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Report on Workshop “The Future of ASEM”

Wednesday 29 October 2008, by [ASEF](#), [CIIA](#), [EIAS](#) (Date first published: 4 April 2008).

This workshop was organised in Singapore the 4th April 2008 by the Asia-Europe Foundation, the China Institute of International Affairs and the European Institute of Asian Studies. It gives the point of view on the ASEM processes of para-governmental institutes following up this process.

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This report summarises the key points of the workshop discussion.

Views and opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the views of the organisers nor the institutions represented by the participants.

I. Introduction

The 7th Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Summit, scheduled for 24th-25th October in Beijing, will take place amid various challenges for the future of ASEM. Observations ranging from “the beauty of ASEM is that it exists” to “ASEM is in deep crisis” permeated discussions at the “Future of ASEM” workshop held at the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) in Singapore on 4th April. The workshop was organised by the European Institute of Asian Studies (Brussels), the China Institute of International Studies (Beijing) and ASEF.

The workshop was designed to provide ASEM leaders and the Summit organisers with some reflections and recommendations regarding the future of ASEM. **Workshop participants did not focus discussions on the agenda of the 7th ASEM summit but rather on the methodology to improve the ASEM process.** In pursuit of this aim, the organisers brought together 15

distinguished diplomats, scholars and NGO participants. The group consisted of both seasoned “ASEM watchers” and practitioners as well as experts in other forms of inter-regional relations.

This meeting was also the occasion for the participants to receive first hand information about the up-coming ASEM 7 Summit from the representative of the Chinese Foreign Affairs ministry as well as of the activities prepared by ASEF and the AEPF on the sidelines on the Summit itself.

Three main issues were addressed during this one-day intensive brainstorming meeting:

1. Based on the evaluation of ASEM’s effectiveness in general, what are the prospects for the future of ASEM? Does ASEM need saving? How can its achievements be effectively communicated and built upon? What kind of reforms does ASEM need to consider?
2. What has been and what should be the role of Civil Society in the ASEM process?
3. How can ASEM’s visibility be improved? How can we sell ASEM to our public?

Actionable main recommendations include the following:

1. ASEM should remain as an informal dialogue forum and all stakeholders should reaffirm their commitment to ASEM. To demonstrate ASEM’s relevance at the global level, ASEM delegations should meet more regularly on the **sidelines of UN** General Assembly meetings (and other relevant occasions) with a view to seeking common positions on global or regional issues.
2. The strategy of **Issue Issue-based Leadership** (IBL) holds considerable potential to enhance ASEM’s effectiveness and efficiency but needs to be fine-tuned; the ASEM Summit is the right venue to identify and agree priority issues; and clarify the mandate of IBL in general as well as each IBL initiative separately.
3. The creation of an **ASEM Secretariat** should be re-considered; at least, the ASEAN Secretariat should co-ordinate ASEM activities on the Asian side.
4. Civil society needs to be further integrated into the ASEM dialogue and outcomes; the potential of ASEF, AEBF, AEPF and other initiatives in promoting exchanges between civil societies of Asia and Europe should be further explored.
5. An **ASEM Spokesperson** should be appointed and charged with giving ASEM a face and a voice to improve public communication in co-ordination with national governments.
6. In the lead-up to the ASEM VII Summit, all **ASEM leaders** should be encouraged to speak about ASEM in their speeches and in media outreach.

II. Summary of Discussions

1. Does ASEM need to be further institutionalised?

ASEM at inception was designed to be an informal dialogue, multidimensional and comprehensive, with an outreach to civil society—these features make ASEM unique compared to any multilateral fora or partnership. Some are satisfied with ASEM’s initial goals and outcomes

i.e. information sharing and mutual understanding, especially after the two successive enlargements from 26 partners in 2004 to 45 today.

Re-assessing the nature of dialogue

There remain different expectations for ASEM. Frustration and lack of concrete deliverables stem from a misunderstanding of ASEM's mandate. High expectations are unrealistic as ASEM is not equipped to meet expectations of a more institutionalised process. Some key questions are:

— **Should ASEM partners decide to move forward from dialogue to concrete cooperation on selected priority areas, what relevant means and institutional structures should be put in place to fulfil this new objective?**

— If ASEM partners agree that the group should still focus on information sharing and mutual understanding and dialogue, how can this dialogue be more meaningful and achieve greater impact at the national and multilateral level?

