

[THAILAND]

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10 Years of ASEM Thailand's Experience

Introduction

As the host of the first ASEM meeting, Thailand has a privileged place in the history of the forum. But the subsequent development of the relationship leaves much to be desired, and it is instructive to examine the experience of Thailand in ASEM to see what lessons can be learned about the nature of Asia-Europe relations and the specific form that it takes under the framework of ASEM.

It should be noted that ASEM is a part of overall Thailand-EU relations, which have other aspects, namely bilateral and regional, in the form of the EU-Thai relations and EU-ASEAN relations.

The Thai government recognized the importance of promoting closer relations with the EU, and it has supported the activities of the Centre for European Studies (CES) at Chulalongkorn University by funding from the government to enable it to function as the national hub for European studies.

The assessment is based partly on a seminar that CES organized in cooperation with the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs in November 2005. It featured the participation of officials and partners involved in various ASEM-supported projects (see list of participants in the appendix).

Section 2: Assessment of ASEM and the state of the relationship between Asia and Europe ten years after ASEM

*What is the elite perception of the ASEM process now? Has this changed over the years?
(interviews with policy makers, politicians and opinion makers, survey of policy statements)*

The seminar participants compared the progress of ASEM with APEC and found that ASEM was lagging behind in terms of concrete achievements, even though the coverage of ASEM was broader. APEC focuses on trade and economic relations while ASEM covers political and cultural issues as well as economic relations. As a participant from the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) remarked, the EU and ASEAN have different agendas. EU is more interested in political and security issues while ASEAN, including Thailand, focus more on “economic

matters.” In this regard, it is not surprising that the view toward APEC seems to be more favourable.

What is the public perception of the ASEM process? (opinion polls, survey of major writings on ASEM)

Public perception of ASEM may be gauged from press coverage. First, news of ASEM Summits are reported mainly in the English language press and only in passing in the Thai language press.

This suggests that ASEM is not the main focus of public interest among the Thai public. In this regard, it may not differ from other countries where ASEM as such is mostly the concern of officials and leaders, and not so much the concern of the average citizen.

However, the reason behind the seeming lack of interest should be investigated. As far as economic issues are concerned, the EU ranks behind ASEAN, other Asian neighbors and the United States. News coverage on relations with the EU is mainly focused on trade problems, particularly of specific cases where Thai exports encounter obstacles in accessing the EU market. While in reality these trade issues concern a limited range of products, where regulations are somewhat stringent, they have been reported widely as though they are typical of the entire range of trade relations with the EU.

With this preoccupation with trade “irritants,” leaders who go to the ASEM Summit are expected to bring them up at the Summit. However, it is not quite the right place for discussion of such issues. This suggests that in the field of Thailand and ASEAN relations with the EU, public perception is rather superficial and dominated by the “fortress Europe” stereotype, which is not in fact the case for the majority of traded products.

Media perception of the ASEM process. Has coverage of ASEM meetings and events gone down? (media coverage of ASEM meetings and events; editorial substance and tone)

Media coverage of the ASEM process in Thailand is sporadic. When an ASEM event takes place within the country, there is greater coverage than if the event were to take place elsewhere. In the latter case, it would be treated as foreign news. Since only leaders attend the meetings, and there are usually no major controversial issues in relations between EU and Asian participants in ASEM, the newsworthiness of the event is somewhat less.

Editorial substance and tone are on the whole congratulatory, reflecting the generally harmonious nature of EU-Asian relations. It could be a reflection of the roles both of EU and

Asian countries in the global arena. Both sides are not always the major players during the period of ASEM.

The most significant event in ASEM's history may be ASEM2 in London in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis. Asian members of ASEM were in need of financial support to deal with the financial and economic chaos that ensued. The ASEM Summit indeed produced measures that may be viewed as gestures of cooperation by the EU. However, the crisis was a more global concern than an interregional one, and it was probably correct for the EU to rely on multilateral efforts to deal with the situation rather than treating it interregionally. As a result, the support given through ASEM was regarded as disappointing by some.

What is the status and impact of the various ASEM initiatives (TFAP, IPAP, AEBF, ASEM Informal Dialogue on Human Rights, ASEM Trust Fund, ASEM Meetings on Child Welfare, etc)

On the whole, Thailand's experience with the various ASEM initiatives is favourable, though there were also some critical remarks. It was noted that in some case (see the note on the SCA), participation of member countries was less than enthusiastic.

