

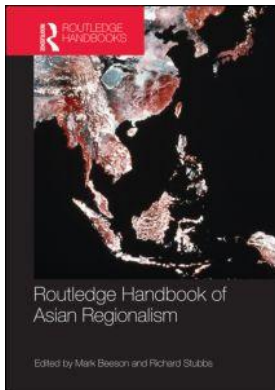
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The Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM)

Julie Gilson

Introduction

As the list of contents to this volume demonstrates, the Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM) sits among a proliferation of regionally active institutional, government-to-government frameworks within the Asian region today. It currently brings together in regular meetings representatives of around half of the world's gross domestic product and over 60 per cent of global trade. And, as the citizens of ASEM states count for around 60 per cent of the world's population, it seems obvious to assume that it represents a major force in contemporary global politics and economics.¹ In fact, this is not the case, and instead in nearly 15 years of existence ASEM has clocked up an impressive quota of diplomatic air miles but very little in the way of substantive and value-added cooperation. This is not to suggest that ASEM has achieved nothing. In fact, as will be shown in this chapter, work on trade dialogue, environmental agreement, the participation of civil society actors, and certain forms of financial assistance has been fruitful. But at a macro level, at which two growing and deepening regions putatively come together to pool their considerable resources in the face of globalization and regionalism, there is little evidence to suggest that ASEM is regarded as a priority on the diplomatic agenda for its member governments. This chapter evaluates its work so far in bringing two distinct and different regions together; examines the sectors in which it has been most active; and proposes that in order to remain relevant ASEM needs to adopt a more *ad hoc*, strategic and issue-led approach to Asia–Europe relations.

ASEM: From the early years to the present

The ASEM process started as a means of redressing a communication gap during the 1990s between the states of the European Union (EU) and the dynamically growing economies in East Asia (for general accounts of ASEM see Gilson 2002; Yeo 2003; Gaens 2008). In fact, the 1994 EU paper entitled 'Toward a New Asia Strategy' was the first time the EU elevated East Asia to a priority within its external relations (Gilson 2002: 59, 114). This strategy paper proposed a means of managing collective relations with the growing region of East Asia within a broad format to encapsulate issues ranging from trade to the protection of the environment and research on HIV/AIDS, and in so doing it represented, according to Pelkmans and Balaoing, a 'most-useful process

of changing the ways of thinking on Asia and EU–Asia relations’ (Pelkmans and Balaoing 1996; see also Gilson 2002: 87). In practice, although it did not amount to tangible policy changes (except for a number of business and investment opportunities), these developments did lead to calls within East Asia for the strengthening of regional collaboration in a perceived trilateral (EU–US–East Asia) global economy; the creation of some kind of currency union akin to the European model; and for greater institutionalized relations.

As a result of these developments, a summit meeting of 25 heads of state from the EU and East Asia (alongside the president of the European Commission) was held in Bangkok in 1996 and formally heralded the beginning of ASEM. Since then, summit meetings have taken place every two years, alternating between Asia and Europe, and have selected a particular theme for each meeting. The Chair’s Statement issuing from the 1996 Bangkok summit celebrated a new partnership based on a common commitment to a market economy, to the open multilateral trading system, non-discrimination, liberalization and ‘open regionalism’. In contrast, the 2010 summit in Brussels emphasized the theme of ‘Greater wellbeing and more dignity for all citizens’ (Chair’s Statement 2010; see also Islam 2010a). Alongside the generic Chair’s Statement, several summits have also issued additional proclamations, such as the ‘Seoul Declaration for Peace on the Korean Peninsula’ from ASEM 3 and the ‘Declaration on Cooperation against International Terrorism’ from ASEM 4. Meanwhile ASEM 7 issued the ‘Beijing Declaration on Sustainable Development’ and the ‘Statement of the Seventh Asia–Europe Meeting on the International Financial Situation’, whilst Brussels 2010 focused on the theme of ‘Improving the Quality of Life’.²

Between summits a wide range of ministerial meetings are held within the ASEM framework. For example, an ASEM finance ministers’ meeting was begun in 1997, to discuss issues related to the global economy and international financial architecture, and a meeting of finance deputies usually takes place alongside these gatherings. In addition, meetings of ASEM economic ministers have been convened almost every two years since 1997, to discuss the promotion of economic opportunities within the inter-regional context. Other ASEM meetings have brought together foreign ministers (for the overall coordination of the ASEM process), environment ministers, cultural ministers and education ministers, whilst certain other ministerial meetings have been convened on an *ad hoc* basis: in 2009, for instance, special conferences were held on subjects including energy security and transport cooperation. ASEM also brings together a range of formal and informal dialogues that offer opportunities for input from civil society representatives. These dialogues have addressed subjects from arms control and disarmament, transnational crime and counterterrorism, to the environment, the welfare of women and children, human resources, and food security. Furthermore, ASEM has sponsored seminars, for example, on trade facilitation within the World Trade Organization (WTO), and agro-technology and food processing. Alongside these events, the Asia–Europe Business Forum meets as official representatives within the ASEM process, whilst other conferences involving non-state groups have also taken place within the ASEM context on topics such as education, youth, trade union meetings, and culture and interfaith dialogue. In essence, then, ASEM embraces a wide variety of topics within its broad remit and beneath its three pillars of economic, political and cultural cooperation.

