

**The Asia–Europe Meeting Process:  
Roles and Prospects**

Az Ázsia–Európa-találkozó folyamata:  
szerepek és kilátások

**MÁTÉ SZAKÁLI**



---

# KKI Policy Brief

Series of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade

Publisher:

Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade

Reviewer:

Tamás Péter Baranyi

Copyediting:

Réka Futász

Typesetting:

Andrea Tevelyné Kulcsár

Editorial office:

H-1016 Budapest, Bérc utca 13-15.

Tel.: + 36 1 279-5700

E-mail: [info@ifat.hu](mailto:info@ifat.hu)

<http://kki.hu>

The present analysis and its conclusions reflect the authors' opinion and cannot be considered the official position of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, or the Government of Hungary.

© Máté Szakáli, 2020

© Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2020

ISSN 2416-0148

**Abstract:** The Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM) is an inter-regional, inter-governmental process established in 1996 to foster informal, flexible dialogue and cooperation between Asia and Europe. In the last few decades ASEM has become one of the key global actors that aim to provide a platform for building mutual political trust, strengthening economic cooperation, tackling global challenges together, and promoting the exchange of ideas and best practices, thus providing a breeding ground for new policy ideas. ASEM can be regarded as the most influential comprehensive partnership platform between Asia and Europe, through which various connectivity initiatives have materialised. Still, the 24-year-old ASEM process faces similar challenges and criticism today as it did during its early years, as it lacks public awareness and visibility, and its achievements are not easily quantifiable. Given this context, this paper provides a broad-brush overview of the ASEM process from the perspective of its role evolution and role prospects.

**Keywords:** ASEM, Asia, Europe, inter-governmental process, comprehensive partnership

**Összefoglaló:** Az Ázsia–Európa-találkozó (ASEM) egy, a két kontinens, valamint a régiók közötti informális és rugalmas párbeszéd, illetve együttműködés előmozdítása érdekében 1996-ban létrehozott kormányközi folyamat. Az elmúlt évtizedekben az ASEM az egyik kulcsfontosságú globális szereplővé vált, amely a kölcsönös politikai bizalom építését, a gazdasági együttműködés erősítését, a globális kihívások együttes kezelését és a politikai kezdeményezések megszületését kívánja az informális párbeszéd révén elősegíteni. Annak ellenére, hogy az ASEM tekinthető az Ázsia és Európa közötti legbefolyásosabb átfogó partnerségi platformnak, az immár 24 éves folyamat ma is hasonló kihívásokkal és kritikákkal szembesül, mint az első évek során. Például kevésbé van jelen a köztudatban, és a működése is kevésbé látható, az eredményei pedig nehezen számszerűsíthetők és értelmezhetőek. Ebben a kontextusban a jelen elemzés egy széles körű áttekintést nyújt az ASEM-folyamatról, annak szerepevolúciójára és -kilátásaira összpontosítva.

**Kulcsszavak:** ASEM, Ázsia, Európa, kormányközi folyamat, átfogó partnerség

## INTRODUCTION

The Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM) aims to serve as a political catalyst to promote consensus and awareness, and to enhance mutual understanding and cooperation between countries from Asia and Europe at all levels whilst contributing to ongoing cooperation elsewhere, thus filling a niche in international relations. Essentially a transregional dialogue forum, ASEM has a broad and multidimensional focus, from reforms in the UN to people-to-people exchanges.



ASEM's list of participating countries has undergone enlargement five times since 2004 (in 2004, 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014) as it became a key global actor. ASEM now [represents](#) 55% of global trade, 60% of the global GDP, 60% of the global population, and 75% of global tourism. Data along these lines is published every two years, on the occasion of the biennial ASEM Summit (the apex of the ASEM structure), but in and of themselves they are merely an indication of the substantial widening of the process, from a limited gathering of 26 participants in 1996 to a sizable forum of 53 partners at present: 30 European and 21 Asian countries, the European Union, and the ASEAN Secretariat. Still, today the 24-year-old ASEM process faces similar challenges and [criticisms](#) as it did during its early years. The forum lacks in public awareness and visibility, its achievements and work in progress are not easily quantifiable or obvious, participating countries disagree on the vision, priorities, and objectives of the forum, while political interest has waned for the forum in parallel with the expansion of the regional and transregional architecture. The forum suffers from a lack of ownership and champions, it is challenged by the extent and pace of changes taking place in its respective regions and on a global scale, and Summits mainly serve as an umbrella for bilateral meetings of exchanges of views and concerns. As a product of globalisation and the first iteration of transregionalism, ASEM was forced to break new ground in terms of establishing a role for itself. With regard to the initiatives, the forum has been particularly active and productive, and it has seen an increasing number of meetings in between the Summits. Yet ASEM has indeed not achieved enough to develop an added value beyond its political goals and framework, and it does not have a transformative impact on the relationships among its participants.