On the AEBF, the view of the Thai participant was quite strong. It was pointed out that while the private sector had high expectations for being listened to seriously, the ASEM Summit did not appear to give it as much attention as it thought it deserved.

The Asia-Europe Environmental Technology Centre was cited as an example of one case of Asia-Europe cooperation that did not survive, though the Thai government found that it brought several benefits. It was noted that there were many initiatives in the environmental area where Asian members took the initiative—China and the Philippines were active on forest issues, for example.

Has trade and investment increased or decreased over the years?

In the case of Thailand, trade and investment were strongly affected by the financial crisis of 1997 and it took years to recover. Thai trade and investment has also been affected by the rise of China as a major trading nation. In the immediate aftermath of the financial crisis, many Thai financial concerns were taken over by foreign concerns including European firms. However, in more recent years, the rise of China has been a major factor, attracting both trade and investment away from the ASEAN region as a whole. Thailand has also been caught up in this trend.

Have visits by government leaders, policymakers and officials to each other's regions increased or decreased over the years?

There has been perceived decrease in the frequency of visits by high level officials. This could be part of the rise of China;, however, and it may reflect a shift in the relative attractiveness of the different countries in Asia.

Has there been more academic and scientific cooperation and joint research?

In contrast to commercial relations, there has been an active increase in the level of academic cooperation stimulated by the ASIA-LINK and the ASEAN-EU University Network programmes of the European Commission. Many Asian universities and ASEAN higher education institutions are involved in various cooperation projects within the framework of these two programmes. While they are not directly associated with ASEM, the increased level of contact at the professional and academic levels should stimulate higher interest in European affairs among these groups who would otherwise be oriented toward non-European partners. These projects have enabled Asians to meet each other. Without the programmes, it is unlikely that such intra-Asian links could have been established.

The same cannot be said about scientific cooperation. The case of the Asia-Europe Environmental Technology Centre may serve as a useful example. There is a need to blend the research cultures of the two regions, and the ASEM process may need more time to allow this to happen.

A more successful case is the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) which concentrates on cultural and intellectual exchanges. It seems that both sides can meet and work together in fruitful ways more easily through institutions such as ASEF.

Has there been an increase in the number of students studying in each other's regions?

In terms of full-time students, there is still an imbalance; more students from Asia go to Europe than the number coming from Europe to Asia. But this should not be a surprize given the quality of education offered in Europe as compared to Asia. In addition, the fact that higher education in Europe is socialized means that if European students to come to Asia, tuition expenses are higher. High cost is also a factor that limits the number of Asian students going to Europe, though Asian students may be able to call upon more family support for education.

Are European and Asian studies gaining greater prominence and interest among academics and students?

In Thailand, there is increasing interest in European Studies. The MA in European Studies Programme offered by Chulalongkorn University Graduate School is oversubscribed and is successful financially, with a graduate class of twenty-five students each year. At the undergraduate level, a general education course, "Introduction to the European Union," is running at the university. It attracts students from all faculties in high numbers. Classes range from fifty to seventy students, relatively high for such courses at a university where students usually concentrate on their majors rather than taking extra-disciplinary subjects.

At the more general level, activities organized by the CES are generally well-attended and appreciated by the public, though numbers vary according to the subject matter at hand. CES runs a training course for social science teachers to update participants' knowledge of current European issues, and these courses are usually well received. CES publications also have a ready market among the Thai readership.

Have there been increased consultations between Asia and Europe prior to other multilateral or global forums such as UN meetings, WTO, G8?

The advent of FTA negotiations in Thailand is raising the public's awareness of these international trade issues. However, concern is focused more on the multilateral or bilateral levels. Among academics, there has not been specific cooperation with European colleagues. Some European NGOs are active in specific social areas such as women and children and natural resource issues. But on the whole, activities are rather sporadic and scattered.

In summary, Thailand's experience with ASEM is limited to mostly official contacts with a small amount of cultural and professional exchanges. Where such contacts take place, they are considered to be useful and beneficial to the participants and could have wider impact.

