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[Who Will Save the Liberal World Order?](#)

Is Europe's Future in Asia?

The Asia-Europe Meeting as an Instrument
of the Rules-Based Multilateral Order

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The world order as we have known it for decades is in turmoil. Countries in Europe and Asia in particular have been profiting from the rules-based multilateral order which provided them with security and allowed them to prosper. Therefore, they are strongly affected by the current volatility. Instead of relying on other powers, countries in both regions should work together and proactively shape the future of multilateralism through the Asia-Europe Meeting.

Introduction

The international community is confronted with severe challenges – migration, terrorism, climate change, and cyber threats, just to name a few. None of these topics can be resolved by individual countries or stakeholders alone since they are not only transnational but interconnected. Yet, we observe a return of preferences for easy, nationalistic, and unilateral answers. As a result, many of the principles that have guided international politics since the Second World War seem to be changing. This gives way to a new narrative which declares that the old hegemon, the United States of America, is in a state of decline, while the new great power of China is rising and the old American arch enemy, Russia, is re-emerging on the world stage. The narrative further states that traditional patterns of international cooperation are being questioned, big countries once again argue from a position of strength, use force to impose their will on others, deny mutual benefits of collaboration, and that smaller states simply have to accept their fate.

While the rules-based multilateral world order is certainly being tested and changes are taking place, it would be too early to write a eulogy for multilateralism. Especially countries in Europe and Asia, many of which are small and medium-sized and would thus be unable to thrive in a system shaped by a “might is right” attitude, are stepping up to defend the old order. In their search for global partners, Germany and the European Union should therefore not lose sight

of Asia. The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is one of the crucial platforms in this regard. ASEM is now well into its third decade and the last ASEM Summit attended by the Heads of State and Government of the current 53 participating partners was held on 18 and 19 October 2018 in Brussels, Belgium. This article will shed light on the competitive advantages ASEM has for Asia-Europe relations and why this time of geopolitical uncertainty may provide a window of opportunity for this dialogue process.

Challenging Times for the Multilateral System

Indeed, one of the main challenges to the rules-based multilateral order is the *return of great power politics* which, combined with renewed preferences for unilateralist and nationalist approaches, create an unfavourable environment for multilateral cooperative arrangements. This becomes even clearer when existing multilateral agreements are put to the test. For instance, conflicts in the South and East China Sea, the annexation of Crimea, and advancements in North Korea’s nuclear missile programme have highlighted the ineffectiveness of non-binding multilateral agreements. Additionally, these cases have displayed the limited options for the international community to act on instances of non-compliance with international rules and norms.

Secondly, populist leaders who are offering seemingly easy solutions – often involving *protectionist and nationalist concepts* – to complex

