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ASEAN in ASEM: The Socialisation of the ASEAN Way?

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Introduction

The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is an inter-governmental process established in 1996 to foster dialogue and cooperation between Asia and Europe. The establishment of ASEM was driven by geo-economic and strategic interests. By the early 1990s, East Asia, Europe and North America had emerged as three dominant poles in the world's economic system.² The three prosperous regions accounted for approximately 85 to 95 percent of global production and trade, finance, foreign investment flow and new technology development.

As the 1990s progressed, the Cold War was receding from international politics, which was increasingly characterised by globalisation and regionalism. As a result, the tripolar relations between East Asia, Europe and North America moved from basic concerns regarding inter-triad power competition towards a more cooperative focused ground. Under President Bill Clinton, the US adopted a more proactive approach toward the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum with a plan to create a transpacific free trade and investment zone. In December 1995, the US and the European Union (EU) adopted the New Transatlantic Agenda, which set in motion a new era in transatlantic relations. Clearly, transatlantic ties which were already quite strong gained more momentum and at the same time transpacific cooperation became increasingly dynamic.

However, the Asia-Europe link of the triangle by comparison was relatively weak. Thus, the perceived original need for this inter-regional relationship primarily arose within this glob-

al-tripolar context. This gave a birth to ASEM. The EU's main motivations for promoting ASEM rested on its anxieties over the prospect of potential geo-economic marginalisation in a transpacific-dominated world economy, as a result of President Clinton's increasing enthusiasm about APEC. In the 1994 Toward a New Asia Strategy, the European Commission (EC) noticed that "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."³

Similarly, East Asia's own motivation for promoting the ASEM idea was to counterbalance American influence in the region and to diversify their international economic relations, especially in the aftermath of the creation of the Single European Market. For the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), ASEM would further promote ASEAN centrality as it adds a new layer to its existing cooperation mechanisms, including APEC and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which centred on ASEAN.⁴

More importantly, ASEAN's role in ASEM has not solely laid in its economic and geopolitical influence but in its ideas and identity, known as the ASEAN way, in shaping the inception of ASEM and in influencing the course of ASEM's institutional development.

Having said that, a large volume of scholarly literature on regionalism and inter-regional cooperation over the past three decades has been influenced and inspired by the EU.

² Christopher M. Dent, "The Asia-Europe Meeting and Inter-Regionalism: Toward a Theory of Multilateral Utility," *Asian Survey* Vol. 44, No.2 (2004): 213-236.

³ European Commission, "Toward a New Asian Strategy," 13 July 1994. Accessed 25 July 2019: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:51994DC0314&from=EN>

⁴ S. Jayakumar, *Diplomacy: A Singapore Experience* (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2011).

These studies, exemplified by the literature on Europe's normative power and the EU's norm-diffusion practices in international relations. Departing from the Eurocentric perspective, this chapter, explores the role of ASEAN in shaping ASEM. More precisely, it attempts to investigate the extent to which the ASEAN Way has been socialised in the ASEM process.

The ASEAN Way

Since its inception on 8 August 1967, ASEAN has generated many optimistic narratives and brought hope to 650 million people in South-east Asia and many more outside the region. Mahbubani and Sng even called ASEAN the "miracle" of the East.⁵ The regional grouping has promoted peace and prosperity to a once troubled region and proven to be the most relevant regional institution in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific at large. ASEAN is an important testimony that countries with different cultures and civilisations as well as bitter historical antagonism can live together in peaceful coexistence and a shared future. Despite diversity, the sense of identity and community has been nurtured among ten ASEAN member states. Diversity has been harnessed to be the strength of this inter-governmental organisation.

ASEAN has provided a reliable security shield for its member states to protect its independence and sovereignty. Mutual respect, mutual consultation, mutual understanding and mutual interest have become the norms and strengths of ASEAN in sustaining a platform or mechanism for dialogue and trust building. The success of ASEAN rests on its open, in-



ASEAN nowadays consists of 10 countries and was created on member of ASEAN on the 30th of April 1999.

clusive and outward-looking nature. ASEAN's success has been partly due to a number of legal norms which have roots in conventional Westphalian international relations. Those legal norms include non-use of force and peaceful settlement of dispute, the principle of non-interference, regional autonomy and collective self-reliance, and the rejection of an ASEAN military pact.⁶ Those norms have gradually enshrined in various ASEAN official documents, including the 1967 Bangkok Declaration, the 1971 Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality, the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), and the ASEAN Carter.

