

## IV

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## Building an ASEM Research Platform

The work of the European Science Foundation (ESF) has demonstrated the scope for encouraging a European research culture in various fields. It has also highlighted some of the practical difficulties involved in achieving it. Ineluctably it has clearly revealed the importance and value of the multilateral endeavours taking place within its framework. The recent introduction of the concept of a European Research Area (ERA) by the European Commission must be considered a very important step towards enhancing and expanding collaborative research in Europe.<sup>1</sup>

The establishment of a European research culture that will complement and take its place alongside the various national research cultures is a way of ensuring that issues spanning the continent receive the best possible analytical attention. This rich European experience can be taken a step further to develop a Eurasian research culture in which issues of common interest can be explored in more depth. More important still are the ideas, analyses, and solutions that can be drawn from the various research cultures in Europe and Asia.

This article examines what has been done in the past decade to bring this goal closer and how these efforts can be expanded within the ASEM context focusing on the cultural exchange, above all on the intellectual exchange part of it.

### 1 Research as an Integrating Force

The emergence of formal Europe-Asia links through the ASEM process is an important moment in the history of the Eurasian continent. The era of European colonialism in Asia ended four to five decades ago. Since then relations between the two regions have been relatively distant and fragmentary. This state of affairs was able to prevail so long because of the aftermath of the colonial legacy, the Cold War, and the overwhelming political, economic, and cultural presence of the US in both Asia and Europe.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the shape of international relations changed radically. Europe-Asia relations strengthened and by seizing the opportunity this has created, the ASEM process is now beginning to establish a partnership between the two regions on an unprecedented

basis of parity. The rub is that ASEM has been devised primarily to address economic, political, and security issues. Research is virtually absent from its agenda, even though multilateral research and education are the most essential tools by which to reinforce an Asia-Europe rapprochement. The importance of an intellectual partnership that also pays attention to cultural co-operation is of primordial importance.

Research linkages between Asia and Europe, especially in the Humanities and Social Sciences, have remained relatively weak since the end of the colonial era, in particular compared with the contacts between both regions and the US. Many Asian scholars continue to work within the scientific paradigms acquired during their studies in the US unaware of developments in Europe. European scholars have tended to be academically self-sufficient but at the same time have been aware of developments in the US.

Although Europe and Asia have much to offer to the other, the construction of a durable relationship, which deals in more than goods and services will require careful attention being paid to Europe-Asian interaction in the world of ideas. The rapprochement between Asia and Europe has been rapid but in the process outdated cultural stereotypes still tend to dominate the minds of decision-makers and the general public in both regions when communicating.

These stereotypes were perhaps useful in the days when contacts were sparse, but they are inadequate to deal with, and at times are indeed actively injurious to, the complex, multifaceted relationship between Asia and Europe which emerged in the final decade of the twentieth century. The global communications revolution gives the misleading impression that the rapid delivery of information brings with it immediate understanding. In fact, rapid communication tends to reinforce the use of stereotypes as an easy tool for sorting (over)abundant information. Establishing a framework for replacing stereotypes with operative solutions based on recent comparative research is the main challenge.

An important part of the search for solutions is the development of a Eurasian research culture in the Humanities and Social Sciences. It is an inescapable fact that each of the national participants in the process works with distinctive national research paradigms, and each of these systems has both strengths and weaknesses. To the extent that ASEM participants take part in international research projects – and this extent varies greatly from country to country – that research is often linked to paradigmatic approaches developed in the US. The research preoccupations of the US are not alien to those of the rest of the world, but nor are they entirely congruent with those of Asia and Europe.

Without relinquishing existing research links with the US, complementary research cultures which are more attuned to Eurasian interests should be developed. While national boundaries are disappearing from the economic map, the need to understand the factors that shape a regional or national culture becomes more pressing. Culture is not just a matter of heritage and history, but also an integral part of our daily lives. It is a reality upon which progress, including economic growth and welfare, depends.

<sup>1</sup> *ESF Plan 2002-2006* (Strasbourg 2002).

It would be extremely timely at this moment in time to enrich the process of Europe-Asia rapprochement by setting up research programmes in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Long-term joint research programmes in these fields will deepen our understanding of respective cultural backgrounds. They will serve to ensure peaceful co-existence, meaningful and productive integration, and lasting co-operation. They will also enhance a much-needed mutual understanding. Needless to say, they will encourage people-to-people contact and create links and networks based on trust and mutual respect.

