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## Asia-Europe Meeting: Contemporary Challenges and the Way Forward

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### Executive Summary

- ❖ The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) was launched in 1996. Since its establishment, ASEM has experienced expansion of membership and a broadening of the scope of meetings and events.
- ❖ ASEM is an informal forum for dialogue that is meant to be candid and comprehensive but often ended being quite scripted.
- ❖ ASEM has been criticized as merely talk shops with no specific or concrete deliverables, and it has low public visibility and profile.
- ❖ In the current uncertain and volatile world, ASEM could fade into oblivion if it maintains the current practices of informal and low-key engagement.
- ❖ To make ASEM relevant in a more complex and contested world, there is a need to rethink ASEM’s objectives and modus operandi.
- ❖ ASEM can be transformed into a more dynamic and vibrant “marketplace” where ideas and actions flow.

### សេចក្តីសង្ខេបអត្ថបទ

- ❖ កិច្ចប្រជុំកំពូលអាស៊ីអឺរ៉ុប (ASEM) បានចាប់ផ្តើមឡើងនៅឆ្នាំ១៩៩៦។ ចាប់តាំងពីពេលបង្កើតឡើងមក ASEM បានឆ្លងកាត់នូវការពង្រីកចំនួនបេក្ខភាព និងវិសាលភាពនៃកិច្ចប្រជុំ ក៏ដូចជាព្រឹត្តិការណ៍របស់ខ្លួន។
- ❖ ASEM គឺជាវេទិកាក្រៅរដ្ឋការមួយសម្រាប់កិច្ចពិភាក្សាដែលត្រូវមានលក្ខណៈស្មោះត្រង់ និងពេញលេញ ប៉ុន្តែជាញឹកញាប់ត្រូវបានបញ្ចប់ទៅដោយគ្រាន់តែជារបាយការណ៍។
- ❖ ASEM ត្រូវបានគេរិះគន់ថាគ្រាន់តែជាវេទិកាជំរុញពិភាក្សារាយបាយ ដោយគ្មានចេញជាលទ្ធផលច្បាស់លាស់ ហើយមានសាធារណៈជនតិចតួចដែលស្គាល់វេទិកានេះ។
- ❖ នៅក្នុងស្ថានភាពពិភពលោកដែលមានលក្ខណៈមិនច្បាស់លាស់ដូចពេលបច្ចុប្បន្ននេះ ASEM នឹងអាចរលាយបាត់ពីភ្នែកមហាជន ប្រសិនបើវេទិកានេះនៅតែរក្សានូវការអនុវត្តដែលៗរបស់ខ្លួនក្នុងការចូលរួមជាលក្ខណៈក្រៅរដ្ឋការ និងមិនសូវចេញមុខមាត់បែបនេះ។

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- ❖ ដើម្បីធ្វើឲ្យ ASEM មានប្រសិទ្ធភាពនៅក្នុងពិភពលោកដែលមានលក្ខណៈស្មុគស្មាញជាងមុនដូចពេលបច្ចុប្បន្ននេះ គេចាំបាច់ត្រូវតែគិតគូរឡើងវិញទៅលើកម្មវត្ថុ និងវិធីសាស្ត្រនៃការប្រព្រឹត្តទៅរបស់ ASEM។
- ❖ ASEM អាចក្លាយខ្លួនទៅជា «ទីផ្សារ» មួយដ៏មានសក្តានុពល និងភាពរស់រវើក ដែលពោរពេញទៅដោយគំនិត និងសកម្មភាព។

## Introduction

The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) was launched in 1996 as a forum for East Asian and European Union leaders to meet and strengthen links between Asia and Europe. It was conceived against the backdrop of optimism about regionalization and globalization, and the belief in the necessity of international dialogue and cooperation. ASEM was also meant to close the missing link between Asia and Europe, two of the three engines of global economic growth (the other being America).

Since its inaugural summit in March 1996, ASEM has developed to encompass multi-level, multi-sectoral meetings – multilevel in that it has involved ministers, senior officials and technical experts; and multi-sectoral in that it has grown beyond diplomatic meetings overseen by the foreign ministry to that involving trade and finance, education, culture, transport, etc. It has also enlarged from the initial 26 members to 53 members comprising the 28 member states of the European Union (EU), the 10 member states of ASEAN (represented by the ASEAN Secretariat), China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Australia, New Zealand, Russia, Norway and Switzerland.

