ASEM and the Politics of Regional Identity

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Abstract

The initial impetus for the formation of ASEM came principally from economic factors as global restructuring and new developments in regionalization occurred following the end of the Cold War. From the time it came into being, however, ASEM’s agenda has been much broader, including as it does both political and cultural pillars as well as an economic one. And although economic factors do contribute to identity formation, it is largely within the context of political and cultural considerations that questions of identity have arisen. These include (although are by no means limited to) two issues. First, there is the issue of who is included in the formal membership of the meeting process and all its attendant activities – and who is excluded. Second, there is the recurring theme of human rights which the European Union has made a centrepiece of its Common Foreign and Security Policy, and which has therefore become part and parcel of its identity as an international actor. The purpose of this paper is to consider how these issues have played out since ASEM was founded, and to consider future directions.

Background

The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) process emerged as part of broader developments in regionalization that picked up pace in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War and which have since been seen as an important element in the development of contemporary international order. One of the major factors identified by commentators on the emergence of ASEM was the apparent realization, on the part of actors in both Europe and the Asian region, that the post-Cold War economic order was dominated largely by forms of regional association linked directly to the US. In the early 1990s, relations between Europe and the US were well-established, as were relations between Asia and the US. But apart from an EU-ASEAN link – formally established in 1980 and strengthened in 1994 by the EU’s participation in the first ASEAN Regional Forum– as well as a network of bilateral arrangements and activities, there was nothing in the way in the way of a formal system of inter-regional linkages between Europe and Asia. The third side of the economic triangle comprising North America, Asia and Europe was therefore regarded as comparatively weak. Described by Singaporean Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong as the ‘missing link’ in a tri-polar world, with poor channels of communication, the relationship between Europe and Asia was one that clearly needed strengthening in a globalizing world.

On the European side, there was a rather belated recognition that Asia was now a significant locus of economic power. And since the EU had been excluded from the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, it was feeling somewhat isolated. This led in the first instance to the commissioning of a report on a ‘new Asia strategy’. The opening lines of this report, which was presented to the European Parliament and the European Council in 1995, framed the strategy in terms of the economic opportunities that should be grasped by Europe (as represented by the EU) without further delay:

The rise of Asia is dramatically changing the world balance of economic power. The World Bank estimates that half of the growth in the global economy will ensure that, by the year 2000, one billion Asians will have significant consumer spending power and, of these, 400 million will have average disposable incomes as high, if not higher, than their European or US contemporaries.

Just three months after the release of this document, the initiative was seized by Singapore’s Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, who proposed a summit meeting in Bangkok, and it is largely through Singaporean international activism that the other members of ASEAN, as well as Japan, China and South Korea, were persuaded to support the project. At this stage, it was to some extent within the power of key ASEAN countries to define the ‘Asia’ that would initially participate, although this would always be mediated by what the EU would consider acceptable. On the European side, there was some hesitation and even hostility to the whole idea (from German Chancellor Helmut Kohl) but with increasing pressure from business leaders as well as other political figures in Europe the proposal for a summit was accepted in principle by the EU in 1995. The first ASEM summit was subsequently held in March 1996 – a quite remarkable feat of organization for a meeting involving almost all 25 heads of government of the participating states as well as the President of the European Commission.

Initially, the whole ASEM idea seemed to have been driven almost exclusively by economic considerations on both sides of the partnership. As one commentator remarked at the time:

Europe and Asia’s ‘rediscovery’ of each other is driven by the necessity of economics. Asia’s entry as a major economic player in the international market is a central reality that Europe cannot ignore. Impressed by Asia’s growing economic clout, and the economic opportunities that abound, Europe realised that its own prosperity required an engagement with Asia. Asia, faced with huge infrastructural and capital needs, is also eager to attract European investments and technology.

