

Anna H. Jankowiak, Szymon Mazurek

Wrocław University of Economics

ASEM AS AN EXAMPLE OF BROAD COOPERATION FRAMEWORK BETWEEN EUROPE AND ASIA

Abstract: The increasing importance of Asia and the Pacific region in global economy has shown that the mutual relations between Asia and Europe are crucial for both sides. **The rivalry** between the regions gave way to a multi-faceted cooperation and agreements. An example of a forum for regular cooperation and experience sharing is Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) that serves the function of an informal dialogue among the Asian and European countries. This article presents ASEM as a forum for establishment of multidimensional relations of the interregional nature.

Key words: cooperation, multidimensional relations, institutionalization of economic cooperation.

1. Introduction

Increasing globalisation of the world economy created a specific climate in mutual relations between the national economies. More benefits have been noticed in cooperation and collaboration than in competition and hostility; thus, growing regional economic integration can be observed. The integration processes take place both in Europe and Asia. Integration in Europe is formalized and institutionalized, while integration within the Asian countries is actually being shaped at present. Bearing in mind the increasing significance of the Asia-Pacific region in the international relations, enlargement of the cooperation among the countries, from the local to the interregional level should be expected.

In the traditional balance of power among the Triad countries, the Japanese economy has diminished in significance due to dynamically developing economies of Southeast Asia, China or India. The interest of the United States or the European Union has been attracted by the Asian tigers; furthermore, informal meetings and single conferences have been replaced by repeated meetings held among regular participants.

An example of a forum for regular cooperation and experience sharing is Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) that serves the function of an informal dialogue among the Asian and European countries. Within its scope, this framework comprises numerous

issues regarding mutual relations: from social and cultural ones to economic cooperation and problems of international safety.

2. ASEM as a dialogue forum between Asia and Europe

At the beginning of 1990s, the economic ties between Europe and Asia were weak or even lacking. At the same time transpacific relations (bilateral and through APEC) were increasingly dense. “The strategic reason behind ASEM was the concept of closing the triangle – balancing the relations and creating strong links between the three engines of growth – America, Europe and East Asia” – Yeo Lay Hwee writes.¹ APEC and ASEM have different goals and sometimes conflicting agendas but both of them represent concept of consolidation of economic and political communication between East Asian countries and USA or European Union.²

The idea of entering into the Asian and European dialogue appeared in 1994; these close relations between Asia and Europe were established by initiative of Goh Chok Tong, the Prime Minister of Singapore. ASEM was initiated during Bangkok meeting in 1996 whose participants representing Asia and Europe perceived the need to work together to create a partnership between the two regions and decided on further promotion of cooperation and bringing together the people of Asia and the Old Continent. The following meetings in 1998 in London and in 2000 in Seoul emphasized the important role and meaning of ASEM in the partnership of the two regions and resulted in adoption of the Asia-Europe Cooperation Framework (AECF) setting out the new undertakings of ASEM at the beginning of the 21st century. The purpose of ASEM is “to promote understanding and enhance cooperation through dialogue, create conditions conducive for economic and social development, to promote the establishment of a new and comprehensive Asia-Europe partnership.”³ The main idea of ASEM is Asia and Europe working together to meet global challenges.⁴

The Summit in London confirmed that the ASEM process should:

- be conducted on a basis of equal partnership, mutual respect and mutual benefit;
- be an open and evolutionary process: enlargement should be conducted on the basis of consensus by the heads of state/government;

¹ S. Bersick, W. Stokhof, P. van der Velde (eds.), *Multiregionalism and Multilateralism: Asian-European relations in a Global Context*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2006, p. 141.

² D. Barry, R.C. Keith (eds.), *Regionalism, Multilateralism and the Politics of Global Trade*, University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver 1999, p. 194.

³ The Seventh Asia-Europe Meeting official website, http://www.asem7.cn/misc/2008-06/27/content_49543.htm.

⁴ *ASEM: Strengthening Relations between Asia and Europe*, European Commission, http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/asem/docs/leafletasem_en.pdf.

