Whither ASEM?
Lessons from APEC and
the Future of Transregional Cooperation
Between Asia and Europe

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Foreword

The ASEM process has been a major policy innovation to contribute towards a strong economic, political and cultural relationship between Europe and East Asia. The regular meetings of heads of states, which started in Bangkok in 1996, continued in London 1998 and which will be followed this year by the summit in Seoul have been very useful events to build bridges. Many other activities concerning economic, political and cultural affairs have also been organized and contributed towards an enhanced understanding of each other and presumably improved the quality of policies.

A period of about six years is rather short. This is even more so when the circumstances for the ASEM process are considered. The financial and economic crisis in some Asian countries influenced in a very substantial way the meeting in London. However, ASEM has set in motion numerous initiatives, has answered to many of the challenges facing Asia and Europe. The Seoul summit provides the opportunity to reflect on the process so far and the way ahead.

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) has contributed towards the ASEM process throughout this period since the inauguration in 1996 in many ways. Conferences and workshops have been organized with trade unions from Asia and Europe, with scholars from both regions, with parliamentarians from selected Asian countries, with policy makers. This year FES has cooperated with Non-Governmental Organisations to reflect on their role in the ASEM-process, FES will co-organize a conference with international trade unions in Seoul. FES has joined hands with scholars from Asia and Europe to reflect on the expectations for the ASEM. And FES has cooperated with ASEF to organize a meeting in Singapore to reflect on “regions in transition”.

This brochure contains a thought-provoking interesting contribution from a German scholar who participated in a conference in Seoul in September 2000. The paper compares the APEC process with the ASEM process and outlines some of the challenges. At the conference in Seoul, the paper was considered to be an excellent contribution towards recognizing the key challenges of the way ahead. The Korea Cooperation Office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung decided to publish the paper as monograph to enable a wider dissemination of Dr. Koellner's ideas and reflections.

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1. Introduction

The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) has lost its momentum. Some observers even doubt whether APEC’s limited results and its allegedly lacking relevance for business still justify the large amount of human and financial resources that are necessary to sustain the process. Is the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) destined to follow the same route? Or will ASEM manage to remain relevant for some time into the future?

In the following I want to explore the problems and challenges that have become visible with regard to ASEM and venture some suggestions concerning the future direction of this still relatively young form of dialogue and cooperation between Asia and Europe. Before doing so, I will try to put APEC and ASEM in comparative perspective by looking at their respective origins, evolution and basic rationales. Tracing commonalities and differences between the two forms of regional relations should provide at least a partial answer to the question of whether APEC and ASEM are destined to head the same way. In a second step I will look back at the ASEM experience so far, focusing on the three pillars the ASEM process rests upon. Thirdly, I will delineate ASEM’s challenges that have become apparent in recent times and outline the perspectives and priorities that have been put forward by different parties in Europe. Finally, I will concentrate on some of the promising areas for future dialogue and cooperation between Asia and Europe. Here, I will put particular emphasis on the need for intensified exchange in the social and cultural realm.

2. APEC and ASEM: Intraregional and transregional cooperation in comparative perspective

Both APEC and ASEM broadly fall into the category of regional relations which has gained new prominence since the end of the Cold War. Both kinds of regional relations are evolutionary in the sense of being potentially open-ended. A distinction that can however be drawn between APEC and ASEM is that the first is all about intraregional cooperation, i.e. cooperation within a region, while the latter is about cooperation between two distinct regions. It has been noted (Yeo 2000: 129) that ASEM is in fact a new form of interaction between regions which should be termed transregional rather than interregional cooperation. The reason for this denomination is that both regions do not come together as two cohesive regional actors but rather as regional groupings comprised of individual members with their individual agendas and individual voices.

This distinction between interregional and transregional cooperation might seem academic or even outright trivial but it is not. The distinction was highlighted at the foreign ministers’ meeting in 1997 when interregional dialogue between the EU and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was put on hold due to a controversy about the participation of
Myanmar/Burma but transregional dialogue between Asian and European foreign ministers within the framework of ASEM could proceed. Counter to this example of the flexibility that transregional dialogue and cooperation can provide it might be suggested that a priori intraregional processes such as APEC provide a more amenable basis for finding common ground than processes involving two different regions. That this, however, is not the case here has to do with the different rationales of the two processes we are concerned with, conflicting approaches within APEC, and the somewhat awkward character of the so-called „Asia-Pacific“ region. To understand this phenomenon we have to turn to the origins and subsequent development of APEC.