It was argued that the **informality** of ASEM is an asset that should be better emphasized as it provides more freedom to exchange views. Moreover, while ASEM's agenda might duplicate the EU's other bilateral relations with Asia, it is not meant to resolve issues but to foster dialogue (confidence-building, consensus-forming) and then bring the outcomes to the appropriate negotiating level. The beauty of ASEM is that it exists as a meeting of minds, a laboratory of ideas.

However, even if the ASEM process should remain informal and relations loose, there is a potential for ASEM to demonstrate its effectiveness for political problem-solving, otherwise it would be seen as an empty 'talk shop'. Whether one agrees or not that serious changes are needed, there is **consensus on the need for increased efficiency**. This is a matter of urgency.

General recommendations:

— ASEM should relate more strongly to **EU dialogues with other parts of Asia** (i.e. ASEAN, China, India, Japan, Korea).

— ASEM could follow the model of "**open open-ended plurilateralism**" looking at examples of non-discriminatory, broad-based coalitions from GATT/WTO and the EU (in its regionbuilding process).

— ASEM delegations could meet on the **sidelines of UN** General Assembly meetings with a view to seeking common positions on certain issues [1].

Fine-tuning Issue Issue-Based Leadership (IBL)

IBL is certainly an important step towards a better continuity and follow-up for ASEM initiatives, compared to an ASEM system relying mainly on the four ASEM co-ordinators and with a proliferation of one-off ASEM initiatives. Guidelines on IBL were agreed at the ASEM VI Summit.

An EU and an Asian country would jointly lead on an agreed priority issue. They would coordinate all the initiatives relevant to the issue, deal with public communication aspects, and report back to the Senior Officials and the Summit. The lead countries are not necessarily the experts on a particular issue but would have a strong interest. Generally, each IBL should last for two to four years. However, there was consensus that the IBL strategy needs to be clarified and made

central to the ASEM process to enhance its efficiency.

Specific recommendations:

— **Evaluation** mechanisms need to be established for issues taken up by IBL e.g. through setting benchmarks.

— **IBL should not bypass the multilateral region-to-region process** but provide efficient mechanisms for improving coordination and reporting.

— **Leaders should provide the IBL mechanism with a clear mandate.** The identification process for topics/issues is therefore critical: the Summit should be the venue for agreeing priorities based on inputs and advice from external experts and civil society consultations. Interested governments could then opt to take the leadership. The process for identification of issues should also be defined. There could also be criteria set for selecting issues e.g. that these are global issues that contribute to the multilateral process.

— Moreover, the Chair's Statement of the ASEM Summit should **prioritise** from among the long list of issues in the ASEM agenda and sharpen the focus of each issue (thus avoiding the frequent criticism of ASEM priorities being a 'laundry list').

— It should be an **open and non-exclusive** platform for ASEM countries to participate. The minimum number of countries to lead an IBL initiative could be increased to four.

Creating an AS ASEM Secretariat

The question of creating an ASEM Secretariat has been raised on a number of occasions. The arguments for the establishment of a secretariat are that in addition to the normal functions of a co-ordinating body, an ASEM Secretariat could: (1) address the institutional imbalance between Asia and Europe; and, (2) effectively monitor and co-ordinate the various IBL initiatives at a central level, liaising with both the IBL lead countries, on one hand, and the ASEM partners, on the other. In general, an ASEM Secretariat would replace the current system of having four ASEM co-ordinators (which itself is a solution for the lack of a secretariat). The Secretariat would prepare Summits and Ministerials with the host countries. ASEM's public relations would naturally be a function of the Secretariat. (See point 3 below)

It was recognized that there is currently an institutional, regional imbalance between Europe and Asia due to the discrepancy in the degree of integration and intra-regional coordination within the ASEM process, which has created some frustrations in Asia and a call for a reinforced harmonisation on the Asian side.

Specific recommendations:

— The function of the Secretariat could be that of a **clearing house** to plan action and to integrate all necessary links to civil society information and participation (see below point 2)

— The **ASEAN Secretariat** has been the main engine for regional integration in Asia and it is of the interest of ASEM to reinforce it and **possibly host a small small-size sized ASEM secretariat** with adequate funding from all ASEM countries. Alternatively, the ASEAN

Secretariat could host the Asian ASEM Secretariat for better regional coordination.

— The question of whether **ASEF** might take on the role of Secretariat or some aspects of it was raised. However, this would undoubtedly necessitate a fundamental change in ASEF's mandate and resources. There might also be a risk that if ASEF was to become the ASEM secretariat, it would jeopardize its unique mission to bridge civil societies from Asia and Europe. To date ASEF has proven one of the few concrete deliverables of ASEM thanks to the focussed networks initiated or stimulated by the Foundation in key areas.

