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# A Social Constructivist Perspective of the Asia-Europe Meeting

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## The Continued Relevance of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM): A Social Constructivist Perspective

### Introduction

*Connected History, Shared Future* is the title of a recent project under the framework of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM). This title already implies the core objective of ASEM: the establishment of close ties between Asia and Europe. When ASEM was initiated in 1996, it was considered the cornerstone of Europe's 'New Asia Strategy' and sought to put into practice what had been manifested in the EU's strategy paper as a 'partnership of equals'. In order to achieve this, ASEM constitutes a communication forum with an informal character that does not intend to produce binding agreements, but instead emphasises the mutual recognition of each other's values. From the European side, high expectations were raised towards the new partnership with Asia, ranging from the entry of new markets, the attraction of foreign investments, and a counter-forum to the Asia-Pacific Economic Forum (APEC) to which Europe had been denied membership.

Over time, however, criticism of the ASEM process has become increasingly widespread. Academics question its moderate character, and maintain that the apparent absence of tangible achievements proves ASEM's failure and irrelevance in the global system (Rüland, 2006; Hwee, 2003). Yet the different rationales behind ASEM, as well as its multifaceted character, leave much scope for interpretation. In the realm of international relations, ASEM's initiation, development, and current state, can therefore be understood under the realist, institutionalist, and constructivist framework.

This essay holds that it is through the constructivist lens that we can see the added value of ASEM. Specifically, it is the only multilateral forum that fosters regional identities in Asia and Europe, and thus provides the prerequisites needed for closer cooperation between the regions in multiple areas. The 'regionalism through inter-regionalism' hypothesis has frequently been put forward to account for the consolidation of the historically fragmented Asia. However, this thesis is also pertinent for Europe, given its contemporary economic and identity crisis. On this account, it is argued that ASEM remains the cornerstone of the European strategy through its role as a regional integrator.

The essay is structured as follows. It starts with a brief outline of Europe's 'New Asia Strategy', and the three different frameworks under which ASEM can be studied. Next, regional developments in Asia and Europe, and the need for ASEM as a regional integrator are analysed. Subsequently, two operational considerations necessary for the continuance of ASEM's role are discussed.

### Europe's Strategy and the Narratives of ASEM

Europe's 'New Asia Strategy' from 1994 came at a strategically crucial time. While the EU had been concerned with its internal market development throughout the 1980s, by the beginning of the 1990s, it became aware of the need to look beyond its borders for economic, strategic, and security reasons. The attraction of foreign investments, and

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access to new markets to tackle inner-political issues, such as unemployment, were considered key factors for the Union's continuous wealth (Hwee, 2003: 16). Simultaneously, the rapid economic growth in Asia (especially in Japan, and the newly industrialised economies in Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore) and China's open door policy, were observed with growing attention. In addition, Europe's denied membership in APEC, which included the strong Asian and North American bloc, gave rise to serious concerns in the EU about being excluded from the international arena (European Commission, 1994: 18). Hence, Asia's growth and the new global constellations constituted both opportunities and threats for the EU.

The significance of Asia as an economic and strategic partner changed the way in which the EU viewed Asia as a region (Hwee, 2003: 21). The EU now sought well-grounded, multidisciplinary ties with the region and explicitly emphasised the necessity of an equal partnership based on the mutual recognition of cultural values and working methods (European Commission, 1994: 2). The establishment of ASEM in 1996 as a high-level participatory and multidisciplinary forum – ASEM is based on a political, economic and socio-cultural pillar – signalled the importance both regions placed on the relation. The 'equal partnership' metaphor is clearly adopted; neither a clear leadership nor strict working procedures are imposed. Instead, ASEM constitutes a communication forum to facilitate dialogue between the regions, to lay the groundwork for economic, political and cultural cooperation, and to support existing multilateral institutions (Gaens, 2006: 133). Its informal character was soon considered its *raison d'être* among other bilateral and multilateral forums (Gaens, 2006: 134).

