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Thinking ahead for Europe

Does ASEM work?

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Abstract

This CEPS Policy Brief is based on a larger study for the EEAS and European Commission, written by the same authors in the run-up of the Milan ASEM summit of 16-17 October 2014. The main idea of the study is to assess whether ASEM works and how, by verifying the factual evidence in detail. After all, ASEM has no institutions, no budget and no treaty, whilst dialogues and a loose improvement over time in Asia-Europe relations refer to process much more than genuine 'results'. The stocktaking covers all ASEM activities since the 2006 Helsinki summit. Summit and foreign ministers' declarations and ASEM calendar of activities (and interviews) are used to trace ASEM activities in the three ASEM pillars (political, economic, and peoples-to-peoples/cultural). All the 'regular' ASEM meetings at ministerial and other levels (many of which are only known to relatively few) have been mapped. Also the ASEM working methods, based on the 2000 AECF framework and many subsequent initiatives, have been scrutinised, including whether they are actually implemented or not or partially. Such methods refer to how to work together in areas of cooperation (beyond the typical ASEM dialogue), organisation, coordination and ASEM visibility.

The main conclusion is that ASEM works reasonably well, once one accepts the ASEM of today, although some inefficiencies still characterise the 'system'. There is a host of secondary conclusions on the three pillars, the foreign ministers, the strong government-to-government nature of ASEM and the working methods. We recommend that today's ASEM needs no reform and that not having ASEM would entail political and diplomatic costs. We emphasise that ASEM is well placed to stimulate exchange of information between the mega-FTAs such as TPP, RCEP and TTIP. However, the ASEM of tomorrow might be different, given the great changes in geo-political and economic conditions since ASEM began in the mid-1990s. Moreover, the size of ASEM has become such that classical ways of operating with (after Milano) 53 countries (including the EU and ASEAN) cannot possibly be effective all the time. We suggest that, in the run-up to the 20th ASEM birthday (2016), EU and Asian independent think-tanks get together to write an 'options report' reconsidering options for a new ASEM, as the basis for a profound and wide debate how to get more value-added out of ASEM.

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This CEPS Policy Brief is a short version of a detailed empirical study written for the EEAS and the European Commission, entitled: "Stocktaking and analysis of ASEM: Outcomes and impact, conclusions and policy recommendations", published on the EEAS website www.eeas.europa.eu. The Policy Brief faithfully reflects the study; in the conclusions and recommendations, however, we go beyond the latter. We thank the EEAS and the Commission for permission to publish this abbreviated version. However, the views and positions in this Policy Brief do not necessarily represent those of the EEAS/European Commission; they are solely the responsibility of the authors.

Key points

- The ASEM summit of 16-17 October in Milan – with 50-plus prime ministers and other government leaders from Asia and Europe – underlines once again that ASEM countries regard a regular and wide-ranging dialogue between Asia (writ large) and Europe as being of value in itself.
- Better understanding and direct contact between government leaders, combined with the numerous other ASEM activities which attract much less attention, has resulted in far better and more intense relations between Asian and European governments (and of course the EU) than when ASEM began, 18 years ago. This is an invaluable 'result'.
- ASEM is ultra-light, has not institutionalised, has no funding and is not based on 'hard' commitments. We show that ASEM works, even if it leaves something to be desired. If one would want 'results' beyond dialogue and mutual understanding, one would need to talk about *another* ASEM. Whether there is much support with the 50-plus ASEM governments (and the EU) for deepening ASEM and moving to active cooperation, with some commitments, programmes and a minimum degree of institutionalisation, is anything but clear.
- We see sound reasons to re-consider the set-up and working of ASEM in the run-up to ASEM's 20th birthday in 2016, without losing out on what ASEM means today. Independent think tanks in Asia and Europe could prepare an 'options report' as the first step for an ASEM-wide debate to assess whether deepening and other reforms add value for the 50 ASEM countries.

1. Introduction and purpose

On 16-17 October 2014, the 10th ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting) Summit will be held in Milan under Italy's chairmanship and hosted by the EU. No less than 49 prime ministers or presidents (and the sultan of Brunei), the Secretary General of ASEAN and the presidents of the European Council and of the European Commission will gather at the summit in order to cement and improve Asia-Europe relations.[1] ASEM has existed for 18 years. Although it attracts many political leaders and is firmly established, it is poorly known in policy circles and the wider public. It was created in reaction to the frictions between Europe and a part of Asia that originated at the June 1993 United Nations World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna and continued into 1994. But the ASEM initiative (first proposed by Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong) was also motivated as a positive answer to the EU's New Asia Strategy of 1994, a policy U-turn that recognised the huge economic and political importance of a rising Asia, especially East Asia.[2] In the conventional sense, ASEM has neither institutions nor a budget. The original idea was that it would be summit-driven (meeting every two years) and that the summiteers would call for 'follow-ups' in the Summit Chair Statement. Any institutionalisation was to be avoided. What mattered was a regular dialogue so as to deepen understanding between decision-makers in Asia and Europe, stimulate 'people-to-people' contacts, generate more trust, and exchange information, views and ideas for policies of common concern.

The present CEPS Policy Brief serves a precise but modest purpose. It inspects, on the basis of extensive data collection, 'whether and how ASEM works' and what exactly it has done so far. It is hoped that this exercise may help readers to better appreciate the role and substance of ASEM in the run-up to the Milan Summit. Our analysis is also of interest because misunderstandings and indeed misgivings about ASEM linger, often without much factual basis and without much of an appreciation of what ASEM is and is not. Since it has no institutions, data are not easy to collect and, more often than not, incomplete. We shall summarise[3] ASEM activities at all levels since the 2006 Helsinki Summit and briefly assess ASEM working methods. The conclusions and recommendations show how ASEM can improve its functioning.

