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## **TOWARD A MORE FLEXIBLE ASEM**

*Michito Tsuruoka*

On October 4 and 5, nearly fifty heads of state and government from Europe and the Asia-Pacific will be assembling for the 9th biennial summit meeting of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in Brussels. ASEM, however, now faces the huge challenge of demonstrating its continued relevance in today's world. The seriousness of the problem can be seen by not only the little coverage it gets from the international press, but also by the low participation rates of various ASEM ministerial meetings,

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to which not a small number of countries send only a deputy- or vice-minister. Washington no longer pays attention to ASEM, although it used to be concerned about the direction of ASEM as a large international grouping from which the US is excluded.

### **Mission Accomplished**

Launched in 1996 amid the unprecedented expansion of Asian economies, the central aim of ASEM was to build a bridge between Europe and Asia. At the beginning, Europeans wanted to catch up with the US, Japan and other countries in engaging in and doing business with emerging economic powers in Asia. The EU and major European countries had certain relationships with the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and individual countries in the region before ASEM. However, in part colored by their colonial past, these relationships were rather outdated in nature and not suited for a new era of dynamic and more equal partnerships. At the same time, Asians wanted to cultivate a new kind of relationship with Europe as a means to expand their foreign relations and diversify their export markets.

In short, both Europe and Asia needed a new bridge between them. Over the past ten to fifteen years, ASEM has indeed accomplished its most important original task of laying a foundation on which to develop Europe-Asia relations. We should not belittle the value of this achievement. Without ASEM as a venue for interaction between Europeans and Asians and as a umbrella framework for cooperation between the two regions, the process of developing bilateral relations, such as EU-China and the EU's relations with other individual Asian countries, would have been more difficult or slower. ASEM has played a significant role as a catalyst in strengthening and mainstreaming Europe-Asia cooperation.

### **From Inter-regional to Bilateral?**

What is ironic is that ASEM now stands at a crossroad because of its very success so far. Europe-Asia cooperation is now a fact of life and people no longer feel the need for ASEM as a catalyst or bridge; there are now various

bridges available. ASEM has covered not only economic issues but also political and socio-cultural affairs from the beginning -- its activities have always stood on three pillars. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that developing and facilitating trade and economic relations have been the areas in which all the members have put the most emphasis.

In the meantime, the EU seems to be moving from an inter-regional approach to a bilateral one in its trade strategies toward Asia. Brussels originally tried to conclude a region-to-region FTA with ASEAN as a partner. That idea, however, has for the most part been abandoned, though it remains the "ultimate objective" according to the European Commission. Instead, the EU is now active in negotiating FTAs with individual countries in the region. At the same time, the EU deals with such major powers as China, India and Japan primarily in bilateral terms as well.

Core issues of trade and economic relations between Asia and Europe are thus increasingly being addressed in a bilateral manner. We need to recognize that the role of ASEM is inevitably diminishing in these areas as a result. Such loose political rhetoric as "ASEM has never been more important" would not be helpful, and we must stop pretending it is so. Given the diversity of members' interests and the ever-increasing number of member countries in the club, it should be of no surprise that substantial issues of trade and economy need to be addressed elsewhere for the sake of efficiency and effectiveness.

However, this is not the end of ASEM, nor is it time to be complacent about it. We can reinvigorate this framework. ASEM deserves revival after its original aim has been accomplished. For that purpose, there are two new areas for ASEM activities requiring the framework to be more flexible.

### **New Areas of Activities**

First, ASEM can play a bigger role in security. This area has been perceived to be difficult for ASEM to address because of diverse interests and values among its members. In the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the US, there is a growing awareness that security in Asia and security in Europe are linked. The problem of piracy off the coast of Somalia exemplifies this link. Given

that trade and economic relationships between Europe and Asia are vital and that these are heavily dependent on safe sea lines of communication (SLOC), there is every reason for ASEM to contribute in this field more. The agenda need not be limited to anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia. Maritime security and SLOC protection have a much wider scope.

To be sure, actual planning and coordination of anti-piracy operations in the theater are not ASEM's business. Many ASEM countries have already been actively participating in international efforts there through NATO, the EU and on a national basis. The UN-led contact group is available for multilateral and inter-institutional coordination. Nevertheless, ASEM can play a role, for instance, in helping Asian countries contribute more to protect the SLOC off the coast of Somalia or wherever is important in the sea lanes between Europe and Asia. Capacity-building assistance is a case in point. It is indeed good news that the issue of anti-piracy is being discussed more in the ASEM framework at the level of officials and experts in the run-up to the October summit.

Second, in the area of trade and economy, ASEM can function as a venue for research on the economic impacts of trade and investment liberalization and facilitation between Europe and Asia, not least the impacts of individual bilateral trade deals on other ASEM members. Also, as a venue in which almost all countries in the vast regions of Europe and Asia are assembled, ASEM can be used to ensure transparency and monitor who is doing what for what aims in trade and economic relations between Europe and Asia. Particularly significant is monitoring various preferential trade arrangements such as FTAs between European and Asian countries so as to prevent them from discriminating against others or distorting the wider picture of trade between the two regions. The Asian Development Bank (ADB), OECD, WTO and other relevant organizations would also be welcomed to participate in these activities where appropriate. Those tasks are indispensable as a foundation for the development of sound and transparent trade and economic relationships between Asia and Europe. ASEM is well placed to assume such a responsibility.

This is obviously not an exhaustive list of potential new areas for ASEM activities. What is important is discerning where the comparative advantage of

ASEM lies. It is not in ASEM members' interest at the end of the day trying to do things that other frameworks or organizations are better at doing.


### **Toward a More Flexible Model**

Looking at a broader picture of Asia-Europe relations, it is notable that many cooperation projects are taking place outside the ASEM framework. This is only natural and should not be seen as a bad thing for ASEM. To the contrary, it is a sign that the overall relationships between the two regions are maturing. ASEM was not intended to monopolize Asia-Europe relations in the first place.

How ASEM can incorporate what is already taking place outside of its confines is an important challenge for the future. In other words, ASEM's value can be enhanced by assisting the Asia-Europe cooperation spontaneously happening outside ASEM. The members should be able to use ASEM as a venue to exchange information on what each member is doing in the domain of Asia-Europe cooperation either in bilateral or multilateral terms. This would ensure transparency, avoid duplication, and facilitate synergy between such undertakings.

For ASEM members, the framework would also be expected to provide an opportunity to attract more participants to various cooperation projects that are not necessarily ASEM-led ones. As a matter of principle, ASEM does not need to be a self-contained grouping. Cooperation among ASEM members -- not necessarily all the members -- on anti-piracy and other aspects of maritime security can fit into this new model. Again, this does not have to be an exclusive ASEM project. What is more important than a distinctive ASEM footprint on each project is the extent to which ASEM can facilitate effective cooperation between countries in Europe and Asia. Flexibility is the key. The more flexible it is, the more attractive ASEM can be as a tool for member countries to use. This would ultimately bring more value to ASEM.

While officials involved in the ASEM process may be smart enough to produce items for cooperation to be included in ministerial or summit documents, cooperation for the sake of cooperation without much substance cannot be sustainable in the long run. We need to have a clearer picture on which areas

ASEM has a comparative advantage over other frameworks and how members can use ASEM as a policy tool for their own interest. There is certainly much work to be done between Asia and Europe, and ASEM has no time to waste. 

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