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7 Which at the time did not include Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.
The inaugural Bangkok meeting apparently produced much goodwill and an enthusiasm for further development of the ASEM process, with the leaders committing themselves to several generalities: ‘to develop a common vision of the future, to foster political dialogue, to reinforce economic cooperation, and to promote cooperation in other areas.’ Vague as these may seem, the willingness to engage in a ‘political dialogue’ was significant, for it moved the process well beyond the straightforward economic realm into areas of sensitivity usually avoided by at least some key countries in the Asian region. It has been remarked that the inclusion of political dialogue is in fact one of ASEM’s strengths compared with other regional groupings such as APEC which has none.

Another idea to emerge from the Bangkok meeting, and again initiated by Singapore, was an Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) to ‘promote better mutual understanding between the peoples of Asia and Europe through greater intellectual, cultural and people-to-people exchanges between the two regions.’ Based in Singapore and funded by ASEM members as well as by donations from the corporate sector, ASEF has generated a significant range of activities since it was founded in February 1997. A recent report stated that ASEF had completed over 120 activities including conventions and symposia, public lectures, youth camps, art competitions, performances and exhibitions. Some of the activities planned for the near future include the Sixth Asia-Europe Young Leaders Symposium, an Asia-Europe Puppet Festival, an Asia-Europe Film Development Plan, ‘Hamlet’ – an Asia-Europe Performing Arts Experience, a Second Asia-Europe Classroom (AEC) International Teachers’ Conference and an Asia-Europe Dialogue on ‘A Gender Agenda’. Although the ASEF approach to the ‘culture’ concept is understood largely in terms of ‘heritage’, some attention has been paid to political aspects of ‘cultural values’ in the context of human rights issues, although ‘cautious’ is the term which best describes the approach. For example, several ‘informal’ symposia have been held on human rights and although they have been supported by ASEF they are not considered to be an official ASEM activity. This to some extent cushions the political implications.

Since Bangkok, the ASEM summits have become a biennial event, meeting in London in 1998 and in Seoul in 2000 with a fourth meeting scheduled to take place in Copenhagen in September 2002. In addition to the formal summit meetings, the ASEM process has spawned a huge number of sideshows. These include meetings of Foreign Ministers on three occasions with Senior Officials Meetings (SOMs) now usually held twice yearly; a similar number of Finance Ministers’ meetings as well as separate meetings of Economics Ministers along with an additional series of Senior Officials’

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Meetings on Trade and Investment (SOMTIs); an annual Asia-Europe Business Forum; a ministerial conference on Science and Technology; an ad hoc meeting of Ministers of the Environment; and another ministerial level conference on Cooperation for the Management of Migratory Flows between Europe and Asia. And these are just a few of the more prominent meetings. The calendar of events for 2002 alone consists (at the time of writing) of 46 separate meetings in cities from Beijing to Tampere, bearing such titles as ‘ASEM Lifelong Learning’ and ‘ASEM Customs Procedures Working Group’ to ‘ASEM Workshop on Conservation and Sustainable Use of Forests’, ‘ASEM Young Leaders Seminar’ and ‘ASEM 6th Investment Experts Group’. In addition to these formal events ASEM has, not surprisingly, also given rise to a parallel set of activities and meetings conducted by NGOs. These have been drawn together under their own special acronym – the AEPF or Asia-Europe People’s Forum which receives formal funding. However, questions have been raised about whether NGOs have received much more than lip-service.

With the fourth summit scheduled to meet in Copenhagen in September 2002, ASEM watchers will no doubt be looking to see how the agenda is shaping up. For an indication of what might be raised, the report from the fourth ASEM Foreign Ministers’ Meeting provides a guide. Among the political items listed for summit attention are some fairly obvious ones such as measures to counter terrorism as well as other major international security issues to do with the tensions between India and Pakistan, security situations in Afghanistan and the Korean peninsular. In addition, international criminal activities such as trafficking in drugs, arms and people, money laundering, and so on will be on the agenda again. The issue of membership, however, seems to have been side-stepped by deferring it until ASEM V. Because membership issue is embedded in identity politics, we look at this aspect next together with how human rights issues are implicated.

