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Mirroring Japan-EU diplomatic dialogue within ASEM.

This paper* focuses on the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), the largest inter-continental forum, which is attended and promoted by the EU and many East Asian countries, including Japan, whereas the US has no seat. Despite its enormous potential at an inter-regional level, ASEM has suffered from sixteen years of successful activity alternated with criticism from those who still believe it is nothing more than a talking shop. Everything hinges on the ability of the EU and East Asian states (particularly Japan) to instil legitimacy and concreteness to the dialogue developed within the ASEM framework that is now widely recognized as a factor that reinforces the Eurasian axis and holds the potential to turn into an instrument of global governance.

1. Introduction: the 1990s scenario

The strengthening of the European image and identity that took place with the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the birth of the European Union and the introduction of economic and monetary union, helped to further enhance EU-Japan relations. Japan's increasing interest in the European Union grew alongside the new ties that the country instituted at the multilateral security level and that allowed Tokyo to position itself strategically in the world forums on regional cooperation.¹ Some of these primarily concerned the Asian arena, while others tried to align Asia's and Europe's strategic visions, as will be seen in relation to the ASEM case. The establishment of APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) in 1989 as a response to the growing interdependence between the Asia-Pacific economies provided Japan with the tools to create a counterweight to ASEAN, with which Tokyo interacted as a partner for dialogue. This helped to bolster the view of those who saw the APEC and ASEAN as two contender institutions.² It was in this period, parallel to the birth and renewal of regional initiatives mostly belonging to the East Asian block, that the growing attention on Europe meant it was increasingly seen as a 'third side of the geoeconomic triangle' (Asia, Europe and the US). Although, in general, the Japanese found it difficult to trust a community that was completely alien to the basic concept of supranationalism, after the fall of the Berlin Wall a debate began over ways to strengthen the third side of this triangle in the face of the anxieties that the US' hegemonic claims, as the last remaining superpower, aroused in both Europe and Asia.³

* This paper is an extract from the book: O. Frattolillo, *Diplomacy in Japan-EU relations. From the Cold War to the post-bipolar era*, Routledge, London-New York (forthcoming).

¹ Tanaka T., "1990 nendai ni okeru Nihon-EU kankei no hatten", *Hōgaku Kenkyū*, Keiō Daigaku, Vol. 73, N. 1, January 2000.

² C. Klenke, *Japan's comprehensive national security and the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy: convergence towards global cooperation?*, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey (California) 2000, p. 28.

³ See B. Bridges, *Europe and the Challenge of the Asia Pacific*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham 1999; R. Drifte, "Japan and the European Union", in Inoguchi T, P. Jain (eds), *cit.*; J. Dosch, "Europe and the Asia-Pacific", in M. K. Connors, D. Rémy, J. Dosch, *The New Global Politics of the Asia-Pacific*, Routledge, Londra 2004; J. Gilson, *Japan and the European Union: A Partnership for the 21st Century?*, Macmillan, Londra 2000; G. Hook, J. Gilson, C.W. Hughes, H. Dobson, *cit.*, Routledge, London and New York, 2005.

Of the East Asian initiatives in which Japan participated, mentioned should be made of the KEDO (Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization), which offered an important opportunity for Japan and the EU to meet and discuss. This organization was founded in March 1995 by the US, South Korea and Japan (and later saw the membership of the EU and other countries) with the aim of implementing the US-North Korea Agreed Framework that froze North Korea's indigenous nuclear power plant development. KEDO serves as an example of combining economy and security to stabilize a region, and it can be seen as a prototype of an effective joint security effort that adheres to the idea of Comprehensive Security.⁴

As noted, efforts to strengthen EU-Japan relations have been implemented in forums involving many other actors, such as the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference, the aforementioned ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting). Among these, ASEM represents an extremely important opportunity for political dialogue between Tokyo and Brussels. It was established in Bangkok in 1996 during the first Summit of the Heads of State and Government of EU member states, ASEAN and East Asia in order to bring Europe closer to Asian countries. In the early 1990s, such a conspicuous economic growth of a region could not go unnoticed, even by Europe, who in 1994 formulated a new strategy for Asia expressed in the document *Towards a New Asia Strategy* (TNAs). The main goal of this document was to strengthen both economic and political relations with the region.⁵ As noted by Yeo Lay Hwee and Tadashi Yamamoto, "the importance of the New Asia Strategy was in its positive approach to Asia. It was not just a revision of an old strategy - since there was none - but a statement that recognized the significance of the region and the EU's urgent need to intensify its presence there. It was [...] a confirmation of "Europe's rediscovery of Asia". The strategy reflected Europe's realization of the need to revise the neglected relationship that, left untouched, would seriously harm Europe's role in the world. Although the main driving force of the strategy was in economy, the importance of regional security and political balance of power was recognized".⁶

At a formal level, ASEM was born out of a proposal made by the Prime Minister of Singapore, Goh Chok Tong, to the French government to establish a meeting forum between European and Asian leaders, in order to fill the persistent political gap. By the will of its participants, it remains a non-institutionalized consultation forum in which government negotiations do not prevail, giving priority to the cooperative intent on issues ranging from politics, economy and culture. As regards Japanese-European relations, the forum has certainly facilitated the development of a new, more positive dialogue. It suffices to consider that ASEM is the only political forum in which Japan and the EU participate without the presence of the US, making it a valuable opportunity that offers the possibility to counterbalance the role played by the White House in East Asia. In addition, ASEM is an "integrative forum" for Japan and the EU where they can renegotiate the issues addressed in bilateral meetings, at the same time giving both actors the opportunity to enhance the institutionalization process of their relationships. The political agenda that characterizes ASEM's activities is, in fact, primarily focused on UN reform, international terrorism, nuclear and conventional arms control and on stability in European and Asian regions.⁷

⁴ Klenke, *cit.*, p. 28.

⁵ See J. Gilson, "New Interregionalism? The EU and East Asia", in *European Integration*, vol.27, n.3, Settembre 2005, pp. 307-326; P.W. Preston, J. Gilson, *The European Union and East Asia: interregional linkages in a changing global system*, Edward Elgar, Northampton 2001, pp. 91-120; W. Wallace, Y. Soogil, *Asia and Europe: global governance as a challenge to cooperation*, Council for Asia-Europe Cooperation, Tokyo 2004, pp. 121-140.