APEC was born in 1989 as a forum to promote and facilitate economic transactions among the Pacific Rim countries. While economic integration within Pacific Asia was (and still is) mainly market-driven, i.e. propelled by the activities of individual companies, APEC gave the process some sort of more formal framework which, however, is less institutionalized and encompassing than NAFTA, let alone the European Union. APEC was initiated by Australia which - as its smaller neighbor New Zealand - has been bent in recent years on closer economic links with East Asia. APEC’s status was enhanced in 1993 when the first summit between the heads of the participating members took place in Seattle (Moeller and Thiel 1999: 20). For the host, US President William Jefferson Clinton, the first APEC summit provided a convenient platform for demonstrating after years of neglect the importance that the US government accords to its Asian partners.

Only one year later, in 1994, APEC already reached its pinnacle. The summit in Bogor/Indonesia produced a declaration which laid down the aim of complete trade liberalization by the year 2010 for the industrially developed members of APEC and 2020 for developing members. In Bogor APEC members also began to play a leading role in the negotiations which led to the 1996 Information Technology Agreement. The resulting euphoria however did not last long. Shortly after the Bogor meeting, the ambitious liberalization targets where put into question by the political realities in a number of APEC countries.

Within a few months, China, Japan and Korea announced that they would seek to exclude agriculture, as a „sensitive“ sector, from APEC timetables for trade liberalization; the US congress renewed support for the US sugar industry; the Malaysian minister for trade and industry stated that commitments on trade liberalization would not be permitted to interfere with the promotion of high technology industries through tariff protection and other supportive measures; and the leader of Australia’s Liberal Party ... declared that he was not „Captain Zero“ as far as tariffs are concerned (Ravenhill 1995: 1).
The so-called individual action plans in which all APEC members laid down their respective blueprints to achieve the Bogor target where seen as „long on already promised concessions - but short on new commitments“ (Reyes 1999). Things did not look more promising during the following years. In 1998 the APEC process effectively reached its nadir. Proposals for `early voluntary sectoral liberalization’ in 15 product categories did not take off and had to be forwarded to the WTO. To make things worse, the headlines were grabbed by the acrimonious confrontation between US Vice President Al Gore (Clinton did not attend the summit) and the host, Prime Minister Mahathir of Malaysia. Criticism abounded from all corners (cf. Wain 1999a). Least surprisingly, Mahathir himself argued that „APEC is now just a place to meet each other. APEC has no clout“ (ibid.). In fact he was only echoing the criticism of some skeptical American analysts. In 1997 Kenneth Flamm and Edward J. Lincoln from the Brookings Institution chided APEC as a „feel-good chat forum ... with activity masquerading as progress“ (Flamm and Lincoln 1997: 4).

It can be argued that critiques like these are not just the result of some short-term frustration which most likely will disappear again. More to the point, they mark deep-seating and conflicting views about what APEC should do and achieve. Academic observers like Beeson and Jayasuriya (1998) have even argued that these differences boil down to different „political rationalities“ between more interventionist Asian countries which see economic policy as subject to broader political and social considerations and the Anglo-Saxon countries which pursue more of a laisser-faire policy with regard to economic transactions. In the case of the United States this general laisser-faire policy is - perversely enough - coupled with a foreign trade policy which emphasizes „results-oriented“ liberalization and deregulation measures on the part of its Asian trading partners.

APEC is the one regional forum where this US trade policy approach is played out - and collides head on with the different agenda of a number of Asian nations. For this group of countries which includes also Japan, the 21-member forum APEC was always seen as an instrument for more broadly-defined cooperation in the realm of economic development rather than as an instrument to push a neoliberal liberalization agenda. General agreements rather than specific results are seen on the Asian side as the most appropriate and acceptable means when it comes to dealing with economic cooperation in forums going beyond the individual nation-state. `Regional regulation‘ is not something that is palatable to most Asian countries (cf. Beeson and Jayasuriya 1998: 331-332).

The result of this clash of interests and priorities is frustration on both sides of the Pacific. APEC thus runs the danger of further losing its role as the central forum for trans-Pacific economic dialogue and cooperation. It is not only that the United States might lose interest if the Congress and the Administration finally come to the conclusion that APEC does not
“deliver” what it seemed to promise in the beginning (cf. Ravenhill 1995: 23). On the Asian side of the Pacific there has also been disappointment about the fact that APEC proved fairly useless a forum for cooperation when it came to dealing with the recent financial and economic crisis in the region. The perceived inadequate if not unfair approach of the IMF - and thus in the eyes of quite a few Asian government of the United States - to dealing with the crisis has left a bitter aftertaste.