Institutionally, ASEM was designed to be loose and non-binding and was principally designed as a channel for dialogue. It does have a clear structure involving multilevel meetings, with the summits at its apex, which are facilitated by a rotating set of coordinating states (in 2010 these were Cambodia, South Korea, Belgium and the European Commission). However, it has no permanent secretariat of its own (although the European Commission is always one of the coordinators and the ASEAN secretariat is represented), and Asian participants in particular have been wary of according the ASEM structure a greater institutionalized framework. Given its informality, the

now unwieldy membership (in terms of both number and diversity), and a distinct lack of commitment on the part of (notably) European heads of government at times, this lack of institutionalized structure can also contribute to a sense that within ASEM ‘commitment to the cause [is] uneven’ (Anonymous 2010e). Seasoned observer Lay Hwee Yeo is optimistic that despite its challenges ASEM could still ‘rise to the challenge of developing a close and comprehensive partnership’ (Yeo 2010). This chapter suggests that whether or not Yeo’s optimism proves to be well founded will depend on two key factors: how the growing membership affects its ability to function as a group; and the extent to which it can be recognized as a valuable forum for issue-specific concerns. The following sections examine these factors briefly.

Contemporary realities

One of the distinctive features of ASEM has been its region-to-region identity. Although the specific format of this arrangement and its potential impact on global practices have been much debated (see, for example, Dent 1999; Gaens 2008; and Gilson 2002), it has been heralded as a coming together of two formerly distant sides of the global triangle of North America, East Asia and Europe. Some observers even remark that East Asia was forced to a large extent to present itself as a ‘region’ for the very purpose of engaging with a significant other within the context of ASEM, with the result that this process engendered greater intraregional institutionalized relations within East Asia itself (Gilson 2005; Reiterer 2006). In practice, however, East Asia and the EU have not created an important region-to-region partnership commensurate with their respective relations with the US, whilst the ‘regionness’ of Asia remains a subject of dispute. From a European standpoint, the EU has never really been interested in East Asia, despite the rhetoric, and has failed to put either its money or its diplomatic heavyweights where its pronouncements lie. Obvious reasons for the relatively low level of interest include the geographical distance, the EU’s preoccupation with its own internal mechanisms, the dominant external relationship with the US, and even the timing and budgetary implications of the multiple ASEM events. Kristalina Georgieva, the European commissioner for International Cooperation, Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response, believes that this lack of interest stems from Europe’s continued inability to speak with one voice. The Lisbon Treaty of 2010 sought to unify the diplomatic patchwork by creating the post of EU ‘foreign minister’, agreeing to the establishment of a Europe-wide diplomatic corps known as the ‘external action service’, and generally raising Europe’s international diplomatic profile. But it remains uncertain that such legal structures will increase Europe’s commitment to East Asia, without additional political will from within the leadership of Europe’s key states.

From an East Asian perspective, the EU partner has been viewed both as opportunity to increase trade with the region, as well as a model (or indeed anti-model) for regional integration (Fukunari 2003: 210). Since the mid-1990s, East Asian states have established a number of intraregional initiatives, including the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Plus Three process (with Japan, China and South Korea) and the East Asian Summits (Gilson 2005). At their so-called ‘Shangri-La Dialogue’ in June 2010, representatives of Asia-Pacific states agreed that they need to develop a coherent and collaborative response to the region’s multiple and diverse security risks: from food and energy security, ethnic conflicts, and insurgencies, to rising tensions on the Korean peninsula.³ Although such constructions have so far generally remained modest in ambition and accomplishment, some analysts regard inter-regionalism as an emergent new form of multilateralism that will become increasingly important in the future (Hänggi *et al.* 2006). In addition to ASEM, other examples of inter-regionalism include the formal connections the EU has developed with ASEAN since 1980, the Andean Pact since 1983, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) since 1989, and the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR)

since 1995. Elsewhere, the South Atlantic Peace and Cooperation Zone has operated since 1986 and now links 24 states of Africa and South America; and, modelled on ASEM, the Forum for East Asia–Latin America Cooperation (FEALAC) was first convened in 1999 and covers governments from 33 countries in those two regions. Loewen concludes that such new inter-regional institutions have contributed to ‘global discourses’ about a variety of issues from trade to the environment (Loewen 2007: 25). What is clear is that ASEM offers one framework in which East Asian leaders have begun to (re)consider their own intraregional dynamics alongside bilateral agenda (Avila and John Lawrence 2003: 213), and to develop their ability to project a common voice in international engagements with other regions. ASEM 7 in Beijing in October 2008 saw the addition of six new members and when Russia, Australia and New Zealand joined the Meeting in Brussels in October 2010, ASEM came to accommodate 48 member states and representatives (alongside the European Commission and ASEAN Secretariat). The breakdown of the inter-regional distinctiveness of ASEM may be a blessing in disguise, given that the notion of a coherent region in this vast ‘Asia’ now included in the ASEM framework is untenable. Instead, what remains is the potential to focus on specific issues of mutual interest and concern. It is to this strengthening of an issue-led approach that the remainder of this chapter now turns.