**Regionalism and Identity Politics**

The process of regionalization, as well as the establishment of formal inter-regional relations, has encouraged much debate about issues of regional identity and membership, including who can rightly belong to both the EU and ASEM. This has become more marked in the post-Cold War period as debates about ‘ideology’ have receded while ideas about the role of ‘culture’ as a major dynamic in world politics have gained popularity. And it is obviously a significant issue with EU enlargement firmly on the agenda. With respect to the regions ‘Europe’ and ‘Asia’, these have often been taken to

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19 See Fourth ASEM Foreign Ministers Meeting: Chair Statement Madrid, 6-7 June 2002, EU External Relations website, http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/asem/min_other_meeting/for_min4.htm, downloaded 16/06/02, p. 3 of 5. There is a Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs website as well (at http://www.u.dk/mutilgemeenr/UK.asp), but at the time of writing the information on it is extremely sparse.
represent cultural or civilizational areas, each with certain essential, if elusive, characteristics. In turn, these are assumed to be the product of centuries old processes of historical evolution – processes which are unique and particular and cannot be simply replicated elsewhere. Regionalism based on supposed cultural characteristics is more exclusive than regionalism based more on economic or geographic criteria. According to Wesley, the latter tend to be supported by those ‘envisioning a more functional rationale for the region’ while cultural regionalism, which is perceived to be gaining ascendancy in Europe and East Asia, is supported by those concerned with issues of internal cohesion and homogeneity and who see these as essential to the prospects of a regional bloc playing a ‘coherent international role’. As we shall see, this is an important issue for ASEM membership.

In Europe, despite its rather obvious cultural diversity (manifest in religious, linguistic and ethnic differences throughout the region), there is nonetheless support for a certain ‘Europeanness’ in fundamental socio-cultural terms which underscores a distinctly European identity. This is assumed to be embedded in a set of shared cultural values and concerns revolving around a political identity that is portrayed as modern, rational and secular and which upholds the basic principles underpinning human rights and democracy. One can argue about how the reality matches up with the ideal, and indeed the arguments for the impossibility of a ‘European cultural identity’ are more persuasive than those in support. Nonetheless, it can be argued that the EU possesses an official political culture that has produced strong support for universal human rights and democratic governance. The basic principles are enshrined certain in key instruments and form the basis for many policies, including the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The following statements illustrate some of the policy implications for both membership of the EU as well as its external relations:

A considerable step in integrating human rights and democratic principles into the policies of the European Union was taken with the entry into force of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) on 1 November 1993. The treaty considers as one of the objective of the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union the development and consolidation of “democracy and the rule of law, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms”. At the same time the new title on development cooperation includes a second direct reference to human rights and democratisation: “Community policy in this area shall contribute to the general objective of developing and consolidating democracy and the rule of law and to that of respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms.” …

The Treaty of Amsterdam, which came into force on 1 May 1999, marks another significant step forward in integrating human rights into the legal order of the European Union. This treaty inserts a new article 6 in the Treaty on European Union, which reaffirms that the European Union “is founded

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on the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law, principles which are common to the Member States”. Member States violating these principles in a ‘serious and persistent’ way run the risk to see (sic) certain of their rights deriving from the application of the Union Treaty suspended. ….

The Commission’s actions in the field of external relations will be guided by compliance with the rights and principles contained in the EU Charter of Fundamental Right which was officially proclaimed at the Nice Summit in December 2000 since this promote coherence between the EU’s internal and external approaches.

With respect to the moral authority which the EU claims, its document on promoting human rights and democratization in third countries states that since all 15 EU member states are democracies espousing the same treaty-based principles in their internal and external policies, this ‘gives the EU substantial political moral weight’. The same document points to the EU’s commitment to the abolition of the death penalty not only as a requirement for countries seeking EU membership, but as ‘a high profile policy that the EU pursues in international fora and in dialogue with all countries, regardless of the nature of the EU’s relationship with them’.

mention the death penalty here not only as a particular issue for EU membership and enlargement, but for the EU’s identity vis-à-vis other members of ‘the West’, and the US in particular. Interestingly, the US, which has also nurtured an identity in international relations as a great protector and promoter of human rights, would not be permitted membership of the EU precisely on the grounds that it does not measure up to EU human rights standards.