⁶ Yamamoto T., Yeo L.H., *ASEM in its tenth year: looking back, looking forward. An evaluation of ASEM in its first decade and an exploration to its future possibilities*, Japan Center for International Exchange, Tokyo, University of Helsinki, Network for European Studies, Helsinki, 2006, p.18

⁷ Fujii Y., *EU no chishiki*, Nikkei bunko, Tokyo 2010, pp. 235-236

From Tokyo's perspective ASEM also offers the possibility of exploiting its relationship with Europe in order to promote its policy in Asia. Japan may appeal to a kind of "diplomacy by proxy", through which Europe transmits some regional proposals of importance for Tokyo. Besides all this, this forum also promotes the improvement of relations between Japan and other Asian countries, contributing to the development of "Asian regionalism". In this way, ASEM helps to facilitate a dialogue with the other two vertices of the triangle (where the US incorporate NAFTA countries and the EU expands its boundaries and deepens its integration) and the growth of other Asian countries in the globalized economy.⁸ The simultaneous creation of ASEF (Asia-Europe Foundation) and of CAEC (Council for Asia-Europe Cooperation) was directly linked to the foundation of ASEM. The ASEF is a think-tank based in Singapore that aims to encourage cultural exchanges, and institutional, intellectual and cultural relations between the two regions. The CAEC correlates seven think tanks operating in Europe (Berlin, Leiden, Paris, Stockholm, Trier and Warwick) and seven from Asia and Australia (Beijing, Canberra, Jakarta, Manila, Seoul, Singapore and Tokyo).⁹

In this context, it can be said that the EU has more advanced and developed relations with Japan than other ASEM members. Certainly, Japan's reputation as a difficult market to access, and Europe's as a "Fortress" (especially after the Maastricht Treaty) raised some concerns in the dialogue between the partners, and led them to try to extend their trade and investment activities.¹⁰ The process of strengthening EU-Japan economic and legal aspects passed through the Regulatory Reform Dialogue (RRD) and representatives of the Japanese government and of the European Commission, who by 1994, started to exchange proposals to improve the rules and regulations with a detrimental effect on the trade and investment existing between EU and Japan.¹¹ These proposals, under the supervision of the respective chambers of commerce, helped to ease restrictions in various areas of mutual interest, including telecommunications, pharmaceuticals and foreign direct investment (FDI). However slow it may be, this process highlights the growing commitment of Tokyo and Brussels to harmonizing their markets and to implementing or suggesting reforms that, without upsetting the markets legal systems, facilitate trade and investment between Europe and Asia, and in particular those between Japan and the various member states within the EU.¹²

Despite the wide array of meeting opportunities between European representatives and Japanese counterparts, many of the latter had doubts, especially during the past decade, about the actual efficiency of the EU when acting in foreign policy. Japan had been observing the emergence of a common foreign policy within the EU with a mix of fascination and scepticism. As stressed by Kawashima Yutaka: "As Japan sees it, it is one thing for the members of the EU to agree on economic policies among themselves, but it is a totally different matter for these countries, which originated the practice of *realpolitik*, to agree on foreign policy. One may call this scepticism a hangover of the cold war".¹³ Despite the concerns expressed in this regard in Kawashima's analysis, still linked as it seems to be to the logic of a balance of power, he agrees that «"the common denominator, however, appears to be the Europeans' shared values" and that Japan became aware of this evolution toward the end of the 1990s, especially after the NATO bombing in Kosovo in 1998 and again after the Iraq war in 2003. It was probably for this reason that Japan often continued to opt for bilateral initiatives with individual EU

⁸ Nakanishi T., *Naze Yōroppa to te wo musubu no ka. Nichi-Ō shinjidai no sentaku*, Benseishuppan, Tokyo 1996

⁹ J. Rüländ, G. Schubert, G. Schucher, C. Storz (eds.), *Asia-European relations: building blocks for global governance?*, Routledge, UK 2008, p. 247

¹⁰ Tanaka T., *cit.*

¹¹ Ueta T., E. Remacle (eds), *Japan and enlarged Europe: partners in global governance*, Peter Lang, Brussels 2005, p. 253

¹² Cardwell, *cit.*, p.4

¹³ Kawashima Y., *Japanese foreign policy at the crossroads*, Brookings, Washington 2006, p. 129

member states, almost as if disowning the supranational entity. The point under debate today, however, concerns the tangible results achieved by developing the Eurasian axis. Some scholars have agreed to explain developments in relations between Europe and East Asia on the logical basis that that ASEM will strengthen the weak side of the world geoeconomic triangle.¹⁴ This means that any progress made by ASEM was framed in this tripolarization of the global economy. Certainly, ASEM was founded at a time when the European Union became the object of increasing interest from East Asia, where it was extending its political and economic role. The Amsterdam Treaty of 1997 and other important political developments such as EU enlargement, the institutionalization of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the introduction of the euro as the single currency and the promulgation of a European Constitution, were phenomena that could not be ignored in East Asia.¹⁵ There were opportunities to test the new interregional platform, as demonstrated by the Asian financial crisis of 1997, which gave various Asian countries, within the ASEM framework, the possibility of working together and formulating a collective response to the European player. Even then, however, the lack of importance that the Asian issues occupied in the European agenda clearly emerged. Lastly, the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) - which includes Japan, China and South Korea, whose first meeting took place in 1997 - represented a formal recognition of a tangible identity in East Asia. Ultimately, the ASEM process has strengthened and reshaped the concept of East Asia as an equal partner in Europe.¹⁶

A more detailed analysis of ASEM limitations and potentialities will be presented further on, but it should be mentioned here that while it has been explicitly proclaimed as a comprehensive dialogue forum consisting of three pillars (political, economic and cultural), it seemed that the first decade of this process has produced only limited results. Nevertheless, as it is not an alliance of NATO's defensive style or a simple mechanism for economic cooperation, ASEM would be better framed as a process not only oriented towards one particular aspect of security, economy, politics and culture. Due to its low level of institutionalization, the informality of the dialogue and the internal symmetry guaranteed by the lack of a hegemonic member, ASEM may be able to play a balancing role in the global triad in a non-traditional way. Without the features that are typical of power balancing institutions, this forum has, however, a more sophisticated function that exerts its effects in terms of a soft balance, and, as suggested by Hänggi, this could also be its *raison d'être*.¹⁷

2. Key-points in the shifting ASEM multilayered framework

From the Japanese point of view, entertaining security relations with the EU on a multilateral basis meant giving greater visibility to the country's international commitment, while leading its own 'silent' foreign policy more actively. For this reason, many of the issues addressed in the context of Japan-EU dialogue can be easily found within UN debates.