Issue-led agenda

The European Commission organized a forum from 11–13 July 2010 to discuss ASEM, alongside the senior officials’ meeting (SOM) in Brussels on 14 July. At the event, European Commissioner Georgieva reflected on how ASEM might enhance bilateral, region-to-region cooperation by addressing jointly particular global challenges in a dialogue that is inclusive and respectful of different views, and using diversity as an asset in international collaboration (Georgieva 2010). The Concept Paper accompanying this forum stressed the need to deal with the general issues of the 2010s: from the effects on all states of the current economic crisis; how to promote Asia–Europe cooperation on energy; environmental protection; food security and social development; to other common challenges such as piracy, transnational crime and terrorism. Dent has often pinpointed particular areas of useful cooperation for Asia and Europe in the economic dimension, including the ASEM Trust Fund, Investment Promotion Action Plan (IPAP) and the Trade Facilitation Action Plan (TFAP). At the same time, he notes that ASEM has made ‘little impact’ in expanding multilateralism (Dent 2003: 231), and it may therefore require a more pragmatic approach to cooperation over particular issues. The following section illustrates the potential for alliance-building, before addressing those issue areas in which the EU and East Asia appear to be developing better forms of cooperation.

Building alliances

Alliances in international relations tend to be represented as straightforward arrangements for non-binding collaboration, or else as a form of joint decision-making structures that ‘bind and restrain the exercise of self-interest’ by ‘entailing collective interests, sympathy, and solidarity’ (Stein 1990: 152–154). Importantly, Stein goes on to explain how alliances are not necessary where the interests of potential member states are already closely related; rather, they serve to manage difficult relations in an environment of competition and conflict (Stein 1990: 168). In a similar vein, Keohane distinguishes between normative and institutional multilateralism: normative multilateralism focuses on the principles that underpin collective behaviour and is enshrined in legal documents, strong institutionalization and clear obligations for members; whilst institutional multilateralism simply offers the means for implementing the goals of participating states,

and embraces diverse memberships, different levels of institutional frameworks and both *ad hoc* and permanent forms of engagement (Keohane 2006). Thus, as normative multilateralism can create ‘generalized principles of conduct’ for all participating members to follow and can have the effect of socializing states into particular forms of behaviour and shared values (Ruggie 1993: 11), its institutional counterpart is not constrained by legal obligation, but rather offers a way for accepting diversity amongst participants and for permitting loose alliance-building for issue-specific ends. This *ad hoc* approach to alliances, moreover, is not dependent on sustained institutional frameworks, but enables participants to come together to resolve or discuss issues of common concern.

Whilst the EU has retained a focus on normatively driven cooperation with, for example, the respect for human rights as a fundamental basis for agreement with other states, the states of East Asia historically have preferred to work on the basis of consensual dialogue. This distinction has been at the heart of problems in bringing together Europe and Asia to date, as Asian values have often been portrayed as being in tension with the ways of doing business in Europe (see, for example, Emmerson 1995). One illustration is the case of the military junta in Myanmar, against which the EU has targeted sanctions, whilst ASEAN retains a policy of engagement. In fact, the EU is under pressure to review its sanctions policy whilst many ASEAN members ‘increasingly see Myanmar’s military rulers as an embarrassment and a tar on the region’s global standing and reputation’ (Islam 2010e). For these reasons, it is hard to see how a strongly principled, overarching code of mutual conduct can be made to work for an increasingly disparate group within ASEM. If not, which are likely to be the issues in which Asia and Europe can work together successfully?

Trade

Notwithstanding the phenomenal economic success within East Asia, the region has consistently failed to become a priority area for the EU and the trade policies of its member states. By the 1990s it was clear to many Europeans that the phenomenal economic growth in East Asia made it an ideal location for new investment and mergers and acquisitions, and offered new and exciting prospects for European manufacturers (Gilson 2004: 186). But in spite of this enthusiasm, by 1996 only 15 per cent of all Asian imports came from Europe and only 1 per cent of EU investment went to East Asia (Gilson 2004: 186). Reasons for this neglect included continuing problems with geographical and cultural distance, Asian tariff and non-tariff barriers (NTBs), structural differences in economic organization and the dominant presence of American investors and traders in the respective regions (Gilson 2004: 186–187). Until the mid-1990s, however, there was little attempt to address these problems from a collective East Asian standpoint, although at that time attempts to attract inward investment and technical know-how were intensifying.

