



Reading time: 15 minutes*

Competitive Regional Security Architecture and the Value of ASEM

Dr. Ren Yuanzhe¹

¹ Dr. Ren Yuanzhe graduated with PhD in diplomatic studies from China Foreign Affairs University in 2009. He also holds a master on international relations from University of International Relations.

Dr. Ren is a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asia Studies, NUS; an associate professor at the Department of Diplomacy and Foreign Affairs Management, China Foreign Affairs University. He is also deputy director of the Centre for Protecting China's Overseas Interests, secretary general at the Centre for Strategic and Peace Studies, CFAU. He is affiliated with many other academic organisations. He is senior research fellow at the Collaborative Innovation Centre for Territorial Sovereignty and Maritime Rights and research fellow at the Institute of Asia-Pacific Maritime Studies, Chinese Association of Asia-pacific Studies.

Dr. Ren has conducted extensive research on maritime security and major countries relations in the Asia-Pacific region. In recent years, he has been paying special attention to China's neighbourhood diplomacy, with a particular focus on Southeast Asia and South Asia. He has been teaching and doing research on these aspects and has published books and articles on them.

Introduction

After the Cold War, security architecture in the Asia-Pacific region has undergone significant transformations. Especially in the context of “power-sharing” and “power-transfer” between China and the US, the Asia-Pacific security architecture is taking on a new appearance. Studies in the academic circle at home and abroad entered into a period of rapid development on security order and architecture in East Asia, Asia-Pacific and the now Indo-Pacific region.² In view of the gradually declining strategic mutual trust between major powers and the epidemic of nationalism in some countries, uncertainties in the development of the Asia-Pacific region are constantly on the increase. Against this background, many scholars in the United States turned to “offensive realism” as their canon with a pessimistic view about the prospects in the region. And some scholars even believed the growing tension and military competition between China and the United States in the region would make it difficult for both sides to get rid of the fate of “security dilemma” and thus make possible the outbreak of military conflict.³ As

perceived by many scholars, one of the major contributing factors of the state of “no-order” and even “disorder” in the Asia-Pacific security order is the imperfect regional security architecture.

As an important complementary to regional architectures, interregional mechanisms play an integral part to strengthen dialogue and cooperation among different regions and contribute to the improvement of global governance. The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) with a low degree of institutionalisation between the EU member states and a large proportion of Asian countries, for more than a decade, provided an excellent opportunity for Asians and Europeans to cooperate in three main areas: the economy, politics, and sociocultural issues. Many observers believe ASEM has balanced power in the US-EU-East Asia triangle. In realistic terms, ASEM is the product of a balance of power between the United States and the EU in relation to East Asia.⁴ In the global context featuring major-power competition, deteriorating regional security situations and the entry into a new stage of development for the ASEAN community, it is critical to understand the current regional security architecture and explore the value of ASEM as an interregional mechanism.

Characteristics of the current Asia-Pacific Security Architecture Adjustment

Ever since the outset of the Cold War, the military alliance system, built with the Unit-

2 Representative achievements include: Claude A. Buss, ed., *National Security Interests in the Pacific Basin*, Hoover Institution Press, 1985; Ralph Cossa and Jane Khanna, “East Asia: Economic Interdependence and Regional Security,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 73, No. 2 (April 1997), pp. 219-234; Aeron L. Friendberg, “Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multi-polar Asia,” *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (1993/1994), pp. 5-33; Barry Buzan, “Security Architecture in Asia: the Interplay of Regional and Global Levels,” *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (June 2003), pp. 143-173. Chinese scholars have also carried out relevant research. Please see Su Hao, *From Dumbbell Structure to Olive Community: Cooperative Security in the Asia-Pacific Region*, Beijing: World Affairs Press, 2003; Liang Yunxiang, “The Current Situation and Conception of Asia-Pacific Security Architecture after the Cold War,” *The Journal of International Politics*, No. 3 (2001), pp. 52-58; Ni Feng, “On the Political and Security Architecture in East Asia,” *The Chinese Journal of American Studies*, No. 3 (2001), pp. 7-23; Liu Xuecheng, “Emerging Asia-Pacific Security Architecture and China’s Asian Diplomacy,” *The Journal of Contemporary Asia-Pacific Studies*, No. 6 (2008), pp. 83-94.