Yet, the different rationales behind ASEM and its multifaceted and informal character leave much scope for interpretation. In her book *The Development and Different Dimensions of ASEM*, Hwee (2003) argues that ASEM's initiation, development and current state can be understood under the realist, institutionalist and constructivist frameworks. From the realist perspective, individual states, not the regions, are the main level of analysis. Through its self-interested, power-maximising nature, each state strives towards a distribution of power in the international system that is most beneficial to its own needs (Gilson, 2002: 1). In particular, smaller states favour an arena for negotiations that would not have been possible otherwise (Hwee, 2002). Hence, rather than an interregional forum, ASEM is understood as an intergovernmental one.

Within the institutionalist narrative, ASEM, as an inter-regional forum, seeks to cope with globalisation and its inherent complexities (Hwee, 2003: 2). Institutionalists see in ASEM a cooperative regime in which principles and working methods are set (Dent, 1999: 59). Given ASEM's lack of clear institutional arrangements, it is often referred to as a 'meta-regime' under which specific regimes may be created (Hwee, 2003: 145). In contrast to these two approaches, constructivists take a step back and consider regions, not as exogenously set variables, but as social constructs whose interests and identities are created only through mutual interaction (Hwee, 2003: 3). ASEM then is the product of forces within Asia and Europe, and of the interaction between both. In this context, the 'regionalism through inter-regionalism' hypothesis has been frequently put forward (Hänggi, 1999). The hypothesis maintains that Asian members have deliberately used ASEM to foster regional cooperation in Asia. This is supported by the fact that in 1996, ASEM constituted the first forum to bring together historically hostile countries such as China and Japan.

Hwee's consideration of these narratives undoubtedly allows for a comprehensive understanding of ASEM, as it takes into account the multiple rationales behind its conception. A limitation of the realist and institutionalist approaches however, is that they view the regions either as exogenously given (institutionalism), or not even at the main level of analysis (realism). In the weaknesses of these theories lies the strength of constructivism. The most essential question is: to what extent can we speak of Asia or even Europe as a region? In constructivist terms, a region can be determined as an actor in international relations that has a distinct identity. Thereby, identity 'describes a process of self-recognition of sharing and adjusting lines or borders between self and others' (Hund, 2003: 24). Looking at the ASEM process from a constructivist perspective allows the consideration of this question. On that account, the theory can determine how and to what extent cooperation between the two regions is possible. Social constructivism emphasises talk and mutual interaction as key prerequisites for closer cooperation (Hwee, 2003: 69). This is exemplified in ASEM, which seeks closer ties between the regions through mutual understanding and trust as its core objective.

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Thus, it is only through the lens of social constructivism that the added value of ASEM and, hence, its continued role as the cornerstone of Europe's 'New Asia Strategy' becomes apparent. The following section therefore analyses developments in Asia and Europe to outline achievements towards regional identities, and to demonstrate the need for ASEM to maintain its role as a regional integrator.

## Regional Developments through ASEM

### *Developments in Asia*

The hypothesis that ASEM serves as a regional integrator for Asia is at the core of the constructivist narrative. It is frequently argued that Asia lacks regional consciousness (Hwee, 2003: 100). Asia's colonial history, extreme rivalries between countries such as China and Japan, the Asian 'time bomb' North Korea, and territorial disputes, including those between Thailand and Cambodia, still dominate the region (Reiterer, 2011: 3).

Despite the fragility of Asia, there are positive developments which can be attributed at least partly to ASEM. The 'ASEAN Plus Three' (APT) constellation, consisting of ASEAN member states plus China, Japan and South Korea, is regularly considered a milestone in Asia's regional integration process. Whether this establishment can be fully attributed to ASEM is debatable. There is widespread agreement that the Asian financial crisis in 1997 caused a greater awareness of the regional connectedness, and paved the way for APT and regional consciousness (Hwee, 2003: 107). Furthermore, several developments on the Asian national level can be observed. Gilson (2007: 28) argues that ASEM has brought Japan closer to its neighbours after being rather distanced from Asia before. Hwee (2003: 172) and Reiterer (2011: 3) note ASEM's contribution to China's economic modernisation and reform, and its multilateral cooperative efforts. Another recent example proves China's commitment to the region. After North Korea's renewed nuclear threat in March 2013, China for the first time distanced itself from Pyongyang, and stayed with the region at least rhetorically (Williams, 2013). The collective criticism of Myanmar at the 2010 ASEM summit can be seen as a further milestone in the consolidation of the Asian region (Reiterer, 2011: 2). Hence, although national sovereignty and non-interference in domestic matters are still dominant principles in Asia, these developments exemplify significant changes towards a stronger regional identity.

