite the extensive information available on ASEF, ASEM had not received much attention nor interest among the political elites in Singapore, except among the relevant officials and agencies that have direct dealings with ASEM (i.e. Foreign and Trade Ministry of Singapore).

It appears that while one could make a strong case for ASEF as one of ASEM's mechanisms in promoting confidence building and closer understanding between the two regions through its cultural-related programmes, questions remain about how it could promote better awareness and interest in the ASEM process—for instance, by dovetailing or fitting in many of its myriad activities with ASEM's programmes and initiatives rather than going into a separate, independent track. But as ASEF's mandate is clearly to promote cultural exchange, expectations about what ASEF should do for ASEM have to be realistic.

Wither ASEM?

The brief audit of ASEM's activities discussed above is certainly not exhaustive. However, what has clearly emerged from the study is that, in spite of the proliferation of ASEM activities ASEM has not been able to make a significant mark in improving inter-regional relations between Asia and Europe nor make an impact in global politics. In addition to some of the reasons cited earlier, certain factors have also been identified that had affected the progress of the ASEM process. These factors are drawn largely from the views and perspectives articulated during the Singapore meeting.

1. Identity of ASEM

As noted earlier, it has been difficult to capture ASEM's identity, distinct from that of ASEAN-EU relations. For example, among the questions in this regard is: What is ASEM's niche? While clearly the motivation for ASEM was to improve ties between the two regions, the main issue has been about the added-value that ASEM brings in creating another inter-regional multilateral forum that would not duplicate the efforts already undertaken under the ASEAN-EU framework. This leads to the point about the need to revisit ASEM's *raison d'être*, especially in the light of the other multilateral fora that are being formed, particularly at the regional and inter-regional levels as well, e.g. East Asian Summit.

On identity-building, it is interesting to note the European observations on the impact of ASEM on Asian identity. Some scholars, for instance, have remarked that one of ASEM's contribution to Asia has been the consolidation of an East Asian 'identity' within the region as demonstrated in establishment of ASEAN + 3 (Gilson 2002; Reiterer 2005). While this may be so, the question however is whether a consolidated identity on one side could hamper the

development of wider sense of a larger, albeit, ‘imagined community’ with shared interests. One could suggest for instance that the ASEAN + 3 was in fact indicative of a self-help mechanism that emerged when East Asian countries felt let down by their other partners in a bigger grouping that so happened to be established a year before the Asian financial crisis. Thus, the tendency of the ASEAN + 3 to be more inward-looking.

2. Lack of Ownership of ASEM

This issue of identity is related to a lack of ownership in ASEM. Ten years down the road, questions had been raised about the impact of ASEM on the member states. It appears that despite the proliferation of ASEM activities, it has actually been difficult to gauge its impact in improving Asia-Europe relations. For instance, how has ASEM in fact served the interest of states in the region given that its ability to help resolve regional and inter-regional problems remains untested. It has also yet to show how it can influence global events (arguably, an unrealistic expectation). As a result, the impact of ASEM has been more symbolic but lacking in substance. Symbolism, however, is not adequate to persuade members that ASEM is indispensable to them.

More importantly, this trend is reflective of the lack of leadership or champions within ASEM. And, while the ASEM meetings and summits do serve a purpose in building confidence and trust, interest in ASEM could wane as meeting ‘fatigue’ begins to set in.

Moreover, lack of ownership is also a symptom of the deeper issue of ASEM not having a strong constituency. ASEM has been described as an elitist and top-down project, without building a people-based support. Despite the fact that ASEM has organised a wide range of activities involving non-state actors and the attempts of ASEM to engage civil society, there are obviously shortcomings in the process that explains the lack of stakeholders in ASEM. Thus, unless the missing linkages between state and non-actors can be addressed and more is done to bring the latter into the ASEM process, it will be difficult for ASEM to take off.