Critical studies in the general field of ethics and foreign policy point to many potential pitfalls in attempting to implement any form of ‘ethical foreign policy’ (although it must be noted that this is not what the EU has claimed to be doing). From the perspective of realist international theory, it is a case of the road to hell being paved with good intentions. A less generous reading would assert that a professed concern with humanitarian issues in the conduct of one’s foreign policy is merely a disguise for self-interest. Others also point to the longstanding realist contention that the security and welfare of

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24 ‘The EU’s Human Rights & Democratisation Policy’, EU External Relations website, http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/human_rights/intro/index/htm, pp. 1-2 of 3. All emphases in the original. Note that the document goes on to outline other declarations, including a Declaration on Human Rights adopted at the Luxembourg European Council in June 1991 and another resolution on Human Rights, Democracy and Development in November 1991 and a further Declaration on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights outlining practical steps to be taken in strengthening the EU’s human rights policy. It also outlines measures on human clauses in agreements with third countries and the funding of activities to promote human rights, including EuropeAid and provision for funding NGO activities.


26 Ibid., p. 16.

27 See Karen E. Smith, ‘The EU, Human Rights and Relations with Third Countries: ‘Foreign Policy’ with an Ethical dimension?’ in Karen E. Smith and Margot Light (eds), Ethics and Foreign Policy, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 186. Smith also raises the question of whether the EU can be said to have a foreign policy at all, arguing that it does, albeit in a limited sense. I take the view that the term ‘foreign policy’ can just as easily be applied to an entity like the EU and not simply to unitary states.
their own citizens is the primary responsibility of political leaders and that ‘the luxury of propagating their own values’ should not be pursued over and above security interests and commercial considerations. Bringing human rights issues into the diplomatic dialogue in fact risks weakening these considerations. Moreover it is incredibly difficult to maintain a consistent approach to all countries, as studies of sanctions and conditionality show. Despite all these problems, there is significant support for maintaining a principled stand and declining to do business with at least some serious violators of human rights even though it carries other diplomatic risks. With respect to ASEAN, the EU has not allowed Myanmar (which became a member of ASEAN in 1997) to sign up to an EU-ASEAN cooperation agreement, or to participate in ASEM. This follows previous problems in the EU-ASEAN relationship over other human rights issues.

What are some of the reasons behind the EU’s very strong domestic and international stance on human rights and democratization? Although one can be highly critical of theories based on historical determinism – and with very good reason – it is nonetheless fair enough to suggest that some of Europe’s shared historical experiences have contributed to the identity that Europe – as represented by the EU – has acquired today. It does not require very much insight to recognize that the common experience of bitter warfare and some of the worst abuses of human rights ever witnessed have had a profound influence on the political development of Europe over the past 60 years or so.

This experience has not only provided the basis for the EU’s strong official support for democratic and rights protective regimes, but also for the weakening of national sovereignty in favour of supranational institutions. Portes and Vines note that for the founders of contemporary Europe, who created the European Steel and Coal Community in the 1950s, their explicit purpose was to internationalize – and therefore immobilize – the primary means of waging war: ‘This lesson was connected with a reading of European history which claims that the existence of the nation state is a major explanation of Europe’s wars, and a deeply held view that moves to enmesh the nation state in wider structures would erect bulwarks against future conflict.’ In summary, one could argue that it is not so much shared practices of ‘civilization’ that has given Europe much of its present unity, but rather a history of horrendous warfare and outright barbarity among and between many of its constituent members.