ASEAN's identity has also been formed by its self-perception as the centre of Asia-Pacific regionalism. Such a role has been widely ac-

⁵ Kishore Mahbubani and Jeffery Sng, *The ASEAN Miracle: A Catalyst for Peace* (Singapore: Ridge Books, 2017).

⁶ Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* (London: Routledge, 2014).



the 08th of August 1976. The Kingdom of Cambodia became a

knowledge and appreciated by all of its dialogue partners, mainly due to ASEAN's convening power in the multilateral diplomacy of the region. The strength of ASEAN does not only rely on intra-regional unity but also the support from all dialogue partners. In fact, ASEAN neither poses security threat to any countries nor imposes world-view on others. Over the past decades, ASEAN has cultivated close cooperation with countries and organizations outside the region. As a result, the concept of ASEAN Centrality constitutes one of the prominent guiding principles of ASEAN's external relations. Although, the notion has been contested, ASEAN Centrality means that the regional grouping lies and should remain at the centre of regional institutions in the Asia-Pacific, particularly through ASEAN-led mechanisms, namely the ARF, ASEAN-Plus Three (APT) and the East Asia Summit (EAS).

However, what is unique about ASEAN is the cultural and social norms – known as the ASEAN Way – that have distinguished the regional grouping from other international actors. Although, the meaning of the ASEAN Way is contested, the term is commonly used by ASEAN leaders and scholars to describe the pattern of interaction and to distinguish it from Western forms of multilateralism. According to Acharya, the key characteristics of the ASEAN Way include informality, inclusiveness, intensive consultations based on consensus and less on binding agreements and regulatory frameworks.⁷ These norms and principles have been contested and simultaneously enhanced. Against the odds, these normative underpinnings still guide ASEAN's internal interactions and its relations with the outside world given changes in regional and international dynamics over the past decades.

Warleigh-Lack notes that "ASEAN's socialisation impact is rather impressive."⁸ Throughout ASEAN's evolution, new states have joined this regional organisation and adopted its norms. Moreover, ASEAN has succeeded in norm exportation to third countries. It has also had an impact on the foreign policies of the regional powers, especially countries in Northeast Asia, including China, Japan and South Korea.

ASEM's Soft Institution: The Socialisation of the ASEAN Way?

Generally, international institutions are established and designed to allow states to work together for particular reasons. Institutional

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Alex Warleigh-Lack, "The EU, ASEAN and APEC in Comparative Perspective," in Murray (ed.). *Europe and Asia: Regions in Flux* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008): p.34-35.

design can be a deliberate choice, not a co-incident arrangement, decided by national governments. Koremenos, Lipson and Snidal argue that “states use international institutions to further their own goals and they design institutions accordingly.”⁹ In addition to their influence on institutional design, states’ interests can also shape the course of international institutions. In this regard, Keohane (1988) suggests that the practice of sovereignty by states directly influences the evolution of the institution. Therefore, states choose or design the type of cooperation framework and may adjust it according to their needs in the course of the cooperation.

ASEM is no exclusion. The region-to-region relations between Asian and European countries in the ASEM framework are rather complex. The complexity of the inter-regional relations in ASEM, can be circumvented by the informal design of ASEM. ASEM partners have opted to design the inter-regional forum that to be less institutionalised. This choice is depicted in the first ASEM Summit Chairman’s Statement which read as follow: “The Meeting agreed that inter-sessional activities are necessary although they need not be institutionalised... The Meeting furthermore agreed that follow-up actions to be undertaken by the participants to the ASEM will be based on consensus.”

This might be a result of ASEM’s complexity. ASEM partners consist of not only a large number of countries in Asia and Europe but also a variety of attachments of those participating states to each other. After a series of enlargement, ASEM is currently comprised of 53 partners: 21 Asian countries, including all

ASEAN member states, 28 EU member states, Norway and Switzerland, ASEAN Secretariat and European Union.