3 Adam P. Liff and G. John Ikenberry, “Racing towards Tragedy? China’s Rise, Military Competition in the Asia-

Pacific and the Security Dilemma,” *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Fall 2014), pp. 52-91.

4 Lluc López i Vidal, *The Theoretical Contribution of the Study Of Regionalism and Interregionalism in the ASEM Process, in Regionalism and Interregionalism in the ASEM context*, Number 23, Serie: Asia, CIDOB, December 2008, p.55.

ed States as its core, has been a key component of the Asia-Pacific security architecture, which can be considered as a multi-tiered “alliance-type” security architecture. The United States henceforth forged an array of bilateral and multilateral military alliances in Europe, Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia and even in South Asia and the Middle East. In the Asia-Pacific region, the US-led alliance system is called the “hub-and-spokes system”, where the United States is positioned in the center of the hub while its allies are placed at the end of the spokes. This system features bilateral cooperation between the US and its allies without horizontal linkage between them. The rationale behind this system lies in the “threat-response” paradigm employed and favored by American scholars, that is, the alliance system is a rational response sparked by common threats.

After the end of the Cold War, this framework has become unsuited to the needs of American security interests in the Asia-Pacific region. Technically, the US chose to admit allied countries to the development and deployment of “Theater Missile Defense System” and thus get these allies connected with a network system. Meanwhile, the United States could directly round up its allies to engage in multilateral consultations on regional security issues and strive to make a mechanism out of such arrangements so as to forge a de facto multilateral alliance. After undergoing the shift of strategic focus and the “neglect” of the Asia-Pacific region when President George W. Bush held office, the Obama administration adamantly viewed strengthened ties with its allies as an indispensable “pillar” in the “returning to the Asia-Pacific” and the “Asia-Pacific rebalancing” strategies. Constructing a new regional security architecture is part and parcel of the Asia-Pacific “rebalancing” strate-

gy pursued by the Obama administration.⁵ It can be easily seen that the bilateral alliance system between the US and the Asia-Pacific region has taken on an obvious development trend into a comprehensive network. In this case, security cooperation between allied countries was institutionalized, horizontal links increased significantly, mini-lateral and multilateral cooperation was carried out between the US and its allies as well as between allied countries, thus making the single-track connection in the “hub-and-spokes” system into a crisscrossing and integrative network.⁶ This alliance network not only consolidated the well-established US-Japan, US-South Korea and US-Australia bilateral alliances but also constructed multiple triple-lateral cooperation frameworks involving the American alliance with Japan and South Korea, the American alliance with Japan and Australia, the American alliance with Japan and India, the American alliance with Japan and ASEAN as well as among “quasi-allies”. Some scholars call it as the “mini-lateralism” diplomacy pursued by the Obama administration.⁷

Since Donald Trump inaugurated in 2017, the U.S. unfolded new vision of regional security architecture. After Trump’s first trip to Asia in November 2017, the Indo-Pacific started to take shape as the geopolitical and concep-

5 Hillary Clinton, “Remarks on Regional Architecture in Asia: Principle and Priorities,” Imin Center-Jefferson Hall Honolulu, Hawaii, January 12, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/01/135090.htm>.
“Hagel Describes Role of Partnerships in Asia-Pacific Rebalance,” April 2, 2014. <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/article/2014/04/20140402297291.html#axzz3xW4tjcQQ>.