We will focus on the case of ASEM, as the positive implications of the diplomatic intermediation provided by forums such as ASEM is, for Japan at least, twofold. On the one hand, it creates additional channels of dialogue, both formal and informal, through which the two actors may interact with each other; on the other hand, it provides Japan with the necessary visibility to exercise its influence over other members. In Togo's words, "Japan's

¹⁴ See Nakanishi, T., *cit.*

¹⁵ Fujii Y., *cit.*, pp. 230-243

¹⁶ J. Gilson, *Japan and the European Union: a partnership for the 21st century?*, Macmillan, London 2000, p.320

¹⁷ Zhimin C., "NATO, APEC and ASEM: Triadic Interregionalism and Global Order", *Asia Europe Journal*, N.3, 2005, p.13

embrace of ASEM and the benefits accrued to it can therefore be examined from two perspectives – from its desire to partake more actively in an emerging East Asia Community, and its development of a multipronged approach toward Europe to deepen ties with the various EU member states”.¹⁸ According to Pardo, “Tokyo also sees ASEM as a forum to conduct dialogue between different civilisations”, while considering it “a key forum to enhance and materialise economic and cultural cooperation with the EU”.¹⁹

Since its foundation, ASEM has been definable as a ‘cyclical’ process, given that it is one of the channels through which the EU expresses its interest towards Japan and East Asia simultaneously. After a first cycle, in which the focus centred around the extraordinary development of the NIEs, European interest shifted in the wake of the Asian financial crisis, but unexpectedly re-emerged in a new phase characterized by the Chinese hegemony in the Asian region at the beginning of the 21st century.²⁰ ASEM’s main purpose, however, remained the strengthening of EU-Asia relations, often referred to as “the weak side of the triangle”.²¹ The overtly optimistic tones of the speeches and press releases that ended the first ASEM meeting in Bangkok in 1996, which foreshadowed the birth of a new commonly shared vision of Eurasia, revealed a certain naivety over the course of time. Nevertheless, ASEM 1 was an historical event generated by the weakening of the Cold War geopolitical constraints. It marked the establishment of the first significant forum between Europe and Asia in which the “emphasis has in the first place been on a dialogue among equal partners rather than on concrete cooperation”.²²

Although ASEM is a non binding organization, as none of its aims include the approval of resolutions that oblige states to act in a certain way, and it does not make the ideal system for establishing plans and concrete actions, this did not diminish its potential in decision-making process. Within the ASEM framework, the exchanges of views between European and Asian leaders are made possible on a purely informal level, because any formal and bureaucratic dimensions are deliberately excluded from these meetings. Its main features can in fact be summarized as its informality, multidimensionality, equity of partnership and its two-dimensional character (on governmental and social levels).²³ As an informal forum, ASEM “can best serve the goals of attaining policy convergence between two regions of great diversity”.²⁴ All this enabled the creation of a forum for an open dialogue that allows officials, policy-makers and representatives of member states to discuss on political, economic and social issues of common concern. In this regard, ASEM activities are complementary to the work carried out in other bilateral and multilateral forums.

3. The past and the future

The foundation of ASEM was a process strongly marked by the intensification of the globalization process during the 1990s, so much so that, in many ways, ASEM could be

¹⁸ Togo K., “Japan and ASEM”, in W. Stokhof, P. van der Velde, Yeo L.H. (eds.), *The Eurasian space. Far more than two continents*, ISEAS, Singapore 2004, p. 159

¹⁹ R.P. Pardo, “The Political Weakness of the EU in East Asia: A Constructivist Approach”, *Asia Europe Journal*, N. 7, 2009, pp. 274-276

²⁰ Yeo L. H., *Asia and Europe: the development and different dimensions of ASEM*, Routledge, New York 2004, pp. 8-10

²¹ J. Gilson, *Asia meets Europe: inter-regionalism and the Asia-Europe Meeting*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Northampton 2002, p. 21

²² B. Gaens (ed.), *Europe-Asia: interregional relations. A decade of ASEM*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2008, p. 3

²³ See Ito K., Tanaka A., Aoki T., *Higashi Ajia kyōdōtai to Nihon no shinro*, Nippon hōsō shuppan kyōkai, Tokyo 2005

²⁴ Zhang J., “EU in ASEM: Its Role in Framing Inter-Regional Cooperation in East Asian Countries”, *Asia Europe Journal*, 2008, Vol. 6, p. 491

considered a by-product of globalization itself.²⁵ The dynamics unleashed by this phenomenon showed and emphasized the forms of interdependence that were at the basis of ASEM's foundation, and concerned both the interests shared by the various member states and the correlations among the issues it addressed.

As Reiterer argues, "establishing the essential importance of the political pillar within the ASEM process is vital. We are convinced that countries that treat their citizens properly also tend to be the best international political and trade partners. In the long run, economic development cannot prosper without democracy".²⁶ Political dialogue has traditionally been a key element of the ASEM process, and the EU played a decisive role in this respect. The ASEAN senior official paper - a document that served as the basis for the preparatory work of the first ASEM summit in March 1995 - provided an informal meeting between several business leaders, the main theme of which was 'Partnership for Growth'.²⁷ As a topic of discussion and in response to their Asian counterparts, the senior European official papers included 'political and security issues in the human and social sphere'. Although irritated by the European proposal, the Asian representatives were unable to reject it. In particular, they were concerned by the possibility that the Europeans could have advanced claims on human rights. The inclusion of a political element within the dialogue with third party countries was becoming the norm for the EU following the application of the Maastricht Treaty, which ensured greater uniformity of the respective foreign policies of the member states.²⁸ However, as noted by Nutall, the tension surrounding this issue was by no means only perceived by isolated observers. One immediate consequence of it was the exclusion of Hong Kong and Taiwan from the process, as the added political dimension caused China to be unmovable on this issue.²⁹

Politically, ASEM became a privileged platform for discussing the most important global issues, such as terrorism, weapons of mass destruction (WMD), migration, dialogues between cultures and civilizations, the environment, and human rights. It serves a privileged forum from which to look at regional developments regarding both Europe and Asia. By regularly exchanging views, ASEM members are often able to reach a common position on regional and international issues of common interest. Other times, when requested, they prefer to support separate policy statements.³⁰ Such was the case, for example, in the 2002 Foreign Ministers Meeting held in Madrid, where were the Middle East Peace Process and the Indo-Pakistan relations were at the top of the agenda, since the situation in that region was deteriorating dangerously.

From a political point of view, it could be argued that the efforts undertaken by ASEM to strengthen the multilateral system while also simplifying the international agenda, with particular reference to the Asia-EU relations, have been remarkable. One need only think of the decision to hold consultations prior to pre-arranged sessions of the UN General Assembly to facilitate the exchange of views on the most important international topics. A first informal meeting of the ASEM countries' ambassadors was held on 7 September 2001 in New York just before the scheduled UN General Assembly session, and since then these consultations "have become a regular event".³¹ However, as is obvious, in the post-9/11 international era, matters

²⁵ Yeo L.H., "The Ebb and Flow of ASEM Studies", in J. Stremmelar, P. van der Velde (eds.), *What About Asia? Revisiting Asian Studies*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2006, p. 70

²⁶ M. Reiterer, "The Seoul 2000 Summit: Review of ASEM Results", *Bulletin of the European Institute for Asian Studies*, Vol. 4, December 2000, p. 6

²⁷ Kanazawa kōgyō daigaku. Kokusai-gaku kenkyūjo, *Nihon gaikō to kokusai kankei*, Naigai shuppan, Kanazawa 2009, p. 97

²⁸ N. O'Brien, "ASEM: Moving from Economic to a Political Dialogue", *EIAS Briefing Papers*, September 2001, p. 26

²⁹ S. Nutall, "ASEM and Political Dialogue", in Lee C. (ed.), *The Way Ahead for the Asia-Europe Partnership*, Korean Institute for International Economic Policy, Seoul 2000, p.156