In addition to the increase in the number of ASEM partners, the complexity of relations in the ASEM process stems from the distinctive diversity embedded in the large number of participating countries. Asia and Europe have neither geographical proximity, nor cultural similarity. Moreover, ASEM consists of Asian and European groups that are different internally, particularly the former. Therefore, one can argue that the most important factor that helps the Asian and European countries to maintain the ASEM process is its informality.

The informality within ASEM allows leaders and other participants to freely discuss a wide range of topics and explore their common interests. Arguably, an informal forum is intended to create a relaxed atmosphere for meeting participants and to relieve them of any pressure to achieve any particular goals. Given the wide diversity among the ASEM partners, ranging from economic advancement to political values and cultural differences, the informality and the lack of regulatory mechanism also contribute to sustaining the ASEM process.

“The informality within ASEM allows leaders and other participants to freely discuss a wide range of topics and explore their common interests.”

ASEM’s soft institution might be a result of the socialization of the ASEAN Way in the inter-regional forum. Fitriani argues that ASEM was established as a loose institution without any binding mechanism as a precautionary meas-

9 Barbara Koremenos, Charles Lipson and Duncan Snidal, “Rational Design of International Institutions,” *International Organization* Vol.55, No.4 (2001): 761-99, p.762.

ure to anticipate differences among ASEM partners in political values, economic aspects and socio-cultural life and more importantly to adjust the ASEAN way.¹⁰ Despite frequent criticism of the ASEAN way, EU countries seem to tolerate ASEM adopting similar principles, namely informality, non-binding, consensus and inclusiveness.

First, the ASEM institution is characterised by a remarkable informality, which has been written explicitly in various ASEM documents. ASEM has persistently maintained the informal form of institution. This is perhaps due to the role of ASEAN member states in establishing ASEM and in shaping its process as the informality of the ASEM institution is similar to that of the ASEAN institution. More noticeably, in the course of building ASEM, the Asia and European leaders found the need for a more effective working mechanism. They then suggested a series of inter-governmental meetings and adopted the 2000 Asia-Europe Cooperation Framework (AEWCF) that includes the working method of the ASEM process. Despite a coordinating mechanism being stipulated, the ASEM institution has been kept informal. ASEM leaders have kept reaffirming the principle of informality in various ASEM documents. In fact, ASEM has no secretariat.

Second, non-binding principle through consensus has been the normative underpinning of ASEM since its inauguration in 1996. The Chairman Statement of the First ASEM Summit states that “the Meeting further agreed that follow-up actions to be undertaken jointly by the participants to the ASEM will be based on consensus.” These characteristics are very likely influenced by ASEAN. In this regard, Fitri-

ani claims that:

The ASEM institution has been built in accordance with the needs of the Southeast Asian countries, that is, inter-regional relations with the needs of the Southeast Asian countries, that is, inter-regional relations managed by an informality and non-binding principle. Those characteristics mirror the influence of ASEAN on the ASEM institution.¹¹

Indeed, ASEM seems to tolerate the Southeast countries to bring in their ASEAN Way, which have helped to maintain ASEM cooperation. The accommodation of the ASEAN institutional style into the ASEM process encourages the Southeast Asian countries to accept and support ASEM. Moreover, the informality of ASEM institution creates flexibility while the non-binding principle seems to reduce the cost of maintaining cooperation while opening up opportunities for the ASEM partners to develop different kinds of strategic relations.

Third, ASEAN has also promoted inclusiveness in the ASEM enlargement with direct implication on the principles of equal sovereignty and non-interference. The process of Myanmar's accession to ASEM is a good illustration of the role of ASEAN in shaping the ASEM process. The EU's concern about human right issue in Myanmar once dominated the political dialogue in ASEM, especially between ASEAN and the EU. Historically, Myanmar's human rights problem was a key obstacle in ASEAN-EU relations. The suppression of the democratisation movement in the country since the early 1990s had provoked international criticism, including from the EU. Asian ASEM countries, however, rejected Western political intervention

10 Evi Fitriani, *Southeast Asians and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM): State's Interests and Institution's Longevity* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014).

