

August 30. 2022 – Zoe Bauer

The Forum ASEM as a "Laboratory for Multilateralism" - What Map of Multilateral Practices Can be Drawn from ASEM?

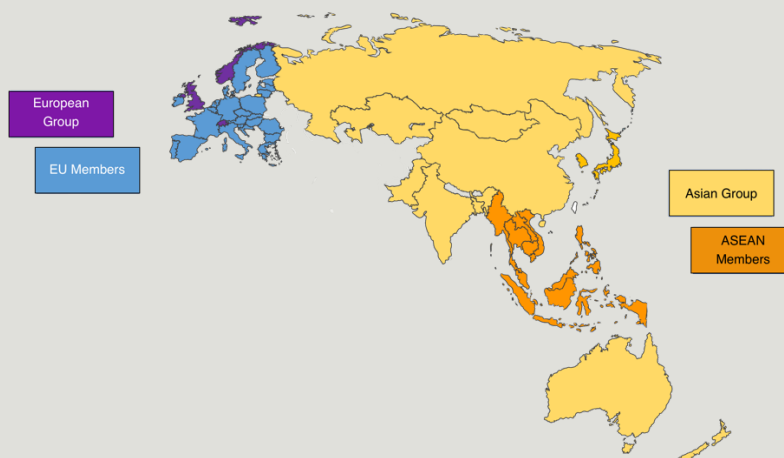
The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) can be used to map out multilateral practices. Such a map facilitates an overview of the multilateral network understanding, multidimensional aspirations, and communication strategies of the forum. These aspects, which are located somewhere between aspiration and reality, can help reimagine multilateralism, argues Zoe Bauer.

In a world that is currently undergoing significant change, according to [Kissinger \(2022\)](#), comparable to the transformation of the Enlightenment, multilateralism must be dynamically and continuously reimaged. The reimaging may be simplified by creating maps of multilateral practices at different scales (small, medium, large). Subsequently, we can evaluate these practices regarding their productivity for global order dynamics. The maps – whether focused on theoretical, empirical, or hybrid aspects – act as exploratory guideposts. They are lively and interactive, offering writers and readers an overview of possible multilateral practices, their paths, limits, and preconditions. Depending on the perspective, new details might be discovered or what has already been seen before may appear in a different light.

A proposal applied in the following sketches a case-specific, i.e. empirical and medium-scaled, map of practices based on the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) as a multilateral cooperation. ASEM is a suitable format because it pursues unusual aspects from a traditional point of view and thus stimulates us to reimagine. There are indeed many ASEM [criticisms](#) and information gaps due to a lack of [transparency](#), [communication](#), and [records](#). But enumerating these seems unproductive for sketching the envisioned map. Instead, I venture to map out alternatives for understanding and using ASEM as a "laboratory for multilateralism."

Presenting an outline of ASEM concisely is difficult, as the structure is complex and nested within itself. With its many facets, it is up to the viewer to decide which aspects to pay particular attention to when drawing (sections of) the map. Certain sights and paths, to stick to this allegory, are only discovered with an adjustment in scale or by including new symbols. Accordingly, drawing a map is an ongoing project. Sketching the key sites, however, appears to be a useful first step: ASEM is conspicuous for its institutional loose and informal character. Yet, there are a constant set of actors that create a fixed, albeit heterogeneous, group that allow for a temporal framing and regular exchange. The format combines different values and ideas of order, especially those coming from autocracies and democracies.

From an initial 26 members, the forum has grown since its founding in 1996 to 53 members, 51 states and two regional organizations, the EU and ASEAN. Members assign themselves to one of the two regions and are admitted on a "two key approach." ASEM currently has 30 European and 21 Asian countries. Regionality is understood broadly and measured against traditional standards in a novel, partly unusual way. For example, New Zealand and Australia, typically assigned to the West, belong to the Asian group. Membership is reinterpreted and appears in this context as a fluid concept. By its own account, ASEM represents 68% of the global trade, 60% of the global population, 65% of the global economy, and 75% of global tourism. Despite its interregional limitations, ASEM, with its scale and ambitions to shape international relations, undeniably fits the concept of a multilateral forum.