³⁰ See C. de Prado Yepes, "The Effect of ASEM On European Foreign Policies", *Asia Europe Journal*, Vol. 3, N. 1, 2005, pp. 25-35

³¹ M. Doidge, *The European Union and Interregionalism: patterns of engagement*, Ashgate, Surrey 2011, p. 124

relating to combating international terrorism also assumed high priority within the ASEM political dialogue. Several measures were undertaken in an attempt to harmonize the different visions of security for individual member countries. The debate on WMDs was particularly lively, as was the remarkable ASEM Foreign Ministers' meeting that took place in Bali in 2003, where their discussions were initiated regarding a political declaration on the prevention of WMD proliferation.³² This demonstrated the importance of the overall implementation of relevant and non-discriminatory international conventions such as the "Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons" (NPT), the "Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty" (CTBT), the "Chemical Weapons Convention" (CWC) and the agreements and protocols of the IAEA.³³

The economic importance of East Asia on an international scale has grown significantly over the last two decades. Notwithstanding, "in terms of regionalism, ASEM is not an inter-regional trading arrangement. ASEM's main contribution in the economic field lies in the information exchange, the transfer of knowledge and the development of infrastructures. These are areas where tangible results have been obtained and where collaboration between the two regions is most noticeable".³⁴ The ASEAN Plus Three (APT) cooperation encompasses over a third of the global population, and represents the most dynamic economic region in the world. East and Southeast Asian countries are the Japan's most important trading partners. As a result of this, it would be reasonable to expect that such economic leverage may equally generate political influence. This is evident by looking at China, which currently holds strong bargaining power over the US. In fact, the Chinese trade surplus against the US increased significantly in recent years, leading Washington to threaten protectionist retaliation if China does not re-evaluate the yuan. Furthermore, countries such as Japan, Thailand and Indonesia now depend on the dynamics of domestic Chinese demand, which has a stronger influence than the American market.³⁵ Unlike Japan, China plays a more active role in the region and one could reasonably assume that before long this will become a leading political role. According to some scholars, such as Reiterer, this new Chinese attitude towards the world politics may serve as an incentive for Japan to take up pro-active diplomacy, both in the region and internationally.³⁶

As it is well known, since its foundation ASEM has paid great attention to trade issues. Its Asian members in particular have always shown themselves to be more interested in trade issues than foreign direct investments. In general, the position commonly shared by the Asian countries within ASEM is that the process of building trust, which passes through the bureaucratic and political elites of the individual actors, represents a fundamental step in order for a cooperative economic approach to be functionally extended to the other areas of the political life.³⁷ The EU, for its part, has shown its intention to give equal importance to all ASEM pillars, but the importance of economic considerations in starting negotiation processes cannot be ignored, nor can the unanimous desire to strengthen the dialogue between equal partners. ASEM economic meetings are certainly a good opportunity for strengthening the relations between Asia and Europe and bringing them into line with the larger number of international actors.³⁸ The issues addressed in the WTO, in fact, are always at the top of ASEM

³² ASEM Infoboard, *The 5th ASEM Foreign Ministers' Meeting* – Bali, Indonesia 22-24 July 2003, p. 3 : http://www.aseminfoboard.org/content/documents/FMM5_ChairStatement.pdf

³³ Asia-Europe Meeting, http://www.aseminfoboard.org/page.phtml?code=About_MainPillars

³⁴ Council for Europe Asia Co-operation Task Force, *The rationale and common agenda for Asia-Europe co-operation*, Council for Europe Asia Co-operation, London 1997, p. 72

³⁵ F. Mazzei, V. Volpi, *cit.*, p. 170

³⁶ M. Reiterer, *cit.*, p. 188. See also N. Lanna, *Il Giappone e il nuovo ordine in Asia orientale*, Vita e pensiero, Milano 2010, p. 121

³⁷ Iokibe M., *Sengo Nihon gaikō-shi*, Yūhikaku, Tokyo 2010, p. 247

³⁸ W. A. L. Stokhof, P. van der Velde (eds.), *ASEM, the Asia – Europe Meeting: a window of opportunity*, Routledge, Oxon 1998, p. 136

agenda, whose discussions often concern globalization and sustainable development. Precisely in this respect, ASEM established a forum to discuss and consult on the key issues during the preparation of the ministerial meetings of the WTO, which has always been referred to as the most powerful arena for promoting trade liberalization.³⁹ Furthermore, a Task Force was created through which influential economic and political personalities could work to improve the economic partnership between the two regions, the main objective of which was to inform the ASEM Ministers of Economy and Finance regarding progress and to submit its final recommendations to the Summit.⁴⁰ The 1997 Asian financial crisis, however, seemed to have brought into question the effectiveness of the body and the deeper sense of the economic cooperation with the EU. The ASEM based its existence - at least according to the intentions of those who founded it - on fundamental principles promoting a pro-active balancing process. It was the relevance of those principles that perplexed Asian leaders, taking into account the limited help offered by the EU to the countries affected in the aftermath of the crisis. East Asia, however, lacked the necessary cohesion to reflect a process of regionalization that perhaps was not yet mature. In a sense, ASEM was caught off guard by a financial crisis that forced several Asian countries to reassess their position on a global level, and that led some East Asian states to reflect on the dangerous exposure to financial flows outside the region.⁴¹ There had been few signs of a true regional consciousness in East Asia before the financial crisis. In Chunyao's words: "Northeast Asia [...] had self orientations which were not derived from the region of 'East Asia'; accordingly, "regional economic cooperation and institutions lacked the basis of regional cohesion and a centripetal force".⁴² In other terms, "this crisis made ASEAN countries realize how vulnerable they are and use 'looking East' as an opportunity for their economic recovery and sustainable development".⁴³ Things now changed, however. The economic importance of East Asia on an international scale grown significantly over recent years and it was expected that its economic influence could generate political power. This is evident by looking at China, which today holds a strong bargaining power over its American counterpart. Regional awareness is certainly now higher than in the past.⁴⁴ However, the spirit of the ASEM remained faithful to the terms in which it was originally generated, namely not an inter-regional trading arrangement. ASEM's main contribution in the economic field actually lies "in information, the transfer of knowledge and the development of infrastructure. These are areas where tangible results have been obtained and where collaboration between the two regions is most noticeable".⁴⁵

The cultural dimension of ASEM can be seen, in Yamamoto and Yeo's words, "in a less than positive light as a "one-size-fits-all" repository for cooperation in very diverse fields other than the political and economic ones".⁴⁶ Since the establishment of the forum, "it may be [considered] the single area of dialogue which has attained most substantial results".⁴⁷ The main inspiring principle underpinning ASEM's cultural dimension and the activities implemented in

³⁹ J. Rüländ, G. Schubert, G. Schucher, C. Storz (eds.), *Asian-European relations: building blocks for global governance?*, Routledge, Oxon 2008, pp. 106-107

⁴⁰ ASEM, http://www.aseminfoboard.org/page.phtml?code=About_MainPillars

⁴¹ See R. Higgott, "ASEM and the Evolving Global Order", *Global Economic Review: Perspectives on East Asian Economies and Industries*, Vol. 29, Issue 1, 2000, pp. 21-52