Section 3: ASEM in the regional and global contexts

What are some of the important changes in the regional and global environment since the launch of ASEM (9/11 and the war on terror, invasion of Iraq, EU enlargement, the EU's recent constitutional crisis, an emerging East Asian community, leadership competition between Japan and China)

For Thailand, the most important change in the above list could be the situation between China and Japan. Both are important players in the Asian region and are important for ASEAN at the regional level. This is recognized by ASEAN in the form the ASEAN+3 arrangements.

However, there are also problems in the relationships among the North Asian parties. Hence, ASEAN has formulated the ASEAN+1 arrangement, which includes the ASEAN-China FTA. The East Asia Summit of 2005 created a current of interest, though there are also doubts as to what such an arrangement can achieve against the background of strong national interests and feelings among the big players of the so-called Community.

How do these changes impact the functioning and focus of ASEM?

Though it may be politically incorrect to say so, these changes are likely to have a strong negative impact on the functioning of ASEM. This is because the divergent stands of Asian members of ASEM make it more difficult to find common grounds and address issues where there is common interest.

Section 4: Re-inventing ASEM—how should ASEM respond to external changes in the regional and global environment and its own internal challenges to enlargement, lack of institutional infrastructure and support

Review of working methods (is current summit-driven working method tenable; should ASEM be more project-driven rather than meeting-driven? How should the various initiatives be linked to ensure coherence and continuity and not unnecessary duplication and waste?)

ASEM Summits are necessary because they drive the process. What is needed is backup to maintain momentum between the Summits. For this purpose, more resources may be necessary to provide such interim work along the lines of APEC financing ongoing study centers and projects. There may be room for focusing on themes such as human resources development that

would meet the needs of the Asian partners, where Europe has a clear advantage or is more advanced than the Asians.

Format and regularity of meetings (there is still need for meetings but what format—retreat style, representation and how often?)

ASEM has stressed informality. This may be a strong point at the leaders level. But the implementation of projects and activities should meet the standard of best professional practices.

Management of the whole ASEM process (the need for political leadership, the role of coordinators, is there need for a secretariat?)

The management of the ASEM process seems to require more formal organization, and more resources should be made available to the organizer.

Visibility and public awareness of ASEM (how to engage the media, who should be the “champions” of ASEM, e.g. politicians, business, academics, civil society?)

Visibility will increase over time if ASEM’s initiatives are high-profile and engage the public.

What should ASEM’s focus be? What is ASEM’s added value and where does its strength lie?

If the shortcomings in the organization of the process are addressed, the effectiveness of ASEM should increase and the objectives would be met. In itself, ASEM is already valuable.

Appendix

Summary report of The workshop on “10 Years of ASEM”

Held on October 21, 2005
at The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Kingdom of Thailand
Organized by the Centre for European Studies,
with the support of the Japan Center for International Exchange and the
Asia-Europe Foundation

Historical Background and Overview

In the age of globalization, most of nations tend to be more cooperative on political, economic and social issues in order to maximize their national interests and maintain the prestige of state sovereignty. Therefore, the regional groupings have been constantly established in search of political stability and economic prosperity. Each state seeks cooperation in order to attain more of bargaining power in global trade competition. In this sense, it is believed that the economic area becomes the common ground for cooperation in all fields. In North America, NAFTA is the common ground. In Europe, the EU is the common ground. In Asia Pacific, APEC is the common ground. At the global level, all of these regional groupings are interconnected but one connection is missing: Europe and Asia. ASEM was set up to bridge this missing link.

The idea behind ASEM

ASEM was originally comprised of ten ASEAN member countries plus fifteen EU countries. Although ASEM has existed for 10 years, its achievements seem to be intangible. Its achievements cannot compare with APEC.

The driving force and key players

At the workshop, there were many government agencies and the private sector participated in the seminar:

- Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Ministry of Commerce
- Ministry of Finance
- Ministry of Labor
- Ministry of Information and Community Technology
- Ministry of Science and Technology
- Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment
- Bank of Thailand
- The World Bank
- The Commission on Higher Education
- Thai Industrial Standards Institute (TISI)
- Thailand International Development Cooperation Agency
- National Intelligence Agency (NIA)
- The Federation of Thai Industries

Public and Elite Perception of ASEM

The majority of representatives from all sectors commented and presented the following:

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The representative commented that ASEM is behind APEC in that the latter has developed and its member countries seem to be more compromising and cooperative. The frameworks of ASEM are well-defined. It has three main areas of cooperation: political, economic and social. The representative vigorously believed that the three pillars would drive ASEM to develop more in the future.