For its part, East Asia did not have the ability to address collectively the opportunities and threats presented to it by an enlarging EU, despite the fact that Japan and South Korea increased their foreign direct investment (FDI) in Europe. The growing ‘fortress’ of Europe of the 1990s, with its punitive measures often directed at particular Asian economies, as well as the imminent enlargement of the Union to incorporate several Central and Eastern European economies, led a number of firms, especially from Japan and South Korea, to hasten investment and production in the EU during the 1980s and 1990s. For their part, European business people continued to be concerned with regard to Asia about a lack of transparency, harmonized laws, protection and enforcement, intellectual property right (IPR) provisions and control over business enterprise in general. It was, nevertheless, upon the cumulative sets of these relations that ASEM would come to be based in the mid-1990s. Following the establishment of ASEM, and in part as a result of the greater cooperation between the two regions through that mechanism, between 2000 and 2007

the EU's trade with its Asian ASEM partners grew by around 60 per cent. During that same period EU exports to ASEM Asia rose from €146 billion (US\$197 billion) to €228 billion (US\$308 billion), with increases in imports from €285 billion (US\$385 billion) to €459 billion (US\$619 billion) (IANS 2008). European trade with Asia was valued at €750 billion in 2009, whilst its direct investment in the region was €350 billion (Islam 2010f). Asia overall remains the fastest growing region in the world and has a 26 per cent stake in EU total trade.⁴ At the same time, ASEAN has moved towards closer economic cooperation, notably through its ASEAN Free Trade Area, designed to lower intraregional tariffs through (www.aseansec.org).

The economic pillar of cooperation between the EU and Asia, notably but not exclusively conducted through the ASEM process, is regarded as a vehicle for encouraging trade liberalization and for enhancing trade and investment across the two regions. In the economic pillar of ASEM, there are regular meetings at several levels, including senior officials' meetings on trade and investment (SOMTI), the AEBF, the TFAP and IPAP. The TFAP was adopted by leaders at ASEM 2 in 1998, and sought to facilitate the reduction of NTBs and barriers relating to the fields of customs, tests, standards, certification, accreditation, technical regulations, procurement, quarantine, SPS (sanitary–phytosanitary standards) procedures, IPR and the mobility of business people. It is, however, not a forum for negotiation. Meanwhile, IPAP, proposed at ASEM 1 and also adopted at ASEM 2, was designed to generate a greater flow of investment and incorporates two pillars: Pillar One for investment promotion and Pillar Two for investment policies and regulations. An Investment Experts Group was endorsed at ASEM 2 to coordinate IPAP and explore best practice in the fields of transparency, non-discrimination and national treatment, privatization, investment incentives (tax/regime breaks), performance requirements, dispute settlement, IPR, investors' behaviour and the entry of key personnel. Whilst both of these initiatives were intended to offer a flagship policy for ASEM, they, too, have suffered from the broader problem of sustaining interest among participants of the ASEM process as a whole. This is in part due to the ways in which business activities function independently of regional and political structures, and in part due to the very loose framework of ASEM, which imposes no strict regime of accountability.

The financial crisis and the ASEM Trust Fund

Issue-specific activities within the economic sphere include the ASEM Trust Fund, the ASEM Child Welfare programme, and ASEMConnect (networking small firms from East Asia and the EU). It is worth examining the development of the Trust Fund briefly, as it is often heralded as a mark of ASEM's success. The 1997 Asian Financial Crisis reflected the lack of direct region-to-region economic interest by Europe and East Asia, and indeed following the collapse of regional currencies the EU scarcely seemed to register the financial earthquake at first. At the ASEM finance ministers' meeting in September 1997 only 3 of the 15 European representatives attended, since most were too busy dealing with euro-related issues. Instead, the crisis led to a barrage of European criticism attacking East Asia's so-called 'crony capitalism' and further provoked European condemnation of 'Asian' business practices, thus initially demonstrating only the distance between the two regions. One of the principal problems was that the crisis split the region into states such as South Korea and Indonesia that accepted International Monetary Fund (IMF) rescue packages, and those such as China and Malaysia that took independent action. From 1997 to mid-1998 the flow of investment to Asia dropped by half, and yet there were no mechanisms to create a common Asian response (Gilson 2002: 87). The Japanese government offered a regional solution in the form of the Asian Monetary Fund in 1997, and although this was rejected (notably by the US), it did provide the foundations of what later became the Chiang Mai Initiative (Hook *et al.* 2005: 238).