Yet despite the enlargement in membership and diversification of meetings and events, ASEM has been criticized for the lack of depth in its meetings, dearth of tangible outcomes and poor visibility. After more than two decades, the dialogue within ASEM no doubt has broadened, but not deepened. ASEM remains a forum for scripted speeches and informal dialogue. While it has a few initiatives that have become “institutionalized”, such as the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), knowledge and visibility about ASEM remain low. Media coverage of ASEM meetings, even of its summits, are usually low key.

Furthermore, engagement and support of the ASEM from its members are uneven. As one of the few multilateral forums in which the US is absent, members should be more aware of its potential strategic value and should perhaps pay more attention to ASEM in the coming years. With an increasingly challenging global environment posed by an unpredictable, transactional and unilateral US under Trump, the need to rethink the instrumentality of ASEM for its 53 members is ever more important.

## Where Are We? ASEM State of Play

The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is now into its third decade. In 2020, Cambodia will host the 13<sup>th</sup> ASEM Summit. There are pressing questions that ASEM has to address. For example, what can the Cambodian government do to generate interest and attention on the meeting? How can ASEM establish relevancy in an increasingly complex and contested world with all its uncertainties and volatilities such as growing right wing nationalist populism, backlash against globalization, Trump administration's unpredictable decisions, and a litany of other challenges threatening to undermine multilateral institutions and forums that foster dialogue and cooperation? How can ASEM with members that are increasingly at odds with each other survive the erosion of trust, the peddling of fear, and increasing antics to carve out spheres of influence in the international system? Can ASEM double down on the promise of supporting multilateralism, as it said it would at the 12<sup>th</sup> ASEM summit in October 2018?

Before we can look into the future of ASEM, we need to sketch out and understand where ASEM is now. What has ASEM achieved in its two decades and what are the challenges and criticisms facing it?

There is no doubt that ASEM has expanded in scope and in membership. ASEM has seen its membership enlarged from 26 to 53 in a short span of 20 years. The enlargement is due in part to the respective enlargement of the EU (in 1996 – EU had 15 members; by 2016 it had 28) and ASEAN (in 1996 – ASEAN had 7 members, by 2016 it had 10). With an eye to numerical parity between Asia and Europe, several countries from other parts of Asia were quickly “inducted” into the ASEM process. As European countries outside the EU such as Norway and Switzerland have also become members, ASEM has evolved from an essentially EU-East Asia configuration at its beginning to one that is now close to a truly Asia-Europe dimension. In fact, its geographical contiguity has shifted the initial inter-regional narrative to one that is trans-continental and Eurasian in essence.

However, the truth is that with rapid enlargement also comes increasing divergence. While ASEM is an informal dialogue forum and promises to be open and inclusive, rapid enlargement to include such a “disparate” group has posed some challenges to coordination in the absence of a Secretariat. The issue over ASEM's working methods and the long running debate over whether a small ASEM secretariat should be set up for better coordination to achieve more tangible outcomes and higher visibility have dominated many meetings of senior officials. When ASEM membership was confined to ASEAN +3 (China, Japan and Korea) and the EU and its members, coordination was between two members from Asia, one from ASEAN, and the other from the +3 countries; and two coordinators from the EU, one from the EU presidency, and the other from the European Commission.

In 2009 when membership for Australia, New Zealand and Russia was being considered, the issue of where to place these three new members in the ASEM coordination mechanism led to prolonged debates over ASEM working methods. While the issue has finally been settled and all three members became part of the Asian group, the refusal to invest in a Secretariat reflects the desire to keep ASEM as a “low cost” informal dialogue mechanism. The Foreign Ministers and senior officials of ASEM members oversee the ASEM process and they are assisted by an informal group of coordinators, two from Asia and two from Europe. On the Asian side, one of the coordinators represents ASEAN and its members and the other represents the non-ASEAN group. The coordinators, currently Singapore and Pakistan, are rotated every three and two years respectively. On the European side – there is a permanent coordinator from the European External Action Service (EEAS) and a coordinator from the rotating EU presidency.

