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Introduction to Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM)

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Introduction

The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is an inter-regional, inter-governmental process established in 1996 to foster dialogue and cooperation between Asia and Europe. Currently, it is composed of 51 member countries and two partner institutions —the European Union and the ASEAN Secretariat. ASEM addresses a wide range of issues including political, economic, financial, social, cultural, and educational issues of common interest based on the spirit of mutual respect, mutual trust, and equal partnership. ASEM has thus far become one of the key global actors, as it shares 60% of global population, 65% of global economy, 55% of global trade, and 75% of global tourism.² This chapter provides a broad-brush overview of ASEM, arguing that ASEM plays an important role in reinforcing open, inclusive and effective multilateralism for a shared growth and promoting a rules-based international order.

The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) was initially conceived as an informal forum and process for dialogue and cooperation between East Asia and the EU. The idea of having a meeting of leaders from Asia and Europe originated at the Europe-East Asia Economic Summit held in Singapore in September 1994, during which economic cooperation was recognised by the leaders as the most effective means to strengthen the dialogue between the two regions. The EU wanted to reap the benefits from the dynamic Asia, whereas the latter viewed ASEM as a means to diversify their economic relations and to strengthen their foreign policy independence vis-à-vis the

US.³ In July 1994, the European Commission published *Towards a New Strategy for Asia* in order to tighten its economic ties with Asian countries. The strategy reads, “The rise of Asia is dramatically changing the world balance of economic power...The Union needs as a matter of urgency to strengthen its economic presence in Asia in order to maintain its leading role in the world economy.”⁴

In November 1994, Singapore and France proposed that an EU-Asia summit meeting be held with an aim to explore ways to build a new partnership between the two regions. Following the above proposal being made, the 1st ASEM Summit was held in Bangkok in March 1996, marking the inception of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) process. The Commission Communication called *Europe and Asia: A Strategic Framework for Enhanced Partnerships*, in September 2001, reaffirmed the EU’s goal to boost its political and economic presence across Asia. At that time, the EU’s notable goals included its contribution to peace and security in the region and the world through the expansion of its engagement with Asia, enhancement of mutual trade and investment flows between EU and Asia, the development of the less prosperous countries of the two regions, eradication of root causes of poverty, protection of human rights and democracy, promotion of good governance and the rule of law, establishment of global partnerships and alliances with Asian countries in appropriate international fora, identification of challenges and opportunities brought by globalisation, strengthening of joint efforts to cope with global environmental and security

2 ASEM Information Board, “Asem in Numbers,” ASEM Information Board, <https://www.aseminfoboard.org/>.

3 Yeo Lay Hwee and Lopez I Vidal Iluc, “Regionalism and Interregionalism in the Asem Context: Current Dynamics and Theoretical Approaches,” (Barcelona: CIDOB, 2008).

4 Ji. Jason Xianbai, “Toward a New Eu Asia Strategy,” (Singapore: EU Centre in Singapore, 2016).

issues and the promotion of Asia's awareness of Europe and vice versa.⁵

The creation of ASEM was mainly driven by Europe's response to APEC and the fears of a fortress Europe on the part of East Asia.⁶ Mutual recognition of common interest in the early 1990s fostered cooperation and partnership between the two regions. ASEM initially comprised 10 Asian members (ASEAN 7 plus China, Japan and South Korea), 15 EU member states and the European Commission, have evolved into a trans-regional dialogue forum that consists of 53 partners. ASEM underwent five times of its membership enlargement beginning in 2004, and later in 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2014, respectively. ASEM aims to provide a platform to foster political dialogue, strengthen economic cooperation and tackle global challenges together and promote the exchange of ideas and best practices, thus acting as a breeding ground for new policy ideas. ASEM is a key building block for open, cooperative and rules-based international system. It can be regarded as the most influential comprehensive partnership platform, whereby various connectivity initiatives have been steadily materialised.⁷

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ground for new policy ideas.”