6 Sun Ru, “The Asia-Pacific Alliance Network of the US and Its Prospects,” *International Studies*, No.4 (2012), p.39.

7 Zhang Yong, “A Brief Analysis on the Asia-Pacific ‘Mini-lateralism’ Diplomacy under the Obama Administration,” *The Chinese Journal of American Studies*, No.2 (2012), pp. 66-67.

tual background of US security and strategic involvement in Asia. The former “Asia-Pacific” became the “Indo-Pacific” for Washington’s defence and security policy planners.⁸ In the Trump era, quadrilateral cooperation, the so-called “Quad”, has been revived. Actually the so-called “Quad” originated in 2004 when militaries from Australia, India, Japan and the US engaged in joint humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) operations after the Boxing Day Indian Ocean tsunami, but the turning point for the materialization of the Quad was 2006. In May 2006 senior officials from Australia, India, Japan and the United States arranged an inaugural Quad meeting on the sidelines of the ARF in Manila to discuss ways to take the four-power relationship forward. However, due to big and unbridgeable divergence of interest and domestic political changes, the Quad dissipate quickly. Much has changed since then. In November 2017, diplomats from Australia, India, Japan and US gathered for working-level consultations alongside the East Asia Summit(EAS) in Manila. The four governments held quadrilateral consultations in May and November 2018 on the margins of the Shangri-La Dialogue and EAS, respectively. As argued by some scholars, “The Quad is a symbolically and substantively important addition to an existing network of strategic and defense cooperation among four particularly capable democracies of the Indo-Pacific.”⁹

In the meantime, traditional land powers represented by China and Russia, after undergoing a succession of adjustment and coordination in the post-Cold War security relations, have gradually formed a “partnership-orient-

ed” security architecture totally different from the US-led alliance system. Moreover, both sides have constantly deepened their efforts in mechanism construction with substantial achievements. This has constituted a new picture of a promising Asia-Pacific security architecture. From a conceptual perspective, this collaboration-based security architecture differs greatly from the alliance-based security system advocated by the United States. Some scholars prefer to call the process of achieving regional order and peace according to the will and wishes of most countries as a “Chinese-style collaborative security model”. This model includes the concepts shared by the community, the practices of actors’ endeavor to preserve or promote the order objectives as well as the interaction to coordinate various actors within the basic mechanism framework of society.¹⁰ For all a touch of idealism, this model is geared to the actual needs of complicated security relations in the Asia-Pacific region.

Chinese government has also been attaching great importance to reforming regional security architecture in recent years. In March 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping paid a state visit to Russia and the two countries issued the “China-Russia Joint Statement on Achieving Mutually Beneficial Cooperation and Comprehensively Deepening the Strategic Partnership of Coordination”, which clearly stated, “the top priority on the regional agenda is to build an open, transparent, even-handed and inclusive framework for security cooperation in accordance with the basic principles of the international law.” Both sides agreed to continue their joint work so as to adopt the

8 Geopolitics by other means: The Indo-Pacific reality, edited by Axel Berkofsky and Sergio Miracola, ISPI, February 2019.

9 Jeff Smith, “The Return of the Indo-Pacific Quad”, *The National Interest*, July 26, 2018.

10 Zhu Ning, “A Comparative Analysis on the Three Modes of East Asia Security Cooperation—Alliance Security, Cooperative Security and Collaborative Governance Security,” *World Economics and Politics*, No. 9 (2009), pp. 56-57.

“East Asia Summit Declaration of Principles on Strengthening the Asia-Pacific Regional Security Cooperation.”¹¹ Thereafter, at the 8th East Asia Summit held in October 2013, China and Russia formally proposed the establishment of the security cooperation framework in the Asia-Pacific region. Although the designing of the new Asia-Pacific regional security architecture was still in its infancy, this proposal put forward by China and Russia was of paramount strategic significance to the building of a new order in the Asia-Pacific region.¹²