⁴² Chunyao Y., "Emerging Collective Identity: An Analytical Framework", *Current Politics and Economics of Asia*, Vol. 17, Issue 1, Nova Science, Hauppauge, New York 2008, p. 255

⁴³ *Ibidem*

⁴⁴ See Habu K., "Tasō-ka suru sofutona chiiki tōgō. Higashi Ajia no chiiki tōgō to EU: Genjitsu kara no nakama-tsukuri", *Gakujutsu no dōkō*, Vol. 16, N. 6, 2011, pp. 42-51

⁴⁵ Council for Europe Asia Co-operation Task Force, *The rationale and common agenda for Asia-Europe co-operation*, Council for Europe Asia Co-operation, London, 1997, p. 72

⁴⁶ Yamamoto T., Yeo L.H., *ASEM in its tenth year: looking back, looking forward*, Japan Center for International Exchange-Tokyo and University of Helsinki, Network for European Studies, Helsinki 2006, p. 111

⁴⁷ Yamamoto T., Yeo L.H., *cit.*, p. 111

this field has been the promotion of cultural diversity, dialogue and cooperation among cultures and civilizations through the development of cultural exchanges, the preservation and the promotion of the arts and cultures in all their forms. It was officially adopted in 2003, following the original “people-to-people” approach, on the occasion of the ASEM Conference held in Beijing in the same year. These developments show the strong interdependence that existed between the various dimensions working under the ASEM mission. The cultural size cannot be considered separately from the economic or political dimension and vice versa.⁴⁸ The importance of the role of culture in the context of ASEM’s political and economic negotiations had indeed changed from the early 1990s. Initially, it was assumed that a progressing of economic relations would have resulted in the establishment of a meaningful dialogue.⁴⁹ This reflects the general economic damage that underpinned the historical path of EU-Japan relations. As stressed by Yamamoto and Yeo, through the years, “the social and cultural dialogue has gradually acquired a better balance with the other pillars and its agenda has been sharpened”.⁵⁰ The shock wave generated from 9/11, along with new indications yielded from the fourth ASEM meeting, led a reconsideration of the importance of cultural cooperation, which is increasingly perceived as a means of confronting the negative effects of globalization and of identifying the roots of terrorism and international crime. Ultimately, there is no doubt that the dialogue between cultures enhances processes, such as the mutual understanding between individuals, and preserves security worldwide.⁵¹

4. Mirroring Japan’s and EU’s diplomacies within ASEM

While ASEM helped to broaden the channels of the dialogue between the two regions, it also helped to improve the relations between Japan and its Asian neighbours. As stated by Gilson, Tokyo used the ASEM framework as a catalyst for identity building within Asia or, in Togo’s words, it “offered an opportunity for Japan to step up overall relations with its East Asian neighbours in a less sensitive framework”.⁵² The effects produced by this further diplomatic function depended on the ability of Tokyo to take advantage of its relations with Brussels as an intermediary in the Asian context. This sort of ‘proxy diplomacy’ contributed considerably to the increase in Japan’s power in the East Asia region in terms of influence.⁵³ ASEM, in turn, promoted the development of other Asian economies, as well as a dialogue with the NAFTA.⁵⁴ These are the ‘inter-regional systems’ located at the vertices of the geo-economic world triangle which, along with the new emerging Japan-China-India pole, incorporate most of the global production and consumption centres.⁵⁵ The strengthening of the ‘Japan pole’ against other Asian countries, essentially allowed Tokyo to build up its regional relations unimpeded by arranging them within the meetings that preceded or took place simultaneously to the ASEM summits. Japan’s participation in some preliminary ASEM discussions were severely criticized

⁴⁸ M. Reiterer, “The Role of Education and Culture in Contemporary International Relations. A Challenge for the Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM)”, *Asia Europe Journal*, Vol. 2, N. 3, 2004, p. 365

⁴⁹ B. Gaens, “ASEM as a Tool to ‘Bridge the Cultural Divide’”, in B. Gaens (ed.), *cit.*, p. 85

⁵⁰ Yamamoto T., Yeo L. H., *cit.*, p. 112

⁵¹ See J. Dosch, “Changing Security Cultures in Europe and Southeast Asia: Implications for Inter-regionalism”, *Asia Europe Journal*, Vol. 1, N. 4, 2003, pp. 483-501

⁵² See J. Gilson, “Japan’s Role in the ASEM: Establishing an Inter-Regional and Intra-Regional Agenda”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 34, N. 5, pp. 736-752

⁵³ G.D. Hook, “Japan’s Role in the East Asian Political Economy. An Emerging Region?”, in G.D. Hook, Hasegawa H. (eds.), *The political economy of Japanese globalization*, p. 50

⁵⁴ See S.-G. Lee, “The Economics of ASEM: Success Formula for Europe and Asia”, *Global Economy Review*, Vol. 29, Issue 1, 2000, pp. 53-66

⁵⁵ See B. Emmott, *Rivals: how the power struggle between China, India, and Japan will shape our next decade*, Mariner Books, London-New York 2009

by the US, who did not appreciate the Malaysian Prime Minister's idea about the creation of an East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC) and accused Tokyo of overly siding with 'the Asian part'.⁵⁶ As noted previously, ASEM is the most important forum in which Japan and the EU interact without the US, though, in Higgot's opinion, Washington remains "a central player" despite its absence. Furthermore, in his words: "for both the Europeans and the East Asians, ASEM offers an opportunity to balance the love-hate relationship that both groups have with the USA", but which they cannot do without.⁵⁷ This particular inter-regional configuration does not only have the potential to act as a counter-balancing instrument in relation to Washington's role in East Asia, but could also facilitate the planning of an agenda based on interests and concerns that do not necessarily coincide with US priorities.⁵⁸

At the end of the 1990s, some serious disagreements began to appear within ASEM between EU and Asian countries over the issues to be addressed in the summits' agenda. Differences of opinion manifestly emerged in 2000, during Seoul ASEM 3, which focused on the "Sunshine Policy" that the host country conceived against North Korea about two years previously by electing President Kim Dae Jung.⁵⁹ On the European side, however, the belief held by France and other European countries prevailed insisting that the EU should have taken a clearer position towards the Korean peninsula issue, since Germany, the United Kingdom, Spain and the Netherlands "expressed – either openly or indirectly – their intention to establish diplomatic relations with North Korea".⁶⁰ The fourth ASEM meeting, held in Copenhagen in 2002, was overshadowed by the post-9/11 fallout. As a result, forms of technical and functional cooperation dominated, while the political and strategic dialogue was partly withdrawn at the bilateral level - as evidenced by the growing importance of the EU's relations with Japan, China and India.⁶¹ These changes in inter-regional dialogue highlighted the different realities and strategies that marked the positions of both parts. In an unprecedented moment in history, Asia and Europe committed themselves to the construction of an intensive political dialogue, and these differences gave rise to criticisms and worries throughout the second half of the 1990s.⁶² The divergences of European and Asian countries rooted in deep differences in terms of backgrounds, beliefs and historical experiences surfaced when setting the ASEM agenda.⁶³ On the one hand, the Southeast Asian countries (many of which were former colonies that only gained independence a few years before and were still under economic recovery) were strongly imbued with the notion of national sovereignty, which they believed to be the best guarantee for stability, security and development.⁶⁴ On the other hand, the EU member states opted for an integrated model of institutionalized sharing of sovereignty as a means of achieving effective cooperation and sustainable development. The comments presented in this respect by Busse and Maull are elucidative, as according to them the history of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)