We should not be blind to the fact that the academic and sociological character of Asian and European Studies varies enormously, depending partly on colonial experiences, overall academic cultures, and current political perceptions. Research both builds on and reacts against past experiences of conquest and domination. Researchers are located in many different kinds of institutions, with very differently defined mandates and levels of funding. Furthermore, scholarly rubrics such as 'Asia', 'Europe', 'Social Sciences', and 'Humanities' enjoy widely varying status, both in national scholarly communities and in the eyes of policy makers. In order to stimulate Eurasian studies in the fields of the Humanities and the Social Sciences the ESF founded the Asia Committee (AC) in 1994.

## 2 European and Asian Initiatives

The activities of ESF-AC were terminated in 2001 on the bureaucratic grounds that the second (and last) mandate of three years had expired. Its aim had been to bring together the fragmented forces of Asian Studies in Europe and thereby to improve standards of research and expertise on Asia to the benefit of both the national participants and the EU as a whole. In the six years of its existence, the ESF-AC developed a wide range of activities to achieve its goal such as the sponsorship of more than fifty workshops of interdisciplinary and joint Asian-European workshops, seed money was given to elaborate on the most promising scientific themes from these workshops; the initiation of three long-term research programmes implemented by Asian and European researchers, a post-doctoral fellowship scheme was designed for leading young scholars to promote mobility between different European institutions thereby improving the quality of scholarly training and simultaneously diffusing new ideas to participating centres; dissemination of research-related information on European Asian Studies worldwide; travel grants were given to young scholars for exploratory visits to centres of excellence in Europe; (financial) support was given to the six professional European associations for Asian Studies and an annual meeting of presidents of these associations has been initiated.

Through these activities the AC has demonstrably developed Europe-wide research strengths and improved links between European centres and researchers and their counterparts in Asia. This support has been firmly based in both the Humanities and Social Science arenas, and a substantial share of it has focused on contemporary issues of importance to European policy makers. In this context it should be emphasized that the Humanities and

Social Sciences are not independent fields of study, but are closely related and are both indispensable to understanding the workings of Asian societies in the broadest sense.

The AC has also been valuable in another way. Apart from the direct results of its activities, European and Asian networking has been greatly improved with real but necessarily unquantifiable results. Delegates on the Committee presented a wide range of Research Councils, scholarly institutions and constituencies. This variety and breadth of experience is what enabled the AC to obtain an unusually comprehensive and considered view of the resources, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of Asian Studies in Europe. A view which is certainly beyond that available to any national body or any other European body.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most important results of the AC is the creation of new networks at various levels that survive the demise of the AC. The national associations of Asian Studies, which were founded in a number of countries, continue to operate. The Strategic Alliance for Asian Studies (1995) in which six European research institutes in the field of Asian Studies co-operate has grown from an initial two to six members in 2002 and is expected to add more members in the future. The annual meeting of the presidents of the six European associations for Asian studies will also be continued. The latter joined its voice to that of the AC in supporting the idea of the International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS) of which the first meeting took place in The Netherlands (Leiden-Noordwijkerhout, 1997), the second in Germany (Berlin, 2001), and of which the third one will be in Singapore (2003). ICAS is also supported by the Association for Asian Studies (US) and in a sense can be seen as a kind of global platform for Asian Studies. Last but not least the Asia-Europe workshops will be continued with the support of the Strategic Alliance and the ASEF.

So far, the activities of the European Commission in the field of the Humanities and Social Sciences research have been very much limited. The Sixth Framework Programme (FP6) shows a clear interest in research. A closer look reveals that this interest is focused mainly on problem-solving work, technology, and science. The aim of the FP6 is defined as to help EU companies to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century and, through research, to come up with answers to a wide range of issues that are important to European society. Clearly, this attitude is too Europe-focused to be instrumental in the general Asia-Europe dialogue. Fortunately, some initiatives in the field of joint Asia-Europe research have been taken.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Proposal for the extension of the ESF Asian Committee* (Leiden 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Completed: EU-China Higher Education Programme; EU-China Academic Network; European Studies Macao; European Studies Programme Malaysia; European Studies Programme Philippines; European Studies Programme-Chulalongkorn University. Ongoing: China-Europe International Business School; EU-China Junior Management Training Programme; EU-China Programme for the Development of Vocational Training for the Industry; EU-India Economic Cross Cultural Programme; European Studies Programme-Jawaharlal Nehru University; European Studies Programme Pakistan; European Studies Programme Vietnam; Post-graduate Technological Studies Programme; Support to the Asia-

Its Asia-Link Programme echoes the ESF-AC activities in that it wants to promote regional and multilateral networking between higher education institutions in EU member States and South Asia, Southeast Asia and China. However, grant support is exclusively given to human resource development, curriculum development, and institutional and systems development. If we take a closer look at where the management of Asia-Link is located, we find out that it operates from the Unit D2 or the Economic Co-operation with Asia Unit. The European Union also supported several initiatives such as the Postgraduate Technological Studies programme; European Studies programmes in the Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia and the ASEAN-EU University Network programme.

