ASEM: renewal and revival for the third decade[1]

By Shada Islam

Introduction

Asian and European leaders will celebrate the twentieth anniversary of ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting) at their summit in Ulan Bator, Mongolia, next year. ASEM has come a long way since its launch in Bangkok in March 1996. Even as leaders take stock of past achievements, however, the ASEM summit in 2016 must upgrade the Asia-Europe partnership by setting it on a renewed and reinvigorated track for its third decade.

The omens are good. ASEM today is more energised and vibrant than at any time in recent years. Governments in both regions seem to have discarded earlier inertia and lack of interest in ASEM in favour of a more constructive and upbeat approach. The ASEM summit in Milan in October 2014 and the meeting of foreign ministers in Delhi in 2013 injected new momentum into the Asia-Europe relationship by reviewing and simplifying ASEM's content, procedures and outreach. Still, more needs to be done. In the years ahead, governments must strike a satisfactory balance between using ASEM as a dialogue forum and meeting demands for enhanced action-oriented cooperation on selected themes of common interest.

Above all, ASEM needs a new over-arching 21st Century narrative and *raison d'etre* which connects it to a broader global conversation on living and working together in an interdependent but increasingly anxious age. Asia and Europe face a growing list of common concerns ranging from climate change to tackling pandemics and combating violent extremism. The two regions economies are even more closely linked than before. A fragile security environment in one region prompts unease and tensions in the other.

Exploiting ASEM's full potential therefore is about more than just improving the channels of communication between Asia and Europe. It is also about providing global public goods, better governance, managing complexities and tensions and working together in trying to shape a new world order. More than ever before, ASEM's focus should therefore be on Asia-Europe cooperation to tackle wider regional and global challenges. It must also increase civil society involvement in ASEM in order to increase its visibility and relevance in the long-term.

This discussion paper explores the relevance and importance of ASEM in a rapidly-evolving and often volatile global order and looks at efforts under way to revive ASEM through the introduction of new formats and a sharper focus on content as well as through enhanced engagement with civil society and the media. It makes policy recommendations for energising the Asia-Europe partnership and ensuring that leaders hammer out a new blueprint for reviving ASEM at its 20th anniversary summit in 2016. The paper underlines the author's view that ASEM is a vital element of Asia-Europe cooperation and global networking but needs a rethink – and a new narrative to make it relevant and credible in an unpredictable and complex "no polar" world.

[1] This paper is to facilitate the panel discussions at the ASEM Symposium on the Future Direction of ASEM, held in Bangkok on March 30, 2015

Yesterday, today, tomorrow

Thanks to much-needed soul-searching and hard work on summit content and format done in recent years, the Asia-Europe partnership has a new and encouraging spring in its step. The 10th ASEM summit held in Milan in October 2014 was certainly successful, proving that efforts to reinvigorate ASEM are beginning to show results. In fact, the search to revive ASEM has been for on for almost ten years, with the ASEM summit in Helsinki, Finland, in 2006 raising the issue of exploring ASEM's future possibilities. The ASEM summit in Beijing in 2008 was important in signaling EU-Asia solidarity in the face of the global economic slowdown. Efforts to revise ASEM working methods were a priority for the Belgian government in the run up to the ASEM summit held in Brussels in 2010. Significantly, the gathering of ASEM leaders in Vientiane, Laos, in 2012 highlighted the importance of EU-Asia cooperation on non-traditional security issues. ASEM summits have also regularly underlined the importance of combating protectionism, working together to promote sustainable development and fighting climate change. This momentum needs to be sustained and built on.

ASEM may still lag behind in terms of concrete achievements but compared to ten years ago, there appears to a real dialogue and sharing of norms and best practice on questions of common interest. Importantly, at the summit in Milan, countries agreed to India's proposal that ASEM partners work in smaller groups or clusters on 16 "tangible cooperation areas" including disaster management, renewable energy, higher education, connectivity and information technology. ASEM participants do not always agree on all issues but over the years, progress has been made in meeting ASEM's key goal of enhancing Asia-Europe understanding on regional and global challenges. The "socialisation" of ministers, officials, experts and others who work on ASEM continues to take place, with insiders pointing to ways in which "peer pressure" can help countries to thrash out compromises. More needs to be done, however, to turn ASEM into a real incubator of new ideas and to encourage Asia and Europe to talk to each other and try and coordinate their positions before and during international meetings.