11 Ibid, p.98

and urged that the ASEAN Way is more applicable to the Myanmar case. This issue almost created a deadlock during the 2014 ASEM enlargement. Preceding the 2004 ASEM Summit in Hanoi, the EU unilaterally determined that while ASEM had to accept the EU's new member countries, the inter-regional forum could not automatically accept ASEAN's new member states, especially Myanmar which joined ASEM in 1997. In the 2003 New Partnership with Southeast Asia, the EU stated that:

*The EU and ASEM partners, in particular those of Southeast Asia, will have to meet the challenge of their respective enlargement in time for the 2004 Hanoi Summit. In this regard, it is encouraging to note that the members of ASEAN have recently and publicly expressed their support to the resuming of the national reconciliation process in Burma/Myanmar. Both sides will strive to avoid letting the question of the participation of Burma/Myanmar endanger the ASEM process itself.*¹²

However, the Asian ASEM side argued that, if ten EU new members "were to be accepted automatically as ASEM partners, then so should new ASEAN members which consisted of Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. In March 2004, the informal ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting reached a common position that "We did agree... that no political conditions be attached on their admission to ASEM." Prime Minister Hun Sen also mentioned that Cambodia would not join ASEM unless the two other ASEAN members were accepted at the same time. To the disappointment of many Europeans, Myanmar was admitted to ASEM

at the Hanoi Summit. In this connection, Fitriani articulates the view that the Myanmar case should not be perceived as a power game between ASEAN and the EU but as "a learning process in which the EU countries were willing to learn and respect the perspectives of their counterparts" in Asia.¹³

Finally, ASEAN lexicons have increasingly used in the ASEM process. For instance, the three pillars of the ASEAN Community, namely ASEAN Political and Security Community, ASEAN Economic Community and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, have become the pillar of the ASEM cooperation. Moreover, ASEAN's concept of connectivity – institutional, physical, and people-to-people connectivity projects – has become a priority of ASEM. During the 12th ASEM Summit in Brussels in 2018, ASEM Leaders underlined "the link between ASEM connectivity and sustainable development for achieving the 2030 Agenda... underlined the shared interests of all ASEM partners in strengthening Europe-Asia sustainable connectivity across ASEM's three pillars, as a means of bringing countries, people and societies closer together."

Future Prospects of ASEAN's Role in ASEM

The future role of ASEAN in ASEM will depend not only on the EU's perception of ASEAN but also on ASEAN's role in constructing an Asian identity within ASEM. The changes in the EU's perception of ASEAN have contributed to reshaping the EU's material interest in and behaviours towards Southeast Asia. Traditionally, the EU's perception of ASEAN was rather negative due to the fact that ASEAN laid at the

12 European Commission, "A New Partnership with Southeast Asia," Com (2003) 399/4. Accessed 23 July 2019: http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/library/publications/2004_seasia_en.pdf

13 Fitriani, Southeast Asians and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), p.75.



bottom of the EU's hierarchy of external relations. It was due to the EU's self-perception as a norm-entrepreneur in regionalism and global governance while ASEAN as a norm-recipient.

However, there has been a major change in the EU's perception of ASEAN since 2012. Nuttin pointed out that the EU "shifted a different gear and placed ASEAN firmly on its radar screen."¹⁴ In July 2012, the EU acceded to the TAC and adopted the Plan of Action to strengthen the ASEAN-EU enhanced partnership. In May 2015, the EU adopted a Joint Communication on its relations with ASEAN which stated that the EU has a strategic interest in strengthening its relations with ASEAN because "ASEAN is the heart of the efforts to build a more robust regional security order in the wider Asia-Pacific."¹⁵ Similarly, in its 2017

report, the European Parliament considered ASEAN as "one of the world's most dynamic and fastest-growing region ... a strong advocate of multilateralism... strategically located in international politics."¹⁶

These changes in perception imply that ASEAN's economic and geopolitical role, as well as its socio-cultural norms have incrementally penetrated the EU's understanding of ASEAN. A challenge, however, is that the set of values and norms that ASEAN and the EU advocate are sometimes incompatible. Although the EU has recently adopted a pragmatic approach towards ASEAN, one has to bear in mind that the normative underpinnings of ASEAN differ from those of the EU. Whereas the EU embraces liberal democratic values such as human rights, the rule of law and good governance, ASEAN stresses the norms of non-interference, respect for state sovereignty. On top of that, the EU has not provided ASEAN a co-

¹⁴ Xavier Nuttin, *The Future of EU-ASEAN Relations* (Brussels: European Parliament Think Tank, 2017). Accessed 23 July 2019: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/578043/EXPO_STU\(2017\)578043_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/578043/EXPO_STU(2017)578043_EN.pdf)