⁵⁶ J. Gilson, "Japan's Role in the Asia-Europe Meeting", *cit.*, p. 736

⁵⁷ R. Higgot, "The Pacific and Beyond: ASEM, APEC, and Regional Economic Management", in G. Thompson (ed.), *Economic dynamism in the Asia-Pacific: the growth of integration and competitiveness*, Routledge, London 1998, p. 329

⁵⁸ B. Bobrow, "The US and ASEM: Why the Hegemon didn't Bark", *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 12, Issue 1, 1999, pp. 103-128

⁵⁹ ASEM Infoboard, *Seoul Declaration for Peace on the Korean Peninsula*: http://www.aseminfoboard.org/content/documents/Seoul_Declaration_for_Peace_on_the_Korean_Peninsula.pdf

⁶⁰ S. C. Yang, "South Korea's Sunshine Policy: Progress and Predicaments", *World Affairs*, Vol. 25, N. 1, Winter 2001, p. 31

⁶¹ ASEM Infoboard, *Declaration on Cooperation against International Terrorism*: http://www.aseminfoboard.org/content/documents/Declaration_on_Cooperation_against_International_Terrorism.pdf

⁶² S. Santander, F. Ponjaert, "The EU and Its Far-Aboard: Interregional Relations with Other Continents", in M. Telò (ed.), *The European Union and Global Governance*, Routledge, New York 2009, p. 296

⁶³ E. Fitriani, "Asian perceptions about the EU in the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM)", *Asia-Europe Journal*, Vol. 9, N. 1, 2011, p. 43

⁶⁴ R. Sukma, K.S. Nathan, "Globalization's Impact on Threat Perceptions and Defence Postures in Southeast Asia: Two Views", in G. Till, E. Chew, J. Ho (eds.), *Globalization and defence in the Asia-Pacific*, Routledge, Oxon 2009, p. 111

in terms of security is, to some extent, “one of the rejecting European role models”.⁶⁵ The explanations given by the two authors focus mainly on issues related to security as well as to geopolitical aspects of the two areas. While many Asian countries were still affected by internal security and economic development problems - frequently as a result of a still incomplete nation-building process - the European states had already become “well consolidated nation-states”.⁶⁶ In addition to this, from a geopolitical point of view, compared to a mainly “land-oriented” Europe, Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific are regions with a strong maritime vocation. Moreover, while the European geo-strategic landscape was markedly bipolar during the Cold War years, the situation in Asia was more complex, punctuated by regional and sub-regional influences that were far removed from European experiences. Today the situation is such as it could be said that the diplomatic games played by both parties show the presence of some “structural limits” within the mutual perceptions. According to Kang, Brussels’ identification of the European political interests in East Asia proved to be a dismissed expectation, while many Asian countries were not able to articulate their vision of the role that the EU could take in their region. Different security priorities, divergent sources of terrorism and a thorough heterogeneity in economic and social development, as well as in sovereignty and jurisdiction issues seem to be among the main reasons attributed to this by the Asian countries.⁶⁷ Moreover, an excellent study recently conducted by the European Studies in Asia (ESIA) consortium revealed important aspects related to the perception of the EU in Asia, not restricting the analysis at the institutional perspective, but rather exploring the cultural impact on the citizens of the various states involved in the ASEM process.⁶⁸ On the basis of results achieved from the empirical research undertaken here, the surprising reality is that “what information did exist tended to be impressionistic, haphazard, ill-informed and lacking scientific empirical evidence on how Asian citizens and the media saw the European Union”.⁶⁹ The phenomenon appears even more pronounced when the EU’s involvement is considered both in terms of inter-regional agreements and of bilateral relations. As stated in an influential 2002 report for the Commission, “Europe does not exist without non-Europe” and “Europe can only be realized in the mirror of Others”.⁷⁰

Nevertheless, Japan’s position in the broader context of the Asian counterpart assumes different aspects. The first Japan-EU Dialogue on the East Asian Security Environment, held in 2005, coincided with the thorny issue of the Arms embargo against China. In the view of the security situation in Asia, Tokyo took a position fully in line with Brussels that, in the words of the former Japanese Ambassador to the EU, Kawamura, “the lifting of embargo should not take place”.⁷¹

The special position of Japan’s “closeness” to Europe, distinguishing it from the wider Asian situation, can be clearly deduced from the speech delivered on September 2006 by the Ambassador Kawamura:

⁶⁵ N. Busse, H.W. Maull, “Enhancing Security in the Asia-Pacific. European Lessons for the ASIAN Regional Forum”, *International Politics and Society*, Vol. 3, 1999, p. 227

⁶⁶ N. Busse, H.W. Maull, *cit.*, p. 227

⁶⁷ Kang C., *Dialogue+Cooperation*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Singapore, Vol. 3, 2003, p. 73

⁶⁸ The results of the study to which we are referring are gathered in N. Chaban, M. Holland, P. Ryan (eds.), *The EU through the eyes of Asia. New cases, new findings*, Vol. II, World Scientific, Singapore 2009

⁶⁹ N. Chaban, M. Holland, P. Ryan (eds.), *cit.*, p. 2

⁷⁰ B. Sträth, Introductory Report, *Intercultural Dialogue*, Office for Official Publication of the EU, 2002. See also: B. Sträth, *Europe and the Other and Europe as the Other*, Peter Lang, Bern 2010; Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, Robert Bosch Stiftung (eds.), *Culture report. Progress Europe*, Stuttgart, IFA 2007

⁷¹ Kawamura T., *Japan and the EU in East Asia*, Speech at the College of Europe in Bruges (September 27th, 2006): http://www.eu.emb-japan.go.jp/former%20amb%20speeches/bruges_speech.html

Despite the differences between Europe and Asia, the countries in East Asia, in our efforts for community building, would benefit greatly from the many and practical experiences of Europe. As discussed earlier, opportunities exist, and we in East Asia certainly could build, for the time being, on common interests, if not on shared values. In the long run, though, fundamental values such as democracy, human rights and good governance would have to be shared, in addition to market economy.⁷²

A few months earlier, a speech issued by EU Commission President Barroso during his official visit to Tokyo had reaffirmed these almost unique relations with Japan:

The EU and Japan share the same core values. Together, we believe in democracy and the rule of law, the protection of human rights and minorities. We respect religious beliefs, promote good governance and act in solidarity with developing countries. We advance high environmental standards and we advocate the primacy of the market economy. We also believe strongly in multilateralism centred on the UN. We both look for ways to develop our roles on the world stage, by using our considerable “soft power”. Japan has made major contributions to the Balkans and to Iraq, not least by deploying Self-Defense Forces, and in Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, where we work side by side. Japan has also stood behind EU efforts to address the nuclear problem in Iran.