Enlargement has certainly made ASEM bigger (from 26 participants in 1996 to 53 in 2014) and more unwieldy, making it difficult to recreate the informality of earlier years. But new members have also injected vitality and enthusiasm into ASEM and brought in new areas of interest. ASEM now goes beyond East Asia and the entry of Norway and Switzerland means it also involves European countries which are not EU members.

As was the case ten years ago, the political pillar remains a central element of ASEM, with economic discussions lagging behind and performing below expectations. There has been no meeting of ASEM economic ministers since 2006. ASEM's socio-cultural or people-to-people pillar is picking up momentum, with meetings of ASEM Business Forum, Peoples' Forum and Parliamentary Forum organised back to back with ASEM summits and provisions also made for direct communication between them. The Asia Europe Foundation (ASEF) is now a well-established platform for promoting further cooperation between the two regions in myriad fields including education. ASEM young leaders were invited to meet leaders at the summit in Milan.

Two key challenges continue to haunt ASEM: the need for better coordination and institutional support, including through the establishment of an ASEM

secretariat. ASEM also still suffers from a lack of visibility and public recognition. Both questions are looked at in detail in the "recommendations" section of this paper.

Ahead of the times

At its launch in 1996 in Bangkok, ASEM was in many ways ahead of its time. Undoubtedly, there was a need for Asia and Europe to talk to each other about trade and investments, security and culture but overall the world was a simpler and tidier place. East Asia was already a dynamic powerhouse but China's remarkable economic development was only just beginning to result in impressive GDP gains. ASEAN was active at a regional level but had not made a global impact. The United States was the undisputed super power although many in Asia and Europe yearned for a "multipolar" world instead of a unipolar one. European integration had yet to result in eastward enlargement or the introduction of the Euro single currency. And Asia-Europe links were still largely under-developed.

Today's volatile international environment makes Asia-Europe dialogue and cooperation a much more compelling necessity. The world in 2015 is messy, chaotic and often violent, with no clear centre of power. In Europe, many decry the end of the post-World War security order. In Asia, re-emerging nations are clamouring for recognition, jostling each other to gain the upper hand as regional and global leaders. Everywhere, international norms and institutions built in the last century are under stress, and seemingly unable to cope with the increasing demands and insecurity of the 21st Century. Most multilateral organisations, set up in the aftermath of World War II, face the daunting task of adapting to new economic, political and social realities, including the rise of emerging powers.

As such, the challenge is not only to ensure the survival of ASEM in the 21st Century but to create conditions for it to flourish and thrive as a real forum for multilateral consultation, global governance and networking in an increasingly inter-connected, complex and disorderly world. If ASEM did not exist, governments in both regions today would probably have to establish it.

Part of a global conversation

It has become fashionable to criticize ASEM. The not-so-ample literature on the Asia-Europe partnership tends to focus on details such as working methods and an apparent lack of tangible deliverables. It is said the club is becoming too big and too diverse for real inter-action. Some ASEM summits over the last two decades have seen a poor rate of participation, with leaders apparently losing interest in the exercise. Too often, the ASEM story is mostly seen as one of disappointing performance, dashed hopes and confusion.

An assessment of "ASEM in its Tenth Year" published in 2006 by the Japan Centre for International Exchange and the University of Helsinki points to ASEM's failure to live up to "initial expectations" and "paucity of tangible results", adding: "ASEM's relevance in the broader international context has been questioned". The critics are right – but their view of ASEM is narrow.

To re-energise ASEM, it is important to view it as an integral and vital part of a much-needed global conversation on 21st Century economic, societal and security challenges. These discussions also take place in other fora, including the United Nations, its agencies and the G20. But if its potential for informality and networking is tapped to the full, ASEM can make a real name for itself on a crowded global landscape and become a critical part of the expanding global conversation on dealing with the new world and its multiple challenges.