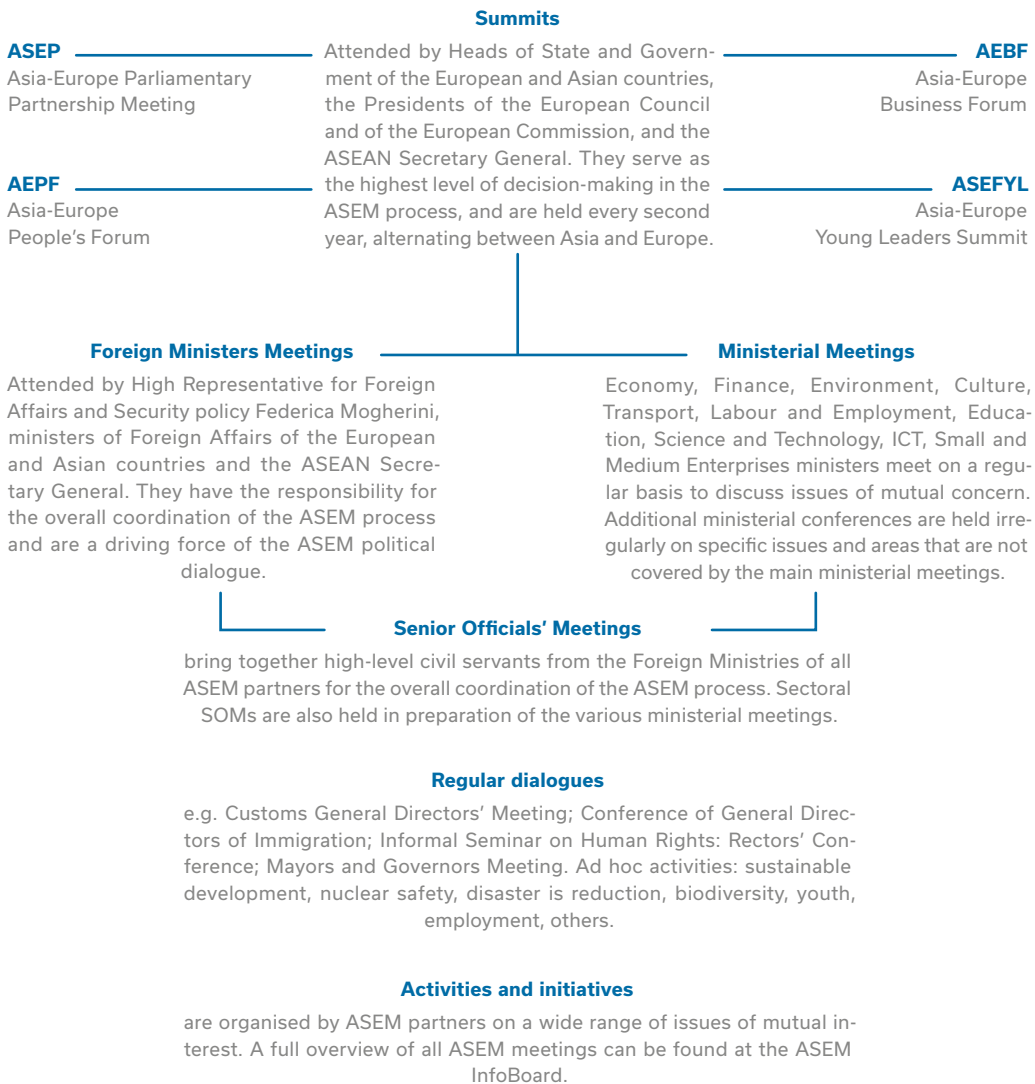


Backward steps into the future: The return of great power politics is increasingly endangering the establishment of multilateral cooperative agreements. Source: © Kevin Lim, *The Straits Times*, Reuters.

challenges, have exploited growing concerns and decreasing societal cohesion within countries. Many of these leaders are less consensus-driven, unwilling to make compromises, seek short-term gains, and question the value of multilateral initiatives as they often do not produce immediate results. They do not look for win-win outcomes, but prefer zero sum games; ultimately destroying trust as well as confidence which are required for multilateral arrangements. The most prominent case is the current foreign policy of the US. Its more nationalistic, inward-looking, and less predictable approach resulted in the withdrawal from previously agreed upon or signed treaties. This not only raises questions about the commitment of the US to multilateralism and the reliability of the longstanding US partnerships in both Asia and Europe, but also reduces

trust in concessions made by the US. This new approach of the long-time defender of a rules-based multilateral order has severe implications for illiberal countries. This is because they feel less obliged to follow international norms or use the developments in the US as a justification to implement illiberal domestic and foreign policies. At the same time, the Chinese leadership portrays itself as the new champion of multilateralism and drives forward economic and investment projects. However, it is through many of those initiatives that the Chinese create dependencies, interfere in the domestic affairs of other states, and promote a form of multilateralism that seems incompatible with a Western understanding of it. Yet, in both cases, it is important to look beyond the official statements and observe the real actions as well as intentions.

Fig. 1: How ASEM Works – Meetings and Activities Organised at Different Levels



1st ASEM Summit:	12th ASEM Summit:
1 to 2 March 1996 Bangkok, Thailand 26 participants: European group: 15 EU members and European Commission Asian group: 7 ASEAN members; China, Japan and South Korea	18 to 19 October 2018 Brussels, Belgium 53 participants: European group: 28 EU members, Norway, Switzerland and the European Union Asian group: 10 ASEAN members; Australia, Bangladesh, China, India, Japan, Kazakhstan, South Korea, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Russia and the ASEAN Secretariat

Source: Own illustration based on ASEM 2018: ASEM Factsheet, in: <http://bit.ly/2RpSNc3> [7 Jul 2018].