30 Ibid., p. 271.
This contrasts with views of Europe that represent it as ‘the fount of wisdom and educator of the world through ‘modern’ and ‘western’ civilization’. In terms of its implicit claims to superiority over the rest of the world, this ethnocentric view has been described as ‘offensive’, and with good reason. It certainly ignores the wealth of the contributions made to ‘Western civilization’ by transfers of technology and learning from different parts of the world, and especially from the Asia that stretches from Turkey and the Middle East through the Indian sub-continent, and across to Japan.

Turning to the Asian region, one is hard-pressed to identify shared ‘cultural’ or ‘civilizational’ characteristics here as well. It is often remarked, even by the proponents of ‘Asian values’, that the cultural heterogeneity of the region as a whole surpasses all others. Even the more limited area of ‘Pacific Asia’ within which the current membership of ASEM is located is extremely diverse. Nonetheless, it is claimed that there is a certain cultural bond, especially among societies described as ‘Confucian’, that has given rise to a common and unique set of values that are qualitatively different from those of Europe or ‘the West’. Indeed, exactly this argument has been put by Tommy Koh in his capacity as Executive Director of ASEM on the occasion of a debate over human rights.

Volumes have been written both for and against the idea of ‘Asian values’, and although the subject has been canvassed exhaustively, it never seems to run entirely out of steam. An implicit notion of ‘Asian values’ has certainly underscored the identity of ‘Asia’ as a participant in the ASEM process. Moreover, the kind of values that have figured prominently in the debate, such as community before self, consensus rather than dissent, respect for authority, and so on, have been constructed explicitly in opposition to the values said to characterize Europe and ‘the West’. In other words, the Asia defined by the Asian values debate consists very largely of a negation of what are assumed to be European (or more generally ‘Western’) values.

These issues aside, just as one can point to a set of historical experiences in Europe that produced a post-war political consensus, one can identify shared experiences in the Asian region that are relevant to the present discussion, although they cannot be said to have necessarily produced the same kind of political consensus.

One significant experience that most Asian countries have shared, and which has a profound influence on issues of identity in the present, is that of colonization by European powers. Without going over a great deal of fairly obvious ground in relation to this point, it can be argued that the memory of the

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34 Pacific Asia comprises the sub-region which includes the area covered by the countries of Southeast Asia as well as China, Japan and the Korean peninsula.
36 There was also an experience of Japanese colonialism and occupation which introduces another dimension to historical experiences in the region, but which cannot be pursued here. Suffice to say that Japan, for this and other reasons – including an obsession among some Japanese with their absolute ‘uniqueness’, as well as significant
colonial period sustains a continuing resentment against ‘Europe’, which is partly manifest in the ‘Asian values’ debate as well as the broader phenomenon of ‘Asianism’. It is also evident in an exaggerated commitment to the doctrine of state sovereignty as a symbol of national independence and international stature. The resentment is further manifest in a form of postcolonial discourse fuelled by a perception that ‘Europe’ has maintained a posture of superiority long after the end of formal colonialism. This includes a posture of moral superiority in relation to issues such as human rights. Koh’s speech on ‘Differences in Asian and European Values’ illustrate some of these points.

…the West has not yet come to accept Asia as an equal. The West has dominated Asia for the major part of the past two hundred years. Most people in the West, including its intellectuals, still regard Asia and Asians as inferior. …. I suspect that the West cannot accept the concept of Asian values because the latter could pose a challenge to Western intellectual hegemony. The truth is that we still live in a world which is economically, culturally, intellectually and morally dominated by the West. Of all the regions in the non-Western world, only East Asia has the potential to achieve parity with the West. By 1995, the ten major economies of East Asia were, collectively, as large as the United States (25% of the world economy) and only slightly smaller than the European Union (25%). East Asia is also the home of some of the world’s oldest and richest civilizations. Therefore, East Asia has the potential to challenge … Western domination in the economic, cultural, intellectual and moral spheres, in the 21st Century.