The most significant attempt to do something about the crisis was the ASEM Trade and Investment Pledge made at ASEM 2 and the Trust Fund at the World Bank from June 1998. Although ‘neither impressive nor very original’ (Godement 2000: 125), they provided a number of countries affected by the crisis with money for technical assistance, advice on restructuring their financial sectors and measures to deal with the growing social problems caused by the crisis, at an estimated cost of more than US\$45 million (42 million ecu). In addition, a European Financial Expertise (EFEX) Network was established to provide assistance to Asian economic representatives, in order to help them gain access to European expertise in reforming their financial sector and to bring European and Asian experts together. An extension of the Trust Fund to Phase 2 was approved at ASEM 3 and its modalities were determined in Kobe in January 2001. Specific issues such as the importance of indirect regulation and the need to address problems in offshore financial centres were also taken into account. On the one hand, the crisis revealed that European interests in Asian economic problems were at best ‘vague’. Civil society commentators believe that the principal aim of the Trust Fund was to develop ‘“good” policy regimes’, and for the Europeans to ‘lock in those institutions appropriate to a liberal capitalist economy: property rights, contracts, company and foreign investment law, bankruptcy law and competition law, and new financial institutions, including market-oriented supervisory agencies’ (Richards 2005). Thus, the socializing value of the Trust Fund is emphasized by some, and it is seen as a ‘passive’ means of reinforcing the existing order. On the other, the mechanisms created within the framework of ASEM did at least engender a flurry of meetings to discuss European assistance and common programmes and to examine the lessons learned by the unfolding events, and pushed East Asian leaders to find their own common solutions to future such crises (Gilson 2002: 90).

The WTO

The WTO forms the background against which ASEM’s economic interests are framed, and it is within its boundaries that the inter-regional relationship functions. The Chair’s Statement at ASEM 1 underlined the fact that much of the discussion at ASEM 1 was geared towards the completion of the first WTO Ministerial Conference in Singapore in December 1996, whilst ASEM 8 in 2010 underlined the need to support the completion of the Doha Round. Other areas covered by ASEM clearly overlap with WTO agendas, such as science and technology cross-flows, agriculture, information and communication technology, energy and transport, human resources development, education, management training, poverty alleviation, the role of women, the public health sector, global efforts to combat AIDS and the promotion of AIDS prevention. ASEM in this way offers a forum in which to develop ‘embryonic WTO accords’ (Dent 1999: 389). The 7th ASEM Summit held in Beijing in 2008 was principally concerned with addressing the effects of the unfolding global economic crisis alongside a focus on sustainable development, as well as issuing an agreement to work together to create better regulation and fiscal stimuli (Chair’s Statement 2008). Thus, EU-Asia relations are firmly ‘nested’ within the WTO process and seek to offer alternative venues for supporting decisions taken within the WTO itself (Aggarwal 1998: *passim*).

In summary, following the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, Loewen states that there ‘was no impetus from ASEM and the discussion of European and Asian on this issue made no difference’ (Loewen 2007: 27). However, as the establishment of the Trust Fund illustrates, there have been attempts to address issues of specific mutual concern. Other issues of economic interest include the key area of science and technology. Although only one ASEM ministerial meeting has so far taken place (in 1999) about this topic, and although it was largely symbolic in its value, summit meetings have continually reinforced the need for greater cooperation in this field (see Chair’s Statement 2008). Parallel to the critique of European responses to the Asian Financial Crisis, however, there

is concern that science and technology cooperation – in areas such as information and communication technologies (ICTs), intellectual property and industrial standards – all play to Europe’s comparative advantage (Konstadakopulos 2009: 353). In this area, though, as in the case of agriculture, there remains a sense of urgency for mutual efforts to be made. In July 2010 ASEM delegates, alongside various representatives from international organizations (such as the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)), met in Vietnam to hold the first ASEM forum on sustainable food security and to discuss how to ensure sustainable food security. They discussed, *inter alia*, rising food prices, epidemics and environmental degradation affecting farming land. Vietnamese Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development Bui Ba Bong, underlined the ‘urgent need to develop a policy framework with strategies that need a strong commitment from all ASEM members to ensure long-term food security.’⁵ This could be achieved, according to the delegates, by intensifying the transfer of technologies and by increasing the number of joint ventures between public and private partners. Thus, since the end of the 1990s the ASEM framework has continued to provide the forum for dialogue about economic issues, by offering the possibility for exchanging information, capital, ideas, and personnel in the area of trade and investment, and has focused *inter alia* on market reform, liberalization and transparency, and compliance with international economic rules (Gilson 2004: 194). For Loewen (2007: 29), however, the problem remains that there are few areas where common EU–Asia positions are possible.

Cooperation on environmental matters

The European Commissioner responsible for development, Andris Piebalgs, observed that ‘green growth holds great potential for Asia and the EU – it is the only way to reduce poverty in a sustainable manner’ (Islam 2010b). The reality for both regions, as Islam points out, is that they share similar challenges in addressing pressing issues, such as problems associated with urbanization, the protection of forests and the development of a low-carbon economy (Islam 2010b).