- enhance mutual understanding and awareness through a process of dialogue and lead to cooperation on the identification of priorities for concerted and supportive action;
- carry forward the three key dimensions with the same impetus: fostering political dialogue, reinforcing economic cooperation, and promoting cooperation in other areas;
- as an informal process, ASEM need not be institutionalised. It should stimulate and facilitate progress in other fora;
- go beyond governments in order to promote dialogue and cooperation between the business/private sectors of the two regions and, no less importantly, between the peoples of the two regions. ASEM should also encourage the cooperative activities of think tanks and research groups of both regions.⁵

ASEM activities can be grouped into three main pillars: political, economic and social/cultural.

1. Political pillar – Asian and European countries can discuss major global issues on the international agenda, such as terrorism, Weapons of Mass-Destruction (WMD), migrations, dialogue of Cultures and Civilisations, environment, Human Rights, or the impact of globalisation.

2. Economic pillar – trade facilitation and trade security, trade and development, regionalism and multilateralism, information and communication technology focusing on aspect of competition and liberalization, and investment issues.

3. Social, cultural, intellectual pillar – ASEM Summits called for the strengthening of cultural links between Asia and Europe, in particular closer people-to-people contacts, which are indispensable for the promotion of greater awareness and understanding between the two regions. Mutual understanding is reinforced through cultural, artistic, educational activities and exchanges involving particularly youth and students of the two regions. Through a process of socialization, ASEM pillar 3 facilitates the building of common knowledge among ASEM partners. ASEM Summits are always seen as opportunities to deepen the dialogue on Cultures and Civilisations within ASEM, and to promote education exchanges between the two regions through Asia-Europe Higher Education Exchanges.⁶

3. ASEM as a forum of economic cooperation

ASEM has 45 members, from which 43 are countries (Austria, Belgium, Brunei, Bulgaria, Cambodia, China, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Republic of Korea, Laos, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Malta, Mongolia, Myanmar, the Netherlands, Pakistan, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Romania,

⁵ ASEM InfoBoard, <http://www.aseminfoboard.org/About/AECF2000/>.

⁶ ASEM InfoBoard, http://www.aseminfoboard.org/page.phtml?code=About_MainPillars.

Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, United Kingdom, Vietnam) and the remaining two are ASEAN Secretariat and the European Commission. ASEM members generate half of the world GDP, conduct 60% of the global trade; whereas, the ASEM inhabitants make 60% of the world population.⁷ In 2008, the European Union export to the Asian ASEM members amounted to EUR 237 billion; whereas, import reached the level of EUR 473 billion.⁸

Economic cooperation is the basis of the ASEM comprehensive partnership. In the global economy, in which the role of the Asian countries – China, India, Singapore or Malaysia – is still growing in importance, the economic collaboration seems to be particularly significant for both parties. ASEM summits are focusing on globalization and sustainable development. In the centre of attention of economic dialogue is the need for better management of economic globalization by promoting multilateralism, enhancing business frameworks between Asia and Europe, and developing innovative ideas in the field of finance. As Gaens writes: “The objectives of further enhancing of economic links between Asia and Europe and reinforcing trade and investments flows were fundamental to ASEM’s creation.”⁹

In its operation, ASEM aims at establishing close relationship both in macroeconomic terms (regarding the European and Asian economies) as well as the microeconomic ones (regarding the enterprises from both regions).

At the Sixth ASEM Finance Ministers’ Meeting there were five recommendations made regarding economic cooperation of ASEM member countries:¹⁰

- to strengthen dialogue and coordination on macroeconomic policies,
- to have in-depth discussions on development paths and strategies and increase exchanges on development experience,
- to deepen substantive cooperation in the fiscal and financial sector,
- to strengthen technical assistance and financial capacity building,
- to foster an environment for win-win international economic cooperation by paying more attention to the interests of developing countries.

Asia Europe Business Forum (AEBF) is responsible for ASEM integration at the business level, its purpose is promotion of cooperation within the business sector in Asia and Europe. The first meeting was hosted by France in 1996, where five separate working groups on infrastructure, consumer goods, capital goods, financial services, and small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) were created. During works, these groups highlighted priorities in the following fields:

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Poland, [http://www.msz.gov.pl/ASEM,\(Asia-Europe, Meeting\),6968.html](http://www.msz.gov.pl/ASEM,(Asia-Europe, Meeting),6968.html).

⁸ European Commission website, <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/creating-opportunities/bilateral-relations/regions/asem/>.

⁹ B. Gaens (ed.), *Europe-Asia Interregional Relations: A Decade of ASEM*, Ashgate Publishing, Aldershot 2008, p. 29.