He the Chairman's statement from the first ASEM Summit in Thailand: ASEM would create peace and security, equal partnership and better understanding of the people in the two regions. He also pointed out that the focal points between ASEAN and Europe are different. ASEAN focuses on economics while the EU pays special attention to politics and security. In terms of political cooperation, Thai government agencies such as the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Royal Thai Police and the Office of National Security Council are encouraged by the government to work closely in this area. They are especially encouraged to work on controversial matters at the present time such as human rights, the Korean peninsula and democracy in Burma.

Office of National Security Council

The representative for the Office of National Security Council, Mr. Surachai Pira, mentioned the government's policy statement on the strategic partnership declared to the parliament. Everything changed since the tragedy of the September 11, 2001. Thai foreign policy should proceed with extreme caution in order to avoid being targeted by terrorist networks. Thus, Thai government policy should be devised under a principal of international cooperation according to the following:

- Eradication of terrorist networks
- Development of mechanisms to prevent threats from terrorists
- Adopting an omnidirectional foreign policy

In the scope of ASEM cooperation, there is an ASEM anti-money laundering project framework that the Office of National Security Council participated in. It determined through the project that European terrorist prevention mechanisms are more standardized than ASEAN ones. ASEAN mostly deals with an exchange of information rather than in-depth cooperation. In addition, ASEM should encourage its member countries not to give support to terrorist groups. The Thai government should also seek the support from major powers in providing training services to Thai government agencies to upgrade anti-terrorism mechanisms. In Thai-Europe cooperation, interchange of information needs to be intensified more in order so that cooperation can become more concrete and tangible.

The Ministry of Commerce

The representative from the Ministry of Commerce, Ms. Kedpirun, suggested that cooperation in the field of energy should be taken into account as high-profile international cooperation. Thai government agencies should propose issues and comments for the approaching meeting.

At the Asia-Europe Economic Ministers' Meeting (EMM) in the Netherlands, one problem was EU enlargement. The EU requested ASEM to accept those new countries as ASEM members as well. ASEAN demanded that if ASEM accepted those countries, ASEM would need to accept ten ASEAN members also. Another problem occurred when the EU did not issue visas for Burmese officials for meetings in Europe; thus, at the EMM meeting, most ASEAN members did not send the high ranking-officials to attend to the meeting but officers instead. At this point, ASEAN and the EU must cooperate on this issue very carefully and separate economics from politics.

Concerning the ASEM 2 Summit it was agreed that the Trade Facilitation Action Plan (TFAP) should proceed accordingly in an attempt to diminish Non-Tariff Barrier (NTBs) and promote bilateral trade between ASEAN and the EU. A 2002—2004 TFAP action plan had six areas of cooperation. Thailand was assigned to be the coordinator in three areas: Standard and Conformity Assessment (SCA), Quarantine and SPS Procedures (SPS) and Intellectual Property Right (IPRs).

Assessment of cooperation

- Standard and Conformity Assessment (SCA)

The role of Thailand is to assist and facilitate organizing the seminars for the working group of Quarantine and SPA procedures with an aim to generate close cooperation and exchange of information. Thailand also acted as the focal point for the ASEAN side in ASEM. Since the SPS wrap-up seminar in Netherlands in July, 2002, it was found that cooperation in this area has developed less because the number of ASEM member countries that attended the meeting was less than expected.

- Standard and Conformity Assessment (SCA)

The role of Thailand is to facilitate hosting seminars for the working group of ASEM/TFAP/SCA in order to create an academic interchange between ASEM member countries as well as to cooperate with the EU on writing the summary report. At the 9th SCA meeting, Thailand proposed a Sustainable Forest Management project.

- Intellectual Property Right (IPRs)

The role of Thailand is to assist and facilitate organizing seminars for working groups and to act as a focal point for information exchange among counterparts. This includes the enforcement of laws and regulation to crack down on violations of property rights. In this connection, member countries agreed, upon a voluntary basis, to Geographical Indication (GI).

The Federation of Thai Industries

The representative from the Federation of Thai Industries, Mr. Sayan, stated that the EU is a fragmented market in the eyes of the Thai private sector. It is quite difficult to trade with EU countries because each country has different demands on imports. The EU has been named as the “land of innovation” on NTBs because it has set up many non-tariff barriers to many trade partners, especially in chemical products. In early 2008, the EU will fully enforce its laws and regulations to upgrade its standard requirements. That is, all imports must be approved by authorized representatives from the EU. It is pivotal for the Thai government to establish an organization to follow this matter.