It has also provided a fertile ground for the (re-)emergence of government-guided economic regionalism within East Asia proper, i.e. with Japan, China, Korea and ASEAN at the core (cf. Higgott 1999: 101-106). Witness for example the recent ASEAN + 3 initiatives aimed at closer monetary cooperation (Bardacke 1999; Japan Times 2000). American and other observers perceive this nascent East Asian regional cooperation as a potential threat to a multilateral rules-based economic regime. It has however to be admitted that from a certain point of view closer integration within East Asia seems much more „natural“ than economic integration across the vast territory across the Pacific which links (or rather separates?) countries with hardly anything in common in terms of shared geography, history, culture or geopolitical interdependence (cf. Buzan 1998). Without wanting to discount the achievements of APEC so far, it can safely be suggested that the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation stands at the crossroads. It is not at all clear whether it can be reinvigorated as a meaningful tool for even-handed economic dialogue and cooperation or whether it will vanish into oblivion in the face of the countervailing expectations and approaches of its members.

That simple rhetoric about some common destiny does not suffice to sustain institutional momentum should be a powerful lesson from APEC for the ASEM process. In short, ASEM can only be expected to function as a successful long-term conduit between Asia and Europe if there is sufficient substance to back up the process and if the common ground can be seized and be hold on to. Potentially ASEM can breed even more discontent than APEC. After all, it encompasses not only the economic dimension of transregional relations but also the social and cultural dimension and finally the political dimension where - as we all know - there are conflicting views about democratization, human rights, the rule of law and so on. On the other hand, ASEM’s much broader agenda than APEC’s also offers additional opportunities. Before coming to these but also the challenges that surround the ASEM process we will first turn to ASEM’s general rationale, structure and activities to date.

3. The three pillars of the ASEM process: the story so far

In discussions about relations within the so-called triad, i.e. (North) America, (Western) Europe and Japan (later increasingly East Asia in general), it had become commonplace in the 1980s and early 1990s to lament the weakness of the link between Europe and Asia. While both
relations across the Pacific between the United States and Asia and relations across the Atlantic between the United States and Europe showed a relatively high degree of „institutional thickness“, this kind of embedding was clearly missing in the relations between Europe and Asia. Not least the fact that a number of European countries had been colonizers in parts of Asia up to World War II or even later led to decades of estrangement or simple neglect.

European colonialism in Asia left a complicated legacy of distrust and disdain. Once retreating European powers reluctantly decolonized, a vacuum in the Asia-Pacific region was left for others to fill. ... From the 1950s until the 1980s, Europe and Asia concentrated on their own backyards. The Europeans began their remarkable experiment in regional integration, while a still-divided Asia rapidly modernized (Buckley 1999).

It took until 1994 to finally launch an initiative to bring the relations between Asia and Europe into some more institutionalized fold. In the October of that year Goh Chok Tong, the prime minister of East Asia’s quintessential „above-its-weight-puncher“ Singapore, suggested the creation of a forum to bridge the gap between the two regions. European and Asian governments responded more or less enthusiastically to the proposal which led in the spring of 1996 to the first summit between the heads of 25 Asian and European countries plus the Commission of the EU. The Asia-Europe Meeting was born (cf. Camroux and Lechervy 1996).

Several factors helped to bring about this „historic event“. It can be suggested that it was first and foremost economics that brought the two sides together. While on the one hand the European side was eager to jump onto the bandwagon of the seemingly never-ending economic boom in East Asia, the Asian side was interested in making sure that its nightmare of a „Fortress Europe“ would not turn into reality. Also, there was a distinct interest on the part of some Asian countries to tap into Europe’s technological know-how and financial prowess. The general movement towards regionalization in the world economy (the Single Market of the EU, NAFTA etc.) provided an additional backdrop to the attempt to bring the two regions closer together.

Related to this was the belated awakening of the Europeans to the APEC process which had not only been given a higher profile with the first summit in Seattle 1993 but could also present some successes a year later in Bogor (see above). The Europeans who had been denied observer status, let alone direct participation in APEC wanted to make sure that they would not be left out in the cold. The ASEM provided them with an opportunity to make their voice heard in Asia. The Europeans and the Asians were moreover united by a growing concern about American unilateralism. ASEM was thus also seen as a lever to keep the Americans committed to a multilateral approach in their foreign economic policy (cf. Bridges 1999a: 181-183; Rüland
Economic concerns were thus very much at the back of the mind of ASEM members when the process was launched. It seems therefore only natural that the economic dimension has dominated ASEM so far - if sometimes not quite in the way foreseen. Thus while ASEM II in London 1998 was very much about economics it was not about how to link Europe's industrial might with Asia's dynamic economies but how to act together in the face of the financial and economic crisis that had beset large parts of Asia (cf. Bridges 1999b).