Beyond the enlargement, ASEM has expanded its scope of activities. ASEM meetings now involve different levels - not only amongst leaders, but also ministers, parliamentarians, city mayors and governors, senior officials and technical experts. They also cover different issues – not only diplomatic engagements among the foreign ministries, but also education, culture, transport, etc. For instances, custom officials meet to discuss trade facilitation, safeguard supply chains, combat piracy and counterfeiting. Technical officers meet to discuss food safety and related sanitary and phytosanitary issues.

While there is a proliferation of meetings and activities, many of these remain at the level of sharing information and best practices, not impactful discussions with concrete outcomes and tangible benefits. They are the key criticisms with regards to ASEM meetings – that they are all talk shops with no specific or concrete deliverables. However, the riposte from the ASEM officials is that ASEM is intended to be informal with its focus on open-ended dialogues. Its value purportedly lies in providing a platform for the exchange of ideas and networking. It is not intended to be a platform for negotiating agreements to political problems or common challenges.

The “proliferation of talk shops” go beyond the official ASEM process. Outside the official ASEM meetings are the Asia-Europe People’s Forum (AEPF), the Asia-Europe Business Forum (AEBF), and the Asia Europe Labour Forum. There were also attempts to set up track 2 ASEM processes. The Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE) initially supported by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs created a Council for Asia-Europe Cooperation (CAEC), comprising of a network of 12 think tanks. The Council was disbanded after 8 years for lack of official support and resources.

One of the most concrete manifestation of the ASEM process is the creation of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF). ASEF was launched in February 1997, barely a year after the inaugural summit. It reflected the initial enthusiasm and commitment by the ASEM partners to strengthen

Asia-Europe engagement beyond the official sector. ASEF's mission is to promote people-to-people contacts and enhance intellectual and cultural exchanges between the two regions, a task it has faithfully carried out for the last two decades.

As ASEM enters its third decade, the criticisms on the lack of concrete cooperation and tangible benefits were somewhat put to rest with the further enlargement of ASEM and the consensus that ASEM with such a diverse membership can at best be a talk shop and the focus of ASEM is on dialogue and exchange of ideas. The narrative that ASEM's strength lies in its informality, its multidimensionality and equal partnership approach has become the dominant narrative that has been used to reject any calls for institutionalization.

Another criticism levied on ASEM was its lack of visibility and profile. The lack of media coverage of ASEM events, lack of awareness of the existence of such a forum amongst the educated public was an issue that has often been raised. Yet, efforts to address the criticism is not easy if ASEM remains an informal dialogue forum on a laundry list of issues under the sun. It is also increasingly difficult to pique media's interest on a meeting without a clear agenda, which does not court controversy and where dialogue is civil and often scripted. The low priority accorded to ASEM by many of its members also meant that not enough resources (human and financial) are allocated and no concerted efforts are made to "promote" ASEM's visibility. The EEAS as the permanent coordinator on the EU side has tried to support more efforts to raise the visibility with the creation of the ASEM Infoboard among others. However, the impact of the efforts is not discernible.

In summary, after more than two decades, one can say that purely from the number of events taking place involving the different sectors and layers of society including those organised by ASEF, ASEM has not done badly especially in comparison with similar forums that were set up in the 1990s such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Forum for East Asia and Latin America Cooperation (FEALAC), and Asia-Middle East Dialogue. The expansion of the membership can be seen (at the official level) as a "mark of success". In reality, it could also be a bane as increased divergences drive the forum to the lowest common denominator and curb the impulse for change. The large number of members could also be an impediment towards genuine dialogue that can truly deepen understanding amongst the leaders, and the latter is supposed to be the hallmark of ASEM. The defining characteristic of ASEM as an informal forum for open-ended dialogue meant that it is hard to pinpoint any tangible achievements, measure any real impact beyond those people who participated in the process, and feel that their horizons have widened or their understanding of issues have broadened.