This great power politics goes hand in hand with the *proliferation of multilateral fora*. The political landscape, with regard to multilateral approaches, is extremely diverse, complex, and characterised by different formats. These range from highly institutionalised forms of international or regional cooperation, to informal and non-binding meetings among Heads of Government and resort ministers, and issue-specific dialogues. Especially this informal multilateralism has to continually justify its existence and benefits, and ASEM clearly falls into this category. In times of growing political volatility and hostility within the international system – but also individual nation-states which have direct implications on multilateralism and the support for the current world order –, it is no surprise that multilateral fora face pressure and criticism. This becomes even more imminent in times of scarce financial resources. New fora are also being created either to address a particular challenge collaboratively or because states feel that the current formats do not sufficiently reflect their interests and respective power. For example, emerging regional powers, which contest the existing status quo, might set up their own new projects or institutions to drive their own agenda and shape their neighbouring countries according to their own interests. In the Eurasian context, this is the case with Russia's Eurasian Union, but also China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These developments and the sharp increase in multilateral initiatives have led some experts to the conclusion that there is an oversupply of such fora, ultimately resulting in a phenomenon described as “forum shopping” and “pure summit diplomacy”.

Coming a Long Way since 1996

Against this hostile background and the plethora of multilateral initiatives, ASEM represents an often underestimated approach and one that might possibly be a blueprint for future multilateral cooperation.

Despite sharing a long and eventful history, it was not until 1994¹ that the idea of placing an institutional exchange solely between Asia and Europe was on the agenda. This visionary idea, which was proposed by Singapore's then Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, drove the development of a multilateral framework that complemented the already existing ties between Asia and America as well as Europe and America, and first came into reality in 1996 – the Asia-Europe Meeting was born.

When the inaugural ASEM Summit was held on 1 and 2 March 1996 in Bangkok, Thailand, 25 countries and the European Commission were present. Today, ASEM has 53 partners which together account for around 60 per cent of the world's population, 60 per cent of the global GDP, and 60 per cent of global trade.² This clearly illustrates the significance and impact ASEM can have on a global scale. However, the process also has much added value for intra-regional cooperation. For instance, government representatives and leaders of the ASEAN states and the three Northeast Asian nations (China, Japan, and South Korea) met regularly between 1995 and 1997 to discuss matters related to ASEM and coordinate their positions. These exchanges were a final push towards regional cooperation in East Asia, which had faced several gridlocks over the previous years, and eventually resulted in the formation of the ASEAN Plus Three framework in 1997.³

Despite this huge potential, ASEM has often been criticised for underachieving and lacking tangible outcomes. This is mainly due to its organisational structure. ASEM is an informal dialogue process – and it is important to recognise it as such – which aims to offer a platform for exchange and discussion on cooperation projects addressing challenges both Europe and Asia are facing. It is neither an institution nor international organisation. It lacks an institutional body in the form of a secretariat. Instead, the main drivers of ASEM are the respective Ministries of Foreign Affairs which are supported by four coordinators – two from Asia representing ASEAN and non-ASEAN Asia and two

from Europe representing the European Union and the rotating EU presidency. This does not mean that ASEM functions on a purely ad-hoc basis and lacks any form of continuity, however. ASEM does in fact have a broad structure (illustrated in fig. 1) and it is important to look beyond the biennial ASEM Summit of the Heads of State and Government. Besides this comprehensive structure, ASEM has created the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF). ASEF stands out since it is the only institution to have developed from the 22-year old ASEM process so far. Based in Singapore, it should, however, not be confused with a de facto secretariat as its mandate is to facilitate exchange, promote understanding, and foster relations among the different stakeholders involved in the Asia-Europe Meeting.

ASEM is less impacted by the great power competition that has hijacked debates in some of the other fora and has resulted in political gridlocks there.

Thematically, ASEM focuses on three pillars which reflect the cornerstones of the bi-regional relations – political (including global challenges ranging from security and environmental to humanitarian questions), economic and financial, as well as social and cultural. The overarching theme for all three pillars and activities of ASEM is connectivity, which ASEM aims to achieve in all areas of cooperation. This theme is supposed to go beyond physical connections to encompass people-to-people, institutional, digital, and cultural connectivity. Its informal and open approach without a binding character enables ASEM to provide a platform for political dialogue supporting bi-regional cooperation based on common standards and sustainability. Ultimately, this should also support the rules-based international system and facilitate more binding as well as concrete bi- and minilateral initiatives.