Following the constructivist logic, ASEM has been contributing to this development. ASEM facilitates dialogue on the regional basis among the Asian members, as well as dialogue with the European counterpart. Pre-ASEM meetings, APT meetings and the summits force the states to talk about issues that would not have been on their agenda without ASEM. Of course, this does not result in a problem-solving approach, but it does reduce historically rooted mistrust which has been an unbridgeable impediment to cooperation in the past. According to Hwee (2003: 107), regional 'togetherness' develops through a demarcation from the European, or more generally, Western 'Other'. In particular, the common rejection of Western ideologies shapes the region's identity. Whereas regional forums, such as APT, focus on problems of and within Asia, and are therefore often deadlocked, inter-regional forums such as APEC, with its strong American leadership and its focus on economics, leave little room for the development of an Asian identity. Therefore, ASEM's suitability as a regional integrator is unparalleled in the global system.

Both ASEM and external events, such as the Asian financial crisis, undoubtedly contribute to the development of an Asian identity. The mutual interaction of these factors leads to great scope for interpretation. Therefore, opinions widely differ regarding the credit to be given to ASEM as a regional integrator. What critics and advocates of ASEM agree upon however, is that Asia is certainly on the move. In contrast to Europe, Asia's regional development is not driven by conscious policies, but rather constitutes a process driven by trade, foreign investments, civil society and international interaction (Rüland and Storz, 2008: 5). Looking from this perspective, it does not ultimately matter which factor has the greatest influence, but only how the process can move forward. ASEM captures the great potential of this process and contributes to it. The final destination of this process is yet to be seen, but as constructivists argue, only mutual interaction matters and ultimately determines this destination.

### *Developments in Europe*

With the EU, Asia seems to face a unified, coherent region. The highly institutionalised entity with supranational

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institutions and a common market stands in stark contrast to the fragmented Asia. Yet, a closer scrutiny reveals inherent problems that can be attributed to the enormous degree of institutionalisation, and the lack of a collective European identity. The EU is a prime example of regionalism where conscious policies, such as the European Single Market and the establishment of a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), represent a top-down process (Rüland and Storz, 2008: 5). This imposition of a regional identity led Delanty (1995: 2) to consider the EU merely an 'imagined community'. While the EU was particularly preoccupied with its integration process and the corresponding difficulties in the 1980s (Hwee, 2003: 174), this inward-looking attitude applies even more so today in times of its economic and identity crisis.

The contemporary picture of the EU displays a rather motley assortment of actors. Decisions do not emerge out of a communal spirit, but are determined in a continuous power struggle among its supranational institutions and member states' governments. (Moravcsik, 1994: 80). In addition, a wide spectrum of parties on the national level, ranging from the conservative right to leftist splinter groups, regularly leads to significant goal changes whenever national governments change. At the same time, the path dependency of the institutionalisation process takes revenge. The Union is locked into its institutionalised character, which only with severe difficulties can be halted, let alone reversed. Particularly now, in times of crises, these conditions and the European regional model itself are questioned by academics, politicians, and especially, civil society. Accusations among member states, and citizens' increasing support for radical parties that demand the withdrawal from the EU, are the consequences.