### **The Way Forward – the Future of ASEM**

In the earlier days of ASEM, there was much optimism about the so-called rediscovery between Asia and Europe. The meeting between the EU and ASEAN+ 3 members also generated enthusiasm about the potential of an emerging East Asian regionalism. ASEM was seen as an inter-regional forum between the EU and the nascent East Asian regional entity represented by the ASEAN + 3 members. Scholars purveyed the idea that ASEM would further catalyse the development of intra-East Asian regional cooperation, as ASEM meetings require that the Asian partners first coordinate amongst themselves before they meet their EU counterparts. The central argument was that region-building and collective identity can be cemented through inter-regional forums such as ASEM.<sup>i</sup>

Expectations were also high amongst scholars and commentators that ASEM could become a building block of global governance. There was a time in the initial post-Cold war era when there was much faith in dialogue and cooperation, which engendered through regional and international institutions could deliver on global peace and development. The proliferation of regional and inter-regional forums was seen as essential building blocks of a multi-level global governance framework to address common challenges.

However, as the earlier section shows, none of these scholastic optimism and expectations were met. ASEM has remained an essentially informal dialogue forum with little “multilateral utility” (a term used by Christopher Dent to examine if inter-regional forum such as ASEM can act as an intermediate level of agency linking regional and global politics in multilevel global governance framework).<sup>ii</sup> The rapid enlargement of the ASEM forum to include countries from South Asia, Central Asia, Australia, New Zealand and Russia all but work to undermine the intra-regionalism through inter-regionalism argument.

More importantly, the positive belief on benefits of globalization and the great convergence underpinning the launch of the Asia-Europe Meeting is now under serious threat. Nationalism, identity politics and xenophobia are emerging as backlash against globalization. Tensions between the world’s largest and second largest economies, US and China, are intensifying. The very foundation of the global order is being eroded. Yet, there is no clear leadership emerging to steer the world amidst the rising political and economic risks and technological disruptions that are threatening to undermine the overall peace and prosperity that a big part of the world has enjoyed over the last few decades. Of the 53 members of ASEM, many are increasingly at odds with each other – EU and China with the EU branding China as a systemic rival in its latest policy paper; India and Pakistan over Kashmir and other issues; Japan and South Korea over historical issues spilling into trade matters; and the list goes on.

So, what can one expect of ASEM in its third decade under such challenging environment and increasing differences?

The UlaanBaatar Declaration at the conclusion of the 11<sup>th</sup> ASEM Summit in 2016 (and also the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ASEM) called for “renewed political will and strong resolve to energise ASEM, to promote connectivity for mutually beneficial partnership and cooperation”. That it had called for “renewed political will” and “strong resolve to energise ASEM” was perhaps a reflection that interest in ASEM has already waned. Hence, the exhortation for renewed efforts to make ASEM relevant to the “future for our people”.<sup>iii</sup>

The 12<sup>th</sup> ASEM Summit held in Brussels in October 2018 was themed “Global Partners for Global Challenges”, which some see as a response to the increasing unilateral, protectionist and nationalistic tendencies in global politics. However, the outcome of the 12<sup>th</sup> ASEM Summit was also underwhelming. There was the usual call and support for a rules-based multilateral global order, yet it could not mask the divergent differences amongst the 53 partners. Just before the 12<sup>th</sup> ASEM Summit, the EU released its own strategy for connecting Europe and Asia, and this was seen by some analysts as a pushback by the EU against China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and infrastructure connectivity agenda. How the geopolitics of connectivity will play out and what role ASEM can play to ensure a win-win outcome is not clear. But one thing is certain, if ASEM members are serious about using the forum to manage the increasing uncertainties and volatilities in the global system and counter rising unilateralism, then ASEM members need to rethink ASEM’s objectives and modus operandi.

At a rhetorical level, one could easily cite various reasons why it is time for Asia and Europe to deepen their engagement and make ASEM an important platform for their partnership. In an “America First” world with Trump acting to undermine multilateral institutions such as the WTO and questioning its traditional alliances, the 53 members of ASEM have the grand opportunity to pool their resources and work together to support multilateralism and counter Trump’s unilateral impulses and disregard for international institutions and norms. Yet the picture is far more complex as several members within ASEM are not spared the rising populist and nationalistic sentiments in their domestic politics.