Compared to the other main fora in Asia – the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) –, ASEM is the only one of the four that does not include the United States, but involves all ASEAN and EU member states as well as both regional organisations themselves. Although ASEM is the biggest of the four organisations with 53 partners, it is less impacted by the great power competition that has hijacked debates in some of the other fora and resulted in political gridlocks. Furthermore, ASEM is the sole initiative with a clear European-Asian geographic focus and is in a unique position to shape these interregional relations.

Due to its comprehensive web of different dialogue formats and a holistic approach touching upon almost all areas relevant to Asia-Europe relations, ASEM is well placed to become a driver for rules-based multilateralism. Its added advantage is that its structure reflects a multi-track approach combining all three levels of traditional diplomacy through the inclusion of Heads of State / Government, ministers, non-governmental organisations, businesses, journalists, and think tanks – to name a few. Furthermore, key countries are supportive of the process. For instance, the EU has been using ASEM quite strategically by providing technical assistance to Asian partners and expanding the theme of connectivity beyond physical infrastructure by focusing on aspects of connectivity of institutions, ideas, and people. At the same time, China takes a positive approach towards ASEM as it sees possible synergies with its own Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as with the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB).⁴

Between Remaining and Becoming More Relevant

Yet, ASEM also has to address inherent challenges in order to show its benefits and added value. With its many partners, ASEM is one of the biggest international projects outside of the UN system. Naturally, it is difficult to come to agreements which go beyond the lowest common denominator. Hence, many of its conclusions

remain at a superficial level. The division among partners on the future of ASEM is reflected by the long debates on whether a) ASEM needs an institutional base in the form of a secretariat, and b) it has to overcome its informality and produce practical outcomes. Supporters for either of these two approaches – remaining an informal dialogue process vs. striving for tangible results – can be found within the Asian and European grouping. Although some Asian partners generally wonder more about the added value of ASEM if no direct results can be achieved.

ASEM has to address inherent challenges in order to show its benefits and added value.

The fact that ASEM and its initiatives lack any form of implementing power and rely on the good will of the national governments to act, has understandably raised questions regarding ASEM's relevance. It is often seen to only pay lip service and to be greatly inefficient. This is reinforced by the fact that challenges, which ASEM partners have debated about for a long time, still exist and that only small steps have been taken to adequately address them. This criticism and the demand for ASEM itself to produce tangible outcomes reflect a misunderstanding of ASEM's nature and mandate as an informal multilateral dialogue process. Instead, by focusing only on tangible outcomes, which are difficult to achieve, critics could create a capability-expectations gap and set ASEM up for failure.

Since officials of the participating states lead the process, support for ASEM might also fluctuate depending on the political leadership and, due to the frequent changes in personnel, institutional memory can be difficult to maintain. For instance, only last year, a number of experienced and highly supportive senior officials changed in Ireland, New Zealand, and Myanmar and Mongolia, the hosts of the last Foreign Ministers' Meeting and ASEM Summit respectively.

ASEM's fast growth and its initiation of many projects in different policy areas has resulted in a so-called silo approach with often limited cross-thematic exchanges. In light of the increasing complexity in terms of challenges and the added advantage of exploring interdisciplinary solutions, this division between the various policy fields and initiatives hinders ASEM from achieving its full potential and developing comprehensive prevention as well as response measures.

Although ASEM has declared its goal to establish connectivity in all its dimensions by offering a platform that promotes alliances on a political, economic, socio-cultural, and people-to-people level, ASEM still lacks recognition. Many people have never heard of the Asia-Europe Meeting nor are they aware of the vastness of the process. Then again, some people who do know about ASEM perceive it as yet another project of the political elites that lacks democratic legitimisation and that has no benefit for the people.

Particularly in the context of the aforementioned oversupply of fora, it is important for ASEM to avoid overlaps and remain aware of possible duplications. ASEM must critically examine its current status and implement reforms so as not to lose the confidence of its partners in the process. If reforms are carried out, the format can function as an agenda-setter for Europe-Asia relations, raise awareness, and promote collaborative projects to tackle many of today's transnational challenges.