On October 10, 2013, Chinese Premier Li Ke-qiang remarked at the 8th Session of the East Asia Summit held in Brunei — given multiple structures of economic cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region, it is imperative that the regional security architecture be established to meet the actual needs of different parties in line with their specific national conditions. This is the first time for the head of the Chinese government to put forward the initiative of building the security architecture in the Asia-Pacific. This move not only displays China’s strengthened capacity for agenda-setting but also manifests China’s aspirations to assume responsibilities for regional security with more active participation and endeavor. On January 11, 2017, Chinese government released a white paper on “China’s Policies on Asia-Pacific security cooperation”, which further demonstrates China’s security vision and policy in the region, and clearly elaborates the necessity and dimensions to improve the

regional security framework.¹³ Although the subject of building the regional security architecture has been mentioned by both parties, it is evident that China and the United States have diametrically different orientations and objectives to pursue.

In recent years, China’s “Belt and Road” initiative and Russia’s “Eurasian Union” strategy marked the tentative attempt and the early start with integration and adjustment of the “collaborative” security architecture under the new geo-strategic situation. The current intersection of these two strategies mainly focuses on the economic field with connectivity and cooperation between the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “Eurasian Economic Union” as the highlights. But against the background of Russia’s pushing forward “pivoting to the East” strategy in response to the US “returning to the Asia-Pacific” strategy as well as Russia’s willingness to cooperate with China in safeguarding maritime rights and interests, China and Russia will have greater potentials and prospects for cooperation under the framework of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. This strategic partnership is not just “convenient”.¹⁴ In this case, these strategic initiatives will serve as a new platform for both countries to develop a comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination and meanwhile mark the restructuring of geo-economy and geopolitics in the Asia-Pacific region and even the Eurasian continent at large by such emerging economies as China and Russia.¹⁵ Relevant security

11 “China-Russia Joint Statement on Achieving Mutually Beneficial Cooperation and Comprehensively Deepening the Strategic Partnership of Coordination,” Chinese Government Network, March 22, 2013 http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2013-03/23/content_2360484.htm.

12 Liu Qingcai and Zhao Xuan, “Strategic Thinking of China-Russia’s Pushing Forward the Establishment of Asia-Pacific Security and Cooperation Architecture,” *Northeast Asia Forum*, No. 3 (2014), pp. 32-41.

13 China’s State Council Information Office, *China’s Policies on Asia-Pacific security cooperation*, January 11, 2017.

14 Michael Cox, “Not just ‘convenient’: China and the Russia’s new strategic partnership in the age of geopolitics,” *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, Vol 1, Number 4, 2016, pp.317-334.

15 Jacob Stokes, “China’s Road Rules: Beijing Looks West towards Eurasian Integration,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 19, 2015, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2015-04-19/china’s-road-rules>.

concepts and system designing advanced by China on the basis of further economic integration, will win more support and popularity and thus give greater momentum to the continued adjustment of the Asia-Pacific security architecture.

The stability of the regional security architecture bears considerable relevance to the strengths of the core countries as well as their respective security strategies and policies. The current changes in the Asia-Pacific security architecture are largely attributed to the impact on the original regional power structure exerted by China's rapid rise. According to the classical theory of international relations, as the institutional supply is actually supported by power, so the changes in power structure will inevitably lead to the transformation of regional security architecture. What is going on in the China-US relationship, be it "power-transfer" or "power-sharing", is indicative of the changed power structure in the Asia-Pacific region. With the increasing escalation of strategic competition between China and the United States in the Asia-Pacific region, there is a growing and grave concern about the "new Cold War".¹⁶ The security relationship between "alliance-oriented" and "partnership-based" security architecture tends to be interpreted as the fate of the "established country" and the "rising power" as well as the structural contradictions between sea power countries and land power states. However, the Asia-Pacific region may also see smaller actors establishing and dominating the international system.¹⁷ ASEAN, through the construction of a series of multilateral security mechanisms,

has become the "third force" in the Asia-Pacific security architecture, thus providing a platform for dialogue for the two major power-led security architectures and meanwhile playing the role as one of the feasible paths to achieve an integrative Asia-Pacific security architecture in the near future.