[...] This rapid “tour d’horizon” demonstrates that the EU and Japan are in many ways natural strategic partners. Our approaches to problems and our interests coincide more often than not.⁷³

The European Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner simultaneously, and with the same enthusiastic confidence, addressed the same content covered by Barroso at the EU-Japan Joint Symposium, “New Visions for EU-Japan Relations”, some weeks earlier:

We also have much in common beyond the economic sphere. We are both looking for ways to develop our roles on the world stage, extending the reach of our diplomacy and taking a more active role in areas outside our immediate neighbourhood. The EU too is becoming more engaged politically around the world. Aceh, Sudan, Congo, Moldova (Transnistria), Rafah border crossing in Palestine/Israel are all recent examples. We provide significant regional assistance to the Balkans and through the European Neighbourhood Policy with a view to creating peace, stability and better governance on our borders. And we are the world’s largest donor of development aid, including significant assistance to the Asia-Pacific Region.

[...] No country today can solve problems alone. So like-minded partners such as the EU and Japan must work together, especially when our democratic values are challenged across the world. Let’s be frank - our political relationship has not kept pace with these developments. Enhanced cooperation across the whole spectrum of current challenges will strengthen us both, whether in Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa, or on specific subjects like energy, development issues, crisis management and the fight against terrorism. As a long-established democracy, Japan is a natural strategic partner for Europe. Our cooperation on the KEDO project to address the specific problem of North Korea’s nuclear ambition is a concrete example.⁷⁴

⁷² Kawamura T., *cit.*

⁷³ Speech by J.M. Barroso, President of the European Commission, “EU-Japan: A Mature Relationship with Untapped Potential” (Tokyo Chamber of Commerce, 21 April 2006): http://www.europa-eu-un.org/articles/en/article_5918_en.htm

⁷⁴ Speech by Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner: “New Visions for EU-Japan Relations”, (Brussels, 6 April 2006):

Despite this, the enthusiastic and the pessimistic tones that had alternately characterized ASEM summits until that point were overcome, and the whole process underwent a transformation. Although the outlines of this change were vague, it can be said that a dose of political pragmatism in the forum's conceptual framework encouraged its members to reconsider their respective positions.⁷⁵ EU member states re-evaluated milder forms of institutionalization, trying to fulfil the claims of the Asian countries in order to inaugurate more informal forms of cooperation.⁷⁶ Moreover, the strengthening of the relations centred on ASEM, made possible by the opening of new areas of functional cooperation, as well as being encouraged by a new willingness to the compromise, was also due to the influence exerted by specific exogenous elements, such as the enlargement of the EU and of ASEAN, the emergence of an international terrorist threat, the global warming issue and the increasing economic interdependence of the two regions.⁷⁷ A key role in facilitating this gradual stabilization process must be traced back to the commitment of the two to for aligning their policies as much as possible, as well as the growing involvement of the bureaucratic apparatus that refined the whole process. As pointed out by Santander and Ponjaert, "the interregional relationship developed between Europe and East Asia within ASEM process crystallizes the continuity as well as the technical and bureaucratic underpinnings that any relevant international arrangement must possess so as to make a noteworthy contribution to global governance".⁷⁸ As previously noted, within the particular context of ASEM Japan benefits from the most advanced diplomatic dialogue with the EU. This invests it with specific responsibilities to promote and build a bridge between Brussels and other Asian countries. The speech by Prime Minister Naoto Kan at the Session I of the ASEM8 Summit, hosted by Belgium in October 2010, summarises this eloquently:

Japan will actively contribute to the activities of ASEM in areas such as youth and student-activities, and exchanges in education and culture, through convening seminars, cooperating with the Asia-Europe Foundation and other means. Under this unique framework, whereby countries with a diverse range of values and economic circumstances gather together, Japan, by serving as a bridge between Asia and Europe, will further enhance collaboration among all of us so as to develop a cooperative relationship between the two regions and to contribute to global peace and stability.⁷⁹

The extent to which ASEM contributes to the improvement of global governance also depends on the ability to develop its functions and its potential for 'multilateral utility'.⁸⁰ As is well known, this term refers to the contribution that these organizations can offer to the global system in terms of stability, peace, equality and prosperity, in concert with the principal multilateral institutions. In particular, it regards the degree to which inter-regional organizations help to shape the 'indivisible goals' of these regional (EU and ASEAN) and as global (WTO) institutions. It is foremost with these latter and with their goals that inter-

http://www.eu-un.europa.eu/articles/fr/article_5894_fr.htm

⁷⁵ Jijitsūshin - Jiji nyūsu Janet, *Koizumi kara Abe e. Nihon gaikō no ima shuyō shiryō-tsuki*, Jijitsūshinsha, Tokyo 2006, p. 133

⁷⁶ R. Higgott, "ASEM: Toward the Institutionalization of the East Asia-Europe Relationship?", in D. Barry, R. C. Keith (eds.), *Regionalism, multilateralism and the politics of global trade*, UBC Press, Canada 1999, pp. 194-210

⁷⁷ S. Bersick, "China and ASEM: Strengthening Multilateralism Through Inter-regionalism", in W. Stokhof, P. van der Velde, Yeo L.H. (eds.), *The Eurasian space. Far more than two continents*, cit., p. 147

⁷⁸ S. Santander, F. Ponjaert, *op.cit.*, p. 298

⁷⁹ Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, *Interventions made by Mr. Naoto KAN, Prime Minister of Japan at the Session I of the ASEM8 Summit* (4 October, 2010): http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/kan/statement/201010/04asem8_e.html

⁸⁰ See C. M. Dent, "From Inter-regionalism to Trans-regionalism? Future Challenges for ASEM", *Asia Europe Journal*, Vol. 1, N. 2, 2003, pp. 223-235

regional organizations such as ASEM should meet, in order to help strengthen them. However, so far ASEM's efforts in this regard had only manifested in acts of deference, deferring the most important decisions to multilateral institutions like the WTO and the WB, without providing any real added value.⁸¹ Even though the difference between the concepts of multilateral deference and multilateral utility can be often blurred, the first leads to of the delegation of passive content being enacted, and this can be assessed positively to the extent to which it is used as the basis for developing the second concept, which requires active commitment to the development of new mechanisms in order to face issues debated at the global level. According to Dent this action spread in two directions: the strengthening of socialization processes between different Asian and European groups and communities, and the rapprochement of the countries and cultures of the two regions, aiming at a consolidation of the inter-regional and trans-regional links between Asia and Europe.⁸² These two policies can be summarized in the concepts of "micro-networking" and "macro-networking" respectively, where the latter is essentially based on the networks produced by the former. The EU-Asia macro-networking bonds represent the weak link in the chain that connects the vertices of the geoeconomic global triangle, since they are less evolved than their transatlantic and transpacific counterparts. This could explain the unexciting results achieved in this field by ASEM.⁸³ Once again, the example provided by the Asian financial crisis is helpful in this regard. Following the ASEM's plans for a special fund set up as an additional countermeasure to the devastating effects of the crisis on the Asian economies, the EU decided to administer the Fund of 31 million through the World Bank by an act of multilateral deferral. This betrayed its hesitation in exploring ASEM's potential multilateral utility. For example, both the EU and East Asian states could have used ASEM as a platform to stimulate a relevant post-crisis debate at the WB and at the IMF about the multilateral governance of developmental and financial issues.⁸⁴