For ASEM, it will be important to decide whether it wants to remain a forum for dialogue driven by senior officials or evolve into becoming a proper tool for global governance and multilateralism. Recent developments indicate that ASEM could play a more active role. Since the eleventh Foreign Ministers' Meeting (FMM) in New Delhi in 2013⁵, ASEM has taken steps towards providing avenues that may deliver more tangible outcomes through new models such as ad-hoc coalitions and thematic working groups. This enables smaller groups of member countries, who are willing to take action, to



Ready for negotiations: Willingness to compromise, reliability, and trust are major prerequisites for reaching a multi-lateral consensus. Source: © Chitose Suzuki, Reuters.

press ahead with certain cooperation areas, and this in turn helps to prevent political deadlocks. Within such an issue-based leadership model, the large number of partners and their diversity can actually be a strength as countries can work on a wide range of topics complementing their individual capacities. This approach was

re-affirmed at the ASEM Summit 2014 in Milan, the FMM 2015 in Luxembourg, and the Ulaanbaatar Declaration in 2016⁶, but has yet to be operationalised. The 2016 Summit identified many areas for concrete collaboration such as counter-terrorism, maritime security and safety, piracy, drug and human trafficking, migration,



cyber security, energy, disaster management, and higher education. Leaders also affirmed that ASEM must be multi-dimensional and people-centred and should promote both multilateralism as well as a rules-based order. This approach seems feasible to strike a balance between the different perspectives adopted by

the partners. ASEM would be able to remain an open and informal process with comprehensive dialogue, promoting cooperation, and fostering trust at the politically highest level of the leaders. Nevertheless, it would expand on this using an action-oriented approach with more concrete outcomes in the sectoral arena through,

for example, joint exercises, sharing of best practices, and capacity building. Yet, it remains to be seen whether countries participating in those working groups will actually implement policy changes. ASEM could, for example, form a group of experts who can assist in the implementation process. In 2016, the ASEM leaders also established the Pathfinder Group on Connectivity (APGC)⁷ for the duration of two years. It defined connectivity and developed a work plan on how soft as well as hard connectivity can be achieved. The last summits witnessed the introduction of a leaders' retreat. ASEM can also use this to facilitate bilateral exchanges and minilateral approaches.⁸

As a second step, it will be important for ASEM to tackle not only specific issues within the wider framework, but to not lose sight of the bigger picture, too. While the softer ad-hoc coalition and network style will allow ASEM to be more practical, less bureaucratic, and focus on selected topics, the partners must promote cross-fertilisation between those thematic areas. Consequently, ASEM will be able to develop holistic responses and solutions to complex as well as transnational, and interconnected challenges affecting a multitude of policy fields.

As an informal meeting that facilitates concrete actions among its members, ASEM can be a blueprint for multilateralism in the 21st century.

ASEM also needs to address its lack of visibility and increase support for the process. The initiation of ASEM Day – also agreed upon at the Ulaanbaatar Summit⁹ and first celebrated in 2017 – is certainly a step in the right direction. Delivering concrete results deriving from discussions at the ASEM level will automatically further increase visibility and legitimacy. Besides improving the economic, political, social, and cultural relations between the two continents,

ASEM could set and ensure high standards, for instance, on environmental protection, social issues, protection of intellectual property, transparency in procurements, and the sustainability of projects. Through this, ASEM can limit the repercussions stemming from globalisation, which are one of the many factors contributing to the rise of populism. While it may be too early to discuss an ASEM-wide free trade agreement (FTA), partners could look for opportunities to facilitate easier trade and support businesses, especially small and medium enterprises.

Within its framework, ASEM could also contribute to more sub-regional cooperation since countries located in the same geographic area can coordinate and collaborate on the preparation and potential implementation of ASEM agreements. This potential was already visible in the late 1990s and the following ASEAN Plus Three initiative. ASEM could then function as a hub that links up these sub-regions and other multilateral fora in which many of its partners participate as well. If ASEM develops this hub capacity, it can become a marketplace for ideas due to its broad participation of stakeholders from all walks of life. Instead of forcing binding rules and agreements, for which ASEM's ability to domestically enforce them remains limited – as is the case for most other multilateral approaches – and which might cause political gridlocks, ASEM may be the hybrid resulting in concrete actions among selected partners in ever changing groupings. This is all while maintaining trust and confidence in the wider circle of partners, working towards a common goal. ASEM would not be the place for practical solutions itself, but rather the platform where ideas are developed, convergence of interests takes place, and where trust is built. This in itself is a deliverable. Ultimately, such exchanges can produce tangible results when the ideas are implemented in mini- or bilateral formats, or even domestically – something that will also support the principle of subsidiarity. This enabling and supporting character could very well be the future role of multilateral fora in a more volatile and truly multipolar world – thus making ASEM a blueprint for the 21st century.