[1] Note that Asia in this paper is 'writ large', as ASEM now includes Australia, New Zealand and Russia. New ASEM members (expected at the Milan summit) will be Kazakhstan and Croatia. Turkey is interested.

[2] For a detailed account of the emergence and beginning of ASEM, see V. Pou Serradel (1996) and Pelkmans & Shinkai (1997). In the latter, a host of initial documents of the first summit in Bangkok and the first year of follow-ups are included. See also Reiterer (2002).

[3] A more detailed account of all ASEM activities, as well as 12 appendices reflecting the data collection, can be found in the full study on which this Policy Brief is based (Pelkmans & Hu, 2014).

Table 1. ASEM topics presented at all four ASEM summits (2006-2012)

no	Political (pillar 1)	Economic (pillar 2)	Cultural/peoples (pillar 3)
1	Afghanistan		
2			ASEF
3	ASEM coop./future	ASEM coop./future	ASEM coop./future
4		Climate change	
5	Counterterrorism		
6			Cultures/civilisations
7		Disaster relief/management	
8		Econ ministers meeting	
9			Education
10		Energy	
11			Interfaith dialogue
12	Iran		
13	Korean peninsula		
14		Labour & employment	
15		Sustainable development	
16	UN reform		
17		WTO	

2. Stocktaking: Issues at ASEM summits

At the four ASEM summits in Helsinki, Beijing, Brussels and Vientiane (and spanning from 2006 to 2012), a total of 63 topics were addressed. Some of them were so closely related that they can be combined, resulting in 52 topics.[4]

Of these 52 topics, 17 were incorporated in the Summit Chair Statements of all four ASEM summits. They are listed in Table 1 above according to the ASEM pillar[5] to which they belong.

Another six topics were presented three times at the summits: human rights, Myanmar and transnational crime/drugs in the political pillar, and food security, health security and science and technology in the economic pillar. The other 29 topics were presented only once or twice. Studying this data allows some tentative conclusions concerning ASEM summits:

i. ASEM deals with many topics. This is in accordance with its tradition and with the 2006 Helsinki Declaration on ASEM's future, which stated that ASEM sees its mission as very broad and that is has a "vital role as a framework for dialogue and cooperation, serving as a prime point of convergence between Europe and Asia". Under the heading "Defining broad perspectives", the declaration lists a host of policy areas and emphasises that ASEM "will address such policy areas while remaining faithful to its character of informality, networking and flexibility" while also offering opportunities for an informal dialogue on "topical priority issues…following but also shaping the international policy agenda". These avowed characteristics set it far apart from the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), for example, which is focused on economic cooperation (ASEM's second pillar). Moreover, although APEC is also based on voluntarism (and no treaty underlies its work), its history records plenty of concrete commitments and calendar-based 'action plans' on trade liberalisation, e.g. the "Bogor

[4] For technical details, see Pelkmans & Hu, 2014.

[5] There are three ASEM pillars: political dialogue, economic cooperation and cultural/people-to-people exchange.

Goals of 1994 to achieve free and open trade and investment by 2010 for industrialised economies and by 2020 for developing economies and a voluntary "Mutual Recognition Arrangement" in telecommunications signed by all 21 APEC countries.[6]

ii. According to the data, pillars 1 and 2 appear to be of greater importance to ASEM than pillar 3, but reality does not support that conclusion. ASEM's main mission is embodied in its summits and foreign minister meetings (FMMs), but outside these contexts the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), founded by ASEM member countries, is entirely devoted to the third pillar in a 'hands-on' fashion via numerous programmes. Indeed, summitry is inherently unsuitable to promote people-to-people interchange, cultural encounters and discourse in the civil society. One needs a special institution to bring those to life and build on experience, networking and a stream of innovative ideas.

3. Stocktaking: 'follow-ups' of ASEM summits and ASEM 'regular' meetings

3.1 Summits and regular meetings

There is an impression in some ASEM circles and the world press that its summits are basically 'stand-alone' events and that the Chair Statement – often full of announcements of ASEM activities – is not followed up very well. If this is ever the case, ASEM may develop a credibility problem. A 'follow-up' is defined, for present purposes, as an ASEM activity (or several activities) recognised in the ASEM calendar and specifically referred to in the Chair Statement. This is denoted as a 'direct follow-up'. There are also other ASEM activities not mentioned in the Chair Statement; we shall survey those, too. Finally, there are many ASEF activities; those not organised under ASEM's mandate[7] are not counted here.

Table 2 gives a concise survey of direct follow-ups of four ASEM summits, starting with Helsinki. Over the seven years following the Helsinki Summit, many direct follow-ups can be observed (in total, no less than 170). In some years there are on average two ASEM activities every month, in other years fewer but still an average of almost two per month. Therefore, it simply cannot be argued that there are few follow-ups. ASEM activity in between summits is lively and varied. It is also incorrect to assert that although there are many ASEM activities, there is nevertheless a lack of follow-up because a number of announced activities or those referred to in the Chair Statements are often conveniently forgotten.

Table 2. Direct follow-ups of four ASEM summits: 2006-2013

(following)	**Pillar 1 (Political)**	**Pillar 2 (Economic)**	**Pillar 3 (Cultural/ peoples)**
Helsinki	3	31	12
Beijing	6	29	15
Brussels	4	20	16
Vientiane	3	20	11

Besides ASEM activities directly linked to the Chair Statements, other ASEM activities, not literally flowing from what is noted in the Chair Statement, have also been organised: most of these (22) have taken place in pillar 2, another 11 in pillar 3 and 3 in pillar 1.

When assessing the follow-ups of summits, one has to first realise what the limits are of this empirical approach. First, a number of ASEM summit topics may give rise to follow-ups in the diplomatic domain and/or international organisations. These follow-ups are invisible to outsiders. Interviews have indicated that no systematic ASEM follow-ups are practised as a

[6] APEC shows some resemblance to ASEM, hence the comparison. It is also of importance that 11 ASEM countries are also members of APEC.