This requires that the current focus on improving the details of the partnership – content, working methods, visibility, continuity and membership – is accompanied by an overarching recognition of ASEM's real usefulness and value as an informal club of nations – big and small, rich and poor, like-minded and non-like-minded – which work together to deal with shared challenges. As underlined by Yeo Lay Hwee of the European Union Centre at the National University of Singapore, relations between states have become more complex and multi-dimensional as countries vacillate between cooperation and competition and even conflict. ASEM provides a platform for a discussion of such complexities.

Stronger Asia-Europe connectivity

Twenty years on, given the rise of China and the subsequent transformed Asian geopolitical landscape, the prime underlying reason for ASEM (balancing relations between America, Europe and East Asia and reinforcing Asia-Europe relations which were much weaker) seems out-of-date. Compared to 1996 or even ten years ago, there is now a stronger EU-Asian conversation on trade, business, security and culture. Exports to Asia and investments in the region are pivotal in ensuring a sustainable European economic recovery while the EU single market attracts goods, investments and people from across the globe, helping Asian governments to maintain growth and development. European technology is in demand across Asia. Engagement between the two regions has been increasing over the years, both within and outside ASEM. Strategic partnership agreements link the EU with China, Japan, Republic of Korea, India and Russia – and at a ministerial meeting last year, the EU and ASEAN agreed to work towards an upgrading of the ASEAN-EU partnership to a strategic one. Asia-Europe economic connectivity has grown.

With total Asia-Europe trade in 2012 estimated at €1.37 trillion, Asia has become the EU's main trading partner, accounting for a third of total trade and surpassing the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). More than a quarter of European outward investments head for Asia while Asia's emerging global players are seeking out business deals in Europe. The increased connectivity is reflected in the mutual Asia-Europe quest to negotiate Free Trade Agreements and investment accords. The FTAs concluded with Republic of Korea and Singapore and similar deals under negotiation with Japan, India and individual ASEAN countries as well as the bilateral investment treaty under discussion with China are important in consolidating EU-Asia relations.

Beyond trade and economics, Asia and Europe are linked through an array of cooperation accords. Discussions on climate change, pandemics, illegal immigration, maritime security, urbanization and green growth, among others, are frequent between multiple government ministries and agencies in both regions, reflecting a growing recognition that 21st century challenges can only be

tackled through improved global governance and, failing that, through "patchwork governance" involving cross-border and cross-regional alliances.

Today, discussions on security are an important part of the political pillar in ASEM, with leaders exchanging views on regional and global flashpoints. Asian views of Europe's security role and vice versa have changed. In Asia, earlier skepticism of Europe's security credentials is being replaced by recognition of Europe's "soft power" in peace-making and reconciliation, crisis management, conflict resolution and preventive diplomacy and human rights. In addition, for many in Asia, the EU is the prime partner to deal with non-traditional security dilemmas, including food, water and energy security as well as climate change. Clearly also, the EU remains an inspiration for Asia's own regional integration initiatives, including ASEAN, and in areas such as rules-based collective security.

Europe too is more aware of ways in which Asia's security impacts on its own future. Europe's focus is very much on ensuring the security of sea lanes and trading routes. The recently-approved EU maritime security strategy identifies several threats to EU interests including cross-border and organised crime, threats to freedom of navigation, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and environmental risks. As indicated above, respect for international law and especially the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea are emphasised. Importantly, several Asian and European countries are working together in the EU-led ATALANTA counter-piracy operation in the Western Indian Ocean. A first-ever EU-ASEAN high-level dialogue on maritime security was organised in Jakarta last November, with a focus on port security, maritime surveillance and the joint management of resources, including fisheries and oil and gas.

The EU has joined the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), the key code of conduct for peaceful inter-state relations in the region. High-level European and Asian representatives are now regular participants at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Asia's prime security forum, as well as the Shangri La Dialogue, an annual informal gathering of security experts held in Singapore. The EU is not yet a member of the East Asia Summit although it is intensifying its cooperation with ASEAN on various issues of common interest such as energy, climate change, environmental issues, disaster relief, education, trade, finance and regional integration. Additionally, the EU is a member of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), a network of Asian think tanks involved in so-called "track two" discussions on political and security challenges facing the region. A joint EU-CSCAP study group has been set up on preventive diplomacy.