In Helsinki, the ASEM 6 summit agreed a Declaration on Climate Change, in which they pledged to strengthen the UN Climate Convention and the Kyoto Protocol to reduce carbon dioxide emissions (Loewen 2007: 28). Working together, Europeans and some of their Asian counterparts have pledged to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions: the EU to a 20 per cent cut by 2010 (or 30 per cent if others will join them); and China is also making pledges to cut carbon dioxide emissions (by 40–45 per cent by 2020) and is developing alternative energy technologies.⁶ For its part, ASEM contributes through, for example, its Switch-Asia programme, designed to encourage the development of consumption and production practices that do not damage the environment. So far, it has funded 30 projects in 15 Asian states, in areas from public procurement to eco-labelling.⁷ Other specific programmes include support for the EC–ASEAN Energy Facility in Jakarta (Indonesia 2002–7), which aimed to facilitate specific joint projects in the energy sector; the ASEAN Regional Centre for Biodiversity Conservation, Manila (1997–2004), which was designed to help ASEAN states promote conservation; and the Regional Institute of Environmental Technology (RIET) in Singapore (1993 to present), which promotes the transfer of technologies. In many of these cases, it is the EC–ASEAN relationship that is the focus of the project, as it is an established framework that is easy to manage, whilst at the same time it now brings in interests from the rest of East Asia, not least through the ASEM process. Once again, however, a common criticism levelled at such programmes is that they do not form part of a coherent strategy, and that they address primarily the needs of Europe, rather than of developing states (Konstadakopulos 2009: 354). For these reasons, there is clear potential for serious

cooperation over environmental issues, but the political will and diplomatic ability to fulfil that agenda remains to be proven, and they need to be designed as mutually enhancing projects.

Security

Both Europe and East Asia face many security challenges. The EU continues to refine its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and to develop new ways of managing its relationship with NATO; whilst East Asia faces diverse issues from North Korean nuclear weapons and Sino-Taiwanese tensions, to growing concerns over the security of food and energy supplies. Despite growing forms of cooperation in economic and political areas, there is a lack of institutional framework in the security dimension in East Asia. In a broad-based discussion of security issues, which generally mirror dialogue over security in other international fora, representatives of the EU and East Asia do discuss a range of issues within the ASEM context. Historically, there has also been regular attendance by EU representatives to the annual ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) ministerial meetings, whilst Europeans have expressed an interest in becoming an observer to the East Asia Summit meetings, which discusses a wide range of issues. However, as Islam notes, agreements made in these fora have ‘not yet resulted in a real meeting of minds on dealing with security challenges’ (Islam 2010f).

The EU and East Asia also cooperate over specific security issues; practical examples include the dispatch of EU representatives, alongside contributors from five ASEAN states (plus Norway and Switzerland) to implement and monitor the mission in Aceh from 2005 to 2006. Most visibly, of course, they have found common ground over counterterrorism measures, which was signalled – along with piracy at sea – as a major issue of interest at ASEM 8. The eighth conference on counterterrorism was convened in June 2010 in Brussels, and identified four principal areas for ASEM cooperation: the exchange of intelligence and information; providing support for victims of terrorism; working jointly on aviation and maritime security; and conducting research in these areas.⁸ The general tenor of discussions over counterterrorism is based on support for UN initiatives, and in this field of activity, too, ASEM representatives are guided principally by agendas set beyond their confines and notably by the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. As Xiaohui Wu notes, however, it is in the phases of dissemination and implementation that smaller scale and geographically specific fora (such as ASEM) can play a part. She notes that the UN’s Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force sent a message to ASEM’s 2009 counterterrorism conference in Manila, to request that those member states with counterterrorism expertise could advise and train those member states that are still developing it (Wu 2009: 96).

One further area of particular mutual interest for EU-Asia security is that of piracy, which has become a huge problem, as the sea lanes used to transport goods provide vital life-lines between the two regions, as well as being replete with threats. With it becoming a growing problem, and increasingly serious in its effects and widespread geographical reach, this is an area of contemporary concern for traders who have to use some of the busiest shipping lanes in the world for their bilateral and intraregional trade. In particular, given that daily efforts to counter this problem involve between 30 and 40 warships from the EU, NATO, the US, China, Russia, Japan and others, the ‘potential for greater Asia–Europe cooperation to tackle piracy at sea is enormous’ (Islam 2010d).⁹ The ASEM seminar on piracy at sea held in Brussels in May 2010 underlined the importance of joint naval operations, including by and among ASEM members.¹⁰ The ASEM 8 summit called for an increase in the sharing of intelligence among ASEM states, with the specific aim of tracing the financial dealings of pirates (Chair’s Statement 2010). In this way, the summit and other meetings have targeted specific issues to be covered by ASEM partners in the coordination of naval actions and provision of intelligence.