[7] ASEF is the Asia-Europe Foundation, created in 1997 and located in Singapore. Its mission is cultural and includes people-to-people activities. See www.asef.org. Note that ASEF helps organise several ASEM ministerial meetings such as those on education and workshops like the regular informal ASEM seminar on human rights.

rule, but ASEM countries may of course refer to ASEM summit conclusions or positions. Second, dependent on the summit, the Chair Statement can be more or less comprehensive as to ASEM activities. It is certainly not automatically the case that one can safely rely on the Chair Statement in order to know what ASEM does or is planning to do. In Helsinki, for example, the Chair opted for a relatively short statement that does not cover all activities. Thus, after Helsinki and after Beijing, many ASEM activities are not 'direct follow-ups' from the Chair Statement. With longer statements and better preparation of drafts, the Chair is better able to refer to nearly all initiatives of ASEM.

Third, ASEM has developed a (growing) number of 'regular' activities (which we will call 'regulars') and ministerial activities ('ministerials') that are sometimes explicitly recognised in the statement but not on other occasions, and which have grown into stable sectorial or otherwise specialised meetings. Table 3 lists these 30 regulars, 7 regular ministerials and 23 other regular encounters of various types.[8] The regulars may or may not be mentioned in the Chair Statement, but it is less and less the case that one could regard these meetings as a direct 'follow-up' of a summit. On the contrary, these meetings develop a routine that may well include strong messages 'upward' to the summiteers which 'follow-up' these ministerials as it were, and give it greater political exposure and leverage.

Fourth, the activities calendar of ASEF should not be ignored, as it is getting closer, in some of its work, to the main activities of ASEM.

Altogether, although ASEM is summit-driven, this does not at all mean that little occurs between summits. On the contrary, in the aftermath of the summits, many ASEM activities have been undertaken in many policy domains and at several levels, be they direct follow-ups or other activities.

With 100 activities, pillar 2 dominates ASEM activities, pillar 3 having 54 and pillar 1 only 16. This distribution may well reflect the more diplomatic nature of many Pillar 1 exchanges that, at least inside ASEM as such, do not lend themselves to direct follow-ups so easily.

Table 3. Regular ASEM ministerials and other encounters

Nr	ASEM policy domain or subject	
	ASEM ministerial meetings	
1.	ASEM finance ministers	
2.	ASEM environment ministers	
3.	ASEM culture ministers	
4.	ASEM labour/employment ministers	
5.	ASEM economic ministers	
6.	ASEM transport ministers	
7.	ASEM education ministers	
	Other ASEM regular meetings	
	Informal Human Rights Seminar	ASEM Young Political Leaders Conference
	ASEM Customs Enforcement/Procedures WG	Seminar on Nuclear Safety
	ASEM Counterterrorism Conference	ASEM Sustainable Development Seminar on Water Management
	ASEM Symposium on Urban Forestry	ASEM Rectors Conference
	ASEM Interfaith Dialogue	ASEM Meeting of Governors and Mayors
	ASEM conference on e-commerce	ASEM Seminar on quality Assurance in Higher Education
	ASEM DGs Conference on Migratory Flows Management between Asia and Europe	ASEM Business/Universities Forum
	ASEM Workshop on HIV/AIDS	ASEM Vocational Education Symposium
	ASEM Youth Interfaith Dialogue	Asia-Europe Business Forum
	Customs DGs & Commissioners Meeting	ASEM ASEP (Parliamentary Partnership)
	Asia-Europe Environmental Forum	Asia-Europe Peoples Forum
	Asia-Europe Economic Forum	

Note: Not all regular activities under TPAP (Trade Promotion Action Plan) and IPAP (Investment Promotion Action Plan) are included above, as some of these activities are not recorded in the sources; nor do they issue press releases. The original IPAP can be found in Pelkmans & Shinkai (1997, Appendix IV).

[8] Note that ASEM Summits, Foreign Minister Meetings (FMMs) and Senior Officials Meetings (SOMs) under the FMM are not included in these 30 regulars.

ASEM has become an active community for governments and, occasionally, for non-government participants. For several ministerials, the absence of any ASEM organisation or secretariat is compensated by ASEF, which provides, on request, support services that facilitate continuity and probably strengthen a kind of 'memory' for these ministerials.

Table 3 shows that ASEM inter-summit activities begin to be more 'regular' in many areas. These regular meetings give more structure to ASEM, without any form of institutionalisation or loss of flexibility. They reduce the unpredictability of an ASEM-summit-led tradition of encounters and initiatives. They express, at least through their established frequency, the ASEM common interest. They help participants explore better policies or best practices whilst contributing to a better mutual understanding of one another's policies and positioning. The regularity should also help build trust between ministers and officials from Asia and Europe. Thus ASEM is summit-driven, without any doubt, and this provides prominence, press attention and political leadership. But by 2014 ASEM has grown in other ways and in many policy domains not necessarily dependent on its summits but on perceived or explicitly expressed mutual interest in specific areas.