Milan: encouraging progress

The Milan summit was clearly a defining moment in Asia-Europe relations, with leaders making an array of pledges on boosting growth, continuing economic and financial reform and building stronger Europe-Asia connectivity. Additionally, meetings were held between business leaders, parliamentarians, academics and civil society actors. The Milan summit – "Responsible Partnership for Sustainable Growth and Security" – allowed for a discussion not only of ongoing political strains and tensions in Asia and in Europe's eastern neighborhood, but also of crucial non-traditional security threats linked to food, water, and energy security. In addition to the plenary sessions, the Milan meeting brought back much of

the informality that marked the first few ASEM summits by including a "retreat" session during which leaders - with only one aide in attendance - were able to have a free-flowing discussion on regional and international issues, including Ebola and the threat posed by the so-called "Islamic State".

Attendance was exceptionally high, with all key Asian and European leaders taking part in the plenary sessions as well as the retreat and engaging in myriad bilateral contacts. Kazakhstan and Croatia joined ASEM, bringing the total number of ASEM participants to 53. Leaders agreed on a long and ambitious work programme until 2016, the year when ASEM, under Mongolian chairmanship, will celebrate its 20th anniversary. Countries agreed to work in smaller groups or clusters on 16 "tangible cooperation areas" including disaster management, renewable energy, higher education, connectivity and information technology. And in a departure from previous final ASEM statements, the one issued in Milan was shorter (10 pages instead of 20) and more readable.

Recommendations for a livelier ASEM

The challenge now is to keep up - and intensify - the momentum for renewal and revival generated in Milan and earlier. Below are some suggestions for doing this while also creating a new ASEM narrative which is suited to the demands of a so-far turbulent 21st Century:

1. Enhancing substance and content

Overall, the content of meetings must be put centre-stage with the focus on a limited number of key issues. ASEM should have a sharper focus on a smaller cluster of issues which allow for real exchanges of views, ideas and experience-sharing. Below are three key topics which deserve enhanced attention:

- ASEM is about connecting countries, regions and people. Connectivity is therefore undoubtedly – and justifiably - the new ASEM buzzword. It should secure enhanced ASEM attention. **The race to build stronger institutional, infrastructure, digital and people-to-people linkages is transforming Asia, creating new partnerships and opening up new opportunities for Asian and European businesses.** At the same time, rapid advances in information and communications technology (ICT) have created tremendous opportunities for economic and social gains in the world's poorest areas. The significance of Asia-Europe connectivity – including **digital connectivity** - was underscored by the summit in Milan, with leaders underlining the contribution increased ties could make to economic prosperity and sustainable development and to promoting free and seamless movement of people, trade, investment, energy, information, knowledge and ideas and greater institutional linkages. The summit urged the establishment of an integrated, sustainable, secure, efficient and convenient air, maritime and land transportation system, including intermodal solutions, in and between Asia and Europe. It also noted the usefulness of an exchange of best practices and experiences on areas of common interest, relating for example to the governance of the EU Single Market and the implementation of the Master Plan on ASEAN

Connectivity. **Enhanced connectivity requires the engagement of all stakeholders, including industry and the think-tank and academic community.**

- Bold steps are needed in order to revitalize ASEM's long-dormant economic pillar. **One option would be to finally acknowledge the elephant in the room and open exploratory talks or a scoping exercise on the pros and cons of an ASEM-wide Free Trade Area**. This will of course require that ASEM economic ministers – who have not met since 2006 in Rotterdam – start meeting regularly and that there are more frequent contacts between economic experts, policymakers and business leaders from both sides. Discussions on an ASEM FTA would reflect the growing economic interdependence between Asia and Europe that has been highlighted earlier while also keeping pace with the increase in the number of so-called "mega-regional" trade agreements (such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) which are under negotiation. There is not much appetite for such a deal in many ASEM countries at the moment but this could change if the leit motive for such an agreement is properly explained to business, parliamentarians and the public.