The Changing Role of ASEAN in the Asia-Pacific Security Architecture

ASEAN countries have been playing a unique role in the multilateral security cooperation and the "weak mechanism" multilateral security cooperation system established around ASEAN has been serving as a bridge linking the "alliance-oriented" and "partnership-based" security architectures. Ever since its establishment in 1967, ASEAN, as an organization for Southeast Asian countries to jointly fight against communist expansion, has been entrusted with an important security mission. As the sole sub-regional international organization in the Asia-Pacific region during the Cold War, ASEAN has been committing itself to promoting cooperation among its member states as well as the peaceful settlement of disputes over some territory and territorial waters, such as the claims of the Philippines and Malaysia in Sabah. Externally, ASEAN has been trying to avoid sensitive and delicate issues concerning international politics and security, ensure that its member states can carry out effective cooperation in response to common threats and guarantee ASEAN's consistency, independence and flexibility in its external policies. This concept has prevailed till today. After the end of the Cold War, in the context of a rapidly changing strategic situation, Asian countries started to consider the importance of establishing a multilateral security mechanism. The Asia-Pacific security

¹⁶ Geoff Dyer, "US v China: is this the new cold war?" *Financial Times*, February 20, 2014.

¹⁷ Wei Ling, "Small Actors and International Institutions—CICA, ASEAN Regional Forum and Asian Security," *World Economics and Politics*, No.5 (2014), pp. 85-100.

cooperation began to take on a feature of “a distinctive combination of power-politics and institutional approach.”¹⁸ In order to maintain the proper balance of power within the region and ensure regional peace and stability, ASEAN actively explored the ways to establish a dialogue mechanism for regional multilateral security and endeavored to play a leading role.

For a long time, ASEAN has been playing a role as an advocate, communicator and even pace-setter in the Asia-Pacific security architecture. Although ASEAN has only occupied the position as a “driver” in a wide range of existing security architecture from “10+1”, “10+3” to the East Asia Summit, from the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM+), the role of ASEAN shall never be downplayed. However, Along with the elevation of ASEAN’s status came unprecedented challenges to ASEAN brought about by the big powers competition towards the future Asia-Pacific security architecture. Amitav Acharya from American University, has also expressed his apprehension about the tendency of ASEAN’s weakening role in the regional security architecture. He wrote specially to warn ASEAN that “While ASEAN faces significant challenges, these have less to do with its external environment, such as great power policies and interactions. Much more important are strains in ASEAN’s internal cohesion and capacity, especially owing to its expanded membership and agenda. ASEAN is not without precedent and advantages in dealing with great power politics. Its external environment is actually more helpful to its security role than is commonly portrayed by the pessimists. If ASEAN’s unity holds and it

makes necessary changes to its ambitions and agenda, it should not only survive great power competition, but continue to play a meaningful role in managing that competition, at least in Southeast Asia.”¹⁹

ASEAN’s position in the regional security architecture is being increasingly constrained by its own strategic orientation and the strategic adjustments by major powers. Now facing changes in the regional security configuration brought about by China’s rapid rise and the US Indo-Pacific strategy, countries in East Asia have adopted the “soft balancing” or “institutional balancing” strategy in succession to cope with the constantly changing situation.²⁰ On the one hand, the intensification of the US alliance network and the demonstration of Indo-Pacific strategy from US have played a “deconstruction” role in the “consistency” of ASEAN’s security policy. This has caused tremendous distress to ASEAN which has been attaching great value to “consensus after consultation” because a majority of non-US allies reject being “kidnapped” by the strategic interests rendered by the US alliance network. Donald Trump’s election victory casts doubt on America’s commitment to East and Southeast Asia, adding to long-standing concerns about US staying power. As some American think tanks suggested “the US can take numerous steps to avert disengagement from the region, especially from Southeast Asia.”²¹

18 Nick Bisley, *Building Asia’s Security*, Abingdon/New York: Routledge/International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2009, p. 19.