Against the backdrop of protectionism, unilateralism and anti-globalisation, ASEM has become one of the key institutional instruments in upholding an open multilateral system basing on the principles of informality, flexibility, mutual respect in the spirit of consensus, equal partnership and mutual benefits. The Chair's Statement of the 12th ASEM Summit in 2018 stressed the increasing relevance of ASEM in enhancing “effective multilateralism and the rules-based international order anchored in international law and with the United Nations at its core”. The ASEM leaders also expressed their commitment to work together for peace, security, sustainable development and prosperity, while promoting an open world economy and upholding the rules-based multilateral trading system with the World Trade Organization at its core.⁸

The Chair's Statement also expressed the commitment to fully implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals and to build an inclusive and sustainable future for all; it aimed to leave no one behind and to focus on helping the most vulnerable ones. The ASEM leaders agreed to work together on strengthening global responses to climate change through ambitious climate actions including the promotion of renewable energy, energy efficiency and other low-emission technologies, industry, transportation, agriculture and forestry, innovation, mobilisation of finance, resilience, disaster management and risk reduction. They also comprise the prevention of deforestation and desertification, which includes water scarcity, etc.⁹

5 Commission of the European Communities, “Europe and Asia: A Strategic Framework for Enhanced Partnerships,” in Communication from the Commission (Brussels: Commission of the European Communities, 2001).

6 Yeo Lay Hwee, “The Origins and Development of Asem and Eu-East Asia Relations,” in *Europe and Asia: Region in Flux*, ed. Murray Philomena (Palgrave Mcmillan, 2008).

7 ASEM Information Board, “Asem Process,” ASEM Information Board, <https://www.aseminfoboard.org/about/asem-process>.

8 Asia Europe Meeting, “Global Partners for Global Challenges,” news release, 2018, <https://cdn.aseminfoboard.org/documents/ASEM12-Chairs-Statement.pdf>.

9 Ibid.

Areas of Cooperation

ASEM promotes inter-regional cooperation between Asia and Europe under three pillars— politics, economics and finance, and people-to-people. These three pillars are interconnected. Sustainable development, climate change and migration are generally regarded as cross-cutting issues that require the involvement of key stakeholders under these three pillars. Realising the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030 has become one of ASEM's key agenda items. At the ASEM Conference in May 2019, the participants called for enhancing ASEM contributions to global efforts in the implementation of the SDGs and furthering exchange of views, lessons learned, best practices among ASEM members and other partners in order to integrate SDGs into development plans from a long-term and cross-sectoral perspective.¹⁰

ASEM political pillar's activities concentrate on international crisis, security, multilateralism. In addition, it seeks to open the dialogue with policymakers from Europe and Asia. ASEM top leaders and ministers have regularly exchanged their views, and occasionally taken a common stance on international and regional developments of common interest. The ASEM political pillar also helps to strengthen the multilateral system and to promote an Asia-Europe dialogue on key issues such as arms control, disarmament, international terrorism, weapons of mass destruction and non-proliferation, environmental issues, human rights, migration, and the UN re-

forms. Building cooperation and partnership with the United Nations has become one of the key agenda items of ASEM. The 4th ASEM Summit in Copenhagen on 22-24 September 2002, decided that ASEM partners should continue this political dialogue by establishing an ad-hoc informal consultative mechanism enabling ASEM coordinators and senior officials to exchange views on significant international events.¹¹

Under the economic and financial pillar, the dialogue focuses on the need to better manage economic globalisation by promoting multilateralism, sustainable development, business frameworks between the two regions, and innovative ideas in the field of finance. The issues relating to the World Trade Organization are always high on the agenda. The main issues discussed at the Summits include trade facilitation and trade security, trade and development, regionalism and multilateralism, information and communication technology focusing on the aspect of competition and liberalisation, and investment issues. ASEM financial dialogue mainly concentrates on macro-economic issues by regularly reviewing the global economic situation and financial developments in both regions.¹²

The social and cultural pillar of ASEM is aimed at strengthening cultural links and people-to-people contacts — indispensable elements to promote a greater awareness and understanding between the two regions. By creating networked personal links, it can overcome misperceptions that may exist, thus fastening a perception of common interests.

10 "Asem Conference on Promoting Economic and Social Inclusion in Asia and Europe," news release, 15-17 May, 2019, https://cdn.aseminfoboard.org/documents/Summary-Report_Final.pdf.

11 ASEM Information Board, "Political Pillar," ASEM Information Board, <https://www.aseminfoboard.org/about/pillars-of-asem/political>.

12 "Economic and Financial Pillar," ASEM Information Board, <https://www.aseminfoboard.org/about/pillars-of-asem/economic-financial>.