It is in this context that this paper will address the question what roles and prospects can be observed for ASEM as an instrument of Asia–Europe cooperation. In order to reflect on the role prospects of the forum, the article will first highlight the way in which certain original expectations concerning the forum have changed before the role evolution of ASEM is discussed. The article ends with a conclusion including recommendations to enhance the relevance of the forum.

## ORIGINAL ROLE EXPECTATIONS FOR ASEM BEYOND SUMMITRY

**A**SEM is not an international organisation, and it has neither a budget nor institutions, including a secretariat to promote coordination, institutional memory, and continuity. It is a forum for soft politics rather than an institution for collective problem solving, where the summiteers call for follow-ups in the Summit Chair Statement.

In the tradition of the European Union's policy of cooperation with other countries and regions, ASEM is based on [dialogue pillars](#): the political, the economic and the socio-cultural pillar (also known as the cultural, intellectual, and

P2P pillar). These aim to cover numerous issues, from addressing international and regional political developments to promoting human rights, fostering sustainable development, enhancing trade and investment liberalization, and engaging in dialogue on cultures and civilizations or on higher education, to name just a few. To pursue these ends, the first Summit in 1996 in Bangkok led to the creation of the [Asia–Europe Foundation](#), the [Asia–Europe Business Forum](#), and the [Vision Group](#). ASEM has also seen a proliferation of ministerial [meetings](#) since its establishment, as it strives to develop comprehensive dialogue and cooperation across all three pillars equally. Any ASEM partner can propose an initiative under the three pillars (usually taking the form of a conference/workshop), as long as it is willing to fund and organize it. There are, however, only a few ongoing projects and activities (such as the Informal Human Rights seminar) that have become a regular item on the ASEM calendar.

From its very birth, ASEM has been affected by differing expectations on both sides. From the Asian side, the end of the Cold War and the decline of ideological competition meant that trade and investment issues could be brought to the fore. However, at the insistence of European participants, establishing three pillars of dialogue was decided. From the perspective of this article, it is important to underline the structural underpinnings of the differing [expectations](#) in Asia and Europe as to what ASEM can be expected to deliver. Namely, in practice, the emphasis placed on each of the pillars is not the same for the different actors in the ASEM process. Even within the microcosm of the EU institutions in Brussels and Asian state structures primary concerns may permanently differ, vary and systematically alter. ASEM nevertheless remains very much an information-sharing platform, where very few decisions are taken at the Summits, and in between them, a series of meetings and conferences take place to further discuss some of these issues and share best practices. The key characteristics of ASEM, as [repeated](#) in several of its statements and documents, are its informality, multi-dimensional character, and its flexibility. This has allowed ASEM to address topical issues in response to a changing environment and global events, resulting in declarations on these issues to reflect their relevance.

As the first forum of its type, there was no clear model on which to base the functioning of ASEM cooperation. In the absence of prior experience and precedent, two [elements](#) in particular served to structure expectations: (1) the influence of the forum for Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC); and (2) the core economic concern of marginalisation among the founding states. APEC influence derived from the context in which ASEM emerged, with the new forum conceived as closing the America–Europe–Asia triangle to balance the relations between the three engines of economic growth. With this link drawn, the Asia-Pacific forum inevitably served to structure certain expectations as to the role of the new Asia–Europe dialogue. Hence, it was expected that ASEM would move rapidly towards the achievement of concrete outcomes, particularly in the area of trade liberalisation. Expectations for ASEM's role were also structured around the economic concerns of the founding countries, most notably fears of marginalisation. In the early 1990s, the EU had



undertaken a reappraisal of its ties with Asia, focusing primarily on establishing mechanisms to mitigate her potential economic marginalisation in the region. Similar unease was evident among the Asian states, members of ASEAN in particular, with persistent concerns over the establishment of the European common market and potential trade diversion as a consequence of EU enlargement. A Pacific-style link between Europe and Asia with the role of mirroring APEC was therefore seen as essential for both regions.

