

Opinions

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Finding New Contents for the ASEM Cooperation



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The 10th Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) was held in Milan on 16-17 October 2014. Fifty three government leaders with more than 2,000 delegates came to the city. The two-day meeting served as an occasion for leaders to discuss important issues, and many bilateral meetings were organized on the sideline.

Under the theme of “Responsible Partnership for Growth and Security”, the 10th ASEM focused on enhancing “connectivity” between Asia and Europe. The final statement adopted at the 10th ASEM was similar to the previous ones, but it had some salient features. First, though the statement enumerated all issues according to categories, it was concise (10 pages instead of 20) and to the point.

Instead of negotiating its content during the meeting, the chair (government of Italy) drafted the content and consulted it with member states, so that leaders could have more time to effective discussion on important issues. Second, 'retreat' session was introduced for the first time. This session was designed to allow more free and spontaneous discussions among leaders on regional and international issues. The leaders also used this occasion to address their important 'national' issues to their counterparts. The meeting was organized on the basis of "connectivity" between the two continents which reaches beyond trade, investment and physical infrastructure to security and environment issues. The spotlight on connectivity is highly related to ever-growing interdependence between Asia and Europe.

It is well known that ASEM has had many ups and downs since its inception in 1996. After a few years of euphoria on its functioning, ASEM lost its initial momentum. ASEM has been criticized for producing small outcomes compared to its scale. European participants used to complain that the meeting produced little outcome and Asian participants often expressed their dissatisfaction with European partners for their lack of commitment. However, low 'effectiveness' of ASEM is normal, if we consider its membership and operational principles. The number of its members has been expanding with very few conditions attached for obtaining membership. Currently, ASEM's membership covers both European and Asian countries and includes Russia, India and Australia. Its members are highly disparate in economic size, level of economic development and political interests. It is well known that enlargement and deepening are two different directions that are hardly compatible. In this context, the cooperation projects in the ASEM limits either to some sectorial issues or to normative gestures. Second, its operational principles are based on informality, mutual respect and networking. From the outset, any form of institutionalization was avoided and non-institutional nature of ASEM was reaffirmed in several occasions. It has served as a regular dialogue to deepen the understanding of decision-makers in Asia and Europe; stimulate 'people-to-people' contacts; and exchange information, views and ideas of common concern. Therefore, all ASEM declarations and statements were bound to be normative, and cooperation within ASEM was limited to sectorial issues.

However, ASEM has lived up to its *raison-d'être*. This forum of more than 50 countries is unique as it is the only occasion where most important countries in Europe and Asia are brought together and discussions of important issues in both regions are done. ASEM summit remains as a useful forum for leaders to discuss issues relatively freely and keep channels open to exchange ideas. During the 18 years of its existence, ASEM has matured and

operated with minimum level of institutionalization. It is no use to argue that ASEM is unnecessary. Given that the 'inter-dependence' between two regions is increasing, it is necessary to develop ASEM in a more constructive way.

In order to reinvigorate ASEM, it is highly important to find new contents. First, ASEM is well placed for bridging information gaps in the on-going mega-FTAs, such as RCEP, TPP and TTIP as well as in bilateral FTAs between EU and Asian countries. Discussing FTAs at ASEM is a tough task, but at least, ASEM and its subordinate meetings can serve to provide information on best practice and implications of one partner's trade policy to others. This is already well discussed among APEC members. Second, ASEM can be more widely used as a platform for the exchange at civil society level. ASEM cooperation has been managed in a 'top-down' and 'government led' way and it is one of the reasons why the role of civil society, for instance NGO, is poorly developed. Given that 'ASEM way' is based on informal and non-binding discussions, wide range of issues can be discussed by inviting more civil actors. Third, from Asian perspective, ASEM is a useful forum for security issues. The geopolitical landscape in Asia is still unstable. European countries have been successful in creating a peaceful environment in Europe based on common rule and functional cooperation. This contributed to restraining excessive competition between sovereign states. It seems that European experiences are still relevant in East Asia where possibility of territorial disputes exists. **KIEP**