19 Amitav Acharya, “Doomed by Dialogue? Will ASEAN Survive Great Power Rivalry in Asia,” *The Asan Forum*, <http://www.theasanforum.org/doomed-by-dialogue-will-asean-survive-great-power-rivalry-in-asia/> “ASEAN can survive great-power rivalry in Asia,” October 4, East Asia Forum, 2015, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2015/10/04/asean-can-survive-great-power-rivalry-in-asia/>.

20 Derek McDougall, “Responses to ‘Rising China’ in the East Asian Region: Soft Balancing with Accommodation,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 21, No. 73, January 2012.

21 Patrick M. Cronin and Anthony Cho, *Averting Disengagement: A Geoeconomic Strategy for the Trump Administration in Southeast Asia*, Center for a New American Security, 2017.

ASEAN's position in the regional security architecture is being increasingly constrained by its own strategic orientation and the strategic adjustments by major powers.

One the other hand, China has been attaching greater importance to the construction of an Asian security architecture with CICA as the firm basis, to the reshaping of security order in the Eurasian continent by employing the strategy of the "Belt and Road" initiative as well as the forging of "strategic countries of fulcrum" in its neighborhood security. All these moves have generated concerns about ASEAN's weakening position in the Asia-Pacific security architecture.

As a whole, the role of ASEAN is changing correspondingly in the current transition of the Asia-Pacific security architecture. This is not only a passive response to the changes in regional power structures but also a natural outcome when ASEAN's own concepts and practices choose to fit in well with a new strategic environment. At present, China and the United States have once again stood at the strategic "crossroad", but this time the strategic consensus established over the past 40 years has loosened with the likelihood of sliding into the "new Cold War". Under such circumstances, ASEAN's status in the regional security architecture is also facing new and significant changes.

As perceived by American strategist G. John Ikenberry, the Asia-Pacific region in the future needs to map out a more ambitious framework acceptable to both countries which can accommodate the US-led alliance system and multilateral security mechanism. In the meantime, the new region order will empow-

er China with greater authority and discourse power as well as satisfy middle powers in between China and the United States. Such a grand architecture is beyond the command of either China or the United States, because Japan, South Korea and ASEAN will decide "how deep we want the US involvement, how China should act the way we wish and how to find a system that allows China and the United States to engage in consecutively."²² A multi-tiered, crisscrossing "spaghetti bowl"-like regional security architecture will run parallel. Moreover, new and functional multilateral security mechanisms are bound to emerge along with the increasing importance of specific security issues such as maritime security. In this intricate security system, ASEAN's centrality will be continuously maintained and strengthened.

Against this backdrop, it is of paramount importance for China, the US and other major countries to "reassure" ASEAN's centrality in the regional security architecture. Xu Bu, the former Chinese ambassador to ASEAN, wrote in the Straits Times in 2015 to expound on the significance of maintaining ASEAN's centrality to East Asia and the Asia-Pacific region.²³ on the significance of maintaining ASEAN's centrality to East Asia and the Asia-Pacific region. The US government recently announced the invitation to ASEAN leaders to co-host the "US-ASEAN Summit" in February 2016 at a California resort. In the view of Nina Hachigian, the former US ambassador to ASEAN, this gesture reflected the "new normal" of President Obama's Asia-Pacific strategy.²⁴ Even in

22 G. John Ikenberry, "Liberal International Order should be Strengthened to Integrate Rising China," an interview by Yoichi Kato, Asahi Shimbun, September 13, 2013, <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/views/opinion/AJ201309130001>.

23 Xu Bu, "ASEAN Centrality Matters for East Asia Cooperation," The Strait Times, December 29, 2015.

24 Prashanth Parameswaran, "A 'Special' US-ASEAN Summit in

the grand Indo-Pacific strategy, “the states of ASEAN are pivotal to any debate about the future of the Indo-Pacific. Geographically, diplomatically and strategically, ASEAN sits at the heart of this important region.”²⁵ At the 34th ASEAN summit which was held in Bangkok on June 23 2019, member-states disclosed its outlook for the Indo-Pacific, officially termed the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). It emphasizes the importance of the maritime domain in the regional architecture and ASEAN’s centrality.²⁶ In recent years, ASEAN’s centrality also clearly reflects in the interregional cooperation between Europe and Asia. The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is a novel example to articulate ASEAN’s role and contribute to the evolving regional architectures.