From the outset, expectations of the Asia–Europe Meeting as an arena for high-end cooperation were also elevated, exemplified by the European Council's [assertion](#) that the new forum must pursue “concrete and substantial results”. Notwithstanding the political element to the process, these substantive outcomes were conceived primarily in terms of trade and financial matters. Despite the proliferation of sub-Summit meetings, however, the anticipated outcomes in terms of economic cooperation and trade liberalisation failed to eventuate, despite ongoing rhetorical commitment to these goals. According to critics, ASEM has not generated what is perceived as concrete, tangible benefits. The most concrete manifestation of ASEM has been the establishment of the Asia–Europe Foundation, today an [integral](#) part of ASEM's socio-cultural pillar.

Nevertheless, institutional proliferation in the absence of substantive engagement quickly became a characteristic of Asia–Europe cooperation, reflecting a form of “[cooperation malaise](#)”. This failure is largely the product of two factors: (1) there was an evident capability–expectations gap, with anticipated outcomes requiring a level of cooperation between the partner regions that proved difficult to achieve; (2) the [informal nature](#) of the ASEM framework itself influencing its ability to pursue concrete goals. Similarly, the preference for soft law instruments and the non-binding and consensual nature of decision-making limited cooperation.

## ROLE EVOLUTION AND ROLE PROSPECTS FOR ASEM

**T**he fact that ASEM was widened before it could be deepened has compounded the problems of achieving consensus, resulting in multiple visions for the aspirations and working methods of the forum. Its role, however, has been evolving into a set direction. Although calls for more substantive engagement within ASEM continue, in practice, for the time being, it is arguably beyond the capacity of the forum to achieve it. Instead, what has become increasingly evident over the last two decades was a [re-evaluating of](#) the role of the forum as a political space, an ideational and discursive process, acting as an informal framework for dialogue and an arena for socialisation and norm diffusion, and consequently functioning both as a mechanism for securitisation and as a refiner for global fora. From this perspective, the most common criticism against ASEM – that it is an insignificant venue for talking shop – misses the point, as ASEM is indeed set up to be a dialogue platform, and the talks and the atmosphere in which these talks take place are the essence of the process while also restraining its prospects.

In this respect, ASEM may be seen in [constructivist terms](#) as a process of embedding shared understandings and social knowledge, replacing threat perceptions with an element of mutual (political) trust, and establishing a firmer basis for Asia–Europe relations. In part, this altered view of ASEM in the eyes of participants has been premised upon a recognition of areas of apparent success, with two particular examples foremost among them: (1) the fostering of regional cooperation in Asia; and (2) the socialisation of participant states into the international system.

In terms of fostering regional cooperation, ASEM has played a successful role in contributing to laying the foundation for the East Asian concept. Until 2008, ASEM's Asian partners were confined to countries from East Asia. It is [reasonable](#) to believe that the inter-regional characteristic of the ASEM process played a significant role in facilitating regional identity construction among the East Asian countries involved in ASEM. Drawing the ASEAN member states together with China, Japan and South Korea, in particular, was instrumental in progressing intra-Asian cooperation, since the intensification of the regional relations has encouraged the emergence of a feeling of "us". Incorporating the big states in the Northeast Asian countries in constructing the Asian side in ASEM and transcending the "we-ness" in ASEM to other regional initiatives can be considered an achievement for ASEAN. Much of this phenomenon is attributable to the binary structure and underlying asymmetry of ASEM, which explicitly posits an Asian group alongside a much more tightly coordinated European counterpart and reinforces this through the proliferation of structures and mechanisms of cooperation, and the ongoing need for engagement in preparation for various meetings of the ASEM fora. In order to foster both intraregional cooperation and to provide guidance to the interregional process, a system of Joint Coordinators was [established](#), with the EU represented by the rotating Presidency and the European External Action Service, while the Asian states draw one Coordinator each from the ASEAN and non-ASEAN groups on a rotating basis. These coordinators work with their counterparts (senior officials) in the foreign ministries to manage the process and work towards the organization of the ASEM Summit and the ASEM Foreign Ministers' Meeting, which is held once every two years, alternating with the Summit.

On a similar note, the Asia–Europe Meeting is seen to have played a key role in the broader institutionalisation of international relations, especially through facilitating socialisation into, and adherence to, the web of (neo)liberal capitalist rules, norms, and values that underpin global relations. This reflects the European Union's [intention](#) prior to the establishment of ASEM to "integrate into the open, market-based world trading system those Asian countries such as China, India or Vietnam which are moving from state controls to market-oriented economies"; and the [Chairman's Statement](#) of the first ASEM Summit in Bangkok: "To further strengthen this partnership, the Meeting expressed its resolve to generate greater two-way trade and investment flows between Asia and Europe. Such a partnership should be based on the common commitment to market economy, open multilateral trading system, non-discriminatory liberalisation and open regionalism."