3.2 *ASEM foreign ministers: commonality, except for trade cooperation?*

The most general, consistent and regular 'follow-up' of summits is pursued between them by the bi-annual Foreign Ministers Meeting (FMM). The degree of similarity and overlap in topics and announcements or instructions for follow-ups between post-summit FMM Chair Statements and the Chair Statements of preceding ASEM summits is great. Indeed, FMMs tend to position themselves as the 'guardian' of ASEM in the period between summits, resulting in reiteration of ASEM summit positions, reminders about follow-ups and a purely formal updates of specific action agendas. Only in the broad area of foreign policy and security – the domain par excellence of the FMMs – does it appear that FMMs assume a somewhat greater discretion in positioning ASEM as a group. However, precisely in this area, follow-ups – if any – are next to impossible to verify on the basis of public documents. There is ample literature on the foreign policy positioning and some other issues in ASEM summits and FMMs; therefore, and given the purpose of this brief, we shall not elaborate on them. [9] FMM Chair Statements tend to be prudent and highly diplomatic. The whole point of ASEM's founding was to avoid confrontation and always seek what binds ASEM partners. This is still the case today. Confrontation is sidestepped by respectfully exchanging views and pronouncing common perspectives. However, there is one interesting exception, in the FMMs and recent summits, to this unspoken but firm ASEM philosophy: the almost explicit difference of opinion between a large part of Asia and the EU on further trade cooperation, led by the Economic Ministers Meeting (EMM). The word 'further' is critical because, as noted, there are several regular ASEM meetings at Director General or technical level on customs, investment promotion or standards. Very little is publicly known about these encounters, let alone what they yield and how they help improve trade policy-making. As far as the authors know, they are pure technical or, sometimes, capacity building exchanges, not cooperation in the more operational sense of trying to align standards or promote joint initiatives in ASEM or in the WTO. The last EMM was held in Rotterdam in 2005. Several ASEM summits and the FMMs in Hamburg (2007), Ha Noi (2009) and Godollo (Hungary, 2011) called for a new meeting of the EMM. The Hamburg Chair Statement even "underlined the potential of ASEM-economic dialogue and cooperation to be a showcase for concrete ASEM achievements". In Hamburg and in Ha Noi, host countries (Indonesia and India) were mentioned, but the EMMs were never held.[10]

[9] See Pelkmans & Hu, 2014, section 3.2 for a short survey of the four FMMs since Helsinki.

[10] How difficult it seemed to have been is also clear from the Chair Statement of Godollo, following a report from an informal SOMTI (SOM for trade and investment). The FMM "encouraged ASEM members to reconvene the ASEM EMM at an early date" and for a formal SOMTI to be organised in early 2012, but it was never held.

The open friction at several summits and FMMs concerning the ASEM Economic Ministers Meetings seems paradoxical. It is not in the spirit of ASEM; indeed, it seems to be the only instance of such a split, repeatedly appearing in prominent ASEM statements, without much avail. The authors have attempted to arrive at a possible explanation of this 'stalemate'. It is clear from interviews that most of Asia is in favour of further trade cooperation and of EMMs to lead the effort, whereas the EU seems to be reluctant. We suggest that there is a link between this impasse and the ongoing trade negotiations between the EU and many East Asian countries as well as India and (an investment treaty with) China. There is a 'tactical' and a 'structural' aspect to this link. Concerning the tactical, the EU might hesitate to expose economic ministers (of trade and industry) to the pressures of several Asian partners that might affect these (bilateral) negotiations. These negotiations are also tied to strategies of East Asian and Pacific regionalism, whether those of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP, led by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ASEAN) or of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). One might of course assume different views on such a position, even more so now that the EU has begun its Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) negotiations with the US, which are likely to affect the TPP negotiations, in which the US plays an important role. It is not inconceivable that ASEM might eventually play a useful role in these strategic trade questions, but this would require a different attitude especially on the part of the EU.

Concerning the structural aspect of the link, the point is that within ASEM the EU – though it of course formally speaks with a single voice – in fact wears two faces: the face of political diplomacy (via the European External Action Service, or EEAS, and individual member states' own diplomatic efforts), characterised by soft power and a natural inclination to align comfortably with East Asian traditions of searching for what binds – but does not constrain – ASEM members; and the face expressed by the 'hard' power of market access rules and discipline concluded in trade and investment negotiations (via the Commission, with DG Trade in the lead but closely involving member states and the new European Parliament's trade powers). These 'two EUs' can enjoy a 'peaceful coexistence', but there is a profound reluctance to blend them. This is especially so because ASEM is not even an organisation and is allergic to committing itself to the slightest form of institutionalisation (such as a purely functional secretariat). Furthermore, it is suspected that such a step would lead to such a low common denominator in trade cooperation (probably also with opt-outs, and certainly no treaties) that the perceived costs are higher than the imaginable benefits in terms of lower market access barriers. This explanation is consistent with the continuation of highly technical cooperation in, e.g. customs practices, whilst holding off ASEM-based trade talks at EMM level.

4. ASEM working methods: efficiency and effectiveness

ASEM's working methods matter primarily for officials engaged in the many ASEM processes and encounters. For outside observers, citizens and stakeholders, they matter only insofar as they tell us something about the efficiency and effectiveness of ASEM. However, this is in itself already puzzling: how can ASEM, which is not an organisation or institution, be efficient and/or effective? Its deliverables are far more a question of process than concrete measures, and its ultimate purpose is to maintain or improve general Europe-Asia relations. This problem was recognised early on in ASEM and led to "AECF 2000": the Asia-Europe Cooperation Framework for working methods at the 2000 Seoul ASEM Summit. The idea is the following: since ASEM is an open and evolutionary process, its working methods help to translate ASEM leaders' political decisions into tangible policy, either as political directions or as administrative measures.

The present CEPS Policy Brief is not the place to analyse in depth the ASEM working methods.[11] We shall limit the discussion to the more important aspects without too much bureaucratic detail. The ASEM working

[11] Our study, op. cit., in chapter 4, comprises a detailed discussion of all the issues and mechanisms of implementation and organisation of ASEM.

methods touch upon four policy aspects, namely how to work together in areas of cooperation (including 'issue-based leadership' [12]), organisation, coordination (including administration and events coordination) and visibility. The overall conclusion is that, while ASEM administration and visibility proved very difficult tasks to accomplish, partners have improved ASEM working methods in the areas of cooperation, organisation and events coordination.[13] The mechanism of 'issue-based leadership', potentially important for developing and small ASEM countries, was not duly implemented by partners.