The degree of institutionalisation proves to be no guarantee for a European collective identity. Hence, attempts to emphasise the EU's foundation on common values, such as in the *Agenda for A Common Culture in a Globalised World* (European Commission, 2007), are poorly received. Another aspect that follows from the lack of a collective identity is the refusal of member states to accept further integration in sensitive areas including the CFSP. Although the Lisbon Treaty aimed at its consolidation in 2009, the common foreign policy remains a struggle due to clashing cultures and member states' interests. ASEM provides a relevant platform for addressing these problems. Constructivists maintain that the confrontation of the EU with another region, or at least another set of nations, is an opportunity to foster communal spirit and to create a more European identity. Hetnne and Soderbaum (2005: 547) argue that through the great importance attached to Asia, ASEM constitutes a completely different type of cooperation for the EU. In contrast to relations with Latin America or Africa, the European Commission cannot take the leading role. Gaens (2008: 93) sees in the EU's 'New Asia Strategy' an attempt to strengthen its identity by demarcating itself from the Asian 'Other'. He argues that this identity building is based on two rather paradox assumptions. First, Europeans consider Asia as homogenous and a body with values and working methods completely different from their own. Second, Europeans consider Asia as heterogeneous and divided amongst itself (Gaens, 2008: 93). Hence, the inability to classify its counterpart in any coherent way leads EU states to associate with their own region. Patten (2000: 7) maintains that the EU was able to significantly consolidate its common foreign policy during the ASEM process and, especially, the Asian financial crisis. Camroux (2006: 37) argues that in particular, the interaction with a region such as Asia is a real test to the European CFSP. Hence, the 'regionalism through interregionalism' thesis can be extended to Europe. On the one hand ASEM forces the EU to look beyond its internal problems, on the other hand it provides ways for Europe to find itself.

Due to its institutionalised character and the corresponding identity-issues, the EU has turned into the 'problem child' within ASEM. The interaction in ASEM represents a proficient tool to help the EU work on its regional togetherness. Simultaneously, the interaction reveals weaknesses in the European structure and hence, ASEM can also be seen as a way of showing the EU alternatives to its rigid approach to decision-making.

## Operational Considerations

The previous section demonstrated that ASEM serves as a regional integrator for the EU and Asia. However, in order for ASEM to uphold this role and to maintain its status as a cornerstone of the EU's Asia strategy, two essential operational considerations need to be taken into account.

### *Structure of ASEM*

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The true value of ASEM lies in its informality and comprehensive scope (Hwee, 2003: 168). Both of these characteristics are essential for its role as a regional integrator. The informal character of ASEM bears potential in two ways. First, for constructivists, interactive and informal talk is the most essential tool to foster relationships (Wendt, 1994: 391); thus ASEM creates the space for Europe and Asia for doing so. Second, ASEM's informality allows for the possibility to slow down, move backwards, or change procedures, in the integration process when necessary (Hwee, 2003: 88). In comparison to the European model, there is no path dependency of integration.

However, trends towards 'over-preparations' undermine these core characteristics, and ultimately threaten ASEM's role (Gaens, 2006: 133). High expectations and increased complexity, leading to more bureaucracy, pre-prepared statements, and proliferation of initiatives, create a vicious cycle. Gilson (2002: 68) notes that high expectations lead to an inadequate adherence to symbolism, and therefore talk is often just 'a refuge to unanimously agreeable discussions'. Another issue that adds to the problem, but simultaneously renders ASEM's modest character even more crucial, is its steady membership increase. According to Reiterer (2011: 4), enlargement leads to soft institutionalisation and takes away informality. In fact, increased membership makes an intergovernmental nature of ASEM less feasible and increases the need for an interregional approach. Hence, whether the enlargement is a contribution to the formation of regional identities, depends on the continuance of ASEM's moderate character.

ASEM is undoubtedly a complex forum, and its most difficult endeavour is not to become too complex. It needs to balance the degree of institutionalisation that supports regional consultation, but also has to stay flexible enough to ensure real talk takes place amongst its members.

## *Inclusion of Civil Society*

One issue that comes when viewing ASEM from a constructivist perspective is its top-down approach. ASEM is clearly an elite process that only marginally includes civil society (Hwee, 2003: 163). A frequently cited survey among Asian students from Beijing reveals low levels of awareness: 68 per cent responded with 'Do Not Know ASEM' (Hwee, 2006: 148). Answers to similar question in Europe would likely not differ significantly. Yet, in order for ASEM to effectively serve both as a regional integrator and a forum for dialogue between the two regions, ASEM needs to be for, and of, citizens (Bersick, 2008: 246). A statement of the European Economic and Social Committee (1996: 21) summarises the necessity of cultural exchange on the level of civil society: 'Asia is not a region like others and precisely for this reason a shared inspiration of civilisation and cultural osmosis is lacking between Europe and Asia'. Furthermore, strong linkages between cultural and security issues make the inclusion of civil society indispensable. In particular, recent trends in European countries in crisis demonstrate how the exclusion of civil society from political processes can lead to increasing support for extremist, xenophobic movements.