- **Discussions on security challenges facing both Asia and Europe take place already but need to be given more attention and priority**. There is no doubt that the Asian Century is marked by an over-arching paradox. The region's vibrant economies remain in the global spotlight as the region expands and deepens its trade and investment networks. But Asia is also home to many unresolved territorial disputes, lingering historical animosities, increasingly strident nationalism and a rise in arms spending on arms. Similarly, Europe faces a challenge in both its eastern and southern neighbourhoods. Relations with Russia remain tense following the annexation of Crimea and the destabilisation of Ukraine. The so-called "ring of fire" in North Africa and parts of the Middle East has led to increased immigration into the EU as well as a rising threat of violence and terrorism. Some of these discussions already take place in ASEM and in other fora such as the ARF but they need to be more focused and in-depth. **Asia-Europe on non-traditional security issues should be deepened, with a focus on experience-sharing.**

2. Keep it informal *and* effective

- In order to maintain ASEM's unique informality, networking and flexibility but also make it more pragmatic, effective and result-oriented – and more relevant to partners' economic and social priorities - a balance must be found between ASEM as a forum for dialogue *and* as a platform for more action-oriented cooperation in specific areas of common interest. These two goals are mutually compatible and not in competition as is often argued. Both are necessary to reinvigorate ASEM. This paper has already highlighted ASEM's contribution to a global conversation on common challenges. In addition, tangible cooperation, provided it is voluntary and variable rather than obligatory, could give the forum an additional boost.

- Progress on ensuring informality and allow for more results-oriented cooperation was made at the Milan summit where leaders did indeed meet in retreat format allowing for more informality and a real conversation but where the decision was also taken to issue an indicative list of ASEM members interested in specific cooperation areas. Approximately seven subjects, including disaster management, water and waste management, SME cooperation, renewable energy and energy efficiency, skills development and cooperation in higher and higher education have been identified as having the support of several ASEM partners from both regions. This illustrates that broader interaction does not stand in the way of concrete cooperation. But, information about these projects must not be allowed to get lost in long-winded communiques which are read only by a few persistent and avid academics and researchers.

- ASEM should preserve and even upgrade its networking credentials by, for instance, an even more active effort to encourage bilateral contacts between leaders (and ministers) and, as Lay Hwee suggests, even holding **"minilateral summits**" within the larger gathering on topics of interest to groups of states rather than the entire ASEM membership. The informal meeting of ASEAN-EU leaders which was organised on the margins of the Milan meeting was in keeping with this principle. Lay Hwee also suggests that ASEM summits should be transformed into an "Asia-Europe Marketplace" for different exchanges, interactions and transactions among business leaders, civil society representatives, parliamentarians and others in one central arena. This would allow ASEM to be really used as an incubator of ideas, to facilitate global governance and improve Asia-Europe connectivity. At the same time, countries which want to work together would be encouraged to work in groups or clusters, within their own timelines and with their own experts - provided the process was transparent and inclusive.

- To really revive ASEM's original informality, leaders and ministers should seize back some of the initiative and power from bureaucrats who have come to dominate the process and content of many Asia-Europe gatherings. This will help to ensure that ASEM is used to explore new ideas, to stimulate and facilitate progress in Asia-Europe understanding in other multilateral fora and encourage capacity-building across sectors. The experts can be brought in at a later stage to put flesh on the bones of certain ideas, turning them into potential joint projects.

3. Become better at outreach

- Increasing ASEM visibility and outreach remains a challenge. **While it is true that ASEM is not about headlines, the occasional one would help.** The 1996 launch of the partnership generated much media attention as did several subsequent meetings, including the 2008 summit in Beijing where Asians and Europeans voiced joint efforts to combat the global economic crisis. The media at the summit in Milan focused on the meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Ukrainian counterpart Petro Poroshenko. Since all leaders attending ASEM summits come with their national media in tow, there is no dearth of journalists at such events. Their attention may be focused on the pronouncements of their

national representatives and bilateral meetings with other leaders – but a good ASEM "spokesperson" or communication expert with an interesting story to tell could certainly find myriad innovative ways of generating media interesting in other Asia-Europe issues. Interviews with leaders, ministers and senior officials who attend such meetings would also give reporters something to write – and think – about.