One of the most outspoken political leaders on the Asian side of the ASEM process on these issues is undoubtedly Malaysia’s Prime Minster, Dr Mahathir who has rarely been shy in voicing his opinions about the perceived arrogance of Europeans – especially the British (Malaysia’s former colonizers) – as well as that of Europe’s main ‘outpost’ in the region, Australia. Mahathir’s hostility to Australia in general, and his opposition to Australian membership of ASEM in particular, is well-documented. In a statement which illustrates his adherence to cultural regionalism, Mahathir has gone so far as to state that if Australia wanted ASEM membership, it would have to join on the European side. Even if this wasn’t quite ludicrous from a geographical and economic point of view, Australia’s relations with the EU are very under-developed. Mahathir’s stance is directly related to what he sees as Australia’s ‘cultural’ difference vis-à-vis its Asian neighbours with racial difference sometimes being invoked as well. Mahathir has gone so far as to state that to admit Australia to East Asian regional meetings would like the EU admitting Arabs. More generally, Mahathir is renowned for a

ambivalences about its own regional belonging and its inclusion as a member of ‘the West’ in some cases – has problems in its historical relationship with other ASEM members.


For a recent discussion of Australia’s relations with the EU, see Philomena Murray, ‘Problems of Symmetry and Summity in the EU-Australia Relationship’ in Stephanie Lawson (ed), forthcoming.

Europhobia that even some of his conservative neighbours believe goes too far. He has also been
unrepentant in claiming that the Asian economic crisis was the result of a ‘Western conspiracy’.42

Some of Mahathir’s statements in relation to Europe and Australia range from comical to
racist. But the extent to which he has pushed cultural regionalism has been mirrored on the European
side – as Wesley’s study has shown.43 Looking back a little further, it should also be remembered
that one of Jean Monnet’s motives in promoting European integration was a fear that Europe’s role in the
very civilization that it had created was declining. And successors such as Jacques Delors were
committed to regional cultural homogeneity as a means of maintaining unity.44 Another point to
consider is that those who focus on postures of superiority among Europeans at large, miss some of the
interesting points of friction within the EU. Britain, for example, is notorious for harbouring significant
numbers of Europhobes within its ranks. In addition, British attitudes have, at least in the perceptions
of their neighbours, verged on the insufferable: ‘Through a long period of imperialism and hegemony,
British people had developed a sense of their uniqueness that bordered on condescension to other
peoples … [which] was particularly pronounced in the attitudes to France and Germany. …45 The
same commentators go on to suggest that such attitudes, which translate into ‘cultural factors’, made
Britain ill-suited for participation in the early experiments in European integration, and still form ‘a
cultural barrier’ between Britain and the rest of Europe. This is related to a concern with defending
national sovereignty, which is interesting insofar as it is comparable to attitudes in the Asian region.46

One of the issues concerning ASEM membership and human rights relates to Myanmar, a
country with one of the poorest records in the Southeast Asian region. In 1997, ASEAN admitted
Vietnam, Laos and Mynamar to its membership, and Cambodia joined two years later. This did not
automatically mean that they would be included in the membership of ASEM. In the lead-up to ASEM
II, however, it became an issue because it was well-known that the EU would be unlikely to
countenance an official relationship with Myanmar, especially since it had imposed stricter diplomatic
sanctions in 1996 due to continuing human rights violations as well as Myanmar’s failure to curb the
drug trade. When confronted with the exclusion of Myanmar from the second ASEM summit it was,
not unexpectedly, Mahathir who claimed that this amounted to discrimination against ASEAN and
suggested that ASEAN members may decide to boycott the meeting as a result.47 Other ASEAN
members such as Indonesia, however, did not support the automatic inclusion of those acceding to
ASEAN in the ASEM process precisely for the negative impact that this was likely to have on ASEAM,
especially given that the Myanmar issue had already stalled the ASEAM-EU dialogue.48