ASEM's sheer size and informal nature strongly suggest that its day-to-day administration, in the absence of an institutional structure, is challenging. Three coordination initiatives have been endorsed by ASEM partners since the Helsinki Summit, to enhance ASEM day-to-day information and administrative support: ASEM Virtual Secretariat (AVS), Technical Support to the Coordination of ASEM Process (TASC) and the ASEM Chairman's Support Group (ACSG). These three initiatives have not been successful, although TASC had distinct merits.[14] All three are attempts to make up for the steadfast refusal of ASEM governments to establish an ASEM secretariat, no matter how modest and purely technical and/or logistical. APEC has a secretariat, and although it has grown in staff over time, it has never been endowed with any real powers whilst effectively serving the 21 APEC countries and APEC's working parties and committees. But ASEM's early conviction not to turn into an 'institution' is apparently still quite strong, though it is not shared by all countries. Having recognised the coordination deficiencies, ASEM partners' preferences about setting up an ASEM secretariat have invariably remained quite disparate. Some advocate upgrading ASEF to become the ASEM secretariat; some argue, on the premise of the AECF 2000, to maintain the status quo of ASEM coordination, i.e. without a secretariat; some suggest establishing two secretariats, one in Asia and one in Europe to promote ASEM in tandem. One interviewee pointed out that in promoting ASEM, ASEF has become well known in Asia, but not in Europe. Therefore, ASEF could become ASEM's secretariat in Asia; in the meantime, a European ASEM secretariat, perhaps in Brussels, could also be established. It would re-enforce Europe's identity in the ASEM process, and might serve as a good counterpart to ASEF in Asia.

The present authors appreciate the general sentiment in the ASEM community that, when discussing ASEM working methods, too much time has been consumed or perhaps wasted on the question of a secretariat. This may well be correct, because establishing a secretariat will not automatically, or 'magically', solve all practical issues, and could become entangled in typical intergovernmental haggling before it could even start working.[15] But there is more: focussing too much on one single 'solution' – a secretariat – might lead one to ignore other ways to address the problems of (more) effective coordination and ASEM 'memory'. One such alternative is to organise a well-prepared and

[12] Issue-based leadership might have been a good idea, as an attempt to cluster themes and have groups of ASEM countries most interested in the themes work together. A kind of 'variable geometry', ASEM style. One additional advantage would have been that small and less developed ASEM countries could have been more closely involved in the selection of agenda's according to their preferences, something that in the huge ASEM is otherwise difficult to accomplish. Indeed, the 'leadership' of some issues would be laid in the hands of these small or developing countries, so as to help stimulate policy thinking in the countries. See also note 20.

[13] "Improved" does not mean that the agreed ASEM 'coordination' always works. For example, a modest form of ASEM 'branding' is the use of the agreed ASEM logo for all announcements and activities. However, a recent summit was held under a logo specially designed by the host country, thereby reducing recognition.

[14] Endorsed by the Hanoi FMM in 2009, TASC (January 2010-March 2012) was deliverables-based. It had a strict obligation to transparency, accessibility and accountability to all ASEM partners while providing technical support, mainly through the ASEM Intranet that the TASC team set up.

[15] The latter fear consists of endless debates on its location, the number of staff members and from what countries, its remit and budget, and who would pay for it. Just giving one example of how cautious ASEM countries are, the ASEM Infoboard (managed by ASEF), which is no more than an ASEM information portal at very low cost, is paid for by voluntary contributions of ASEM countries.

timely 'handover' of the ASEM dossier and knowledge base to other officials inside national administrations,[16] thereby ensuring continuity and stability by passing on the ASEM 'memory' and spirit. Complementary to an efficient handover is that host countries prepare themselves well and verify up-to-date networking and recent initiatives of all kinds. To some extent, this has been accomplished between summits by the (old) host-to- (new) host cooperation.

With regard to raising visibility, it is crucial to realise that ASEM is very much a process driven by governments, for governments and of governments, including their policy-making officials. It neither serves nor involves citizens, except sometimes in the margin. On this account alone, it is bound to be very difficult for ASEM to reach billions of ordinary people from Asia and Europe. This was confirmed by two press-monitoring exercises[17] in 2010 and 2011, respectively. Media outlets have little to report on ASEM in the absence of summits and FMMs, while specialised ASEM activities – which, again, are only for government officials or ministers, and only sometimes for technical experts and analysts – are scattered across all ASEM countries throughout the year. Of course, almost right from the start, ASEF was and continues to be called upon to serve as a conduit to connect citizens and civil society with the ASEM process. Having a permanent staff, various communication tools, such as its comprehensive website, and rich programmes, ASEF – true to its mandate – has achieved good visibility within ASEM civil society.

However, in recent years ASEF has advocated moving 'upstream' in the ASEM process, i.e. to become an 'ASEM Secretariat', while on its website it already profiles itself as ASEM's "only permanently established institution".[18] Although factually correct (except for the secretariat for the ASEM educational ministers in Bonn), this claim nevertheless seems to contradict Point III.8 of the AECF 2000, which states that "as an informal process, ASEM need not be institutionalised".

5. A short survey of ASEM working methods

Since ASEM was established in 1996, nine working methods were adopted, including three 'non-papers'.[19] Though working methods, adopted either by ASEM leaders or FMMs, may seem like ASEM 'administrative law', that is 'ASEM laws' implementing leaders' instructions and wishes, it is perhaps necessary to point out that not applying these working methods is not 'illegal', nor does it necessarily cause friction, since being informal is where ASEM's uniqueness lies. The authors have surveyed how ASEM working methods have been implemented, in our search to answer our query of how, in the absence of an institution, ASEM works. We show that the four summits and the four FMMs since the 6th ASEM in Helsinki (held (10-11 September 2006) followed the instructions given at ASEM 6 and each time updated the clusters of political, economic and cultural topics according to the changes in the international arena. But it might still beg the question of what added value ASEM provides when ASEM leaders and foreign ministers express their support of issues such as UN reform, the WTO, the Middle East peace process, etc., which appear to be beyond ASEM's mandate. To answer this question, referring to AECF 2000,[20] one must remember that the nature of ASEM lies precisely in the evolving political dialogue process itself between Asia and Europe. Thus negotiating the text of the Chair Statement is an opinion-forming process, laying down foundations for future discussions among ASEM partners.