While - at least in terms of official rhetoric - political and cultural matters were supposed to be equally important components of the ASEM process, in reality dialogue and cooperation on these issues seemed to have more of an „add-on“ character. That this is not what some of the proponents of closer European-Asian interaction had in mind is shown by Goh Chok Tong's plea for cultural rapprochement between the two regions (Goh 1997). It was again left to Singapore to forge ahead in this realm through the founding of the Asia-Europe Foundation.
ASEF (ASEF) in February 1997. ASEF's activities revolve around artistic, educational and people-to-
people exchange between the two regions.

Already a cursory glance at the structure of the ASEM process reveals that ASEF's activities have remained somewhat lopsided, giving great prominence to economic issues in the broadest sense (see chart 1, „The ASEM structure”). This first impression deepens when one takes a closer look at ASEF's activities since ASEF I in 1996. As mentioned before, ASEF is supposed to stand on three pillars: a political, an economic and a cultural one. Apart from the summits which take place every two years, alternating between the two regions, regular meetings take place between foreign ministers, between ministers charged with economic affairs, between finance ministers, and between senior officials from foreign ministries. Meetings of foreign ministers and Senior Officials' Meetings (SOM) are charged with the coordination and preparation of the summits. These meetings are also supposed to serve as forums for political dialogue within ASEF. In principle no topic should be excluded from this political dialogue. Asian and European foreign ministers agreed however in February 1997 to deal in an initial phase only with topics which bring the dialogue partners together and not apart. The idea here is to arrive over time at „a climate of trust which permits the political dialogue to be broadened“ (Moeller und Thiel 1999: 7).

Turning to the economic pillar of ASEF we find a plethora of activities at various levels. These range from the above-mentioned meetings of economic and finance ministers to private sector meetings such as the Asia-Europe Business Forum (AEBF) which brings together representatives from Asian and European enterprises and economic associations on an annual basis. Moreover there are also Senior Officials' Meetings on Trade and Investment (SOMTI plus SOMTI Coordinators' Meetings) and meetings of senior officials from finance ministries. A so-called financial core group gathers regularly at the margins of IMF/IBRD Meetings. Also, at ASEM II a trust fund amounting to some US$ 47 million was set up at the World Bank to help finance technical assistance and provide advice on restructuring the financial sectors in the crisis-stricken Asian countries.

Finally, a particular working group on the public and private sector initiated by Thailand was formed early on to present proposals on the facilitation and promotion of trade and investment. As a result of the activities of this group, a Trade Facilitation Action Plan (TFAP) and an Investment Promotion Action Plan (IPAP) were agreed upon in London. As follow-up measures to these plans, there have been a number of seminars on topics such as standards, testing and certification, sanitary and phytosanitary rules and quarantine, intellectual property rights, public procurement, and the distribution sector. Finally, officials from Asian and European customs authorities have come together on an annual basis since 1996 and there have been a number of individual seminars on topics such as small and medium-sized enterprises or infrastructure
financing.

Somewhere in between the economic and the cultural pillar of the ASEM process we can locate the ASEM Science and Technology Ministers' Meeting which took place in October 1999 in Beijing. That there has been so far only one such meeting in the history of the ASEM process, compared with numerous meetings of ministers and senior officials in the political and the economic realm in particular, is already quite telling with regard to the importance that is accorded to the third pillar of ASEM cooperation. Even more so is the fact that most of the working papers prepared for this particular meeting dealt with „hard“ technology and its applications (see http://www.cordis.lu/asem/src/papers.htm). Regarding technological cooperation within the framework of ASEM, one can also note the launch of an Asia-Europe Environmental Technology Centre which was finally opened in Bangkok in March 1999.

Admittedly there have also been quite a number of activities in the realm of social, cultural and intellectual exchange. Apart from a handful of seminars and conferences on topics as diverse as the future of electronic media, child welfare, labor relations, states and markets or traditional and modern medicine which brought together specialists in the relevant fields, there have been somewhat more consistent efforts focusing on the one hand on informal intellectual dialogue about human rights and on the other hand on exchanges between universities, business schools and think tanks in both regions. Get-togethers of younger lawmakers (see below) and young professionals in government, business, media, academia etc. (the so-called ASEM Young Leaders' Symposiums) have also taken place in recent years on a regular basis. Quite a number of these activities have been coorganized by the Asia-Europe Foundation in Singapore which runs also summer schools, alternating between Asia and Europe, for selected students from Asia with an interest in Europe and vice versa.