At the ASEM conference on Cultures and Civilisations in 2003, the ASEM ministers in charge of cultures or relevant portfolios and eminent partners from civil society groups agreed to promote cultural diversity, dialogue and cooperation among different civilisations through promoting exchanges on cultural policies, preserving and promoting traditional and contemporary forms of arts and culture.¹³

In addition to the three pillars of cooperation, ASEM began introducing areas of focus and related actions on connectivity in 2018. ASEM's connectivity activities rely on existing sectoral mechanisms, including the use of thematic ASEM ministerial meetings, preparatory Senior Official Meetings (SOMs), Directors General (DG) meetings and other competent ASEM forums. The areas of focus consist of connectivity policies, sustainable connectivity (promotion of quality infrastructure, sustainability of financing, sustainable supply chains, ensuring free, open and safe maritime transportation, clean energy technologies), trade and investment connectivity (free, open and vibrant trade and investment, custom clearance facilitation, promotion of transport connectivity, future connectivity and digital economy, and security challenges linked to connectivity such as cybersecurity, infectious disease control and food security).¹⁴ Effective multilateralism and a rules-based international order and Asia-Europe connectivity are mutually reinforcing. The Brussels Report on Strengthening ASEM Connectivity in 2018 assessed the drivers for deepening ASEM connectivity and effectively using ASEM's connec-

tivity mechanisms to deliver results for global development programmes. ASEM has chosen to give its strength to support its member countries and global institutions alike in order to make progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to create conditions under which benefits of development can be shared under the motto "Leaving No One Behind". The combined strength of ASEM will be important for the global community to respond effectively to global challenges. ASEM's connectivity mechanisms have a strong knowledge and capacity-sharing base, which contribute to the realisation of development goals in Asia and Europe.¹⁵

The Danube-Mekong Cooperation Initiative is a concrete example of ASEM connectivity concentrating on sustainable development issues. It shows the way forward for further cooperation between ASEM partners under the framework of the ASEM Sustainable Development Dialogue, and encourages further concerted actions for tangible cooperation on water-related issues through transboundary, sub-regional and bi-regional cooperation.¹⁶ A network of bilateral cooperation is critical to realising this vision. For instance, Cambodia and Hungary, in June 2019, signed a bilateral agreement which covers multifaceted cooperation between the Mekong and the Danube region.

Key Characteristics

ASEM is an informal process of dialogue and cooperation with the aim to facilitate and stimulate progress in other fora, but it does

¹³ "Social, Cultural and Educational Pillar," ASEM Information Board, <https://www.aseminfoboard.org/about/pillars-of-asem/social-cultural-educational>.

¹⁴ "Apgc Plan for Areas of Focus and Related Actions on Connectivity," news release, 2019, <https://cdn.aseminfoboard.org/documents/APGC-Plan-for-Area-of-Focus-and-Related-Actions-on-Connectivity.pdf>.

¹⁵ Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, "Brussels Report on Strengthening Asia Europe Connectivity : Drawing Synergy from Global Development and Governance Programmes," ed. Prakash Anita (2018).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 94-100.

not seek to duplicate what has been done within bilateral and other multilateral settings between the member countries. The key characteristics of the ASEM Process include: *Informality*—aimed at providing an open forum for policy makers and officials to discuss any political, economic and socio-cultural issues of common interest, complementing the works being carried out in bilateral and other multilateral fora; *Multi-dimensionality*—covering the full spectrum of relations between the two regions and devotes equal weight to political, economic and socio-cultural dimensions; *Equal partnership*—stressing the principles of mutual respect and mutual benefit; *State-led and people-centred cooperation*—providing a platform for meetings of Heads of States and Governments, ministers and senior officials with an increasing focus on fostering contacts between the peoples from the two regions).¹⁷

“The key characteristics of the ASEM Process include informality, multi-dimensionality, equal partnership and state-led and people-centred cooperation.”

Working Methods

ASEM is not an international organisation, and has no secretariat. Foreign Ministers and their senior officials (ASEM-SOM) have an overall coordinating role within the ASEM Process, and are assisted by an informal group of coordinators [2 from the Asian side – representing the ASEAN and non-ASEAN (NESA) groups, and 2 from the European side – the European External Action Service (EEAS) as permanent coordinator and the rotating EU Presidency]. The ASEM Summit is the highest decision-making

body. It takes place biannually with the participation of the Heads of State and Government, the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission, and the Secretary-General of ASEAN.