We also conclude that ASEM leaders' wish to strengthen the role of coordinators has been duly pursued and implemented. So has the suggestion to enhance the role of summit hosts before and after a summit. This is achieved by

[16] Changes of national ASEM officers are frequent, and can be problematic, absent any joint ASEM body.

[17] See Pelkmans & Hu (2014) for details.

[18] Available at www.asef.org/index.php/about/history.

[19] See Pelkmans & Hu (2014) for details.

[20] The Asia-Europe Cooperation Framework (AECF), adopted by Heads of State/Government at ASEM 3 in Seoul in 2000, sets out the vision, principles, objectives, priorities and mechanisms for the ASEM process for the first decade of the new millennium.

internal as well as external means, for example, "the ASEM coordinators' meeting" mechanism and the technical coordination project.

Nonetheless, some aspects of the ASEM working methods have been ignored. We provide evidence that issue-based leadership was never really taken seriously.[21] Another example consists in the quasi-permanent search for more effective and durable technical support of the splintered and extremely decentralised ASEM process. Several initiatives have been taken such as the AVS, discussions about a modest technical ASEM secretariat (which went nowhere), and several ad hoc and temporary technical support projects, such as TASC and the ACSG. There is evidence pointing to some degree of effectiveness of TASC but none (yet) for the ACSG. AVS failed. Enhanced coordination, as this problem is called, remains a weak spot in ASEM.

Some ASEM working methods were applied partially. As is already mentioned in Section 3 on ASEM follow-ups and regular meetings, our survey concludes that the SOM (Senior Officials Meetings) mechanism has been well established in the sectors of TFAP (trade facilitation action plan), culture, labour and employment, and migratory flows pursuant to what ASEM leaders recommended at the Helsinki Summit, but not in the sectors of environment, energy, health, science and technology and ICT. At the ministerial level, we found that meetings on culture, education, finance, labour and employment, and transport took place regularly. Reflecting on the sectoral SOMs, it seems that active cooperation in the areas of TFAP, customs and migratory flows remained at working level. They are not upgraded to the ministerial level. Conversely, in sectors without the preparation of SOMs, such as energy, environment, ICT and SMEs, meetings nevertheless took place at ministerial level. Indeed, more ministerials now take place than in Helsinki and all meet regularly (except the EMM as noted).

The question of ASEM visibility, awareness and links with stakeholders is intrinsically difficult to handle, given that ASEM is typically intended for governments and driven by governments. Several attempts have been made to develop a 'better' communication strategy and some elements have reached a wider public, such as the ASEM Infoboard, the EEAS ASEM website, and ASEF's peoples-to-peoples activities and assistance for some ministerials.[22]

We identified ASEM working methods for which we are unable to verify whether they were applied properly. These include the role of ASEM coordinators, the 'regular' contacts between embassies of ASEM countries and the roles of the three ASEM gatherings closely connected to the ASEM summits (AEBF, ASEP, and AEPF, explained below).

The Asia-Europe Business Forum (AEBF) was envisaged by AECF 2000 as one of the key priorities for Asia-Europe cooperation.[23] It consists of a few working groups, but overall information about AEBF is very scarce, scant publicity exists between summits and no permanent information, let alone positions and background papers, can be traced. It is therefore not easy to verify how AEBF is fulfilling its mandate and what impact it has made on promoting business between the two regions.

As for Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF),[24] there is some doubt about its representativeness. AEPF seems to be more a gathering of (self-selected) NGOs that shape an agenda that is rather selective and probably not representative of what many political currents or others in civil society would prefer to debate.

Meanwhile, discussions conducted at the Asia-Europe Parliamentary Partnership Meeting

[21] The Helsinki Summit adopted the 'issue-based leadership' mechanism (IBL) in order to sustain a summit-to-summit momentum. Though initial attempts to implement IBL were serious, and progress, however limited, was made – with an IBL list adopted at the Beijing Summit – subsequent information on IBL cannot be found. The Collated List of Interested ASEM Members for Tangible Cooperation, annexed to the Chair Statement at FMM 11 (Delhi) appears strikingly similar to the IBL list adopted at the Beijing Summit. It is also possible to interpret IBL or the Delhi initiative as an attempt to introduce a kind of 'variable geometry' given the large number of ASEM countries.

[22] See Pelkmans & Hu (2014) for details on ASEF.

[23] More information is available at www.aseminfoboard.org/asia-europe-business-forum-aebf.html. See also Point IV.16, AECF 2000, for the AEBF's mandate.

[24] www.aepf.info.

(ASEP)[25] revolve around the same three pillars of cooperation as under the ASEM process. Very limited information is available as to how ASEP has supported greater public awareness of the ASEM process and particularly of the ASEM summit.

6. Conclusions and recommendations on the working of ASEM

6.1 Conclusions

ASEM works surprisingly well in its own way and from the perspective of accepting what it is and what it is not. Its 'dialogue' function has deepened and intensified over the years. It has also broadened: ASEM works on an incredibly wide range of policy issues and does this at various levels, from the summit and foreign ministers meetings, to many other ministerials, high level groups, conferences, seminars and workshops. Generally, this broad mission is pursued whilst remaining faithful to ASEM's character of informality, networking and flexibility. Although ASEM is purposefully not an agenda setter, it effectively 'identifies' issues of agreed policy relevance for the 50-plus countries concerned.