4. Challenges and problems of the ASEM Process

In view of all these activities one might think that all is well and good with ASEM. After all, numerous forums and networks for dialogue and cooperation have been created particularly but not exclusively in the economic realm. However, one might also recall the criticism leveled at APEC which has been called a „feel-good chat forum ... with activity masquerading as progress“ (see above). Indeed activism does not equal relevance and long-term viability. It should thus come as no surprise that similar critiques - if in a more guarded language - have been brought forward with regard to ASEM. Especially the „F-word“, viz. „forum fatigue“, has started making the round (see e.g. European Commission 2000: 5; Fourquet 2000; Yeo 2000: 124). Officials from ASEM member governments now openly speak about the dangers of a proliferation of activities while some outside observers suggest that ASEM is full of symbolism but lacks substance (Westerlund 1999: 19; Yeo 2000: 123-124).
What is required in the eyes of many participants and observers of the ASEM process is a (re-)prioritization of the whole enterprise. Especially government officials involved in ASEM affairs want to avoid the wastage of precious resources in terms of time, money, and personnel which could be put to better use elsewhere. For its part, the EU Commission has recently listed general and specific priorities that ASEM should concentrate on in order to stop forum fatigue from getting stronger. While preserving the advantages of ASEM - which the Commission sees in the informality, the multi-dimensionality and the high level-orientation of the process - the EU agency suggests to focus on a „small“ number of specific priorities. These range from dialogue and cooperation with regard to regional and global security, dialogue on trade and investment issues, socioeconomic policy issues, and regional macroeconomic cooperation to the initiation of a consumers‘ dialogue between the two regions and the expansion of educational exchanges (European Commission 2000: 9-12).

Needless to say that these priorities are not shared everywhere. It comes as no surprise that not only the various governments which participate in the ASEM process but also numerous organizations and interest groups which hold a stake in ASEM try to push their individual agendas, be it the protection of workers‘ rights, the expansion of academic exchanges, or the protection of human rights in Myanmar/Burma. The ASEM process is thus faced with a host of diverse demands.

However it is not just the danger of proliferating activities that has been pinpointed recently. Equally it has been rightly pointed out that the ASEM process has evolved so far at a fairly elitist level. If only ministers, senior government officials and a limited group of individuals and organizations from business and academia are involved in ASEM, the process will never really take off and achieve legitimacy and long-term viability. As one participant at an ASEM seminar remarked earlier this year, „the arcane process of officials and bureaucrats must be overcome“ (Fourquet 2000). Certainly more needs to be done to bring the broader public into the process. This involves also a better „marketing“ of the ASEM process and more activities which can be directly experienced by interested people in both regions (see also below).

Another kind of criticism concerns the content and the usefulness of political dialogue within the framework of ASEM. Given that so many topics including questions pertaining to democratization, human rights, or security policy have been judged „sensitive“ and deferred to some undefined point of time in the future (see above), there is hardly anything left that would be worthwhile to talk about - or so the criticism goes. Subjects „which are in the purview of other fora, which create an uneasy atmosphere and which are strictly bilateral“ are anyway not supposed to be discussed at ASEM (Bridges 1999a: 185; Moeller and Thiel 1999: 15). Critics such as Möller suggest that because of these limitations political dialogue cannot go beyond a mere exchange of information. The significance of such a political dialogue would be virtually
The discussion about the content of political dialogue is linked to the broader question of what should be the focus of ASEM anyway. The variety of other bilateral and interregional forums for dialogue and cooperation between Asia and Europe begs the question of how ASEM can produce „value-added“. Certainly it is not necessary to repeat the discussions and the kind of cooperation that goes on, say, within the framework of EU-ASEAN relations. Redundant activities would inevitably lead to mounting disinterest on both sides. How can ASEM then guarantee its usefulness?

The most convincing approach in this regard has come from the late Gerald Segal. In a number of articles he has put forward the argument that ASEM activities have to be based on the principle of subsidiarity. In other words the vital question is: „what can best be done at the ASEM level“? Second to that the question can be asked: „what can additionally be usefully done at the ASEM level“? All other kinds of dialogue and cooperation that do not meet these criteria should better be left for the more appropriate forums be they at the bilateral level (e.g. Germany and China), the regional level (ASEAN Regional Forum/ARF), the interregional level (EU-ASEAN) or the multilateral level (e.g. WTO). Moreover, Segal (1997; 1998) suggests that some issues could better be tackled by only a few select interested European and Asian countries.

In addition, it has to become clearer what can be and what should be expected from ASEM. Do we expect specific results in the sense of say, solved disputes between European and Asian countries about the application of anti-dumping measures or countervailing duties (cf. Islam 1998)? Or do we rather see ASEM as a long-term process that might help to put relations between Europe and Asia on a firmer basis? Do we in other words hope that with the launch of ASEM a process has been set in motion that will in the end yield long-term benefits by creating networks at different levels which in turn create their own dynamics (Möller and Thiel 1999: 18-26; Yeo 2000: 120-121)? In short, should ASEM be more result-oriented or more process-oriented? Whatever the answer, it has to be spelt out more clearly in order to avoid frustration for all parties involved. With these general considerations in mind we can now address to question of how ASEM should move into the future.