Subsequently, as the ASEM process developed, a view that it was nested within the broader multilateral framework became firmly entrenched, reinforced for example through efforts to ensure that cooperation remained both WTO, Bretton Woods Institutions, and UN consistent. In this respect, ASEM [served](#) both as a means for familiarising China with the expectations associated with involvement in WTO-led economic multilateralism, while at the same time effectively testing the resolve of Chinese leaders to participate. Adherence of the various ASEM fora to these norms meant that the Asia–Europe Meeting served as an effective training ground, where states not already members of the multilateral economic order were able to learn multilateral diplomacy. This socialisation function and drive to achieve Chinese and Vietnamese membership in the World Trade Organization can be considered so central to ASEM that in the aftermath of their WTO accession the economic pillar of the dialogue was seen to have become somewhat disoriented.

Essentially in these discursive processes directed towards the building of identities and reaching a common understanding, and the acceptance of core norms and practices, rather than towards the achievement of substantive outcomes that the role and value of ASEM has come increasingly to be seen to reside. ASEM is [identified](#) as an important arena for conducting informal dialogue at Summit and sub-Summit-level engagements on a range of sectoral issues from sanitary and phytosanitary standards, customs and border control, quality assurance in higher education and child welfare, possibly incorporating non-governmental and civil society actors. Without any expectation that partners will be bound by discussions, the willingness of those involved increases to address potentially contentious issues openly. In this respect, ASEM serves as a useful mechanism for generating an understanding of positions and perspectives among a diverse array of states on issues of consequence, and sometimes of a sensitive nature, facilitating problem-solving and contributing to efforts at the global level. The density of ongoing interaction at all levels means that ASEM [provides](#) a context in which to establish direct personal contacts with a variety of partners, contributing to the building of trust and mutual understanding, facilitating access to Asian and European leaders and officials, the forging of shared identities, and, as a consequence, strengthening the foundations of regional stability and security. This transition in the way in which ASEM's role is conceived and has become widespread is seen to be valued in the forum's continuing expansion despite the lack of concrete outcomes.

Installed on the principles of informality and flexibility in the spirit of consensus and mutual benefits, ASEM has become a key institutional instrument in upholding an open multilateral system against the recent tendencies of protectionism, unilateralism, and anti-globalisation. The ASEM12 Summit held in October 2018 in Brussels concluded with a strong call for the persistence of a multilateral world order. The [Chair's Statement](#) emphasized the increasing role and relevance of ASEM in enhancing “effective multilateralism and the rules-based international order anchored in international law and with the United Nations at its core”. The statement also designated ASEM as “the main platform for Europe and Asia to strengthen dialogue... on multilateralism and tackle global challenges together”. ASEM leaders



shared the view that the United Nations Charter must remain the [cornerstone](#) of a multilateral order. Of similar significance for them is the preservation of the WTO and the multilateral trading system, which is a precondition for free, fair, and non-discriminatory trade. Leaders thus [highlighted](#) “their commitment to comply with WTO rules, cooperating on rendering its dispute settlement system more effective, and redoubling on-going efforts aimed at WTO reform.”

ASEM's increasingly emphasized pro-multilateral stance can also be derived from its role in socialising participant states into the international system. That role may be legitimized by the fact that the Asia–Europe Meeting is a large international forum by any standard, and the bilateralism inherent in its fora may indeed facilitate policy coordination for regional and global multilateralism. ASEM's [calls](#) for revitalising multilateralism are rather vague, however, given the great diversity of participants' interests and capabilities. While both European and Asian participants of ASEM tend to use multilateral institutions for institutional balancing and [forum shopping](#), the majority of old EU members are more [oriented](#) towards multilateralism on the basis of generalized principles of conduct, which prioritize international law and relegates *realpolitik* and political pragmatism to a secondary priority. Asian states in their majority reject the Western brand of multilateralism, which they distrust as an attempt to curtail their sovereignty and the sovereign equality state-to-state. They rather [prefer](#) flexible broad-band consultative institutions conducive for institutional *realpolitik* and producing “soft law” at best.