¹⁰ Speech by Premier Wen Jiabao of China at the Opening Ceremony of the Sixth ASEM Finance Ministers’ Meeting, 26 June 2005, <http://www.chinaembassy.cn/eng/dtxw/t203092.htm>.

- infrastructure,
- international rules,
- WTO principles,
- tariff and non-tariff barriers,
- the adoption of international standards (ISO),
- the tie-up of European and Asian SMEs,
- financial market liberalisation,
- information accessibility,
- cross-border investment facilitation and the need for stable, transparent and non-discriminatory market-driven investment framework,
- human resource development,
- the improvement of social contacts at the business level.¹¹

Provision of such a sound basis for building up the number of business contacts and improvement of their intensity shows the ASEM ambition to play a significant part in shaping the international economic relations of the modern world. However, the emphasis on business cooperation shall simultaneously mean that the European Union assumes the Asian logic of economic integration. The basic difference between the European *state-driven* and Asian *market-driven* integration model lies in the driving force of the entire process. In the EU, the leading role is played by the institutionalized political vision which is supposed to clear the way to the real integration processes. In Asia, aversion to formalization of the intraregional and interregional cooperation can be observed; therefore, the transfrontier economic activity is given priority.

4. Institutionalization of ASEM

Promotion of the multidimensional cooperation between Europe and Asia as part of ASEM, most of all takes place via regular discussion and consultation fora held at various levels. Only in 2010, as much as 16 significant meetings are planned, including the eighth ASEM summit to be hosted at the beginning of October by Belgium in Brussels (the list of the main events in 2010 and a preliminary list for 2011 is shown in Table 1).

Diversity of ASEM meetings comes as a result of vast subject matter to be discussed by the member countries. Moreover, representation of the member countries participating in the individual events is also diversified. Part of the meetings is held at the governmental level, some other part is held by the expert panels.

The complex ASEM structure is shown in Figure 1. On the one hand, it provides for the in-depth dialogue held as part of ASEM, starting from the heads of states, through the governmental level to the expert working groups. On the other hand, the

¹¹ Bureau for Workers' Activities, International Labour Organization, <http://actrav.ilo.org/actrav-english/telearn/global/ilo/blokit/asem.htm>.

Table 1. ASEM 2010/2011 calendar of events – selected events

Initiatives	Venue	Date
ASEM Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM)	Madrid, Spain	25 January
ASEM Seminar: Asia-Europe Learning Mutually – Asia-Europe Cooperation in the 21 st Century (Towards the 8th ASEM Summit)	Tokyo, Japan	30 March
ASEM Finance Ministers' Meeting (FinMM19)	Madrid, Spain	17-18 April
Asia-Europe Economic Cooperation and Development Forum: ASEM Seminar on the New Growth Paradigm in the Post Crisis	Nha Trang, Vietnam	26-27 April
ASEM Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM)	Phnom Penh, Cambodia	5-6 May
4 th ASEM Meeting of the Working Group on Customs Matters (AWC)	Hanoi, Vietnam	6-7 May
ASEM Forum 2010 on Green Growth and SMEs	Seoul, Korea	6-8 May
ASEM Seminar on the Enforcement of Intellectual Property Rights	Prague, Czech Republic	19 May
2 nd ASEM Development Conference	Yogyakarta, Indonesia	26-27 May
8 th ASEM Conference on Counter-Terrorism	Brussels, Belgium	10-11 June
ASEM Conference on EU-Asia Inter-regional Relations	Brussels, Belgium	12-13 July
ASEM Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM)	Brussels, Belgium	14 July
4 th ASEM Culture Ministers' Meeting	Poznan, Poland	9-10 September
ASEM 8 Summit	Brussels, Belgium	4-5 October
1 st ASEM Meeting of the Ministers of Interior on Irregular Migration	Bucharest, Romania	2010
ASEM Energy Ministers' Meeting	Singapore	2010
3 rd ASEM Education Ministers' Meeting	Denmark	2011
5 th ASEM Culture Ministers' Meeting	Vietnam	2011
10 th Foreign Ministers' Meeting (FMM 10)	Hungary	2011

Source: European Commission website (External Relations: ASEM), http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/asem/docs/calendar_en.pdf.

division into three main thematic areas which are of interest to the participants of the entire process still remains very clear.

