



Reading time: 9 minutes*

Prospects on Cambodia's Chairmanship of ASEM Summit 2020

Perspectives from Dr. Sok Siphana

Dr. Sok Siphana¹

¹ **Dr. Sok Siphana** is a practicing attorney and the Managing Partner at SokSiphana&associates/a Member of Zicolaw, a law and consulting firm specialized in international trade, corporate and banking law in Phnom Penh.

Dr. Sok was appointed by Prime Minister Samdech Techo Hun Sen to hold concurrently the position as Advisor of the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC), as Advisor to the Supreme National Economic Council (SNEC), and as Advisor to the Council for Development of Cambodia (CDC) with rank of Minister in August 2009 and November 2011 respectively. In September 2018, he was reappointed as Senior Advisor to the Royal Government of Cambodia with rank of Senior Minister.

Previously from 1999 to 2005, Dr Sok served as Secretary of State at the Ministry of Commerce, where he worked extensively on issues related to trade policies and development, commercial legal framework and economic integration. During his service at the Ministry, he was also a negotiator in Cambodia's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). From October 2005 to July 2009 he served as Director at the International Trade Center (ITC) a joint technical agency of the UNCTAD and the WTO in Geneva, Switzerland.

From 2011 to March 2018, he served as the Chairman of the Board of Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI), Cambodia's oldest and prominent independent research institute. From January 2019, he was elected to be the Chairman of the Board of the Asian Vision Institute, a newly established policy think tank in Cambodia. Dr. Sok is holder of a Juris Doctor (J.D.) from Widener University School of Law in Delaware, United States (1992) and a Ph.D. from Bond University School of Law in Queensland, Australia (2009). He is also currently pursuing a Ph.D. degree on Comparative Laws with the Université de Paris 2, Panthéon-Assas.

Introduction

I have the opportunity to follow the evolution of ASEM since 2011, a few years after my return from Geneva, when the Government requested me to advise the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on foreign policy matters. My first impression of ASEM back then was a bit disappointing and unpleasant. The text negotiation of the Chairman Statement for the 9th ASEM Summit in Vientiane, Lao PDR was confrontational and long drawn. We spent three days and one night to negotiate the text and we took turn to sleep. At one point I had to say something very harsh: "None of us will be able to receive our leaders when they arrived in the morning, if we could not clear the Statement." Ultimately, we did finish on time by the early morning and the Summit went well. I must say that ASEM comes a long way since the Vientiane Summit in 2012 and we kept learning along the way about how to make ASEM more effective. We talked about streamlining and making ASEM more efficient. We convened a Bangkok symposium to that effect; we agreed on the "Bangkok Initiative on Future Direction of ASEM", then we had the "Chongqing Initiative"; recently we drew a lot of lessons from the "EU study on ASEM in 20 years". ASEM has been a long journey of learning and improvement and it will continue to be so in many decades to come.

By now ASEM's value and importance in today's politics, diplomacy, and inter-regional relations is uncontested, after playing a key role for more than two decades as a forum for dialogue and cooperation connecting Asia and Europe. Since its inception in 1996 ASEM has changed significantly to adapt itself to the fast transforming global environment marked by an increasingly multipolar world, and a progressively more interdependent Asian region.

Its membership has been enlarged substantially along with an expanding European Union. In terms of substance, the process is now covering much more ground, reflecting newly emerging global challenges that Asia and Europe need to tackle, some separately and some together. Moreover, ASEM has taken incremental steps to strengthen coordination and to translate its informal dialogue process into tangible outcomes and common policies.

ASEM Benefits

The question I have heard regularly from Cambodians from different walks of life is very simplistic. What is ASEM to Cambodia? What is it for us?

Cambodia has joined ASEM since the 5th ASEM Summit in 2004 in Vietnam because we value ASEM as an important forum for region-to-region cooperation that offers numerous benefits for Cambodia. After all, ASEM provides Cambodia an excellent venue to promote Cambodia's image in the international arena. The recent Summit in Brussels was attended by the Heads of State and Government, or their high-level representatives, of 28 European Union states and 21 Asian countries, the President of the European Commission and the Secretary-General of ASEAN. That is an impressive gathering of leaders whose countries represent around 62.3 per cent of the world's population, 57.2 per cent of the global GDP and almost 60 per cent of the world's trade.