3. Lack of Focus and Definition of Purpose

The lack of ownership within ASEM is also symptomatic of the lack of focus in ASEM. One could in fact suggest that the proliferation of topics in ASEM meetings is reflective not only of a crammed agenda but also more indicative of the lack of progress made on specific issues and

projects. The lack of direction in ASEM feeds into its inability to make an impact in inter-regional relations and on the rest of the international community.

Although the European Union in its 2000 report had already pointed out the risk that ASEM could lose its momentum if “it cannot confirm and maintain its clear relevance to public and business interest”, it is interesting that the same concern exists even after the holding of the 5th Summit. That this concern persists despite the fact that there are clearly many areas where partnerships can be forged and where cooperation for global governance has become more critical against new and complex security challenges ahead, make for more compelling introspection and soul-searching within ASEM.

IV. Moving the ASEM Process Forward

ASEM at 10 clearly needs to be revitalised. Before we proceed to offer our recommendations, it is worth reiterating here a point made recently by Reiterer (2005), which captures the main thrusts of our report. He noted that:

“ASEM research identifies four shortcomings of the process: lack of substance, trust, understanding and solidarity. These negative feature cannot be denied completely but should be contrasted with achievements like the initiation of a broad based dialogue, impetus to reinforce or foster regionalism, the socialisation of the actors involved at various levels, the enlargement of international exchanges to include new actors, representing civil societies. However, it is clear that ASEM has arrived at a critical juncture.” (*Reiterer, 2005: 279*)

Mindful of the fact that ASEM is a relatively ‘younger’ forum when compared with similar interregional and multilateral institutions in region—APEC and ARF, we have attempted in this report to highlight some of the issues and challenges it faces in order to suggest some ideas to realise the potential of ASEM. While we recognise that ASEM has made a modest contribution in helping to improve Asia-Europe relations, we believe that more can certainly be done to help move forward the ASEM process. Drawing on the findings of our report, we therefore offer the following 10 recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Re-vitalise ASEM with renewed political will.

Against concerns that interest in ASEM may wane and ‘meeting fatigue’ will set in, East Asian and Europeans leaders should muster the political will to make ASEM a relevant multilateral forum for improving Asia-Europe relations. ASEM leaders must show that ASEM is an indispensable diplomatic platform in enhancing Asia-Europe relations, and through this forum, convince the international community that ASEM multilateralism matters in global governance and international relations.

Recommendation 2: Craft a new mandate for ASEM with clear goals and objectives.

ASEM needs a new sense of purpose. To do this, the ASEM process has to be steered from dialogue to cooperation by identifying specific areas of common interest between East Asia and Europe. ASEM should avoid ad hoc programmes and one-off projects, and instead focus on developing a roadmap for specific projects for the next ten years to demonstrate the necessity for cooperation between the two regions.

Recommendation 3: ASEM must identify visible flagship projects to carve a niche for itself in promoting Asia-Europe relations.

It has been observed that ASEM is thick on agenda but thin on action. This impression can be reversed if ASEM adopts specific, flagship projects that can be identified with ASEM. ASEM, for example, may consider the recommendations of the Council for Asia-Europe Cooperations (CAEC) Task Force that identified 4 key areas of cooperation: Strengthening multilateralism for global governance, cooperation on energy security, cooperation against global warming, and collaboration on human security centred development and security policies. Focusing on visible flagship projects of common concerns allows ASEM to carve its own identity and niche in the global community. This is the value-add that ASEM can bring to enhancing Asia-Europe relations.

Recommendation 4: ASEM must have leaders to champion the cause of ASEM.

ASEM needs leaders to drive the ASEM process and develop a more robust agenda for action. It is no longer sufficient to leave the rotating host of ASEM summits to initiate programmes and raise issues. Leadership builds commitment to ASEM as well as brings dynamism to the ASEM process. Since ASEM is a shared commitment between the two regions, it follows that leadership should also be equally represented for mutual partnership and build better understanding between the two regions.