From the private sector’s viewpoints, ASEM was set up to counterbalance APEC since the latter is comprised of major powers like the United States but not the EU. Unfortunately, ASEM is a consultative forum and most of its mechanisms are less concentrated on economic matters. Moreover, the majority of member countries have not fully made efforts to discuss economics.

EU countries have requested that ASEAN speed up customs procedures with an aim to stimulate trade interaction between the two sides and to reduce the troublesome procedures. Thailand could take this opportunity to play a leading role in convincing ASEAN members to endorse this proposal and present it to ASEM.

The Ministry of Finance

The representative from the Ministry of Finance, Ms. Kedsuda, explained that since ASEM was found, the Finance Ministers’ Meeting has been organized six times. It first took place in Thailand in 1997 during the economic crisis in Asia. The latest meeting in 2005 in China highlighted the need to promote sustainable development in Asia in order to reach the Millennium Development Goals.

The World Bank

The representative from the World Bank in Thailand, Ms. Kanita, noted that her duties involve working with the Asian Trust Fund as well as hosting a Monitoring Review in 2004 and 2005. The Bank cooperates with government agencies to create development partnerships. All of the work procedures are based on the national agenda. The CDP program received funding from ASEM for projects in two areas: financial and social.

The Commission on Higher Education

The representative from the Commission on Higher Education emphasized that in the ASEM frameworks there are two programs concerning educational affairs: the Education and Research Network Education Hub and the ASEM Duo Fellowship Program. The Education and Research Network Education Hub is designed to promote exchange of the university professors and students among ASEM member countries. The ASEM Duo Fellowship Program was designed to create bilateral exchange between universities of ASEM member countries. Those exchanges will help upgrade educational standards in Thailand.

Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment

The representative from the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment said that after the first ASEM Summit in Thailand, it proposed establishing an Asia-Europe Environmental Technology Center as a pilot project. At the first ASEM Ministerial Meeting on environment in At the second ASEM Ministerial Meeting in Italy, the need to follow up on the Millenium Development Goals was highlighted. The Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment has adopted ASEM policy to Ministry strategies. Thailand designed a Land Map of countries in Mekong Delta region. The EU gave support to the ASEAN-EU Diversity Center in the Philippines for a partnership program.

Ministry of Labor

The representative from the Ministry of Labor, Mr. Kamjohn, reported that the Ministry participated in the ASEM Lifelong Learning (LLL) for Employability project with financial support from Finland. In the same year, the Ministry wrote a report on behalf of the Thai government covering the following items:

- Ensuring Basic Skills for All
- Integrated Approaches to Lifelong Learning and Recognition of Skills
- Policies and Incentives to Promote Access to Lifelong Learning

In the future, the Ministry would like closer cooperation to facilitate Thai workers access to European markets. At this moment, the Ministry is planning to send some government officers to Berlin to help Thai workers seek opportunities for work in Europe.

Ministry of Culture

The representative from the Ministry of Culture, Ms. Jansuda, noted that the ASEM framework has four main areas of cooperation: academic, people, cultural and public. This includes cultural heritage exchange, training seminars, young drawing competitions, music and tourism. There have been two ASEM Culture Ministers Meetings, in China and France. Financial support is a significant problem.

Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

The representative from the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Ms. Anchalaporn, mentioned that areas of cooperation are intangible. Cooperation between Thailand and Finland existed through a joint venture called the Finland-Thailand Technology Fund. After the tsunami of 2005, the Finnish government offered to help create an early-warning system.

ICT has also cooperated on cyber crime prevention and law enforcement as well as capacity building in telecommunications, especially for mobile phone security.

Thailand International Development Cooperation Agency

The representative from the Thailand International Development Cooperation Agency noted that from his perspective, the political will of EU member countries differ. He referred to cooperation in several areas including transnational crime, drug trafficking control, and avian flu.

Topic: Workshop on Ten Years of ASEM
Venue: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Kingdom of Thailand
Participants: Thirty persons from governmental agencies, state enterprises, academic institutions and the private sector
Date: October 21, 2005