

Wim Stokhof and Paul van der Velde (eds) *ASEM: A Window of Opportunity*. London and New York: Kegan Paul 1999. 179pp + index ISBN 0-7103-0622-9.

From its inaugural meeting, held in Bangkok in 1996, the Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM) has developed into a new forum for the discussion of matters of common concern between Asian and European governments. A subsequent meeting was held in London in 1998, with the third planned for Seoul in 2000. Stokhof and van der Velde's book is therefore a timely discussion of the rationale and priorities of ASEM and the most important challenges confronting this initiative, both in the immediate future and in the longer term.

The ASEM is an inter-regional forum consisting of the heads of state of the 15 Member States of the European Union, together with six members of ASEAN and China, Japan and South Korea. The main themes of ASEM include political dialogue, security, business, education and culture.

Although there is a long and extensive history of contacts between European and Asian countries at governmental level prior to 1996, it was commonly felt that such contacts were of too fragmented a nature for action to be taken on common concerns; and that there was a need for a more formal mechanism to strengthen relationships. In the period between ASEM 1 and ASEM 2, several sub-group meetings have been held and some governments have set up special units to deal with ASEM affairs.

The editors of the present work have included contributions by authors from both government members and academia, outlining ASEM's themes, progress and contemporary problems. Nine of the book's 11 chapters were developed from papers presented at a conference held in 1997 on the Europe–Asia Relationship, that is, before the London ASEM meeting in 1998. The remaining two chapters contain specially invited articles. Also included are the Chairman's Statements from ASEM 1 and 2, which provide an insight on the content of the discussions and on the areas for priority action that might be considered by the relevant governments.

As the editors point out, the various chapters of the book are loosely grouped around four themes. After a comprehensive introduction, which summarizes the main areas of discussion within the book, the first section deals with the politician's viewpoint. Derek Fatchett assesses the UK's role in ASEM in the context of historical trade and other links between Europe and Asia and in so doing, he discusses some important cultural and educational benefits of the ASEM dialogue. Percy Westerlund takes a broader EU view of ASEM, reflecting on the potential benefits of ASEM, but also pointing out possible dangers, such as the setting of unrealistic goals. He is against the proliferation of follow-up meetings, arguing that there is a danger of losing focus. It could be argued, however, that such meetings constitute a dynamic mechanism for informing ASEM discussions and spreading awareness of the benefits of the ASEM process. Westerlund suggests that there are three major areas of priority: trade and investment; cultural aspects (including education and personnel exchanges) and political dialogue. Michael Hindley takes up the issue of communicating the notion of ASEM to voters and generally heightening awareness of ASEM.

The second theme of the book deals with the improvement of mutual contact between Asia and Europe. Wim Stokhof argues that ASEM can provide an important mechanism for advancing cultural understanding and education generally. Andras Hernaldi promotes the role of Central Europe, arguing that this area could attract significant investment from Asia. Finally in this section, Cesar de Prado Yepes discusses the likely impact of information technology on European-Asian contacts and, like Westerlund earlier in the book, considers that focus is important in developing programmes for promotion of technology and systems.

'Challenges and Problem Areas' is the book's third theme. Dong Ik-Shin and Gerry Segal discuss the vexed question of security, arguing that dialogue without interference is most important. A historical perspective is included, pointing out the involvement and subsequent withdrawal of Western influence at the close of the colonial period. The authors evolve a classification of security matters and closely survey a number of areas

for co-operation. Jong Bum Kim considers the problems of corruption and sees ASEM as a mechanism for undertaking more informed action, based upon mutual understanding. Tet-sundo Iwakuni assesses the developing business relationships and the associated trends and challenges. He suggests that the Japanese relationship with Europe forms a special case and goes on to develop an assessment of potential business co-operation between Asia and Europe, arguing for the importance of promoting cultural understanding through education and educational exchanges, for example.

The fourth section is devoted to an assessment of the future of ASEM. Zhao Ganheng discusses China's open-door policy and its potential role in ASEM. China has received a high level of investment from Europe in the past two decades and is obviously interested in further developing its economic relations with Europe. Jurgen Ruland examines the potential for ASEM development, including the expansion of membership, and stresses the importance of involving citizens and also of raising awareness in the media and other bodies of projecting the role and importance of ASEM.

It is still early days for ASEM and, as might be expected, it is still a relatively loosely organized process and the agenda is still quite fluid. However, if the process leads to a greater level of understanding between European and Asian nations, it could provide some very positive benefits. It will be some time before the forum becomes a recognized part of the political environment but from the evidence of the initial meetings at least, it seems to be an important process in international relations. In a comparatively small book, the editors have effectively portrayed in an accessible manner the importance of ASEM and the challenges facing the initiative. The book is a timely and important—if rather pricey—contribution to the literature and would be of interest to those concerned with the social sciences and the potential impact of ASEM on their particular discipline.

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