However, one should remember that as a matter of fact, ASEM has no institutional superstructure. The only institutional manifestation of this dialogue forum is Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) whose main task is ASEM promotion via involvement in activity connected with widely understood culture. All other meetings, panels and working groups, despite being given their own names as well as being assigned more or less precisely specified tasks, lack the structure that can bear the name of an institution.

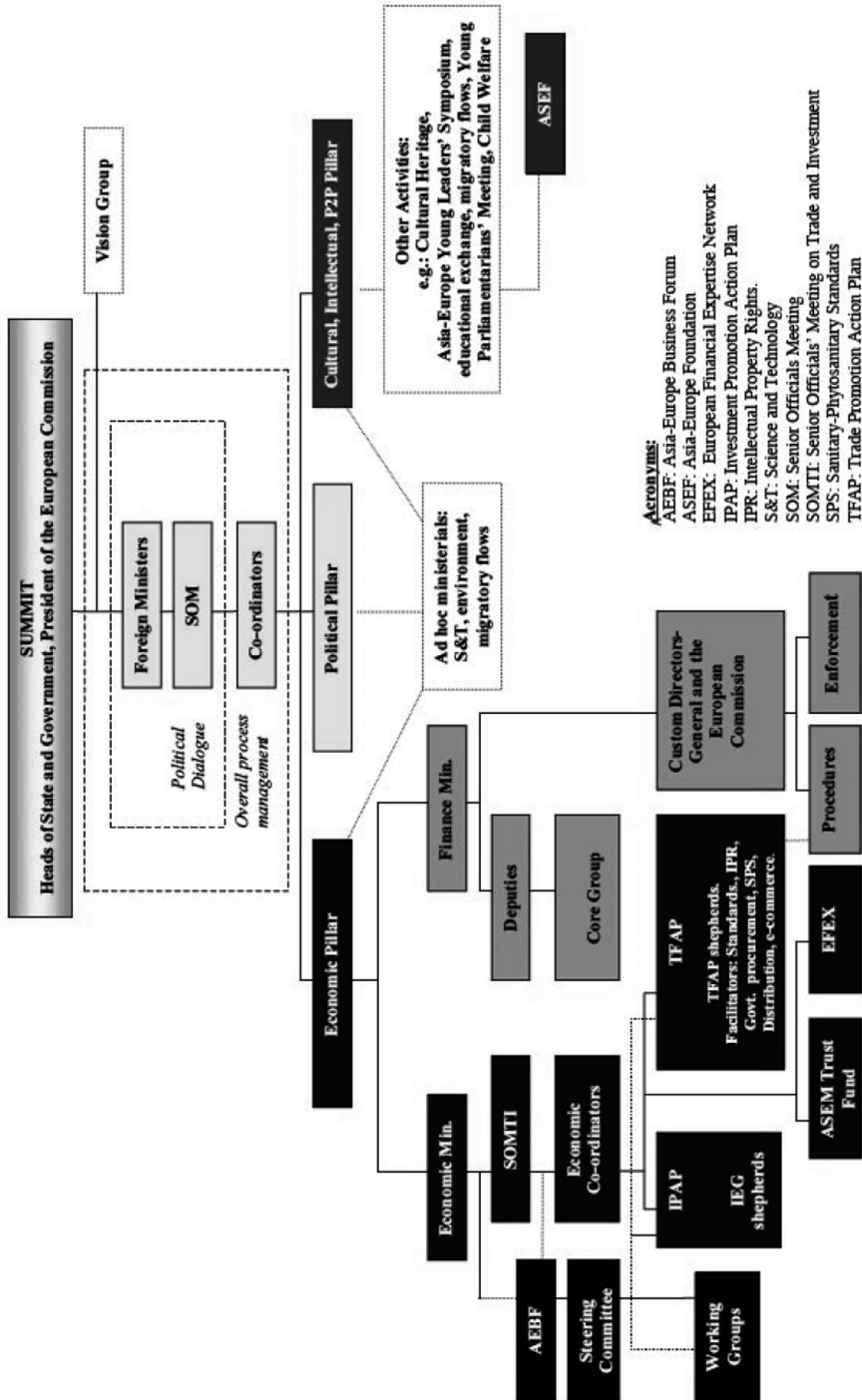


Figure 1. ASEM structure

Source: ASEM InfoBoard, <http://www.aseminfoboard.org/>.