5. Future cooperation between Asia and Europe: some suggestions

As the European Commission (2000: 5) rightly points out there is „a risk that the [ASEM] process may lose momentum if it can not confirm and maintain its clear relevance to public and business interests“. ASEM thus faces the danger of going the same way that APEC has taken in recent years. Will the euphoria with which ASEM was greeted in the beginning - in some
quarters at least - be finally transformed into a „gloom-and-doom mood“? Not necessarily so. Much if not all depends on whether first ASEM is seen in both regions as relevant and worthwhile as an undertaking and second whether the broader public can be better integrated in the process. In short,

- there has to be consensus on what ASEM should achieve;
- ASEM has to be given a clearer sense of mission; and
- ASEM has to encompass activities that involve not only a small elite.

One of the things that the experience of APEC teaches is that there is bound to be frustration if there are different approaches as to what the organization (or process for that matter) should achieve and how it should go about reaching these goals. Thus while everyone agrees that APEC is about economic cooperation and dialogue, there are conflicting ideas as to whether economic development in a broader sense or a narrower liberalization agenda should be at the center of APEC. Related to this is the unresolved question whether the APEC should be seen as a long-term process or whether it should be results-based and thus „accountable“ in the short-term. This kind of conundrum should be averted at ASEM. It has to be spelt out clearly what ASEM's mission is. Both a process-oriented and a results-oriented mission are possible and none is a priori preferable to the other. They are simply different missions. As long as it is clear what the mission is and all sides stick to that approach frustration can be averted or at least contained. Looking around both Asian and European capitals it seems that a process-oriented approach to ASEM is favored by most participants. If this is really the case, it should be confirmed and clearly spelt out in an ASEM mission statement.

ASEM also has the chance to limit the ups and downs that have characterized APEC. APEC's success and failure is predicated upon whether there is clearly visible progress in the economic field simply because this is what APEC is all about. ASEM on the contrary has the advantage of being not just dependent on progress in one dimension. ASEM rests on three pillars - cooperation and dialogue on political, economic, and cultural matters - and that's the way it should be. It is suggested here that in the mission statement referred to above not only the importance of all three dimensions of the ASEM process should be emphasized but also the fact that all three dimensions are of equal importance. This would not only counter the danger of getting bogged down in disputes about particular economic issues but would also lay the groundwork for making the ASEM process more relevant to a broader public as will be argued below. As will also be argued below, ASEM has so far overemphasized the economic dimension in its activities. We will look at these issues in the context of an discussion of all three pillars of the ASEM process, starting with political dialogue.

As noted above there is some concern whether there is sufficient room for meaningful political
dialogue within the framework of ASEM as so many topics are considered „out of bounds” or „too delicate“. Notwithstanding these problems, the European side has clearly indicated that it is interested in pursuing the political dialogue and finding common ground for joint action in areas such as terrorism, drug-trafficking and regional security. In late July this year, the EU Commissioner in charge of external relations, Christopher Patten, suggested that he would like to see political dialogue to be given a more prominent place within ASEM. Patten mentioned in this context issues such as security matters in the Taiwan Straits and the South China Sea, nuclear proliferation in South Asia, tensions in Indonesia and problems related to Burma (Patten 2000). Important as these issues undoubtedly are, the question remains whether the ASEAN Regional Forum might not be the more adequate arena to deal with them. It seems questionable that the concerned Asian states are willing to enter substantial discussions about these issues when they perceive the danger that the whole enterprise is simply about pointing fingers at them.

The fact remains however that the EU as a growing global power with a stake in Asia's stability has a legitimate interest in discussing security issues in the region. Though Europe's military role in Asia is limited, the EU's moves at creating a joint 60,000-troop rapid reaction force as well as continued attempts to speak with one voice in foreign and security policy matters mean that Europe has to be reckoned with. In view of these developments it seems no longer sufficient that Europe's „contribution” to Asian security is confined to the supply of weapons and military equipment. As the common foreign and security policy of the EU evolves, however slowly, so should policy and security dialogue between Asia and Europe. Ranging from issues like the reform of the United Nations to the possibility of joint Euro-Asian peace-keeping operations (PKOs) there is much ground to be covered. Meaningful and pragmatic dialogue about political and security-related issues, including „sensitive“ ones, will take time but is well-worth the effort. Giving up on such a dialogue because the time does not seem quite ripe yet constitutes hardly the appropriate approach. After all, there can be no comprehensive relationship built on trust when the vital political dimension is missing.