¹⁵ European Commission, "Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU and ASEAN: A Partnership with a Strategic Purpose," 18 May 2015. Accessed 24 July 2019: [https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/abaf503d-fd58-11e4-a4c8-](https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/abaf503d-fd58-11e4-a4c8-01aa75ed71a1/language-en)

[01aa75ed71a1/language-en](https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/abaf503d-fd58-11e4-a4c8-01aa75ed71a1/language-en)

¹⁶ European Parliament, "On EU Political Relations with ASEAN," 28 June 2017. Accessed 23 July 2019: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2017-0243_EN.html

herent message and clear strategy to ASEAN. Some member states of ASEAN do not quite understand what the EU wants to achieve and what role it wants to play in the region. If the EU desires to promote liberal democratic values, it should do so fair and square without double-standards to countries in the region. If the EU wants to promote its strategic and geo-economic interests in the Asia-Pacific, it should not do so under the guise of democratic values.

ASEAN's role in ASEM will also depend on the relevance of ASEAN in the wider Asia-Pacific. In fact, while external pressure from European participants in the ASEM process encouraged a more solid voice of Asian participants, the driving stimulus to group among Asian participants can also come from within. There were also cultural differences in the interactions in ASEM. The general perception within the Asian ASEM side is that the Europeans tend to behave openly whereas the Asians are more reserved and likely to group among Asians. As a result, Asian participants prefer to mingle with other Asian people at ASEM forums because they are more familiar with them. Lee and Park argue that through inter-regional forums, such as ASEM, Asian countries established an Asian identity.¹⁷ Similarly, Gilson and Yeo suggest that the Asian coordinating mechanism of the ASEM process has helped create self-identification of "we" among Asian participants as their European counterparts acted as the "other".¹⁸

So far, ASEAN has played an important coordinating role not only within the Asian ASEM side but also in the regionalism and multilateral cooperation in the Asia-Pacific through ASEAN-led frameworks such as the APT, EAS, and ARF. Therefore, in order to promote ASEAN's role in ASEM, ASEAN needs to maintain its central role in regionalism in the Asia-Pacific. It is increasingly a challenging task due to the rise of regional powers, such as China and India, and the great power rivalry in the region. Within the context of increasing geopolitical rivalry, it is more crucial for ASEAN member states to stay united and collectively address structural risks and challenges. Together, ASEAN can ward off adverse impacts from the great power rivalry – especially by upholding its neutrality and implementing a collective hedging strategy to mitigate mounting geopolitical risks. Collectively, ASEAN can build an open, transparent, inclusive, effective and rules-based international order and ensure that everyone will fairly benefit regional integration and community building process.

"Therefore, in order to promote ASEAN's role in ASEM, ASEAN needs to maintain its central role in regionalism in the Asia-Pacific."

Conclusion

The evolution of ASEM over the last two decades revealed some features of interaction between ASEAN and other ASEM partners. ASEM has emerged as an inter-regional forum espousing the principles of informality, inclusiveness, non-binding, and equal sovereignty. ASEM's soft institution might be shaped by the complexity of inter-regional relations between Asia and Europe with distinctive diver-

17 Jung-Hoon Lee and Jin Park, "The Role of Regional Identity in Asia-Europe Relations with Special Reference to ASEM," *Global Economic Review*, Vol.30, No.3 (2001): 19-33.

18 Julie Gilson and Lay Hwee Yeo, "Collective Identity-Building through Trans-regionalism: ASEM and East Asian Regional Identity," in Stokhof, Velde and Yeo (eds.), *The Eurasian Space: Far more than two continents* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and International Institute for Asian Studies, 2004).

sity embedded in the large number of partner countries.

ASEM's institutional characteristics are very likely influenced by ASEAN and its member states through the socialisation of the ASEAN Way, which includes informality, inclusiveness, intensive consultations based on consensus and less on binding agreements and regulatory frameworks. The ASEAN Way has provided a comfort for Asian ASEM partners to take part in regionalism and inter-regionalism. ASEAN has also convinced the European ASEM partners that the ASEAN Way can be an alternative approach to regionalism when there is a need to bridge differences between participating countries and to accommodate their varying interests.