42 Ole Bruun and Michael Jacobsen, ‘Introduction’ in Michael Jacobsen and Ole Bruun (eds), Human Rights and
Asian Values: Contesting National Identities and Cultural Representations in Asia, Richmond, Curzon Press,
2000, p. 17.
43 Wesley, ‘Politics of Exclusion’.
44 Ibid., pp. 538-39.
46 Ibid., p. 182. The authors note that France has also made sovereignty an issue at times.
48 Yeo Lay Hwee, ‘ASEM: Looking Back, Looking Forward’ in Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of
International and Strategic Affairs, vol. 22, issue 1, April 2000, online version at http://ehostweb9.epnet.com,
downloaded 16/06/02, p. 14 of 29.
Given these developments, it was thought that human rights and ASEM membership may become an issue for ASEM II. But this was not to be. Understandably, there was a strong focus on financial/economic issues following the 1997/8 financial crisis in the Asian region. However, this did not mean that there was insufficient space for the discussion of other issues. According to one report, the meeting had simply ‘glossed over’ issues such as membership enlargement, human rights and good governance. On the question of membership, this was due to ‘lack of consensus’. It was further reported that some ASEM members were keen to include Australia, New Zealand, India and Pakistan not simply because they had previously expressed a desire to join, but because of their importance to the region, while the European ‘side’ was keen to deal with the ‘whole’ of Asia and not just Southeast and East Asia.

A perspective offered by another commentator on how human rights issues were broached in ASEM II interpreted the lack of substantive debate on the subject quite differently. Describing the meeting as being ‘refreshing free’ of a ‘spiral of hubris’, Segal maintained that the earlier ASEM agenda had been characterized by a ‘destructive debate between those who argued there were unique and immortal Asian values and those who hectored Asians about their authoritarian values.’ The second summit, he argued, showed that ‘Asians and Europeans increasingly recognize that while there are distinctive values in parts of Asia and Europe, there are no immutable Asian or European values.’

It is doubtful, however, whether most participants in ASEM really have moved beyond the kind of simplistic culturalist paradigm that takes basic values as very difficult to change, if not completely immutable. For example, the first informal ASEM symposium on human rights concluded rather lamely that although the universality of human rights is accepted, there may nonetheless ‘be different ways of implementing these rights in different cultures’. In ‘Asian values-speak’ statements like this mean that human rights advocates can go on about universality until the proverbial cows come home – it can always be qualified by the ‘cultural difference’ (read cultural relativist) argument.

When ASEM III met in Seoul in 2000, the Chair’s official statement simply noted that: ‘Leaders committed themselves to promote and protect all human rights, including the right to development, and fundamental freedoms, bearing in mind their universal, indivisible and interdependent character as expressed at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna.’

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emerge, not down the Asia/Europe divide this time, but among the Europeans. This occurred when French leader Chirac indicated that he would not go down the road of formal relations with North Korea – an idea that some other European countries had apparently entertained.53

Nonetheless, the almost inevitable Asia/Europe split on attitudes to general human rights issues surfaced again as well. One South Korean official was reported as remarking that on the subject of human rights there continued to be ‘two schools of thought – one from Europe and one from Asia’. It was further reported that ‘the Europeans … wanted to have human rights a central issue on regional security, including North Korea, while the Asians preferred to gloss over the subject.54 Interestingly, on the very same day that ASEM III officially opened in Seoul, the authorities in Myanmar released a British human rights activist. One report suggested that it was not so much Western or British pressure that had prompted Myanmar’s action, but pressure brought to bear from other ASEAN members ‘who have grown increasingly exasperated by the impact of world anger at Myanmar on their hopes of expanding trade and international influence.55

ASEM III also saw a great deal more NGO activity, with a well-attended People’s Forum being held just before the leader’s Summit. Gilson reports that the key themes here were ‘economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights according to international human rights and humanitarian law; environmentally, socially, economically sustainable patterns of development; greater economic and social equity and justice including equality between men and women; and the active participation of civil society organisations at ASEM.’56 At this level, then, there was clearly plenty of debate about human rights issues, although this clearly does not impact on political aspects of the membership issue.57