Our Prime Minister, Samdech Techo Hun Sen, has always placed a paramount importance on attending the ASEM Summits, from the very beginning starting with Hanoi, Helsinki, Beijing, Brussels, Vientiane, Milan, Ulaanbaatar, and Brussels. For him the relevancy of ASEM is obvious when it comes to oppor-



The photo shows the Win Win monument, which is a symbol of peace in Cambodia.

tunities for bilateral encounters and frank exchanges at the ASEM retreat sessions. I can say “relevancy at the high level” is there. I recalled when we were on the way back from Milan, the Prime Minister said to our delegation that “...we come all the way to Milan, we chartered a special flight to Hong Kong and then we flew on commercial flight with a big delegation and I got to deliver a speech at the plenary and the retreat for only eight minutes. But it is all at the bilateral meetings that I was able to speak frankly on many issues crucial for Cambodia, and I could say “Yes” it was well worth the trip.”

Why Host the ASEM Summit?

In fact, Samdech Techo Hun Sen placed a special interest to hosting the Summit one day when the occasion arises. That is why, at the last Summit in Brussels, he officially announced Cambodia's offer to host the Summit. The announcement was very much appreciated and welcomed by all ASEM Leaders. Why did he decide to offer hosting the 13th

ASEM Summit in Cambodia in 2020?

Hosting the ASEM Summit is on a voluntary basis and it takes turn every two years between Asia and Europe. It's quite an ambitious task to host such a huge Summit, with the participation of 53 Leaders. It will definitely require a lot of resources to cope with the organizational challenges, i.e. budgetary resources, human resources, technical support, physical facilities, high level protocol and utmost security details, etc.

Admittedly, with all these efforts, Cambodia will gain a lot in return as well. This Summit will become the biggest historical event ever to be held in Cambodia's contemporary history. It will bring great honour and recognition for our nation indeed. Obviously, we had organised successfully in the past many regional and sub-regional Summits, such as the ASEAN Summits in 2002 and 2012, but they were not as huge as compared to this ASEM Summit. The maximum was 27 countries, here I mean at the top leaders' level.

More importantly, hosting the Summit is an excellent opportunity to assert Cambodia's role at its highest level of involvement in the international arena. It demonstrates our country's active engagement in the ASEM framework on the basis of equal partnership with all its members. It will also reflect Cambodia's continued commitment through the ASEM process to address today's global challenges and to seek opportunities to further strengthen dialogue and cooperation among ASEM partners and beyond.

Why Host other ASEM Related Events?

Enhancing visibility and awareness of ASEM is extremely important so as to promote a better understanding of what ASEM is and does. The same idea goes with the need to improve the quality of ASEM's public profile in relation to all the ASEM stakeholders. Whether they are coming from parliaments, civil society groups, media, youth and women, business and academic communities, all of their inputs can help support and promote the ASEM agenda.

As the host country, Cambodia has planned to organise seven side events, which are traditional practices of the ASEM process, namely: (1) the Asia-Europe Parliamentary Partnership Meeting; (2) the Asia-Europe Economic and Business Forum; (3) the ASEM Young Leaders Summit; (4) the ASEM Editors' Roundtable; (5) the Asia-Europe Labour Forum; (6) the Asia-Europe People's Forum, and (7) the ASEM Cultural Festival.

Of the seven events, the "Asia-Europe Parliamentary Partnership Meeting" will be the other high profile ASEM event which will

bring together parliamentarians from all the 51 countries. The "Asia-Europe Economic and Business Forum" will further strengthen private sector participation to deepen business-to-business cooperation, with a special focus on small-and-medium enterprises between the two continents. In the past, there was an opportunity to have a representative of the business summit to present the business sector's recommendations directly to the Leaders at the summit. The ASEM Young Leaders Summit, in addition, will further empower the role and participation of young people through a "model ASEM".