Many specific areas and issues can be identified where Asian and European interests, at first sight, coincide (e.g. bilateral political, economic, financial, social, and cultural connectivity, stability on the Korean peninsula, energy security, acceleration of the transition to a low-carbon future). The track record of Europe and Asia is, notwithstanding, not persuasive regarding ASEM's ability and future role to champion multilateralism. Conflicts of interest, strategic rivalry and disagreements over norms, international law, and rules-based policies among participants can be found in the trade (e.g. WTO reforms), the security (e.g. territorial disputes), connectivity (e.g. the BRI and the EU Asia–Europe Connectivity Scheme), and environmental (e.g. CO<sub>2</sub> reduction policies) domains alike. ASEM-driven multilateralism – as ASEM itself – is “[diminished](#)” multilateralism. It is dominated by governments and bureaucracies. Other stakeholders (e.g. the Asia–Europe Parliamentary Partnership) play a rather marginal role. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang [argued](#) that “there should be more exchanges between our parliaments, social organizations, think tanks, universities and media outlets to enhance understanding and friendship between our peoples. This is also conducive to cementing political mutual trust”. The primary purpose of these interactions is therefore not the debate of crucial themes shaping Asian and European relations but the fostering of mutual understandings and friendships.

As ASEM expanded, its agenda also widened. Still, the Meeting has hardly evolved into a professionalized, modernization-driven and problem-oriented platform. If it is to play an active role in facilitating a robust multilateral order, bolder institutional reforms will be required with more ambitious functions and mandates. The first [review](#) of ASEM in 2006, a decade after the inaugural Summit, already



revealed increasing disappointment and some dissatisfaction concerning the lack of “meaningful and concrete achievements” and the broad but shallow dialogue. ASEM’s call for a multilateral global order at the last Summit has certainly increased the forum’s relevance and stature and made it a rhetorical antipode to US President Trump’s protectionist and unilateralist policies. The forum’s role (model) limitations in promoting and protecting multilateralism, however, have not changed beyond the rhetoric, and the very limited policy relevance of ASEM has not been enhanced by structural reforms. Accordingly, whether Asian–European policy coordination in global organizations and fora such as the World Bank and the G20 will indeed intensify after the ASEM13 Summit this November in Phnom Penh remains to be seen.

## CONCLUSION

Looking at the development trajectory of ASEM’s role, we can detect a short period of euphoria leading to disproportionate expectations, followed by disappointment and frustrations, as well as calls to review, rethink and re-energize the goals of the fora, and streamline the processes in order to retain relevance. Although the need for a new narrative is widely accepted, [the lack of strategic and geopolitical congruence](#) both within and between the two regions means that, to date, there is no desire to move beyond the nature that has characterized the ASEM process up to now. ASEM research [identifies](#) four shortcomings in this process: lack of substance, trust, understanding, and solidarity. These negative features might be contrasted with achievements such as the initiation of a broad-based dialogue, impetus to reinforce or foster regionalism, and the broadening of international exchanges to include new actors, representing civil societies.

Over the 24 years since its inception in 1996, the role of the Asia–Europe Meeting – including, importantly, participant expectations around the forum – has evolved considerably. At the most basic level, this transition is a product of ASEM being the first iteration of transregionalism, and therefore the lack of a pre-existing model on which to base initial expectations. The accumulation of experience over the succeeding decades, therefore, have [played](#) an important part in defining the role and functioning of such structures. While anticipated substantive outcomes, particularly in terms of trade liberalisation, have so far failed to eventuate and indeed seem beyond the capacity of the forum to achieve, participants have increasingly come to recognise what the forum does accomplish. In this respect, ideational aspects such as identity building and norm diffusion, and the value of dialogue without preconceptions and binding commitments, have come to the fore, a product of the breadth and informal nature of engagement. In this regard, the Asia–Europe Meeting has succeeded in creating a role for itself in the increasingly densely institutionalised architecture of global governance.

Since ASEM has not been meant to replace other fora but should stimulate and facilitate progress elsewhere, three main [recommendations](#) can be made to enhance its relevance in the future. First, ASEM should build on and further promote its strengths. These include informal dialogue and networking, flexibility, the inclusion of non-state stakeholder groups, and the presence of a large number of key regional and global players. Second, ASEM can draw valuable lessons from other processes, including with regard to vision and objectives, priority areas of cooperation, and more effective coordination. Third, ASEM should adapt in order to meet the new challenges of a changed global agenda. This can be done inter alia by making optimal use of variable geometry, strengthening ties with stakeholder groups, promoting public awareness, and further enhancing coordination mechanisms. As ASEM seems to be limited in achieving agreements on global issues due to the lack of structures suited to an international actor, aiming for a presence in virtually all domains might lead to a loss of relevance and effectiveness. Therefore, the main challenge for ASEM in the coming years will be to target the issue areas and levels where it is willing to have an impact.

The author:

*Máté Szakáli*, Research Assistant, Pázmány Péter Catholic University – University of National Excellence, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Modern East Asia Research Group