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Germany and ASEM – Engagement and Expectations

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Introduction

The Asia-Europe-Meeting (ASEM) has been an established forum for exchange between Europe and Asia for 20 years.

In order to keep pace in a rapidly changing world, Germany must raise its relations with Asia to a new level. In light of the increasing complexity and importance of economic and security challenges, cooperation at a purely bilateral level does not seem sufficient. It is therefore important to take advantage of the many opportunities offered by increased, institutionalized cooperation.

ASEM could play a central role in deepening European-Asian relations. The key question will be, whether ASEM will become more than the pure dialogue platform it has been until now.

Germany's and Europe's Future Lies in Asia

Not only China, but also its Asian neighbours have undergone rapid economic and social development in recent decades, which has led to the growing importance of the Asia-Pacific region. The golden future of these emerging markets has not just recently been named, but has been characterized by a steadily growing and enormously dynamic development for years.

Asia now accounts for almost two-thirds of the world's gross domestic product, two-thirds of trade and two-thirds of the world's population.

During the last two years, German trade with Asia reached a new peak. Asia and Germany are interconnected economically in many

ways, and there is a continuing mutual interest. This makes great investment potential for German and European companies: With high growth-rates, low inflation and little unemployment, Asian markets offer long-term opportunities and a stable potential for future investment. At the same time, Germany remains one of Asia's most important European trading partners.

Some key economic data illustrate this positive development quite distinctly:

The German-Asian foreign trade increased exceptionally strong in 2018. The trading volume reached a new high of 412.7 billion Euros. At the same time, the share of German trade with Asia in total German foreign trade reached 17.1 percent. In 2018, imports from the Asia-Pacific countries to Germany increased by almost 5 percent and amounted to 214.3 billion Euros. Furthermore, a strong increase in German exports of 6.6 percent, compared with the same period of the previous year, can be recorded. The exports to the Asia-Pacific region reached a total of 198.4 billion euros in 2018. Compared with the total export growth of the Federal Republic of Germany (+3.0%), the Asia-Pacific region recorded an increase more than twice as high in percentage terms. German exports to the ASEAN region increased in 2018 by 11.3 percent to EUR 28.2 billion, compared to the year before. Especially German exports to the Philippines (+26.6%) and Vietnam (+18.0%) have increased recently.²

Accordingly, the importance of technological innovation, economic dynamism and

² Ostasiatischer Verein e.V., "Deutscher Handel mit Asien wächst 2018 überdurchschnittlich", accessed July 17 2019, URL: <https://www.oav.de/meldungen/beitrag-lesen/deutscher-handel-mit-asien-waechst-2018-ueberdurchschnittlich.html>.

networking in Asia for Germany has been stressed several times by the German Government. For instance, on the occasion of the last ASEM summit on 18-19 October 2018 in Brussels, Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel reaffirmed this commitment during a corresponding statement.³

“One can say without a doubt: The future of Germany’s prosperity lies in Asia.”

In addition to the future economic prosperity of Europe, it is also the world’s future peace and security that will be decided in Asia. Europe depends on a strong and stable Asia, both economically and in terms of security policy.

Germany therefore actively promotes confidence-building and détente policy in the strategic dialogue. Multilateral forms of cooperation such as ASEM are the method of choice. Above all, ASEM offers the opportunity to bring together the different positions of EU member states regarding the other members of the meeting and therefore to reduce redundancies.

In addition, the threat posed by international terrorism, cross-border organised crime, migration, piracy and human trafficking is being addressed by Germany in the context of ASEM.⁴ The importance of the Asian states as partners of Europe in solving critical global is-

ues will continue to grow in the future.

Germany shares the European vision set out for a comprehensive strategy to better connect Europe and Asia. Including not only physical connectivity - transportation networks, energy networks and digital networks, but connectivity of services, investments and people. The European approach to lasting connectivity is based on respect for common rules. European-Asian connectivity is the future.