The degree of national and regional institution building in the Asian ASEM member countries is still at the teething stage. Although on several occasions member states have stressed the importance of national and regional co-operative links, for several reasons this co-operation has developed at a very slow pace. Cross-national professorial associations such as those existing in Europe have not yet developed. One positive development was the introduction of the ASEAN University Network (AUN) in 1995. Under this, some ten universities signed an agreement on co-operation between ASEAN scholars, pertaining to developing human resources, plus the dissemination and exchange of scholarly knowledge. Other networks are the Association of Southeast Asian Institutions of Higher Learning (ASAIHL), the Association of Universities in Asia and the Pacific (AUAP), and the University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific (UMAP). These activities, however, are not focused on joint collaborative research programmes.

### 3 Joint Initiatives

At the inaugural summit of the ASEM in 1996, the objective of the ASEF was stated as: 'To enhance mutual understanding between Asia and Europe, through greater intellectual, cultural and people-to-people exchanges'. Given its brief and restricted funding possibilities, ASEF concentrates on short-term activities. In its intellectual exchange programme ASEF stimulates academic discourse. It supports the Education Hub Programme as proposed at the second ASEM in London in 1998. Notwithstanding the useful initiatives taken by ASEF, we believe it necessary that ASEM should pay more structural and long-term attention to joint research and education as two major elements in a (cultural) rapprochement between the two regions. Initiating and implementing joint multilateral research could play an important role in achieving ASEF's objectives.

A step in that direction was the Programme for Europe-Asia Research Linkages (PEARL), a network of researchers from Asia and Europe, representing leading Asian and European Studies Institutes in the field of the Humanities and Social Sciences. PEARL was established in Seoul in October 1998 under the patronage of the ESF-

Europe Foundation. To be launched: EU-China European Studies Centres Programme and the EU-ASEAN University Network Programme.

AC and the ASEF. PEARL was an open network and its members belonged to the ASEM countries.

PEARL was established out of a need felt on both Asian and European sides for research interaction between the two regions, and out of a sense of opportunity created by the gathering of strength of the ASEM process and the establishment of ASEF. PEARL members were concerned that research did not receive the attention it deserved on the agenda of ASEM. PEARL was a broad-based research partnership encompassing the Humanities and Social Sciences of the Eurasian continent, which was poised to deliver great intellectual benefits to scholarship at national, regional, and global levels.

PEARL had set its sights on developing a Eurasian research culture by tightening links between Asia and Europe in order to develop long-term joint Asia-Europe research projects on a multilateral basis. This would not only enrich the quality of research, but would also enable attention to be directed more effectively to issues that are pertinent to both Asia and Europe. It was to promote and initiate studies of contemporary developments in Asia and Europe in a comparative perspective and against their historical and cultural backgrounds. It tried to integrate the best of the European Studies and Asian Studies and to provide an institutional framework for collaboration on topics of common interest.

Within the existing relevant bodies such as the ASEM or the ASEF, no substantial possibilities yet exist to develop and implement joint multilateral Asia-Europe research and educational programmes. PEARL thus provided a unique structure for Asia-Europe co-operation in the field of research but for a number of reasons this did not materialize. PEARL like other initiatives, which were discontinued, has not been a waste of time because the experiences gained in the process can be used in building a solid ASEM Research Platform (ARP).

### 4 Towards an ASEM Research Platform

ASEM is a unique mechanism for dialogue. It is an informal process and it has no permanent organizational body. This poses a problem because if certain programmes, beneficial to the ultimate aim of the ASEM (co-operation in the economic, political, and cultural fields), are to be implemented successfully, they need to take place within an organizational structure. This has been done in a few cases.<sup>4</sup> Now, the need is urgently being felt by different parties and at various levels for an ASEM Research Platform which will be specifically designed to encourage multilateral scientific co-operation at an Asia-Europe level.