ASEM brings together a very diverse group of players with increasingly diverging interests – the EU and its member states are at odds with Russia over Ukraine and Syria; China’s assertiveness and actions in the South China Sea are causing tensions and discomfort amongst ASEAN member states; the EU is also increasingly wary of Chinese growing footprints in Europe; and India is not entirely enthusiastic about China’s Belt and Road Initiative. ASEM survive these complexities and tensions precisely because of its low key, low cost nature and its focus on talk and not actions or any binding commitment. As of now, there is no burning desire to change the format and character of ASEM, as not many ASEM members truly pay much attention to the forum.

The question is how much interest on ASEM could be sustained in the long run if it continues in this current form? As ASEM partners face scarcity in their attention and resources with more pressing challenges, will they have the “luxury” and “interest” to indulge in a mere talk shop that cannot capture the public’s imagination? As attention is turned to adhoc diplomatic channels to manage both entrenched and emerging global and regional issues, and as major powers create and sponsor their own talk shops and forums in competition with each other, ASEM as a loose forum operating based on the lowest common denominator could easily fade into oblivion and become a footnote in history.

Yet this need not be the fate of ASEM. ASEM’s diversity and informality is both a strength and a weakness. If members take the diversity and informality as an excuse not to go beyond what is comfortable for all – it is a sure formula for ASEM to remain of little utility beyond platitudes and rhetorical statements of support for multilateralism and rules-based order. Repeating these statements without concrete follow up actions or tangible projects or policies would only add to the cynicism that is growing towards global politics and international engagement, which in turn would lead to its demise. Hence, there is an urgent need to rethink the modus operandi of ASEM to make it more visible and fit for purpose for a more volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world. The diversity and informality of ASEM can be a source of strength and resilience in this kind of environment.

ASEM members must leverage on the multilevel, multisectoral nature of the ASEM framework to create different constellations of functional networks taking on issues of common interest. With ASEM’s emphasis on equal partnership, this is a place where we can break out of the idea of hegemonic leadership – one that has been the hallmark of the past few decades of the Western-dominated global order – to rely on leadership exercised by a group of members in specific issue areas. Issues like resource sustainability, climate action, cooperation on green economy, and digital economy can be the starting point. Building on the initiatives that have proliferated, ASEM needs to facilitate the formation of dedicated working groups that can coordinate efforts and actions in each area by identifying priorities and benchmarks for progress.

The future of ASEM lies in taking the following steps to transform ASEM to a flexible network of different coalitions acting and interacting on different issue areas. This is not really a leap into the unknown, as much groundwork has been done in the discussions that started back in 2006 at the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ASEM.<sup>iv</sup> Since then, several ideas have surfaced on how to make ASEM “work better” and deliver on the promises of strengthened engagement and pragmatic cooperation between Asia and Europe. Some of these ideas should be revived and reviewed if ASEM is to really make a difference as one of the forums that bring much of Asia and Europe together. Two ideas in particular stand out that can take ASEM into the future.



### ***Transforming ASEM into a Marketplace of Ideas<sup>v</sup>***

For ASEM to become a dynamic and vibrant forum instead of the current low-key, technocrat-led process of meetings and scripted dialogue, ASEM members should agree to link up the meetings between leaders, officials, civil society, businesses and media. ASEM Summits should be organised Davos style involving cross-cutting issues and conversations among different actors mediated by hyper-connected media personality (mainstream or social media influencers). Prior to ASEM summits, coordinators of the official ASEM process should meet with the organisers and coordinators of AEBF, AEPF, the Asia-Europe Labour Forum, etc., to work on a priority list of issues to be addressed. It should be Davos-style in ensuring participation from different sectors of society, having many networking sessions and creating a media buzz over it. However, it should not be “Davos style” in being too elitist and exclusive with high price of participation. The meetings should be made as accessible and inclusive as possible.

### ***Enabling and engendering actions through “coalition of the willing” and functional leadership<sup>vi</sup>***

In parallel with the sharing of ideas, the marketplace should also be a place for real “transactions” to take place. From ideas to actions – the ASEM process in between the Davos style meetings could become an overarching framework for coalition of ASEM partners to test out some of the ideas and translate them to workable initiatives, projects or frameworks for common policies. Instead of different “silo” ministerial meetings as it is being organised now, working groups of ministers, technocrats, researchers, and other non-governmental actors from a coalition of ASEM members will further develop some of the ideas into action plans. The different working groups or coalitions will be jointly led by clusters of members willing to coordinate and oversee the actions of the groups. Besides, participation in the working groups will remain open and voluntary.