In context of ASEM, Germany’s intentions can accordingly be summarized as to better connect the cultural and economic areas and thereby create new opportunities, to set signals for free trade and against protectionism, to promote peaceful solutions to the conflicts on the Korean peninsula, in the Taiwan strait and in the South China Sea, and to promote human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

The future lies in a strengthened cooperation between Europe and Asia. Nonetheless, due to the increasing complexity and importance of economic and security challenges, it is getting more and more demanding to identify and pursue common European goals.

Bilateral Partnership is not Enough

Germany and many other European countries have a long and far-reaching history of relations with most Asian countries.⁵

But when it comes to Asia as a whole, there can be no narrowly defined uniform concept for German foreign policy. The political, social and cultural diversity calls for diverse

3 Angela Merkel, “Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzlerin Dr. Angela Merkel zum Europäischen Rat am 17./18. Oktober 2018 in Brüssel und zum ASEM-Gipfel am 18./19. Oktober 2018 in Brüssel vor dem Deutschen Bundestag am 17. Oktober 2018 in Berlin,” in Bulletin der Bundesregierung, Nr. 112-1. (Oktober 2018).

4 Auswärtiges Amt, Aufgaben der deutschen Außenpolitik. Südostasien sowie Australien, Neuseeland und Pazifische Inseln am Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts (Berlin: Auswärtiges Amt, 2002), p. 9.

5 Parag Khanna, The Future is Asian (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019), p. 239 ff.

approaches.⁶ Unlike the member states of the EU, the Asian states are hardly linked by supranational organizations. This fact explains the importance of a common dialogue platform like ASEM for Germany to address political issues.

Especially from a European point of view, the Asia-Europe-Meeting is a great opportunity to participate in the dynamics of Asia and to get involved in shaping them. The meeting has developed into the central multiregional discussion forum for Eurasian cooperation. Its number of participants has doubled since the first meeting in Bangkok in 1996⁷ and Germany is committed to continue its active role in the future development of ASEM together with like-minded partners.

The decisive question will be: How can an organisation with currently 53 members unlock its potential for enhanced cooperation? The format lacks the ability to act. It is clear that this can only be improved by a stronger institutional anchoring. However, this institutional weakness should not diminish the basic concept of a forum for inter-governmental discussions on topical issues of European-Asian relations. The open dialogue approach has been ASEAN's strength so far. However, further development is now promising the greatest opportunity. What is necessary now, is a stable institutional body.

As the bridge between Europe and Asia is be-

coming more and more important, its pillars and connecting pieces have to be enhanced to bear heavier burdens in the future. Such a strengthened bridgework would consist both institutionalization and capacity for action.

ASEM could play a central role in deepening European-Asian relations. The decisive question here will be, whether ASEM can further develop to jointly shape policies between Europe and Asia in the future and thus become more than the pure dialogue platform it has been so far.

Potential for Enhanced Institutionalised Cooperation

In recent years, the idea that ASEM should be more action-oriented, has gained more and more importance.

The creation of a permanent ASEM secretariat could be the first step. An increased degree of institutionalization would allow the participating states to coordinate and pool their interests and to speak with one voice. This would simplify negotiating multilateral treaties and agreements. A joint secretariat could not only prepare the ASEM summits, but also coordinate the discussions and the formation of opinion between the summits including the regular specialised experts' meetings involving top level officials from various European and Asian governments. It would also make sense to set up an ASEM secretariat at the most important regional organizations EU and ASEAN. Since increased institutional integration is also expected to increase bureaucracy and generate costs, financing will be a central aspect that needs to be further discussed.

The potential for a more powerful ASEM is

6 Auswärtiges Amt, Asien in der deutschen Außenpolitik, last modified July 07 2015, accessed July 17 2019, URL: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/regionaleschwerpunkte/asien/asien-deutsche-aussenpolitik/217256>.

7 Yeo Lay Hwee, "The 10th ASEM Summit – Paving the Way Towards an Asia-Europe Marketplace?", in *The Future of Asia-Europe Cooperation*, ed. Dr. Wilhelm Hofmeister and Patrick Rueppel, (Singapore: Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung and European Union, 2015), p. 1-6.

manifold. It provides a framework to address challenges of global concern with almost all of Asia at once.