As mentioned earlier, it seems that it has already been decided to defer consideration of membership issues for at least two more years. This was made fairly clear in the report from the Fourth ASEM Ministers’ conference held in June 2002 which noted two things in particular. First, the meeting ‘welcomed the positive developments in the Union of Mynamar, in particular the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, and looked forward to further positive and concrete steps towards national reconciliation.’ And second, with respect to the issue of membership, the meeting … welcomed the interest in joining, expressed by various European and Asian states, in particular the ASEAN members Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, and agreed to recommend to Leaders to take up the

54 Ibid.
57 Gilson’s chapter (ibid.), also raises some interesting questions of identity in relations to NGOs.
issue of enlargement … at the fifth Summit in Hanoi in 2004, to allow consolidation of the ASEM process.

Given that the agenda is reasonably flexible, however, there is still the possibility that membership issues will be the subject of at least preliminary discussion in Copenhagen.

Concluding Remarks
It is clear from the foregoing discussion that one question raised early in the whole ASEM process that remains unresolved is: ‘with which Asia should Europe conduct dialogue?’ One could also ask the same question about ‘which Europe’ but, for the time being at least, ASEM dialogue is affected much more by the former question. In considering this question, I suggest that two related issues will ensure that the forces of cultural regionalism (in which ‘political regionalism’ is presently subsumed) continue to prevent developments in regional identity along geographic and economic lines, thereby limiting membership of ‘Asia’ in the ASEM process. The first is the human rights issue, and this issue has several dimensions.

The EU is unlikely to accept Myanmar as part of the ASEM dialogue while ever its human rights record remains so obviously wretched. In this respect, the EU does have influence, not so much in determining what Asia is in an existential sense, but in terms of an Asia that it is willing to do business with. The desire to play more of a role on the world stage (itself an identity issue) might nudge the core membership of ASEAN component of ‘Asia’ to place further diplomatic pressure on the regime in Myanmar, although this is unlikely to be carried out in any public way.

Human rights issues are implicated in particular versions of what constitutes Asian identity in another way as well. The stance taken by Malaysia in relation to both Myanmar and Australia, as discussed above, illustrate this. As we have seen, the Malaysian position (at least as represented by Mahathir) is that the EU has no business dictating to countries in the Asian region with respect to their human rights practices. We have also seen that Australia’s position vis-à-vis Malaysia and other ‘authentically’ Asian countries is regarded by Mahathir as one which simply assumes a European perspective – a perspective which embodies a continuation of Eurocentric and colonial attitudes of superiority towards what are now equal sovereign states. For this reason, Malaysia is likely to maintain a veto over admitting both Australia and New Zealand in the foreseeable future.

More generally, it is difficult to see how the ASEM process is going to move beyond the formula of cultural regionalism. As Gilson suggests, ASEM is an explicitly inter-regional dialogue that not only posits an ‘Asia’ grouping alongside a ‘European’ one, but also engages in a form of exchange that is constantly portrayed as a ‘dialogue of difference’, not least with respect to issues such as human

All this seems to confirm Huntington’s approach to the role of ‘civilizations’ in world politics in the post-Cold War period in general, noting that he specifically promotes the view that ‘the extent to which countries observe human rights corresponds overwhelmingly with divisions among civilizations’. This represents a conservative/relativist view of the role cultural factors in international order which has become deeply embedded in the contemporary politics of regional identity and which is likely to significantly influence the evolution of ASEM for the foreseeable future. There seems to be very little likelihood, however, of the ASEM process actually unravelling over issues of human rights and membership – Mahathir’s antics notwithstanding. The original economic imperatives as well as the momentum gained through the proliferation of ASEM-related activities should ensure that it continues to develop as a key inter-regional institution in the twenty-first century.

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60 Gilson, ‘Making Uncommon Cause’.