

WORKSHOP BRIEFING

ASEM OUTLOOK WORKSHOP 15-16 April 2009, Brussels

The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) will undergo its third round of enlargement with the entry of Russia and Australia at its eighth Summit in 2010, bringing the process to a total of 45 countries¹ that represent more than half the world's GDP. With more countries in line, the continuing political interest to participate in ASEM is an indication of its success, but demands have also risen accordingly. Consecutive enlargements in recent years have almost doubled the number of ASEM dialogue partners in the thirteen years since its launch. The number and variety of issues to be addressed at the dialogue forum have increased significantly, and the need for improved working methods, coordination and efficiency for the inter-regional process has intensified.

In the search for greater efficiency at this important juncture of ASEM's development, the ASEM Outlook Workshop gathered a small expert group of 25 ASEM practitioners and watchers from both government and civil society sectors to examine the forum's existing operations. Jointly organised by the Asia-Europe Foundation, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the Belgian Federal Public Service for Foreign Affairs, the Workshop took place in the run-up to the ASEM 8 Summit that will take place in Brussels on 4-5 October 2010. Participants included ASEM Senior Officials, representatives of the Asia-Europe Peoples Forum and the Asia-Europe Business Forum, leading Asian and European think tanks, and experts from other regional forums like the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and Asian Development Bank (ADB).

Enhancing the ASEM Process

The Workshop is part of the reflection process to formulate a discussion paper on *Improving the working mechanisms of an enlarged ASEM* that will be tabled by the Belgium ASEM 8 Task Force in preparatory discussions in the lead-up to the ASEM 8 Summit.

Reflections about how to improve the efficiency of the ASEM process made reference to ASEM's broad objectives, which has given rise to partners' differing expectations of the process and consequently, differing views about its performance. Based on the Asia-Europe Cooperation Framework 2000 (AECF), ASEM seeks to *enhance mutual understanding and awareness through a process of dialogue and lead to cooperation on the identification of priorities for concerted and supportive action*. ASEM also aims to *foster political dialogue, reinforce economic cooperation, and promote cooperation in other areas*.

¹ At the ASEM 8 Summit in 2010, the process will involve 45 partner countries and 2 regional institutions, the European Commission and the ASEAN Secretariat. For the full list of members, see <http://www.aseminfoboard.org/page.phtml?code=Partners>.

Is ASEM a platform for “soft” dialogue, or should it aspire to achieve a greater role as a forum to more actively encourage convergence on global issues?

Currently, the ASEM process of informal dialogue operates with flexibility in all areas of function and process. Two European and two Asian coordinators rotate among the ASEM partners, either on a preset order (the Presidency of the European Union) or following ad hoc arrangements (the ASEAN and NESAC coordinators). Coordination and communication between 45 dialogue partners thus poses practical challenges on the day-to-day level, emphasising the need for stronger coordinative support and structured working processes that can strengthen the forum’s continuity from one summit to the next.

Drawing from experience in other international forums, a number of options exist to enhance support mechanisms that can provide coordination, technical and advisory support, information management and public communications to prepare and follow up on the dialogue process. Better coordination and the use of robust mechanisms need not be equated with institutionalisation nor the loss of the informality that is a key feature of the ASEM process.

Incremental changes that adhere to the founding principles of ASEM were seen as the practical way forward.

- ⇒ The number of ASEM coordinators could be increased to six, including the next two Summit hosts. With reference to APEC’s troika and “Friends of the Chair”² mechanisms, ASEM officials could consider devising a formula for the earlier designation of summit hosts to improve regularity and allow for early planning.
- ⇒ Improving ASEM’s institutional memory and record-keeping functions is a priority. ASEM could consider the set up of a small technical support team to carry out the necessary administrative functions, including information gathering and dissemination, preparation of ASEM meeting documents, and management of ASEM contact lists and websites, among other functions.
- ⇒ Overall, ASEM Senior Officials (SOM) need to play a more substantive role in managing the process and setting operating procedures, tracking activities, and ensuring the delivery of set targets. The technical support team will support the SOM in this regard.

Visibility

Discussions about ASEM’s external communication strategy highlighted the distinction between the transparency and legitimacy of ASEM as an inter-governmental process versus ASEM’s visibility in terms of public awareness by Asian and European citizens. There was consensus that transparency was a necessity – ASEM must, at the very least, be equipped to communicate its rationale, processes and achievements to the public. Participants concurred that the **ASEM**

² The APEC troika mechanism consists of the current, immediate past and next host economies, which will collectively play a leading role in the development of the next APEC Summit agenda and processes. APEC also relies heavily on its “Friends of the Chair” mechanism, where member economies leading specific priorities could call for volunteers among Members to assist in developing and lobbying other members on those priorities. Volunteer members are referred to collectively as the “Friends of the Chair”.

Infoboard (www.aseminfoboard.org) serves a critical purpose in this regard and should be fortified.

On the other hand, ASEM's ability to appeal to the general public with its limited resources and the vast and varied audiences to cover across the two regions is constrained. In terms of public outreach, ASEM's continued engagement of civil society and broad audiences through ASEM dialogue activities as well as the AEPF and AEBF channels were seen as the most feasible and effective ways of strengthening the legitimacy of the ASEM process on the ground.

ASEM's legitimacy, however, is dependent on the two-way direction of the government-civil society exchange. To develop as a transparent and legitimate process, ASEM governments need to further integrate and recognise civil society participation and input as part of the official ASEM dialogue.

The connection between the visibility and the substance of the process was raised. To elicit attention from informed publics, ASEM must identify and address compelling issues of common interest to dialogue partners from both regions, especially those that will allow ASEM to push for convergence amongst partners in other international forums. Although ASEM's ethos of community and consensus may not make headlines, focusing on compelling issues of shared Asia-Europe concern will garner media attention, especially from those sections of the press that want the background story. ASEM's visibility efforts should reach out to these specific sections of the press.

Streamlining the ASEM Agenda

The importance of ASEM, if it does not successfully focus and specify its agenda, may diminish on the international stage especially as other multilateral forums like the G20 appear and develop. The agenda for policy dialogue generally comprises:

1. **Global governance issues**, where there may not be distinctive regional positions
2. **Issues of Asia-Europe agreement**, where ASEM can move faster than in other multilateral forums; ASEM's convergence in these issues could allow partner countries to build wider global convergence in other multilateral forums
3. **Issues of Asia-Europe debate**, to enable dialogue, understanding and mutual acceptance of differing positions within ASEM
4. **Current issues** responding to immediate and unforeseen events

⇒ Amongst the cluster of themes and initiatives identified, participants agreed that **issues of Asia-Europe agreement** should be prioritised for long-term ASEM action, being the most likely to bring about visible results.

⇒ A significant thread in the discussion of ASEM's needs in terms of coordination support raised the question of support for the development of policy dialogue. Studying OSCE and APEC experiences of policy support from their secretariats to the Chair could prove useful: technical preparation in support of policy discussion enabled dialogue to progress smoothly over time as Chairs rotate.

⇒ ASEM could look to existing think tanks across Asia and Europe as well as the Asia-Europe Foundation for their role in providing policy input to the process, which is already taking place in practice.

Discussing the substance and content of the ASEM dialogue again raises questions of function and coordination. This reflects the growing recognition amongst ASEM partners that the process is in need of a stronger coordination function. Process is seen as an integral part of substance. ASEM dialogue partners need to improve the working methods that are currently in use in order to arrive at a workable consensus on the dialogue content, that is, an agreement on how to prioritise and focus the substance of the ASEM dialogue.

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