The working methods, adopted at the 3rd ASEM Summit (ASEM3) in 2000, outline the following principles:

- Meetings should be more informal and interactive. To this end, the Chair should be active in realising this goal. Appropriate informal intervals and retreat sessions could be useful tools.
- By setting focused agenda items with a few topics, ASEM’s added value will be assured for all meetings. ASEM partners could also consult regularly before international meetings.
- ASEM initiatives/activities should be linked to the dialogue and be supportive of it. Presenting activities in clusters can facilitate reaching synergies within the ASEM process but also within a cluster; organisers/facilitators especially within a cluster are invited to discuss about the agenda and timing.
- In order to gain more time for dialogue, the Chair shall be responsible for reflecting fairly the outcomes of meetings in short and factual statements. Summits and Ministerial Meetings consensus on Chair’s Statements (CS) should be reached through close coordination among partners. However, it was confirmed at the meeting that consensus shall not be interpreted as meaning that texts would be

¹⁷ ASEM Information Board, “Fostering Dialogue and Cooperation between Asia and Europe,” ASEM Information Board., <https://www.aseminfoboard.org/about/overview>.



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negotiated word-for-word. Separate negotiated political declarations on specific subjects in addition to the Chair's statement, if appropriate, could be issued, thereby raising the visibility of the issue treated.

- In order to raise the visibility of ASEM, reaching out to the public is necessary. The ASEM Senior Officials saw the importance of involvement of various sectors of society in the ASEM Process. On ASEM events, host countries may, at their discretion, organise activities with businesses, think tanks and other sectors of society. These events will be open to all ASEM partners.

Meetings

The summits are attended by Heads of State and Government of the ASEM countries, the President of the European Council, President of the European Commission and the ASEAN Secretary General. They serve as the highest level of decision-making body of the ASEM. The summits are held every second year, alternating Asia and Europe. In conjunction with each summit, side events such as the Asia-Europe Parliamentary Partnership Meeting (ASEP), the Asia-Europe Business Forum (AEBF), the Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF), and the ASEM Young Leaders Summit (ASEFYLS) are organised.

The Foreign Ministers' Meetings are attended

by the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security policy, Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the ASEM countries and the ASEAN Secretary General. They are responsible for overall coordination of the ASEM Process, and act as a driving force of the ASEM political dialogue. In addition, Finance, Culture, Economic, Education, Labour, Transport, Environment and Employment Ministers meet on a regular basis to discuss issues of mutual concern. Additional ministerial conferences are held irregularly on specific issues and areas not covered by the main ministerial meetings.

The Senior Officials' Meetings (SOMs) bring together high-level civil servants from the Foreign Ministries of all ASEM Partners for the overall coordination of the ASEM process. Sectoral SOMs are also held in preparation of the various ministerial meetings.

Other meetings include Customs Directors-General Meetings, Conferences of Directors-General of Immigration, Mayors and Governors' Meetings or ad hoc activities on topics pertaining to sustainable development, nuclear safety, disaster risk reduction, biodiversity and others.

Informal Supporting Mechanisms

Several informal supporting mechanisms have been created to promote dialogue and practical cooperation with an ultimate aim of realising the main objectives set out in the three pillars of ASEM. These include the Asia-Europe Parliamentary Partnership (ASEP), the Asia-Europe Foundation, the Asia-Europe Business Forum and ASEM-DUO Fellowship Programme

- **Asia-Europe Parliamentary Partnership (ASEP)** Meeting is a part of the overall Asia-Europe partnership process. It serves as a forum for interparliamentary contacts, exchanges and diplomacy among parliaments, with an ultimate aim to promote mutual understanding among the peoples and countries in Asia and Europe. ASEP meetings are convened on a regular bi-annual basis, alternate between Asia and Europe, and normally take place before the ASEM Summit.

- **Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF)** is an important and central institution of the social, cultural and educational pillar. To date, ASEF is the only permanent institution of the ASEM process. Since its inception in 1997, ASEF has been very active in implementing its mandate, especially given its large scope of action and its resources. ASEF's mandate is to promote and catalyse intellectual, cultural, and people-to-people exchanges between Europe and Asia.

- **Asia-Europe Young Leaders Summit (ASEFYLS)** is organised to promote interactions among the young leaders from Asia and Europe and provides opportunities for the young leaders to meet political leaders, top-tier business representatives, and prominent thinkers. The ASEFYLS takes place alongside the ASEM Summits or the ASEM Ministers' Meetings.

- **Asia-Europe Peoples' Forum (AEPF)** is an interregional network of progressive civil society organisations across Asia and Europe. Since 1996, the AEPF has remained the only continuing network linking Asian and European NGOs and social movements. It has assumed the unique

function of fostering people's solidarity across the two regions and has become a vehicle for advancing the people's voice within Asia-Europe relations.