While the positive contribution of the Asia-Europe Foundation is acknowledged, ASEM members must become aware of the need for a more comprehensive approach towards civil society. Cultural exchange needs to be more than just the third pillar of ASEM that often seems to be the 'easy part'; dealt with in easily enforceable student exchange programmes.

## **Evaluation**

Due to ASEM's modest nature, its most visible outputs are summits, workshops and initiatives, rather than agreements or concrete solutions to problems (Hwee, 2003: 63). This focus on qualitative and long-term outputs led many scholars to declare ASEM as a 'clearing house' for other meetings, or a 'talk-shop' with no real value for the actors involved (Rüland, 2006: 48). Yet, as the essay demonstrates, three theoretical frameworks account for diverse dimensions and perceptions of ASEM, and inevitably lead to diverse expectations and assessments. Western emphases on tangible outputs, effectiveness, and accountability, further impede an appropriate assessment of ASEM; as anything that does not follow these principles is deemed to be ineffective and is ultimately questioned. Keukeleire and MacNaughton (2008: 206), for instance, note a tendency in the EU to regularly enhance terminologies of partnerships, only for the sake of making these continue to appear relevant.

Yet, ASEM has a distinct philosophy and can only be judged based on its intention and capabilities. The main reason

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for Europe's 'New Asia Strategy' was 'working towards a partnership of equals capable of playing a constructive and stabilising role in the world' (EU Commission, 1994: 2). In order for this interregional partnership to be possible, the consolidation of the regional entities needs to be ensured through regular interaction. Hence, ASEM was never intended to produce binding agreements, or to replace existing partnerships. Instead, it sought to lay the groundwork for this equal partnership to play a role in the world. Therein lies the added value of ASEM. The previous analysis demonstrates ASEM's role as a regional integrator in Asia and Europe, revealing that the regional process of integration takes place under different conditions and internal problems. Whereas in Asia, historical rivalries and the emphasis on national sovereignty still impede regional consciousness, Europe faces different issues. Its high degree of institutionalisation, the economic crisis, and the crumbling support for the European regional model, are at the core of concerns. Thus, the analysis reveals the potential and the need for future endeavours concerning the regional consolidation of Asia and Europe. This is in line with Hwee (2003: 163), who argues that ASEM is a 'mega-project' that has only just begun. Indeed, if regional consolidation will not be supported, ASEM risks becoming an intergovernmental forum that is dominated by national interests (Hwee, 2003: 70). Hence, working towards regional identities also constitutes a life insurance of ASEM and Europe's 'New Asia Strategy'.

There is an increased proliferation of international agreements and institutions, particularly in Asia (Lanteigne, 2008: 98). However, ASEM has the potential to escape this proliferation due to its special character. Its emphasis on informal talk and dialogue, among and between the regions, helps to build long-term trust. Felicio (2006: 13) sees in interregionalism the perfect tool to combat global security threats. On this account ASEM does not only remain the cornerstone of the EU's 'New Asia Strategy', but further bears great potential to contribute to interregionalism in the global system generally.

## Conclusion

In the international arena ASEM remains unprecedented, and its added value clearly lies in its role as a regional integrator for Europe and Asia.

This essay approached the question as to whether ASEM continues to be the cornerstone of the European 'New Asia Strategy' by first outlining three frameworks under which ASEM's role can be understood. The essay argued from the constructivist perspective and consequently analysed regional developments and the continued need for ASEM as a regional integrator in Europe and Asia. The analysis showed that regional integration in both regions takes place under different conditions and difficulties. Whereas in Asia, historical rivalries and the strong role of national sovereignty still complicates the development of a regional identity, Europe's high degree of institutionalisation, and its present economic and identity crisis leads to crumbling support for its regional model. To consider if ASEM will be able to maintain this role, the analysis raised two operational considerations. First, despite its increased complexity and the great expectations of ASEM, it needs to maintain its informal character to allow for real talk and different speeds of institutionalisation. Second, Asian and European civil societies need to be incorporated into the process; ASEM cannot remain significant when holding on to its elitist nature.

Hence, it is only through the constructivist lens that we can see the added value of ASEM. It is the only multilateral forum that fosters a regional identity in Asia and Europe, and thus provides prerequisites for closer cooperation between the regions.

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