Turning to the economic dimension of the ASEM process, we noted above the already existing broad dialogue at the level of economics and finance ministers plus senior officials. In view of the many resources invested in this area, there has been some criticism to the effect that „[t]oo much of the [Asia-Europe] relationship is still devoted to the business of doing business“ (Bridges 1999a: 200). In a similar vein Segal (1998: 362) has argued that the „economics-in-command model“ of ASEM is dead and that more attention should be focused on other relevant areas. In fact it would seem appropriate to carefully check whether existing economics-related activities within the ASEM framework (can) produce „value added“ on top of similar activities at the bilateral or interregional level. In general it seems that trade and investment related matters can be tackled more successfully either at the bilateral level where
country-specific issues can be dealt with or at the WTO level where broader package deals linking different issues can be achieved better. In short, redundant economics-related activities within the ASEM framework should be scrapped.

In view of the „fatigue problem“ that has already become apparent with regard to the Asia-Europe Business Forum, creating even more „expert groups“ comprised of business people - as for example suggested by the Asia-Europe Vision Group - does not seem to hold much promise. Representatives of the private sector tend to lose interest in such activities if there is no relatively clear-cut business rationale. Moreover, one can be skeptical whether business dialogue and cooperation covering the whole of Asia (or the EU for that matter) makes sense to most business representatives when their activities are concentrated in a smaller number of locations.

To assess the usefulness and benefit of economic dialogue sponsored and carried out by governments, the more general question has also to be raised what role governments can play anyway in promoting trade and investment between the two regions. While there are certainly a number of areas where such as role is useful (standards come to mind for example) in other areas there is hardly a rationale for government involvement as market forces alone will bring about most business activities. Certainly the 1990s have seen a dynamic growth of European-Asian trade and investment transactions. As a consequence, the EU has made great progress in catching up with the United States as far as economic involvement in the region is concerned (cf. Das 1999; Bridges 1999b: 458). This growth in Asian-European business linkages has hardly been due to government activities but has rather been the result of individual companies following market signals. Thus governmental initiatives in the economic realm should be limited to areas where there is a demand for such activities by business itself or where issues are involved that go beyond simple private sector interests.

Seen in this way there is certainly scope for governmental dialogue and cooperation. Apart from pro-business and pro-consumer related issues that can be tackled within ASEM broader issues such as the reform of the international financial architecture or the international role of the Euro also seem to be relevant for further discussions between the two regions (cf. Ifri 2000). Moreover, it might also be worthwhile to explore whether there is sufficient interest on the Asian side to discuss the implications of monetary cooperation for closer regional integration (cf. Dieter 2000). Certainly the recent Asian financial and economic crisis has created mounting interest in the region to find East Asian (rather than say „Asia Pacific“) solutions to common financial and monetary challenges. Working together on these issues in an East Asian context (or format) seems fairly legitimate. Thus if there is an interest in learning more about European answers to similar challenges, the European side should be willing to offer its support and technical assistance where required.
We now come finally to the cultural pillar of ASEM which as we suggest constitutes the most underdeveloped dimension of the transregional process. In spite of the many activities of the Asia-Europe Foundation the cultural and social dimension of the ASEM process stills looks quite insubstantial when compared to the economic and financial dimension. As rightly noted by Yeo (2000: 130-131), however, economic motivations are not sufficient on their own to sustain the ASEM process.

The importance of social and cultural exchange between Asia and Europe has often been emphasized by government representatives and academics alike (see e.g. Goh 1997; Stokhof 1999). Thus for example the European Commission (2000: 5) has argued that „[c]ultural and intellectual networking should help to build a broader and deeper awareness of the importance of Asia-Europe relations among a wider public“. Creating such a deeper awareness is however not just a question of better marketing or education - useful as they may be in themselves. It involves more than a simple top-down approach which concentrates on rational arguments for closer cooperation. Asia-Europe relations will only be seen as relevant if and when sizable groups within the respective societies are genuinely interested in and committed to the other region.

There is the argument that if there only would be more information available about the other region there would also be more interest. Even though undoubtedly there could and should be a better diffusion of relevant information by involving the mass media more in the process of Asia-Europe relations, the general argument seems to be flawed on two counts. First, there already is a plethora of information in terms of publications and so on that only needs to be tapped into. Information per se does not trigger interest; it is more likely to be other way round. Second, the provision of information on its own is hardly enough in another sense too. If what we aim at is mutual comprehension, then the provision and diffusion of information can be a useful tool but more fundamental are raised awareness and stimulated interest. Awareness and interest are strongest when they are based on personal experience and encounters. The question thus becomes how such experience and encounters can be promoted within the framework of ASEM.