- **Asia-Europe Business Forum (AEBF)** is an annual meeting, where private and public sectors meet to exchange views, network and debate issues in specific working groups. AEBF provides an opportunity for the business communities from Asia and Europe to review issues relating to trade and investment matters, as well as to provide some inputs to the official dialogue. As a matter of fact, private sector has an important role to play in identifying obstacles to trade and investment in ASEM countries.

- **The ASEM-DUO Fellowship Programme**, funded by ASEM partners, is a fellowship-granting programme for university students and teachers in pairs (DUO) of ASEM countries who wish to go to Europe or Asia (i.e. Asians to Europe, Europeans to Asia) for further study, research or joint lectures. This fellowship programme, established in 2001, aims to contribute to enhancing reciprocal academic exchanges between students and teachers of the European Union and those of Asian countries of ASEM.

Conclusion and Recommendations

ASEM is the most dynamic inter-regional cooperation between Asia and Europe. By adopting a "soft" institutionalism, ASEM provides flexibility and comfortability to all member countries and institutions. However, due to increasing challenges posed by global development and changes, ASEM needs to forge

a common vision, take more concrete measures to strengthen social and economic inclusiveness, and advance an inclusive, open, effective, and rules-based multilateral system. The remarkable shift in the geopolitical balance of power have a major impact on economic and security development across the countries and regions. Moreover, the return of great power politics, compounded with renewed economic nationalism, protectionism, populist politics, and unilateralism, have put multilateral system at a greater risk.

As the centre of global economic gravity has shifted towards Asia, Europe has adjusted its strategies and deepened its engagement with Asia. Against the backdrop of global power shifts and changing pattern of economic interdependence, ASEM needs to have a practical plan for structural reforms that entail management of changes, especially to reap the benefits stemming from a rising and dynamic Asia. ASEM is expected to play a critical role in enhancing a rules-based international order amidst the uncertain and volatile world. Countries in both regions must double down their efforts to save the future of multilateralism, especially through the enhancement of multilateral trading system and the reforms of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

To strengthen its relevance, ASEM must continuously reform to strengthen its institution and implement its commitment in order to respond to new realities and changes. Some scholars and observers of ASEM have suggested the following:

- Enhancing Europe-Asia partnership will become increasingly relevant in dealing with threats and challenges, as well as in taking advantage of opportunities in an

increasingly interconnected world.¹⁸

- ASEM partners should move beyond their sole focus on the development of closer interregional ties to the impacts and implications of global changes on their partnership and the global responsibilities that ASEM must bear.¹⁹

- In order to enhance ASEM's role as an important interregional forum, or a tool that may contribute to global governance and to help shape the new world order, two things need to happen. First, East Asia must be further integrated so as to become a distinct regional and global actor. Second, the EU must be willing and prepared to shoulder more global responsibilities.²⁰

- A dynamic ASEM can be materialised only when some policy entrepreneurs or political leaders highly regard ASEM as a test bed and a platform for experiment towards a more networked approach in international cooperation, and when they try strengthening Asia-Europe ties for mutual benefits.²¹

- ASEM partners should focus on its relevance and building up its credibility. ASEM should learn to feel comfortable in its own skin, rather than to compare itself

fruitlessly to other international or interregional fora.²²

- With some strategic thinking and a clear setting of priorities, ASEM can capitalise on dialogue on issues of mutual interests, and seek common understanding and positions that may be helpful in supporting the global agenda in addressing some of the most pressing challenges facing all of us.²³

18 Walter Kemp, Indra Abeldinova, and Ariun Enkhsaikhan, "Setting the Agenda for Greater Asia-Europe Cooperation and Connectivity," in *Asia-Europe Connectivity Vision 2025: Challenges and Opportunities*, ed. Prakash Anita (Jakarta: Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, 2016), 11-24.

19 M. Dent Christopher, "The Asia-Europe Meeting and Inter-Regionalism: Toward a Theory of Multilateral Utility," *Asian Survey* 44, no. 2 (2004).

20 Lay Hwee.

21 "Toward a Dynamic Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem)?," (Singapore: EU Centre in Singapore, 2013).

22 Lai Suet-Yi and Loke Hoe Yeong, "Asem Outlook Insight: Asem: Crystal-Gazing Beyond 51 Members," (Singapore: Monash University & EU Centre in Singapore).

23 Lay Hwee and Lopez I Vidal Iluc.