Recommendation 5: Establish a Secretariat

The ASEM as constituted now is too loose and informal. Given the proliferation of ASEM activities, ASEM should consider establishing a Secretariat. With an enlarged membership, it is essential that ASEM has a secretariat that can coordinate the myriad areas of functional cooperation that has been set and to provide continuity and focus. An ASEM Secretariat can also be a clearing house for information about its activities. Alternatively, in lieu of an actual Secretariat, ASEM can construct a ‘virtual’ Secretariat until member states can agree to establish a real one.

Recommendation 6: ASEM should review and streamline areas for functional cooperation.

The burgeoning activities under ASEM’s functional cooperation programme, be it in the economic and socio-cultural areas, need to be reviewed and streamlined in order to improve its implementation. For example, in promoting educational exchanges, more efforts must be given to facilitating accreditation, standardization of entry requirements, and mutual recognition of certificates for students from both Asia to Europe. Similarly, in promoting SME activity in and between ASEM regions, attention must be given to addressing gaps in information and financing.

Recommendation 7: Enhance cooperation in new security challenges

Aside from the need to streamline areas of functional cooperation, ASEM should also pay more attention to transnational security issues like terrorism and develop more effective inter-regional cooperation in counter-terrorism strategies such as information sharing, intelligence gathering and improved cooperation among law enforcement agencies.

ASEM should also boost cooperation in addressing emerging threats to human security such as the spread of infectious diseases (Bird flu/H5N1 and HIV/Aid) and natural disasters (earthquakes, tsunami, floods and hurricanes). If human security, despite preventive and precautionary policies, are endangered in one or more member states by e.g. acts of terrorism, infectious diseases, natural or man made disasters, ASEM should stand ready to assist as a visible demonstration of international solidarity.

Recommendation 8: Raise ASEM's profile by making optimum use of institutional framework and available resources.

Raising ASEM's profile is one of its biggest challenges. To this end, efforts must taken to enhance ASEM's profile by tapping into the resources and expertise of the institutions linked to ASEM such as ASEF and the AEBF in order to raise awareness and interest in the ASEM process. There is a need to strengthen the density of ties among these ASEM-linked institutions and to examine concrete ways to feed their work into the ASEM process.

Recommendation 9: ASEM should strengthen links with Track 2 forums and civil society organisations.

ASEM should strengthen links with track 2 forums and civil society organizations. Track 2 processes provide the mechanism for developing new ideas to promote transregional relations. Closer linkages between ASEM and the Council for Asia-Europe Cooperation must therefore be encouraged. Likewise, building business networks must be promoted further to enhance inter-regional cooperation. In addition, links with non-governmental organisations and other civil society actors must be encouraged and supported by the governments of East Asia and Europe.

The involvement of non-state actors in the ASEM process will enhance its legitimacy. Ultimately, for the ASEM process to take off, it needs to build a stronger constituency of actors who believe in ASEM. This can be done by allowing for a more participatory process where both a bottom-up engagement complements ASEM's top-down approach.

Recommendation 10: Define a common strategy for future ASEM enlargement.

The dynamics of engagement in a 25-member body would have substantially changed as ASEM enlarged to 39 members. Given the declared interest of other countries to join ASEM, it would be imperative for ASEM to adopt a prudent strategy in plans for future enlargement, considering its implications. While it is important to affirm the principle of open regionalism, outward-looking and inclusiveness, it would also serve ASEM's purpose to maintain coherence in its aims and a project a sense of unity of purpose. These call for a careful calibration of future enlargement as the process of promoting trust and establishing a certain level of comfort among new members would require some time to nurture.

V. Conclusion

This report assesses the relevance of the ASEM process in improving ties between Asia and Europe. The ASEM process has seen some modest advances in enhancing dialogue and cooperation among its members. It also has been a valuable diplomatic tool to socialise member states from two vastly different regions.

Against the rapid changes in the global environment that have brought on new challenges to states and societies across continents, the existing informal framework of ASEM has been shown to be inadequate. Making ASEM relevant requires us to look beyond its current modality as merely a forum for the exchange of views. At this critical juncture, ASEM has to face up to the necessity for action and cooperation. To this end, we hope that the recommendations in this report can be a helpful starting point for introspection and robust debate.

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