Three major reasons for seeking a top-level presence of Asian and European Studies in the ASEM process can be identified. First, the need for a creative and well-informed

<sup>4</sup>Other institutions or programmes, which were created on the basis of ASEM decisions, are: the Asia-Europe Environment and Technology Centre (AEETC), of which the objective is the promotion of Asia-Europe co-operation on environmental issues; and the ASEM Trust Fund, which has been set up to promote technical assistance and training in financial and social sectors for Asian countries.

policy on both the European and Asian sides has in many cases outstripped the capacity of government administrations to deliver it. The Asia-Europe rapprochement has caught officials and policy-makers across a wide range of fields unprepared. The perceptions of Asia entertained by European officials and politicians, precisely like these of their counterparts' perceptions of Europe, are often restricted, blurred by historical reminiscences and time constraints, or the one or the other, which prevent officials from specializing in certain fields and areas. These are busy people who are sometimes forced to rely on aphorisms and stereotypes as tools for ordering the complex new world in which they find themselves. As the policy-making apparatus at the ASEM level grows, there needs to be a visible Asian and European Studies presence at the same level to ensure that officials and policy makers can quickly lay their hands on the best advice on complex inter-regional issues.

The second major reason is the need for cross-national co-operation. The distinctive national traditions of research and scholarship in various aspects of Asian and European Studies which exist throughout the ASEM community are a precious resource. In the present environment of globalisation, however, these traditions need to be brought together into complementary partnerships. No single nation can sustain a research endeavour on the scale needed to address the issues arising from globalisation fully. Co-operation and collaboration in Eurasian study centres could raise the awareness of the richness of each others' research cultures.

The work of the ESF-AC has shown that internationally oriented bodies can play a major stimulating role both in bringing small centres of excellence out of isolation and in promoting innovative research which would not normally find support within any single national framework. By bringing Asian and European studies in Asia and Europe into a facilitating framework, it will be possible to evolve further creative synergies without in any way detracting from the current strengths of the national research efforts.

The third cogent reason is the need to link academia to the ASEM process. The reason for acting now is that the key institutions for ASEM co-operation are in the process of formation. Long-term joint research projects, on a multilateral basis, are a most effective tool for reinforcing links between Asia and Europe. Especially in the Asian context, these long-term ventures are conditions for sustainable success. Experience has proven that such personal relationships, once established, continue to thrive, even after the project has finished. The Humanities and Social Sciences are particularly important in this respect. They form an integrating force by contributing to a better insight into each other's political, social, and economic concepts and in the way in which parties cope with issues of common interest.

The ARP should monitor and implement co-operative activities in research. This platform should be an umbrella organization for the wide range of high-quality scientific research in general and should be composed of representatives from major research institutions from both continents. It should be committed to promoting high quality science at a Eurasian level. In this platform Asia

and Europe can work closely together on topics of common interest. Research agendas and strategies will be designed and developed by a number of committees in which renowned scholars from Asia and Europe should participate. It should be funded by the ASEM member states.

Scientific work to be sponsored by the ARP should not be restricted to the Humanities and Social Sciences, but it should link to other forms of sciences as well. The ARP will have to work closely with already existing bodies such as the ASEF, the Asia-Europe Environment and Technology Centre (AEETC), and with EU-projects such as the Asia-Link Programme.

The establishment of an ASEM Research Platform under the aegis of ASEF, could lead to a division of labour between the intellectual exchange division of ASEF, which could concentrate on short-term projects, and the ARP on long-term projects. Such a construction could remedy the overemphasis in ASEM on trade and security issues. Needless to say, the ARP can build on the expertise in Asia-Europe relations assembled in the past ten years. A first step in the direction of building ARP is gathering all relevant information about ASEM which is now dispersed over a wide and unstructured number of sources. A portal is being constructed where all information about ASEM will be systematically ordered and made available, not only for research purposes but also to a wider audience, because the ultimate success of ASEM will depend on the active participation of the citizens of both continents.<sup>5</sup> Researchers can contribute to this goal by taking an Eurasian stance as starting point of their research endeavours.

The Eurasian research culture may directly engage the efforts of a couple of thousand scholars across the ASEM community. The spin off from their endeavours can be enormous. It derives its influence on the one hand through the formulation and analysis of the issues that move Asian and European governments and the media and on the other hand through the students trained and educated in this culture who move outside academia to other positions in society. The cost of developing and sustaining such a Eurasian research culture represents a small financial investment in comparison to the fruits that will certainly be derived from it. With the growing of the unilateralist attitude of the US in practically all matters, it seems more necessary than ever before that Europe and Asia should rediscover their own rich cultural and intellectual traditions for the benefit of the whole world.

<sup>5</sup>The web site of the ASEM Research Platform will be made available on September 1st, 2002 at: [www.IIAS.nl/ASEM](http://www.IIAS.nl/ASEM).