Despite these drawbacks, there is ample room for improvement in ASEM's ability to play a proactive role at a global level, directly linked to the achievement of its main goal, which lies in strengthening the inter-regional dialogue between the EU and East Asia. Related to this goal and functional to the development of multilateral utility is the formation of a strong consensus among ASEM members on the actions to be taken at the multilateral level.⁸⁵ It suffices to consider, for example, the very divergent characteristic positions of the EU and some Asian countries on the regulation of labour standards at the global level. Another example is given by the stalled negotiations on the big environmental issues, in which the promise of agreements to limit CO2 emissions seem to remain inconclusive. Yet in these cases, the informality of the ASEM process can be effective in reaching those compromises that are slow to mature within traditional negotiation processes. On the other hand, the search for a compromise is made more difficult if the interests and ideologies of some states prevail over those of the inter-regional forum. Some doubts, for example, were raised over the will of the UK to support any ASEM initiatives that may imply actions against US national interests. If the close relationship of a forum member with a non ASEM country may call some aspects of the forum's multilateral utility into question, it should be remembered that other important countries, such as France and China, focused on how to promote multipolarity through the international system. In short, ASEM's history does not date back far enough to legitimate expectations in the short term. That said, it should also be stressed that the debate about "subsidiary role" of ASEM compared

⁸¹ See Y. L. Hwee, "Dimensions of Asia-Europe Cooperation", *Asia Europe Journal*, Vol. 2, N. 1, 2004, pp. 19-31

⁸² C. Dent, "The Asia-Europe Meeting and Interregionalism. Toward a Theory of Multilateral Utility", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 44, N. 2, 2004, p. 214

⁸³ C. Dent, "The Asia-Europe Meeting and Interregionalism. Toward a Theory of Multilateral Utility", *cit.*, p. 214

⁸⁴ C. Dent, *cit.*, p. 222

⁸⁵ Y. L. Hwee, "Taking Stock of ASEM@10", *Panorama. Insights into Southeast Asian and European Affairs*, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Berlin 2007, pp. 75-82

to other international bodies is likely to be less useful from a practical point of view, because its soft institutionalization allows its members to be engaged in a more informal setting that facilitates the pursuit of compromise.⁸⁶

The “Helsinki Declaration on the Future of ASEM”, adopted in 2006 during the Helsinki Summit, focused on the risk of future marginalization due to an overloaded political agenda. An annex to the Declaration also raised the possibility of improving ASEM’s institutional mechanism, reiterating its informal nature. This resulted in the creation of a Virtual Secretariat, which aims to encourage a greater interaction between ASEM partners, enhancing the process of sharing and evaluating information.⁸⁷ It wishes to serve as a bridge between informal consultations and the promotion of new areas of governance that could soften the contrast among deference and multilateral utility. While the remarkable flexibility of this multilateral cooperation forum is commonly acknowledged, centred on the preparation of a shared agenda and on the coordination in terms of policy implementation, the debate about the ability of this structure to meet the basic functions of any international institution remains open.⁸⁸ The forum continues to be, above all, one of the most remarkable examples of the on-going dialogue. As summarised by Togo, “the pursuit of co-operation with Europe through the broader perspective of Japan-Europe and Asia-Europe became a conscientious approach of Japan’s policy towards the EU and its member states”.⁸⁹

5. Conclusions

As the highest expression of the inter-regionalism in the EU-Asia relations in general, and in Japan-EU dialogue in particular, ASEM became an important policy tool for strengthening the multilateral framework of international relations between the two parts. The rapprochement of two of the three major world regional blocs gives it a potentially global significance, in that the forum also promotes the development of Asian regionalism despite the importance of its economic pillar. There is little chance that this will become the starting point for the discussion on free trade inter-regional agreements due to the profound differences among the Asian members. It may, in any case, serve as a tool for the EU to encourage an increasingly multipolar international environment, through a holistic approach. Its political and cultural dimensions help it to further differentiate itself from APEC, counter-balancing its influence.

The dialogue within the forum expanded over time, embracing the most varied issues. Unfortunately, this did not result in the corresponding development required to give greater legitimacy to its action at the institutional level. This clearly limited the quality of ASEM’s contribution to the management of international issues. This new platform for dialogue introduced soft tools envisaged to promote greater inter-regional awareness, but it is evident, however, that these initiatives - which resulted, for example, in the preparation of negotiation stances for the WTO meetings - did not favour the creation of an effective alliance or of a common position shared by the members of the forum. ASEM recommendations were accepted and perceived as soft matters of common interest, but it seemed there was never any doubt as to which of the two institutions, the WTO or ASEM, would have the final decision, the latter being primarily a forum for dialogue.

⁸⁶ L. C. Wha, “Economic Profiles in the ASEM Process: Looking Back, Looking Forward”, in C. Franck, Kwang H. C. (eds.), *The European Union, East Asia and South Korea: a progressive relationship*, UCL Presses Universitaires de Louvain, Belgium 2005, p. 57

⁸⁷ B. Gaens, “The Development of the EU’s Asia Strategy with Special Reference to China and India: Driving Forces and New Directions”, in B. Gaens, J. Jokela, E. Linnell (eds.), *The role of the European Union in Asia: China and India as strategic partners*, Ashgate, England 2009, p. 72

⁸⁸ S. Santander, F. Ponjaert, *op.cit.*, p. 302

⁸⁹ Togo K., *cit.*, p. 162

From a constructivist perspective, while it mirrors diplomacies, the interaction that takes place within ASEM is strongly linked to the identity construction process: this concerns the Japanese case in particular, Although each state participate in ASEM individually, the performance of the member states is often based on identity discourse. For instance, this helped to build the notion of an 'East Asian region' through a series coordination mechanisms, and this was also because the Asian countries found themselves confronted with "the most accomplished regional entity", like the EU.⁹⁰ Furthermore, "ASEM serves to reinforce the EU's social identity in Asia", and Japan.⁹¹

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⁹⁰ A. Acharya, "An Asian Perspective. Regional Security Arrangements in a Multipolar World: the EU's Contribution", in M. Ortega (ed.), *Global views on the European Union*, Institute for Security Studies - Paris, November 2004, p. 99

⁹¹ R.P. Pardo, *cit.*, p. 271

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