2. ASEM and Civil Society

In order to avoid the endless debate about the nature of Civil Society, it has been agreed to consider Civil Society as inclusive of any organisation not directly part of the state; hence, encompassing the business sector, academic and research institutions, NGOs, media organisations; parliaments, youth organisations, autonomous cultural organisations, et cetera.

General recommendation:

There was a consensus among participants that there is a **need for more civil society involvement and engagement** in ASEM. Such a move would also **enhance the legitimacy of A ASEM** in the public's eye. Only through participatory mechanisms would Civil Society be better associated with the ASEM dialogue and its outcomes. The strong and growing appetite for more dialogues and cooperation among civil society representatives contrasts sharply with a kind of 'forum fatigue' felt among ASEM governments.

As for the **business sector**, a business forum is important to gather information about biregional trade and its obstacles, monitor progress, advocate solutions and liaise with ASEM officials. However, it was argued by some that business people do not necessarily require a Forum to develop their business beyond this role of observatory and advocacy.

Specific recommendations:

— New efforts should be made to facilitate dialogue between governments and civil societies. Moreover, the AEPF has played important role in promoting dialogue and cooperation between civil societies of Asia and Europe and it should be further consolidated/supported. Some participants suggested that leaders should have a forum with Civil Society.

— There should be an **accreditation process for NGO participation** in ASEM meetings and activities with clear criteria of participation.

— Should each ASEM Government think it would be appropriate to its own local context, a participant suggested that they could identify one Civil Society partner, e.g. a university body, to channel ASEM activities in the country.

— ASEF should play a more active role other than as civil society arm of the ASEM in the 3rd pillar and cover all three pillars of ASEM (political, economic, socio-cultural). One suggestion was that **ASEF could be tasked to organise the Civil Society component of each Issue Based Leadership mechanism**. If necessary, ASEF's mandate could be revised accordingly.

— An **Annual Dialogue** with ASEF, the AEBF and AEPF could be organised during the years between ASEM summits.

3. ASEM Visibility

Is “visibility” necessary? **The emphasis should be put on proper “communication” instead of “visibility” *per se*** . There is a tendency for discussions to focus on visibility, but it is not necessarily a pre-condition for efficiency or effectiveness. Society tends to mix images with substance. There are unknown processes that can be very valuable e.g. Informal ASEM Seminar on Human Rights, which can be effective precisely because it’s “invisible”. [2]

General Recommendation:

A need for ASEM leadership is a fundamental problem that mirrors a lack of ownership of the ASEM process by individual governments. ASEM leaders should be the first champions to emphasise the importance of the Asia-Europe relationship and the relevance of the ASEM multilateral process. Nobody is better qualified than ASEM leaders to make ASEM visible (a lesson from APEC for instance) and lead public diplomacy for ASEM.

The **ASEM Infoboard** (www.aseminfoboard.org) has made progress in its function as a repository for ASEM-related documents and basic information about ASEM activities but it is a passive tool of communication. Some participants argued that ASEM should reach the grassroots and be known widely. Others viewed this issue differently and argued that visibility to ASEM’s masses was not a realistic proposition and **public communication should be targeted at influential groups and leaders of opinion**, who in turn would have a broad outreach to the community.

Specific recommendations:

— ASEM leaders should be encouraged to mention ASEM in their **speeches** and articles in order to promote an interest in ASEM.

— Creation of an **ASEM Spokesperson** to provide a face and voice for ASEM, talk to journalists and follow up on activities. This person should be seconded but selected through a competitive process. He or she should possess considerable expertise in public relations.

— A small **ASEM Media Center**, located at either a possible ASEM Secretariat or at ASEF, could co-ordinate public outreach for ASEM.

— The **ASEM SOM could select 3 3-4 major ASEM events each year** and all ASEM partners should be asked to communicate nationally on these events at the same time, tailored for national specificities and co-ordinated by a central mechanism (whether the ASEM Spokesperson or an ASEM Media Center).

ANNEX 1

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Footnotes

[1] This idea was first introduced at the first ASEM Summit and later on re-emphasized at the fifth Foreign Affairs Ministers' meeting.

[2] The Informal ASEM Human Right Seminar Series, organised at ASEM's behest by the Raoul Wallenberg Institute (Sweden), the French government and ASEF (as secretariat), is generally closed to the press except for specific sessions such as a public opening ceremony. Participants are a mix of Governments officials and civil society representatives (researchers, NGOs, trade unions etc).