ASEM offers the possibility to pool the various Asian policies (not only) of the EU member states in numerous possibilities for cooperation. However, this can only be effective, if the different positions would be combined in favour of concrete and balanced approaches. Forging these approaches, again requires a body of decision-making. We can no longer stop at rhetorical announcements. What is needed for a vital future of ASEM, is active implementation of determined steps forward.

ASEM is experienced in identifying lowest common denominator in topics involving the majority of its members. Such as international security concerns, terrorism and international crime, but also environmental issues. The EU has four of its official Strategic Partners in Asia (China, India, Japan and Korea) and needs influential Asian partners to address jointly global challenges.

In present and past conflicts it became evident that there are no substantial transnational organizations in the Asian Pacific region that could step in to settle disputes between nation states. However, ASEM has already proven itself as a platform to engage in crisis diplomacy by means of “quiet diplomacy”⁸ - providing the setting for mediation or talks - as well as statements of the Chair, addressing for example the conflict on the Korean Peninsula in its statement of the 11th

ASEM Summit in Ulaanbaatar⁹ or allowing for useful action on water security (e.g. in Danube and Mekong river basin countries).

The importance of the Asian partners for Germany and Europe as partners in tackling the threats of terrorism and international crime will continue to grow with their increasing economic weight and closer cooperation. Germany is eager to further expand, deepen and foster the existing good relations.

The same applies to environmental issues. Within a strengthened framework of ASEM, the climate issue has the potential to be broken down into concrete issues of environmental protection and nature conservation, as all countries in Asia are affected by these issues. Europe could act here as a technology partner for Asia.

2020 – Discussing a strengthened Asia-Europe Meeting

Asia matters to Europe and will do so even more in the future. As noted earlier, Germany's and Europe's economic future is strongly connected with Asia, and the increasing complexity and importance of economic and security challenges around the world seems to condemn cooperation on a purely bilateral level as insufficient. It is therefore inevitable to take advantage of the many opportunities offered by institutionalized cooperation. The potential for a stronger and more institutionalized ASEM is as appealing as it is complex, with topics ranging from multilateral trade treaties, to security policy issues,

8 Michael Reiterer, “Asia Cooperation: Quiet Diplomacy and Conflict Mediation – A European Perspective”, in *The Age of Connectivity – ASEM and Beyond*, ed. Dr. Beatrice Gorawantschy, Megha Sarmah and Patrick Rueppel, (Singapore: Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung, 2016), p. 39-45.

9 ASEM, Chair's Statement to the 11th ASEM Summit, 20 Years of ASEM: Partnership for the Future through Connectivity, Ulaanbaatar: July 15-16 2016, accessed July 17 2019, URL: https://cdn.aseminfoboard.org/documents/Chairs-Statement-ASEM11-adopted_7ajqc3.pdf, paras. 25-27.

to environmental protection. Despite these challenges, ASEM could grow into a platform, where European and Asian stakeholders are able to discuss important future topics, and therefore strengthen the bridge between Europe and Asia.

“Asia matters to Europe and will do so even more in the future.”

The upcoming 2020 ASEM summit in Phnom Penh will be the right time to talk about a stronger institutionalization of ASEM and to discuss opportunities for an enhanced cooperation. Germany and Europe will only be able to defend and keep their prosperity, if we foster and cultivate our interdependence with Asia. There is a lot of potential still to be unlocked in shaping the European-Asian cooperation.

As of today, the German government has already noticed the 2020 ASEM summit in order to look into it more closely. Nevertheless, it is still too far away to make certain statements of how the German government is preparing for the summit, who will be involved in the preparations, if it is treated like a big chance and who will finally travel to Cambodia. Generally speaking, the lead times for detailed planning processes of international conferences are very short. This means that in most cases it is only decided a few weeks or even days before the conference starts, whether the Federal Chancellor will attend it, or whether she will be represented by a Minister or a State Secretary. Whatever the decisions will be – Germany should be willing to actively participate in the process of strengthening ASEM and making it a high-priority project in its own best interest.