Civil society

Within the official channels of ASEM, there are two principal frameworks for civil society: the Asia–Europe Business Forum (AEBF); and the Asia–Europe Foundation (ASEF). The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) also has access to official meetings. The AEBF was established at the first summit and aims to foster discussion over issues from market development, financial services and sustainable development, to urbanization, corporate social responsibility and cross-cultural business dialogue.¹¹ It has formal consultative status within ASEM. The tenth AEBF took place prior to the Helsinki summit in 2006 and sent three messages on to the summit itself: to support the need for a successful conclusion to the WTO Doha Round; to ensure free trade through the removal of discriminatory rules between the two regions; and to address the serious issue of procuring sustainable energy at an acceptable price.¹² In addition, its five working groups made specific recommendations within their remits of trade, investment, financial services, ICT and infrastructure. One of the main criticisms of the AEBF is that ASEM leaders do not implement their proposals, so that in spite of their privileged access there is a concern that their presence does not make sufficient impact on the overall process of economic engagement.

Trade union conferences are recognized within the ASEM framework and they generally provide statements and proposals for summit meetings to consider. For example, in 2010, the trade union group appealed to ASEM 8 and the ASEM labour and employment ministers' meeting in December 2010 to intensify efforts to address the effects of the global economic crisis; to implement progressive tax reforms; and to 'establish a project to consider and evaluate the best means to achieve an equitable economic growth model that can build decent work and inclusion rather than greed and unproductive financial instability'. The group functions within broader frameworks, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), by, for example, promoting the creation of national decent-work plans based on the ILO's Global Jobs Pact.¹³ Although the trade union has access to ASEM, it continues to seek formal consultative status along the lines of the AEBF, and to this end proposed in 2010 the establishment of a consultative status through an Asia Europe labour forum. In addition, it supports the creation of an ASEM project to examine, *inter alia*, the impact on employment of climate change. It also urged ASEM to call on the UN to impose a complete arms embargo on Myanmar and to support the UN Commission of Inquiry into crimes against humanity.¹⁴ At the trade union summit in parallel to ASEM 6 in Helsinki in 2006, John Monks, general secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), claimed that ASEM, by focusing on trade and investment, had failed to address the issues of 'social coherence, decent work, good governance or respect for human rights'.¹⁵ Further, to this end, the same calls were made in 2010, when Monks said: 'It is time for ASEM Leaders to end this disparity once and for all, and agree to establish equal consultation rights for trade unions in ASEM.'¹⁶

The Asia–Europe Foundation (ASEF) was established in Singapore in 1997 and funded by voluntary contributions from ASEM governments, and holds the remit to expand people-to-people exchange and to enhance mutual understanding between the two regions. It has implemented more than 450 projects, involving in excess of 15,000 direct participants. ASEF has involved a vast array of engagements, bringing together, for example, journalists, young leaders, school children, artists and parliamentarians from the two regions. In so doing, it fulfils the function of enhancing people-to-people exchange, although it is not a lobby group for civil society claims. That job is done by a group that lies on the margins of ASEM and which was established as a parallel summit alongside the leaders' meeting; namely, the Asia–Europe People's Forum (AEPF).

AEPF is a gathering of non-governmental organizations from Europe and East Asia, and in essence it calls for greater accountability from ASEM leaders and for them to take account of the needs of the communities they claim to serve. In so doing, it fundamentally challenges unfettered

neo-liberal trends, and unlike ASEF is funded through charitable means and not supported by member governments. AEPF's meeting in Beijing in 2008 was the biggest non-governmental organization (NGO) conference ever to take place in China since the Women's Conference in 1995; more than 500 participants from 40 countries took part, including more than 200 from China (Islam 2010c). In 2010, it continued, like the trade unions, to have access to ASEM commensurate with that of the AEBF, to ensure that the voices of civil society are better represented within the formal ASEM framework.

These examples illustrate that ASEM to date has embraced those civil society groups that hold more closely to its dominant trade and investment agenda, and that do not challenge too directly the government representatives within it. ASEM summits have included various commitments to meet with, and listen to, civil society representatives, but there is a lot of rhetoric about inclusion that is not backed by serious commitment. The reality remains that discussions on inter-cultural dialogue 'are often an add-on and an after-thought' (Islam 2010c). Thus, whilst Acharya observes that 'newly empowered civil society elements' can use regional institutions to promote their agenda (Acharya 2003: 377–378), and Grugel notes that some see in new regionalism 'an opportunity for transnational civil society activism' (Grugwel 2006: 210), this is far from the case here.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that East Asia and Europe face a range of contemporary challenges and that the ASEM framework is one forum in which they discuss them. It has shown that in all fields ASEM is a body for discussion and reflection, largely on agenda that have been set outside it. The evidence above shows that ASEM convenors need fundamentally to rethink the two major strands of ASEM activities, its viability as a region-to-region forum and the way issues are selected and why.