- Getting more ASEM visibility clearly also requires the hammering out of an **up-to-date communication strategy which uses social media.** Summit and other communiques need to be shorter, more precise and more readable. In addition, pre-meeting and post-meeting press conferences and other outreach mechanisms should also spotlight the issues that were discussed and why in an articulate manner.

- **ASEM faces the uphill task of securing stronger public understanding, awareness and support especially among young people**. The Milan summit saw the organization of a youth "model ASEM". This should be continued and is especially important in the run up to the 20th anniversary summit in 2016. Public awareness requires more initiatives such as those developed by ASEF in Singapore to foster dialogue and better understanding between the two regions, particularly in the education and cultural sectors. Reviving the Asia-Europe relationship will require stronger and more sustained efforts to ensure even more involvement of the public, civil society, and academia. A citizen's online chat discussion with senior policymakers on the lines of the Debating Asia-Europe initiative taken by Friends of Europe (www.debatingeurope.eu/focus/asia-europe/) encourages more public awareness of Asia-Europe relations. The ASEM infoboard (www.aseminfoboard.org) also provides the public with relevant information on various ASEM activities.

- Such information, however, should be enhanced by **more regular ASEM contacts with civil society, including members of parliament, business representatives, scholars and journalists as well as local authorities**. Such initiatives need to be regular and sustained. In 2010, a "Passage to Asia" art exhibition at the Brussels' Beaux Arts museum raised knowledge of the cultural and historical links between Asia and Europe. Ideas abound about a "big project" to create more of a buzz – perhaps through ASEM "games", "ASEM-vision" song contests and visa-free travel. **The appointment of an "ASEM "ambassador" (on the lines of UN "ambassadors") to create public understanding and goodwill is worth exploring.**

4. Don't' stop enlargement

Although there is justified criticism of ASEM as becoming much too big and diverse for a real conversation, **it is equally important to note that enlargement has added to the forum's credibility while also making discussions livelier** and making sure that ASEM has kept up with the times. New members also tend to be very enthusiastic about ASEM's potential. Asia's transformed geo-economic landscape is evident in the ASEM membership of Australia and New Zealand, countries which were once kept out of the Asian conversation but are now accepted as

an integral part of Asia. Both countries add to ASEM's credibility and content. Russia too is seeking to expand ties with Asian countries. Bringing Bangladesh into ASEM has helped improve the country's contacts with both Europe and Asian countries while non-EU countries, Norway and Switzerland offer their own interesting insights into how they view and deal with Asia. ASEM must therefore not shut the door on new members but make sure that enlargement is paced in an intelligent fashion.

5. **Ensure better coordination**

While there is still no agreement on whether or not to set up an **ASEM secretariat, more must be done to ensure that the forum has an effective "institutional memory" and there is efficient coordination between the different regional groups.** This is essential if ASEM is to keep evolving in keeping with the changing global and Asia-Europe landscape. Understandably, the drive to set up an ASEM Secretariat is essentially driven by Asian partners who feel the need for such an institution. Europeans, on the other hand, are generally satisfied with the current situation since the European External Action Service plays an important coordination role for European partners. Since this debate is likely to continue, another option would be to set up smaller functional sectoral ASEM "agencies" to reinforce synergies and ensure follow-up in specific areas. One example of such cooperation is the ASEM education secretariat which encourages synergies in the areas of higher education and vocational education and training and was set up in 2009 as a body which would rotate among ASEM participating nations every two to three years. The secretariat was initially hosted by German and is currently in Jakarta. A similar initiative could be launched in the area of disaster management or indeed on connectivity.

Conclusion

In the end, ASEM's future hinges on continued economic interdependence and increased strategic engagement between Asia and Europe. The 21st Century requires countries and peoples - whether they are like-minded or not - to work together in order to ensure better global governance and focus on global public goods in a still-chaotic multipolar world. As they grapple with their economic, political and security dilemmas – and despite their many differences - Asia and Europe are drawing closer together. If ASEM reform is implemented as planned, 2016 could become an important milestone in a reinvigorated Asia-Europe partnership, with constructive outcomes for the two regions but also for the wider world.