ASEM as an Avenue to Promote the ASEAN-EU Partnership

In the current environment, ASEM may also be able to provide the most promising avenue for broader EU-ASEAN multilateralism beyond bi-regional cooperation, but rather jointly within a wider context. This is the declared goal of the Joint Statement on the 40th Anniversary of the Establishment of ASEAN-EU Dialogue Relations¹⁰, the revised Plan of Action¹¹ adopted at the EU-ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference in 2017, and the Global Strategy of the European Union on Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS).¹² These documents corroborate that the two regional bodies are not only relevant to their specific region and member states, but have the potential to be of strategic relevance in the international system. This can be achieved by not only looking at their own and mutual benefits, but by forming a partnership to contribute to a rules-based international order.¹³

ASEAN and the EU should work together and coordinate their positions within ASEM in order to have an impact beyond bi-regional cooperation.

In light of this goal, the EU and ASEAN have the potential to use ASEM as a tool to foster effective multilateralism through the approach developed since 2013. They could even multilateralise initiatives such as the BRI and AIIB in order to generate mutual benefits without one-sided gains for the driving force behind them. Together and as long as they maintain their unity, ASEAN and the EU are strong enough and have sufficient leverage to create a multilateral environment in which unilateral actions are more costly even for great powers. Since ASEM is an ASEAN- and EU-driven initiative, the two regional organisations should work together and coordinate their positions in order to have an impact beyond bilateral and bi-regional

cooperation. They could use ASEM to promote better understanding, develop a shared European-Asian vision for the future, and enhance practical cooperation on areas of common interest¹⁴, for which ASEM's comprehensive structure and multi-stakeholder involvement provide a unique opportunity. All while jointly focussing on preventive diplomacy, confidence-building and discussions on strategic regional security threats within the ARF, which is the only other multilateral forum of the so-called ASEAN centrality approach of which the EU is a partner. In this way, overlaps between the two fora could be avoided or at least minimised.

Conclusion

Despite the huge geographic distance between Asia and Europe, both are directly and indirectly affected by the political developments in the other region. This provides vital opportunities for collaboration and dialogue between the two regions. Many Asian and European countries are strong supporters of a rules-based multilateral system and should work together in order to establish a cooperative environment with preventive arrangements to contain insecurities, build trust, and increase predictability.

However, as outlined in this paper, Europe and Asia are confronted by an environment that is becoming increasingly hostile to international collaboration and multilateral engagements. Growing volatility in the international system with more assertive great powers that focus on national interests as well as unilateral approaches with one-sided gains, and that have a limited willingness for concessions and coordination, pose a severe threat to multilateralism.

Yet, the signing of free trade agreements by the European Union with Japan and Singapore, respectively, are strong commitments to the liberal world order. A joint communiqué, recently released by the ASEAN foreign ministers to uphold the rules-based multilateral order,¹⁵ as well as the commitments by European leaders¹⁶ to this system, show the importance countries in both regions attach to this approach, and send

a strong political signal. It further underscores that Germany and Europe have a more than willing partner in Asia to secure the future of multilateralism.

This is also the case for ASEM, which forms the only multilateral track for Asia-Europe cooperation. It thus has a clear geographic focus, and has so far been able to avoid some of the great power dynamics that can be observed in the ARF and EAS. This is not the only reason why we should be confident about ASEM playing a more crucial role in the future. With the enhanced focus on connectivity, the development of ad-hoc thematic coalitions, and identification of common interests, the dialogue process was able to form a unique framework for collaboration and possibly set an example for a 21st century form of multilateralism. Its holistic, multi-track approach, incorporating almost all important stakeholders, offers promising opportunities to lead the bi-regional relations and contribute to a Europe-Asia driven multilateral order.

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