Lack of institutionalization, even though that sometimes impedes achieving tangible results and conducting binding negotiations, is a conscious choice of ASEM. Open, informal and not binding dialogue is the leading philosophy behind ASEM. The said philosophy comes directly as a result of the *open regionalism* concept assumptions. They accept the diversified forms of establishing the networks of the international relations as the key ones (from the bilateral contacts evolving up to the regional agreements). In this context, ASEM had been planned as one of many tools to stimulate the Europe-Asia contacts, not an institution to absorb other cooperation fora.¹²

Still, large number of meetings organized as part of ASEM demonstrates the natural need for the institutional background. At the same time, a wide thematic scope makes the results of this work slightly visible. Whereas, greater pressure on reaching visible results intensifies opinions voicing the need of establishing an institution having the form of ASEM secretariat – to take responsibility for the entire process and enable providing it with coherent endeavours.

5. Conclusions

It is difficult to assess the role of ASEM in the process of economic, political and cultural integration of Europe and Asia. By assumption, ASEM is an initiative directed at establishment of various relations between regions. As stated by Higgott, “the role of ASEM is to [...] provide a template within which relationships between Asia and Europe can develop.”¹³ The major characteristic feature is openness of the countries participating in the dialogue to other participants of the world geopolitics. This is fostered by the informal character of ASEM. Lack of any institutions having specific competences allows avoiding provocation of these entities in the world policy, which – similarly to the European Union – are interested in strengthening their relations with the Asian countries.

Still, the non-binding character of the ASEM dialogue does not facilitate effectiveness of initiatives undertaken as a part of this forum. Time will tell whether the effort undertaken in various areas of ASEM activity shall contribute to the actual increase in intensity of the business, cultural and political contacts between Europe and Asia.

References

- ASEM InfoBoard, <http://www.aseminfoboard.org/About/AECF2000/>.
ASEM InfoBoard, http://www.aseminfoboard.org/page.phtml?code=About_MainPillars.

¹² S. Bersick, W. Stokhof, P. van der Velde (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 132.

¹³ D. Barry, R.C. Keith (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 201.

- ASEM: Strengthening Relations between Asia and Europe*, European Commission, http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/asem/docs/leafletasem_en.pdf.
- Barry D., Keith R.C. (eds.), *Regionalism, Multilateralism and the Politics of Global Trade*, University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver 1999.
- Bersick S., Stokhof W., van der Velde P. (eds.), *Multiregionalism and Multilateralism: Asian-European Relations in a Global Context*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2006.
- Bureau for Workers' Activities, International Labour Organization, <http://actrav.ilo.org/actrav-english/telearn/global/ilo/blok/asem.htm>.
- European Commission website, <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/creating-opportunities/bilateral-relations/regions/asem/>.
- Gaens B. (ed.), *Europe-Asia Interregional Relations: A Decade of ASEM*, Ashgate Publishing, Aldershot 2008.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Poland, [http://www.msz.gov.pl/ASEM,\(Asia-Europe, Meeting\),6968.html](http://www.msz.gov.pl/ASEM,(Asia-Europe,Meeting),6968.html).
- Speech by Premier Wen Jiabao of China at the Opening Ceremony of the Sixth ASEM Finance Ministers' Meeting, 26 June 2005, <http://www.chinaembassy.ee/eng/dtxw/t203092.htm>.
- The Seventh Asia-Europe Meeting official website, http://www.asem7.cn/misc/2008-06/27/content_49543.htm.

ASEM JAKO PRZYKŁAD OGÓLNORAMOWEJ WSPÓLPRACY MIĘDZY EUROPĄ A AZJĄ

Streszczenie: Rosnące znaczenie regionu Azji i Pacyfiku w gospodarce światowej pokazało, że wzajemne stosunki między Azją i Europą są kluczowe dla obu stron. Rywalizacja między regionami ustąpiła miejsca wielostronnej współpracy i porozumieniom. Przykładem regularnej współpracy i wymiany doświadczeń między Azją a Europą jest ASEM, który spełnia funkcję forum nieformalnego dialogu między krajami Azji i Europy. W artykule przedstawiono ASEM jako forum do tworzenia wielowymiarowych stosunków międzyregionalnych.