Not only does ASEM work consistently on issues in all three 'pillars' (political, economic, and cultural/education/peoples-to-peoples), the combination of its flexibility and commitment to operate in all three pillars enables it to address topical priority issues following but also shaping the international policy agenda. This flexibility and informality allows regular discussions on sensitive questions such as human rights in an annual informal seminar setting. All three pillars witness a great deal of ASEM activity. There is no clear bias between pillars, all three have their peculiarities, but the second (economic) pillar has grown in its number of activities.

It would seem that the many ASEM regular meetings strengthen the sustainability of and permanent (common) interest in ASEM. The 'regulars' minimise the unpredictability of an ASEM summit-led tradition, express through their permanence, at least implicitly, the ASEM common interest, and help in exploring better policies or best practices whilst contributing to a better mutual understanding of one another's policies and positioning. The regularity should also help build trust between ministers and officials from Asia and Europe. The many 'regulars' (30 in total, ministerials and other) reflect a degree of maturity in Asia-Europe relations.

Amongst the many areas for 'follow-up' to summits, very few fail to be addressed. There is only one genuine and indeed conspicuous failure: the repeated calls, both in summit statements (three out of four) and FMMs, for ASEM economic ministers to meet. There are indications that many Asian countries would like the EMM to meet, whereas the EU apparently hesitates to do this at ministerial (and European Commission) level. At DG or technical level, however, many activities on trade, customs and investment continue as before. The EU's reticence to engage in EMMs should be read in the light of the numerous trade (and investment) negotiations with Asian countries. Asian ASEM countries face 'two EUs', as it were: one is relevant to ASEM's typical diplomacy (conducted by the EEAS, based on 'soft' power and seeking what binds ASEM countries); the other to EU trade and investment policy (conducted by the Commission, based on 'hard' disciplines and legal commitments of market access). Apparently, the preference is to enjoy a peaceful coexistence of these approaches, but not to blend them.

The FMM is clearly fulfilling the role of 'guardian of ASEM' in between summits. On the whole, FMMs conform very closely to the Chair Statement of the preceding summit.

ASEM is very much a process driven by and serving governments. It is not, or is rather only indirectly, intended to serve or involve citizens, except sometimes in the margin (and in many ASEF activities targeted to citizens and the cultural sphere). This fundamental characteristic is a formidable hurdle to overcome in any communication strategy, because it translates into very little visibility and recognition of citizens; relevance to them is at best remote, if not absent, as no decisions are taken – it is all

[25] www.aseminfoboard.org/asia-europe-parliamentary-partnership-meeting-asep.html.

about 'dialogue' and 'follow-ups' that concern only governments.

The Helsinki Summit issued working methods instructions that subsequent summits and FMMs have followed. Each subsequent summit and meeting has also updated the political, economic and cultural topics under ASEM's purview, to keep in step with current affairs. The function of ASEM working methods is only to facilitate, i.e. without institutionalisation, operational measures or manifest added value. The nature of ASEM lies precisely in the evolving political dialogue process itself between Asia and Europe. Thus, negotiating the text of a Chair Statement is an opinion-forming process. Unfortunately, some aspects of the ASEM working methods have been ignored. We show that 'issue-based leadership' was never taken seriously. Another example consists in the quasi-permanent search for more effective and sustainable technical support of the splintered and extremely decentralised ASEM process. Enhanced coordination, as this problem is called, remains a weak spot in ASEM, though the degree of its weakness is contested. An ASEM secretariat has remained a controversial issue for the last 15 years. Some ASEM participants point out that, on the one hand, a technical secretariat would make neither an immediate nor significant impact, and, on the other hand, timely and well-prepared 'handovers' of ASEM dossiers and its knowledge base within national administrations will sufficiently maintain ASEM 'memory' and spirit, ensuring continuity and stability.

The ASEM policy with respect to the three ASEM gatherings closely connected to the ASEM summits (AEBF, ASEP, and AEPF) is less than clear and not explicit. There is some doubt about the representativeness of the AEPF, which seems to be more a gathering of (self-selected) NGOs. Also, one would expect the role of the AEBF to be more prominent. Scant publicity is generated until just before an ASEM summit and no permanent information, let alone positions and background papers, can be traced.

Many previous attempts to improve efficiency and coordination have occurred since the 2000 Seoul Summit: some have strayed or failed, whilst others now seem to work (e.g. host-to-host summit cooperation). It should also be noted that it is not easy to identify other comparable international gatherings that involve many countries and consistently attract the highest level political leaders and from which ASEM could learn. Even the comparison of ASEM to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (on security and transparency, as well as good practices in elections) and APEC prompts mixed reactions from the broad ASEM membership and opinion-shapers; so, too, has the idea of inspecting how the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) works and what one might learn from it. Thus, one often hears, ASEM is therefore 'unique'. Indeed, it *is* unique, but should this be regarded as a virtue or is its uniqueness an obstacle to its longer-run credibility and attractiveness?

6.2 *Policy recommendations*

I. For today's ASEM, there is no need of reform.

The core function of ASEM works. ASEM has proven to be an effective facilitator of Asia-Europe dialogue in many ways, in many areas, and at all levels. For all the practical problems at the official level, which ASEM 'coordination' has apparently failed to resolve even after many attempts, it is nonetheless critical never to confuse this failure with the overall mission of ASEM: to maintain, develop and widen the scope of Asia-Europe dialogue and exchange between political leaders, supplemented by many other substantive encounters of a more specialised nature. As long as the nature of ASEM lies in the evolving dialogue process itself between Asia and Europe, there is no need to reform ASEM.