Who in ASEM could work on this transformation to become a useful platform for testbedding new ideas and catalyzing actions to address the umpteen challenges confronting Asia and Europe? The most likely candidates are the European Union and members of ASEAN. The EU and ASEAN with their long-standing experiences in regional cooperation and managing diversities and strategic distrust must take the lead to spearhead this overarching framework of the “coalitions of the willing” network to sustain a functioning regional and inter-regional order in the absence of a global order. They were also the original drivers of the ASEM process and should be much more invested in the transformation of ASEM to ensure its relevance. Hopefully, as they both confront the rising risks to peace and prosperity, they would exercise greater agency and be more proactive in coming together to drive the transformation within ASEM. ASEM can and should be one of the tools to help its members navigate the treacherous

and stormy weather ahead and help stop a potential shipwreck that will roll back all the progress that has been made so far in human development.

## Conclusion

Summing up, ASEM has “survived” for more than 20 years. However, it is hardly “thriving”. After 20 years, ASEM members seem contented to let ASEM remain as an informal dialogue forum. This has resulted in a proliferation of meetings – from the launch of the Summit in 1996, it now has regular ministerial meetings ranging from economy, transport to culture and education. The official meetings are also taking place below the ministerial level involving senior officials and experts dealing with more technical issues such as custom, food safety, etc. As often criticized by analysts and scholars, the dialogue has broadened and expanded to many more areas but has not deepened.

The low-key nature of ASEM also meant that not many people beyond those who participated in the meetings are aware that such a forum exists. In an increasingly fragmented and uncertain world where many challenges need to be confronted head on, we need to be even more conscious of utilizing existing institutions and forums such as ASEM to make them more visible. Multilateralism and multilateral forums such as ASEM are also increasingly undermined as outmoded ways of engagement by nationalistic politicians. We need to prove them wrong.

Facing a far more contested and complex world than in the heydays of the post-Cold War era, ASEM will fade into oblivion if members do not rethink its objectives and modus operandi. There is still a window of opportunity to transform ASEM into a more dynamic and useful forum for its members. As the original drivers of the ASEM process, the EU and ASEAN in particular should work proactively to reshape ASEM into a marketplace of ideas and an overarching framework for various “coalitions of the willing” to take joint actions on common areas of interest. Only with creative leadership and drive can ASEM have a future of relevance to its members.

*The opinions expressed are the author’s own and do not reflect the views of the Asian Vision Institute.*

## End Note

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<sup>i</sup> See Julie Gilson and Yeo Lay Hwee’s article on “Collective Identity-Building through Transregionalism: ASEM and East Asian Regional Identity” in Wim Stokhof, Paul van der Velde and Yeo Lay Hwee (eds) *The Eurasian Space: Far More Than Two Continents* (Leiden and Singapore: International Institute for Asian Studies and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2004)

<sup>ii</sup> Christopher Dent. “The Asia-Europe Meeting and Inter-Regionalism: Toward a Theory of Multilateral Utility”, *Asian Survey* 44 (2), 2004, 00 213–236.

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<sup>iii</sup> Chair's Statement, 11<sup>th</sup> Asia-Europe Meeting Summit, "20 Years of ASEM: Partnership for the Future through Connectivity", 15–16 July 2016, Ulaanbaatar

<sup>iv</sup> Refer to Publication of The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Finland 4/2006 "ASEM in its Tenth Year: Looking Back, Looking Forward – An Evaluation of ASEM in its First Decade and an Exploration of its Future Possibilities"

<sup>v</sup> Yeo Lay Hwee, "Transforming the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) into A Swinging, Eclectic Marketplace (Asem)", EU Centre Commentary Series, 29<sup>th</sup> July 2014.

<sup>vi</sup> EU Publication "The Future of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM: Looking Ahead into ASEM's Third Decade". 2015.