Moreover, the exciting flagship event that will catch the attention of the ASEM delegates will probably be the memorable "ASEM Cultural Festival". Last year, in conjunction with the 12th ASEM Summit in Brussels, the "ASEM Cultural Festival" was launched under the theme "Europe meets Asia, Asia meets Europe". For its part, Cambodia will seize the occasion to promote this event as its "Cultural Diplomacy". There is no doubt that cultural diplomacy and cultural cooperation can act as an engine for social and economic development, especially by fostering cooperation amongst European cities and Asian cities, which are all so rich in cultures. I am quite certain that Cambodia will organise magnificent and breathtaking events in Siem Reap, where ASEM delegates can appreciate our ancient civilisation through the marvels of the Angkor Wat Temples Complex, and the richness of our Cambodian culture intertwined in an inter-cultural dialogue among other ASEM partners. For me, the thought of this is in itself exciting. I look forward to enjoying the moment at that ASEM Cultural Festival.

What Lies Ahead Leading to the ASEM Summit?

A lot of things are happening in the world now and will continue to unravel to the time of the next Summit in Cambodia. The world economy still faces growing uncertainties and destabilizing factors. On the European side, the European parliamentary elections will see some new leadership team at the helm. Europe still has yet to feel the possible fallout of Britain's exit from the European Union. The problem of refugees and illegal migrants are getting thorny. A host of other more worrisome challenges like terrorism and violent extremism are more deadly than ever.

Worse yet the US-China trade war and their battle for supremacy on high tech has just begun and smaller economies that are relying on trade with either one or both of these super powers are really worried. The global and regional supply chains will for sure be affected, but to what extent we don't know yet. How will they affect these countries' aspiration to ride the trends of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the picture is not clear yet. When trade shrinks, we are less prosperous and less generous. Then, how will we finance the high cost of our ambitious climate change adaptation programs and the SDGs? Still a lot of question marks.

But not all is doom and gloom. When there is a risk, there is also an opportunity. As the world undergoes complex changes with profound adjustments in the global economy and the reconfiguration of international order, opportunities will also arise. A new wave of scientific and technological and industrial revolutions is gaining momentum as new technologies, industries and models keep emerging. New sources of growth will emerge. More

economic cooperation will be intensified to keep pace with the times and adapt to the changing trend. The connectivity momentum shows no signs of slowdown. Most European countries are leading in this technological breakthrough. But on the Asian side, we are thriving and have ample financial resources to invest. Together Asian and European partnership opportunities abound.

These are issues for the Asian and European leaders to deliberate. ASEM is a safe place to discuss "unsafe and challenging ideas". The main principles of ASEM - informality, flexibility, mutual respect in the spirit of consensus, equal partnership and mutual benefit - are all the more conducive for these spontaneous exchanges. In the past, crisis have brought Leaders together in very unexpected ways. I recall the ASEM Summit in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. The focus of the Leaders' discussions was shaped by the Nice terrorism attack the night before. A day earlier, the ASEM SOM stayed up until three o'clock in the morning to negotiate the Chair Statement until the projector burned, and we did not agree on Japan's stand-alone Statement on Terrorism... until the news of the Nice attack the next morning. Needless to say, everybody reached consensus to issue the stand-alone statement.

So I believe ASEM Leaders will be happy to join in frank discussions in the Retreat session, which will offer them a good mechanism to settle "highly conflictual issues" of global and regional pertinence. Moreover, ASEM is a place where they can improve both multi and bilateral relations among themselves. It is a catalyst for pushing deeper connection and inter-dependence between Asia and Europe. In the context of uncertain political changes brought about by protectionism and a reversal globalization by the U.S. and given the

growing importance of Asia to Europe and vice versa, the Leaders will use this important, relevant and useful platform to engage to bring the globalization back on track. There is always the flip side of a coin – the next ASEM Summit here in Cambodia could be the silver lining.

What Does Cambodia Expect From the ASEM Summit?

As host and co-chair with the European Union, Cambodia hopes to have a visionary “Phnom Penh Declaration” that will project ASEM’s narrative of relevance in the 21st century, a compelling vision of a thriving well-connected Asia-Europe marketplace. We don’t have yet a theme for the Summit at this point. It is expected that H.E. Prak Sokhonn, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, will announce it at the upcoming 14th ASEM Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in December of this year in Spain. Indeed, the theme will reflect the common aspiration of all ASEM members to stay true to their mission of building a strong, vibrant and comprehensive partnership as ASEM looks ahead to the next decade of its existence.