II. Eliminating ASEM would inflict political and diplomatic costs.

ASEM has lived up to its mission. ASEM summits remain useful forums for some 50 political leaders from Asia and Europe to discuss relatively freely and keep channels open for exchange on many issues relevant to ASEM's three pillars, including sensitive issues of 'high politics'. *Not* having ASEM would have made such approaches more cumbersome, or in any case more fragmented, and possibly created lingering suspicions or perpetuated a lack of

mutual understanding. Preventing these problems, obstacles or inhibitions is precisely the paramount motive behind ASEM's creation in 1995-96. Furthermore, ASEM has matured and its agenda is firmly established via a large number of 'regular' ASEM meetings, at ministerial and other levels, that complement ASEM summitry. Dismissing ASEM because it does not produce 'results' and 'hence' is a waste of time disregards the intangible but crucial benefits it bestows. Not having ASEM anymore would be costly.

III. Tomorrow's ASEM might be different.

There are, however, good reasons for measured change. One reason consists of what is sometimes called the gap between expectations and capabilities, even though the former are hard to measure in a convincing way. If expectations in ASEM countries are structurally higher than what today's ASEM can bring about given its nature, it might be worthwhile to reflect on ways to move from 'dialogue' to active 'cooperation', if only in some areas. Another reason is found in the drastic changes in the geopolitical and economic context since the mid-1990s, strongly suggesting that today's predicament might well demand an adapted ASEM. A third reason might consist in the huge size of ASEM, combined with its UN-like principle of the equality of all ASEM countries. Whilst one ought to be extremely prudent before deviating from that principle, it cannot be ignored that China and India sit next to Malta and Luxembourg in ever more massive gatherings. Even if 'issue-based leadership' failed, forms of clustering countries and/or practising 'variable geometry' or perhaps focusing on certain themes would need to be considered, even more so when moves from 'dialogue to cooperation' would be initiated.

IV. 20th birthday gift: study on alternative ASEM designs

Considering what ASEM's characteristics have been over a period of no fewer than 18 years, one has to first accept that credible options for change are extremely limited. Improving its capability is possible, of course, but not without realising that many previous attempts to improve efficiency and coordination have been attempted since the 2000 Seoul Summit: some attempts have strayed or failed, whilst others now seem to work. Institutionalisation remains sensitive. One way this shows up is when one tries to compare ASEM to other international gatherings of many countries and attended consistently by the highest political leaders. Even comparison to the OSCE (on security and transparency, as well as good practices in elections) and APEC prompts mixed reactions from the broad ASEM membership and opinion-shapers, let alone the idea of merely inspecting how the OECD works and what one might learn from it.

Critical discussion about ASEM is in principle a sound form of engagement and ought to be encouraged in all ASEM quarters and countries. If the objective of a given assessment is to express the preference for going beyond mere exchanges of policy views and making ASEM more 'effective' in problem solving, realising that preference would lead to a very different ASEM. In other words, moving from dialogue to active cooperation – which is a familiar action in many other international organisations – does not seem to have many outspoken supporters amongst ASEM governments. This should not be read as an opinion that a major effort, e.g. by independent think tanks from Asia and Europe working together, to create a convincing rationale for redesigning ASEM would not be worth its while. It almost certainly would be. Both the deepened mutual trust and the more mature Asia-Europe relationship provide a foundation that was not in existence in the mid-1990s. Also in terms of economic development and geopolitics, the context of Asia-Europe relations has drastically changed. The 20th anniversary of ASEM in 2016 seems to the authors to be an excellent occasion to organise in 2015 a profound reflection on alternative designs of ASEM, stimulated first by independent thinkers.

V. Getting more value out of ASEM: Exercise better ownership.

The fundamental problem of ASEM might be its 'ownership'. ASEM is a large 'collective' and hence it risks suffering from typical 'collective action' problems. All governments 'are' ASEM, yet nobody seems to 'own' ASEM, with the remit or responsibilities that come with it. In a

way, it is admirable that ASEM works, despite its possibly fragile incentive structure. Therefore, one vital route to cement and ascertain ASEM's viability is to reflect seriously on how to increase 'ownership' in ASEM. This is directly linked to 'capability'. One could create better structures to obtain greater added value. The various sectorial SOMs might be transformed into or delegate tasks to 'working parties' or designated ASEM committees, with programme assignments. Chairs could rotate (always in Asia-Europe pairs, of course) every two or three years, work programmes and results could be pursued and published in ASEM publications and disseminated via the ASEM Infoboard, EEAS website and other means. Such working parties might commission studies and reports and even reach consensus regarding, e.g. best practices in certain policy areas, and disseminate all this information in an active way. The OECD and to a lesser extent APEC frequently create value-added activities and publications often in collaboration with governments. The central guiding principle is that such ASEM activities should benefit ASEM governments and indeed also a wider public. That is namely what 'ownership' implies: managing the precious common 'asset' of ASEM activities in ways that yield more and more tangible results. Getting more out of ASEM on a continuous basis, without in any way constraining ASEM governments, is an essential goal.

VI. ASEM can usefully connect three mega-FTAs.

ASEM can play a cautious, constructive role in strategic discussions on world trade and investment. Precisely because it is neither necessary nor feasible to agree on operational conclusions to be laid down in legal commitments, Asia-Europe exchanges have the potential to gather broad support for selective WTO initiatives, be they multilateral or plurilateral. This could be generated from conferences, 'ASEM studies' and technical dialogues, and eventually reach the EMM. As there is no need to define a 'mandate' for such WTO activities, there are no tactical constraints for ASEM member countries or the EU as a group: it could be pure win-win. In addition, ASEM is uniquely well placed for bridging information gaps between ongoing mega-free-trade agreement negotiations (RCEP, TPP and TTIP), given that ASEM membership overlaps partially with TPP, RCEP, TTIP and APEC. Following from such information exchanges, it would eventually be conceivable to engage in confidence-building measures between these three partially overlapping trade groupings in the making, on a voluntary basis. These could include principles of regulatory cooperation, as already discussed in OECD and APEC circles, as well as broad guidelines on standards at international level. The underlying idea is that the three mega-FTAs 'reach out' to third countries, in particular, in regulatory trade policy and investment issues, without constraining negotiators in detail.

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