

Book Review: Europe-Asia Interregional Relations: A decade of ASEM, edited by Bart Gaens, Ashgate: Aldershot, 2008, ISBN- 978-0-7546- 7142-8.

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This volume provides an overview of Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) activism from the European perspective in nine chapters. It was in 1994 when Goh Chok Tong, a former Singaporean prime minister, put forward the proposal to institutionalise interactions between the European Union (EU) and Asia. Such a communication channel would better serve to create understanding and facilitate cooperation involving the two regions.

In Chapter 1, entitled ASEM's Background and Rationale, Bart Gaens describes the origins of Asian-European collaboration. Indeed, nonparticipation would have meant a loss of competitiveness to the USA, which was already active there within the framework of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, as well as a voluntary relinquishment of any influence in this part of the world. Regrettably, the author articulates EU strategy aimed at setting up closer relations with Asian countries in an unsystematic way.

Chapter 2 focuses on ASEM as an Economy-oriented Partnership. Bart Gaens excessively analyses the instruments elaborated within the forum which were conducive to supporting commerce and industry. Although fruitful, the dealings have never been simple, bearing in mind the different attitudes Europeans and Asians have towards the ways and means of doing business. This discrepancy sharply manifested itself during the Asian Financial Crisis which struck in 1997. The long term results of the recession extorted certain reforms in the functioning of ASEM. The subsequent chapters track down the after-effects of this process.

Chapter 3 is devoted to ASEM, Multilateralism and the Security Agenda. It explains the political environment in which ASEM operates. Timo Kivimäki explores the ASEM engagement in relation to traditional and non-traditional threats as well as the measures it can utilise to prevent and combat them. While assessing its pursuance of security, he asserts that despite the expected limitations, the Asian-European dialogue in this field should be continued, taking into account the advantages it brings. The ensuing chapter, concerning Human Rights and Burma/Myanmar in the ASEM Dialogue, illustrates how difficult this task is. Silja Keva presents the principles which the EU and its Asian partners apply in regard to human rights and shows their clash in the case of Burma/Myanmar. It could be said that the joint statement on Burma/Myanmar at ASEM 6¹ provided a convergence of some kind in the realm of human rights. However, the continuing infringements upon human rights within the country as well as the present violence against Christians in India, not to mention other cases, which have been accompanied by a lack of any ASEM involvement, prove it is controversial.

In chapter 5, Bart Gaens looks into ASEM as a Tool to 'Bridge the Cultural Divide'. He assesses the work of the Asia-Europe Foundation, which has begun to define the cultural and social agenda of the ASEM. The author discusses the mutual representations of the parties concerned and their dimensions. It is hard to agree with his final remark that the recognition of distinct Asian characteristics will help the EU in its own perception of Europe since these two notions of the EU itself and Europe as a whole differ and the Europeans themselves have still not agreed on the identity of the former. Thus, it is inappropriate to suggest the EU could offer Asia an organisational basis to imitate. Moreover, it may be slightly naïve, because of the cultural reasons outlined in the next chapter on ASEM and Civil Society by Silja Keva. She sketches the differences in understanding of civil society and consequently its role in EU and Asian organisational structures of societies. The author underlines, for example, how non-governmental organisations are not involved in any official stream of ASEM. Syndicalism represents a good example. As trade unions inside most Asian countries are not permitted to act freely, it is unreasonable to expect that their governments will agree to let them participate at an international


1 The sixth summit meeting of the group.

level. Finding a solution which will satisfy all the partners is a major challenge because, as Teija Tiilikainen in Chapter 8 on ASEM in the Context of the European Union's External Relations notes, the Asian block is not as homogeneous as the European block. The matter is even more complex, since European integration happens most slowly in the area of foreign policy. Hence, the author explains accurately the risk of settling particular matters between individual European and Asian countries, which may prevent the adoption of a coherent EU policy in regard to ASEM and within.

Chapter 7 deals with ASEM's Institutional Infrastructure. Silja Keva and Bart Gaens show to what extent this initially informal partnership has become institutionalised. They demonstrate how the cooperation between the ASEM participants has become typical for international organisations like meetings, workshops or committees. The authors also scrutinize initiatives taken within ASEM, consider representation and attendance at its summits and include other issues such as enlargement of partnership and soft law acts enacted. The chapter approaches the subject of ASEM's coordination in the near future. The authors point out that the process needs improvement, especially on the Asian part but with respect for its prime character.

In Chapter 9, Bart Gaens expounds The Outcomes of the ASEM6 Summit in Helsinki. This part of the book is rather superfluous, since in the previous chapters every author refers to this meeting in their own topics. Bart Gaens discusses exactly the same areas and even directs the reader to check chapters 2, 7 or 8 as examples. The only really fresh issue of interest in this chapter is about ASEM in the media. However, it could be said it is not very useful to know how many articles on ASEM have been published in leading European newspapers. The same author also prepared the summary and conclusions.

The title of the book is enticing. ASEM presents a new phenomenon in international relations, not widely examined or very well known. Therefore, the volume should be interesting. Disappointingly, it is not. It seems that such authors as Timo Kivimäki, Silja Keva or Teija Tiilikainen have tried to do their best but have been failed by the editing. This affects first of all the composition. This is why I have not reviewed the chapters in their initial order. Logically, it had to be different. Furthermore, it would have been much better if the authors had selected the given information more restrictively. Some observations are unduly repeated. And last but not least, it would be better to simplify the language in forthcoming editions. Too many words blur the essence of the message.



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Security and Human Rights (formerly Helsinki Monitor) is a journal devoted to issues inspired by the work and principles of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It looks at the challenge of building security through cooperation across the northern hemisphere, from Vancouver to Vladivostok, as well as how this experience can be applied to other parts of the world. It aims to stimulate thinking on the question of protecting and promoting human rights in a world faced with serious threats to security.

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