First, after more than a decade in operation, ASEM has failed to stamp its own purpose on region-to-region relations. Instead of drawing on global institutions as the background or fundamental principles against which ASEM functions, it has instead replicated to a considerable extent the agenda of those institutions. In this way, ASEM has often simply served to reinforce or support those agenda and its own value-added purpose becomes lost, rather than addressing those issues pertinent to these two particular regions. This will be explored further below. In addition, the very region-to-region nature of ASEM became its foundation stone in 1996, as ASEM was seen to bring Europe and Asia together as a means of reinforcing the 'weak side' of the global triangle with the US. In so doing, it generated discussions not only about the intensification of relations between these two globally significant regions, but also about the very 'regionness' of East Asia itself, whose own moves to forms of closer integration were seen in part to be due to ASEM. The enlargement of ASEM, particularly to include Russia, India and Australia, throws into question this unique region-to-region dimension. Whilst the structures of ASEM continue to be based on regional formations (for example in the selection of convenors and summit loci), it is impossible to expect regional coherence to be reflected in ASEM discussions. As a result, moreover, the uneven structure may further reinforce the regional capacity of the EU, with little collective response from the other ASEM member states. The overall result may be that ASEM continues to be compared with other fora – and notably those including the US – as a poor relation.

Second, the issues dealt with under the umbrella of ASEM have covered a huge range. Recently ASEM has begun more successfully to target more of those issues – such as piracy – that have a direct resonance in Europe and Asia, rather than simply mimicking global fora. By focusing the substance of discussion more tightly and becoming issue-led, the demise of the region-to-region shape of ASEM could be turned to an advantage if its entire remit adopts a micro-focus. Thus, whilst Loewen sees in the discussion of climate change the possibility of 'an

improved multilateral effectiveness of ASEM' (Loewen 2007: 23), this chapter suggests that it is precisely in eschewing its multilateral role in favour of *ad hoc* alliances that genuinely and concretely address those issues affecting these two regions – or a majority of their states – in particular could offer the best way forward. What is needed is for representatives to stop claiming that they have an overarching relationship – especially in light of imminent further enlargement, with a large agenda and a lack of institutional support. Instead, they need to focus on particular issues of mutual concern, over which they may have some international influence (climate change) or direct local control (piracy). Thus, sharing intelligence, best practice and expertise over a range of issues, and including civil society actors in a meaningful way could open new opportunities for the sprawling ASEM process.

In summary, the conceptualization of ASEM as a multilateral forum needs to be reconsidered in the light of its waning purpose and demise of its region-to-region distinctiveness. Instead, as noted above, alliances can also be viewed as institutional functions aimed at simply creating the means for implementing specific goals, whilst embracing a diverse membership. The ASEM process holds a body of expertise and experience and is perfectly structured to focus on this issue-led approach to cooperation and to address the challenging problems of the twenty-first century that are shared by a range of states within the general regions of Asia and Europe. Opportunity and interest may matter more than the pursuit of multilateralism for its own sake.

Notes

- 1 The current ASEM partners are: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brunei Darussalam, Bulgaria, Cambodia, China, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Laos, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Malta, Mongolia, Myanmar, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Romania, Russia, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, the United Kingdom, Vietnam, the ASEAN Secretariat and the European Commission.
- 2 See ASEM InfoBoard for up-to-date information about the meetings, available online at <http://www.aseminfoboard.org>.
- 3 Organized by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies and attended by the US and several European states, see <http://www.iiss.org/whats-new/iiss-in-the-press/july-2010/europe-and-asia-as-global-security-actors>.
- 4 See http://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/international/non_eu/asia/index_en.htm.
- 5 See <http://vietnamnews.vnagency.com.vn/Social-Issues/201253/Strong-food-security-a-must-in-Asia-forum-.html>.
- 6 Loewen notes that carbon reduction is seen to require four dimensions of action: improving energy efficiency in manufacturing and construction; increasing low-carbon energy supply; preventing further bad practices (such as deforestation); and encouraging behavioural change (2007: 28).
- 7 See <http://www.indepthnews.net/news/news.php?key1=2010-06-28%2019:53:49&key2=1>.
- 8 See <http://www.asem8.be/sites/default/files/2010061011%20Chair%27s%20Summary%208th%20ASEM%20Conference%20on%20CT%20-%202010-11%20June%202010.pdf>.
- 9 See <http://www.antaraneews.com/en/news/1285064058/piracy-terrorism-to-be-discussed-in-asem-summit>.
- 10 See <http://www.asem8.be/sites/default/files/20100505%20Chair%20Summary%20ASEM%20Seminar%20on%20Piracy%20at%20Sea.pdf>. Accessed on 10 October 2010.
- 11 See http://www.aseminfoboard.org/page.phtml?code=Asia_Europe_Business_Forum_AEBF_
- 12 See the Chair's Statement at http://www.ek.fi/businessforums/aebf/en/liitteet/Chairman_Statement_FINAL_11sep06_1000_logolla.pdf. Accessed on 10 October 2010.
- 13 See http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/ASEM_2010_September_statement.pdf.
- 14 See <http://www.scribd.com/doc/38817149/Trade-Unions-Call-on-ASEM-to-Act-on-Burma-04-10-2010>.
- 15 See <http://www.etuc.org/a/2789>.
- 16 See <http://www.ituc-csi.org/trade-unions-demand-equal.html>.