Given the content of the Chair’s statement, Cambodia is of the view of having a short, concise, balanced, consensus based, more focused and reflective on “issues that bind rather those that divide”, and we should refrain from issues which do not provide direct benefits to both Asia and Europe.

As a full-fledged active member of ASEAN, we want to highlight the ASEM’s relevance to ASEAN and vice versa. We will have the opportunity to update ASEM Leaders on the outcomes of our ASEAN Summits as well, which by the way will be chaired by Vietnam in 2020. We

will stress ASEAN’s endeavours in expanding its relations with European ASEM partners in furthering engagement with the region through most of our ASEAN-led processes.

ASEM is another opportunity for add fresh impetus to Asia-Europe cooperation at the country-to-country level. To secure new sources of economic growth - product wise, country wise, Cambodia needs to pursue vigorously the “Connectivity” dimension because if we are to deliver on the vision of our Prime Minister Samdech Techo Hun Sen of getting Cambodia to become a middle-income country by 2030, we won’t be able to do it without a strong connectivity linkage. For us, connectivity is an enabler – for development, for improving the quality of life of people, for encouraging greater people-to-people exchanges, for stimulating trade and investments, and indeed for building peace, stability and security. In Cambodia and in the Mekong region, China’s “Belt and Road” Initiative and Japan’s “Quality Infrastructure” are complementing each other.

That is why we need to draw maximum benefit from the recent works of ASEM Pathfinder Group on Connectivity (APGC). We should draw the lessons learned from the APGC’s two years’ worth of productive exchanges as to what constitute a good Connectivity infrastructure projects, i.e. the needs to stress the importance of sustainability and to be in conformity with international standards including open and fair access, economic efficiency in view of life-cycle cost, safety, resilience against natural disaster, job creation, capacity building, social and environmental consideration, alignment with economic and development strategies as a quality benchmark, and make the link with the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). That is a lot to chew, I know, but that is what a good

Connectivity project should be.

As host of the Summit, Cambodia has to work with other like-minded nations to explore areas in which ASEM can make a difference or to put in another way "ASEM added value". As much as ASEM can only function as an incubator for the so-called hard connectivity, private sector cooperation would be the propeller and cornerstone for developing these inter-continental business and investment partnerships. In my view, ASEM, designed mainly as a mechanism for informal dialogue, can take on a more practical dimension in its cooperation, in particular in trade and investment, or in quality infrastructure to achieve sustainable growth, to mention just a few areas.

So far there is a perceived gap between those emphasizing the informal dialogue process, and those seeking to increase concrete joint endeavours. I guess we don't have to choose either one. We can still do both. That is the beauty of ASEM. We can be very macro in term of global high level policy cooperation like tackling climate change and making multilateralism more effective. Yet, at the same time we can be so micro as to what we consider connectivity should be like. All, too often, some tension exists between high expectations and ASEM's limited capabilities. Perhaps promoting or making optimal use of a "Variable Geometry ASEM" through issue-based leadership could enhance the effectiveness of tangible cooperation? How about enhancing more sectoral engagement and dialogue. Leaders have already noted with appreciation the outcomes of various ASEM Ministerial meetings in the areas of Foreign Affairs, Economy, Transport, Education, Culture and Finance. All these efforts taken together clearly demonstrate the important added value that the ASEM framework brings.

Building the Foundation of the Future of ASEM

Here I see clearly the role of the "Asia-Europe Foundation" in empowering the role of young people, women and girls in contributing to sustainable development. ASEF works in the past have produced gratifying results with their vast programs and activities in the educational, cultural and social fields. The role that various stakeholders can play in pursuing social and economic inclusion, sustainable societies and people-centred development is extremely important for the future of a "socially relevant ASEM".

In conclusion, I would stress that ASEM's inherent strengths – in the diversity of its membership, the complementarity of its capacities and resources, the commitment of its political leadership and the strength of its economies, are ground for great optimism. As we look ahead, to the next Summit in Cambodia and the next decade, it is incumbent upon us to ensure that ASEM remains a responsible and positive forum. With vision, ambition and action, Cambodia will work with other ASEM members to actively advance long-term cooperation between Asia and Europe so as to bring more benefits to the people and make even greater contribution to peace, stability, prosperity and development of the world.