The Rising Importance of ASEM and China’s Position

Since its establishment in 1996, ASEM has been playing an important role as a highly influential interregional cooperation mechanism in the Asia-Pacific region. It conforms to the situation of economic globalization and regional integration and has an increasingly important role in the establishment of new-type partnerships on two continents, the development of civilized dialogue, the enhancement of mutual understanding, and the promotion of economic and trade cooperation. It can be said that the establishment of a new equal Asia-Europe partnership marked by the Asia-Europe Meeting after the end of the Cold War is not an accident, but the result

of the synergy of various international factors.

Firstly, with the transformation of the world pattern, the peace and development era has provided a favorable international environment for the Asia-Europe relations. Secondly, the world economy is mainly consistent of three pillars— Western Europe, North America and East Asia. There is an urgent need for an Asia-Europe cooperation mechanism to connect East Asia and Western Europe. Thirdly, the sustained and rapid development of East Asia’s economy has narrowed the economic gap. The mutual complements in economy between East Asia and Western Europe has been enhancing. The huge market of East Asia and the capital and technology of Western Europe have promoted profound interdependence and cooperation between them. Finally, changes in cultural concepts have laid a cultural foundation for the accelerated development of Asia-European cooperation.²⁷ It is due to the benign international environment and needs of both sides that have contributed to the development of the new equal partnership between Asia and Europe which consists of equality, mutual benefit and cooperation and started the ASEM cooperation process towards the 21st century.

The world is moving towards a historical juncture. On the one hand, with the rising status of the east and the declining of the west in the international pattern and the further development of the world multi-polarization, the global governance system and international order are changing towards a more just and rational direction. On the other hand, the world economy lacks growth momentum and the economic globalization has suffered setbacks and the

Sunnylands in 2016?” *The Diplomat*, December 25, 2015.

25 Julia Bishop, “ASEAN: The nexus of the Indo Pacific”, Asia Society Speech, New York, March 8, 2018. Available at: https://foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/Pages/2018/jb_sp_180308.aspx?w=tb1CaGpkPX%2FIS0K%2Bg9ZKEg%3D%3D

26 Prashanth Parameswaran, Assessing ASEAN’s New Indo-Pacific Outlook, *the Diplomat*, June 24, 2019.

27 Yu Jianhua, Evaluation of the development of ASEM mechanism in the new century, *Journal of International Relations*, Number 4, 2016.



ASEM member states represent 65% of the global economy and 55% of the global trade, which means that they depend on a liberal and rules-based global world order.

polarization between rich and poor has become increasingly serious. The wind of trade protectionism is blowing and the downside risks are increasing with more uncertainties and instability factors. The regional hotspots are on the rise and non-traditional threats to security are still grim. Therefore, under the current international situation, the Asia-Europe cooperation has a more far-reaching significance.

Compared with other regional cooperation mechanisms, ASEM is a typical representative of interregionalism.²⁸ Globalization and regional integration are important reasons for the development of interregionalism. And this development will affect the structure of the

international system and the construction of identity within the region. Under the current complex and changing international environment and the competition among major powers, the importance of ASEM appears gradually. ASEM formed at the end of the Cold War and the rise of economic globalization. The multilateralism and the open world economy are the foundations and the always popular themes of this meeting. In this era, ASEM can respond well to unilateralism and protectionism and resolutely safeguard the international order of multilateralism and also respect the central position of the UN and its Security Council in global governance. Faced with complex and serious development problems and non-traditional security issues, Asian and European countries need to strengthen unity and coordinate actions on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and issues such