As a matter of fact, many suggestions have already been put forward on how encounters with the other region, its cultural bases and artistic manifestations could be furthered. They range from the Vision Group's proposal to establish ASEM Cultural Festivals and to introduce ASEM Twin-Cities schemes (AEVG 1999: 18-19) to a host of suggestions put forward on the occasion of the IIIrd Asia Europe Young Leaders Symposium in Korea in 1999. The latter include the increased targeting of a younger audience by focusing on topics of interest to them including fashion, films, contemporary music or sports. It also has to be noted that the basis for cross-regional interest has to be created at home through language training at various levels and the
integration of Asian and European-related topics in school curricula. Teachers should thus be one of the primary target groups within the cultural pillar of the ASEM process (cf. AEYLS 1999).

Another group that has to be closely integrated in the ASEM process are parliamentarians from both regions. To name just one sorry case, it is for example extremely difficult to find German MPs with an interest in the East Asian region. This of course does not bode well for the future of political dialogue between the two regions. Existing initiatives such as the ASEF Young Parliamentarians Meeting which has taken place twice so far should be built upon.

While it is necessary and important to involve elected representatives on a continuous basis in the ASEM process, people-to-people contacts and exchanges should certainly not be confined to them. If Asian-European relations are to be put on a firm and long-term basis that is more comparable to those already existing across the Atlantic and the Pacific we need much more youth and educational exchanges. As the late Derek Fatchett (1999: 17) correctly noted, „educational exchanges [are] the most effective way [to] challenge prejudices and nurture new relationships“. It is these investments into the future that offer the biggest chance for comprehensive and sustainable relations at various levels between Asia and Europe in the times to come. While there are already a number of education-related programs linking the EU with different parts of Asia (cf. European Commission 1997), more needs to be done at the level of education ministries and universities to facilitate crossregional flows of undergraduates and postgraduates. This includes offering more courses and study programs in English and other relevant languages, developing schemes for the transfer of credits and the recognition of degrees and diplomas, and creating an ASEM student exchange program similar to the ERASMUS network.

In summing up, I would like to suggest that the ASEM process is indeed a worthwhile enterprise. However, steps have to be taken to stop the process from losing momentum or following the path of APEC. What is needed at this point is a mission statement which clearly spells out the general approach ASEM is taking with regard to transregional relations and the means to achieve the mission in terms of equally-important political, economic, and cultural dialogue and cooperation. Existing and future activities in all three pillars should be checked as to whether it makes sense to pursue them at the ASEM level or whether another level might be more appropriate. The ASEM process has also to be marketed better and has to involve a much broader societal base than is hitherto the case. If these requirements are met, then the future for more stable, comprehensive and sustainable Asia-Europe relations might be bright indeed.
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### List of Abbreviations

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>APEC</td>
<td>Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation</td>
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<td>ASEM</td>
<td>Asia-Europe Meeting</td>
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<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>Association of Southeast Asian Nations</td>
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<td>EU</td>
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<td>NAFTA</td>
<td>North Atlantic Free Trade Area</td>
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<td>ASEF</td>
<td>Asia-Europe Foundation</td>
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<td>SOM</td>
<td>Senior Officials' Meetings</td>
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<td>SOMTI</td>
<td>Senior Officials' Meetings on Trade and Investment</td>
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<td>AEBF</td>
<td>Asia-Europe Business Forum</td>
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<td>TFAP</td>
<td>Trade Facilitation Action Plan</td>
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<td>Investment Promotion Action Plan</td>
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<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
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<td>IBRD</td>
<td>International Bank for Reconstruction and Development</td>
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<td>PKOs</td>
<td>Peace-keeping Operations</td>
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<td>AEVG</td>
<td>Asia-Europe Vision Group</td>
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<td>AEYLS</td>
<td>Asia-Europe Young Leaders Symposium</td>
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List of members of the Asia-Europe Meeting

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Dr. Koellner was born in 1968 in Hamburg and educated at Konstanz University (Diplom in Administrative Science 1993), the University of Essex (M.A. in the Study of Contemporary Japan 1993) and Humboldt-University of Berlin (Ph.D. in Political Science 1997). His Ph.D. thesis dealt with South Korea's management of industrial-technological dependence on Japan. In 1996 he joined the Institute of Asian Affairs (IFA) in Hamburg, Germany where he covers political and economic developments on the Korean peninsula and domestic politics in Japan. Patrick Köllner is the founding editor of the Korean Yearbook of the IFA and has served on the scientific advisory council of the German Association of Asian Studies since 1999.