²⁸ Hainer Hanggi, Ralf Roloff & Jurgen Ruland, eds, *Interregionalism and International Relations*, London: Routledge, 2006.

as climate change. In terms of global economic governance, Asia and Europe should always hold high the standard of the open world economy and safeguard a fair and non-discriminatory multilateral trading system to promote the establishment of an open and inclusive regional free trade arrangement and an open world economy and accelerate the construction of a unified market in Asia and Europe, opposing various forms of protection. These are important prerequisites for sustainable growth in Asia and Europe. In addition, ASEM's promotion of interoperability and interactions and mutual learning is very essential for the economic development and social progress of European and Asian countries. Facing new challenges and new opportunities, it is high time to deepen cooperation between Asia and Europe.²⁹

China is always the firm supporter of ASEM. Its position and policy on Asia-Europe cooperation has not changed. From 1996, China has played a significant role in the ASEM process. China has not only actively supported ASEM activities but has also added significant weight to the Asian side of ASEM. Indeed, one of the primary objectives in forming ASEM was the deepening of Chinese engagement with the international system.³⁰ For China, ASEM's principle of equal partnership with Europe in the areas of the economy, politics and culture has been highly appreciated.³¹ China is also a staunch supporter of interregionalism and multilateralism. ASEM's trans-regional coop-

eration model has offered a new impetus to globalization and will contribute to political mutual trust, economic cooperation, cultural and educational exchanges and mutual learning between Asian and European countries and promote the development of multilateralism and multi-polarization. Determinacy and positive energy are provided for the current uncertain international situation. In the context of China-U.S. intensified strategic competition, China's support to the ASEM does not mean to exclude the U.S. out of the region and establish a new political and economic world order that is only profitable to China. China refers to use this platform to promote economic cooperation between Asia and Europe and meet together the challenges brought about by the uncertainty of world development. Over the years, China has also seen the platform as vital to promote economic cooperation. What can facilitate this vision is the Chinese BRI initiative. This initiative conforms to the trend of globalization, the global governance system reform demand of the times, and the aspirations of people of all countries to live a better life. At the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, Chinese President Xi Jinping emphasized that China will not implement this initiative alone. He repeatedly mentioned the word "cooperation" and invited foreign and private sector partners to participate more and also called for more multilateral and commercial financing for the BRI infrastructure projects. It will lay the foundation for future cooperation among big countries such as China, the United States and Europe. BRI has become an important platform for the in-depth cooperation between Asia and Europe and will also ease strategic competition among major countries to some extent. Next year, the 13th ASEM will be held in Cambodia. The meeting will be very crucial in the background of the dramatic changes in the

29 Zhang Jun, "New challenges, new opportunities to deepen cooperation between Asia and Europe", *People's Daily*, Oct. 11, 2018.

30 Bart Gaenes, Gauri Khandekar eds, *Inter-Regional Relations and the Asia-Europe Meeting(ASEM)*, Palgrave macmillan, 2017, pp.220-221.

31 Louis Brennan and Philomena Murray eds, *Drivers of Integration and Regionalism in Europe and Asia: comparative perspectives*, London: Routledge, 2015, pp.315-316.

international situation and relations between major powers. Its importance is obvious. It will help Asian and European countries strengthen their new partnerships, promote deeper and more substantive cooperation between Asia and Europe and enhance the stability of the world peace and development with the certainty of Asia-Europe cooperation and the consistency of multilateralism maintenance.

“ASEM’s trans-regional cooperation model has offered a new impetus to globalization and will contribute to political mutual trust, economic cooperation, cultural and educational exchanges and mutual learning between Asian and European countries and promote the development of multilateralism and multi-polarization.”

As Cambodia Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn said “It is an important forum to promote cooperation between the two continents and will provide many opportunities that benefit Cambodia”. China has expressed staunch support for Cambodia in hosting the next ASEM summit, and believe it will definitely be a great success, contribute to the interregional architecture building and open a new era for Asia-Europe cooperation.