ASEM membership by regional group; own representation based on ASEM info board

The format's goal is to explore new spaces for action and opportunities for improved Asia-Europe relations. It yearns to serve as a "catalyst" for Asia-Europe relations. ASEM works with what is already in place, accelerates – so the ambition – the processes without being overbearing, and is not itself consumed by use. Forum activities consist of summit meetings (there have been 13 so far, the latest in 2021), ministerial meetings, meetings of senior officials, dialogue events, and initiatives. ASEM can be defined as an intergovernmental process with elements of civil society exchange. How exactly cooperation is to proceed without an institutionalized structure is subject to a constant process of dialogue and development.

What is striking when creating ASEM's (medium scaled) map of possible multilateral practices is the design of multilateralism as a process and a network (cf. "networking club"). The network is mobile and flexible due to its process-like character. It is to be understood as spatially multidimensional and extends across the axes actor, issue, and (influence) sphere.

Dynamic Networks

This network is placed within the three-dimensional field between the axes. ASEM is a multi-actor and multi-thematic platform and, additionally, the "main platform" for European-Asian exchange, i.e. across regions, offering various interconnections. This internal heterogeneity allows unusual interlocutors to meet, unique areas to be linked, and sensitive topics to be discussed in different group constellations. It involves different actors who, in the best case, communicate "cross-track." The network is constantly in motion: Actors are added or change their position; the topics are considered at varying depth depending on the world situation.

In the multi-level global governance system, ASEM occupies a novel policy level because it can be understood as a unique form of (new) interregionalism. The preparatory and supplementary work for other high-level meetings, the strengthening of interregionalism, and the continuing of regional integration – all in a non-military manner – are located on this intermediate level. It is first and foremost a platform for the exchange of opinions, the agreement on interests, and the search for solutions, without any claim to contractual binding results as a forum.

The designed network should have a trust-building and fragmentation-reducing effect. As a platform, ASEM is neither an actor nor a direct supplier of results but acts as an "enabler" of cooperation with symbolic value and benefit. From a theoretical perspective, it is a valuable addition to the global governance system, which, when used correctly in practice, can facilitate strategic partnerships and become a "policy tool" itself.

Note that ASEM is "merely" a small section of an extensive network of relationships and interactions. It forms a fine structure, but without connections beyond itself – whether through international rules and norms, national structures, or collaborative partners and their implementation efforts – the forum finds no foothold or position in the coarse structure of the comprehensive multi-level system that structures our world. Flexibility through the underlying informal and process-like operating mechanism, however, allows for easier adaptation than a more static entity with fixed procedures could provide.

In practice, the need for specification continues to prevail. Especially the "lack of results" – certainly a justifiable criticism even if the evaluation in detail is challenging due to missing transparency and data – weighs heavily. In principle, the following question is debatable: Can a forum justify itself as an "enabler," or does it need precise results and visible collective action to be productive for reimagining multilateralism?

Thematic Multidimensionality - Practical but too Complex?

ASEM's three thematic fields – the political, the economic, and the social – testify to its multidimensionality. The three areas, which in theory are often regarded as individual fields, are in practice closely interwoven and must be understood as strongly interdependent, especially given the significant challenges of today, such as climate protection and global security. With such an understanding, ASEM demonstrates great practical relevance. The forum has recognized the need to communicate in (inter)regional spaces of interaction in addition to national and global spaces and to seek ways and means at this level, too. Multilateral relations are to be strengthened within this multidimensionality.

Admittedly, this notion increases the complexity. The variety of topics mirrors reality but is equally confusing, too diverse and superficial for concrete output. The forum gets in its way of delivering progressive results. More concise and straightforward guidelines would be more manageable, goal-oriented, and consequently, it would facilitate ASEM's work.

Using the Momentum of a Buzzword

Linguistic adaptations enable the creative reimagining of multilateralism. Naming, defining, and communicating central terms and their conceptual basis create additional network nodes and spark new dynamics within a tighter network. In the case of ASEM, this can be observed by the concept of "[connectivity](#)," developed by the specially mandated ASEM Pathfinder Group on Connectivity (APGC) and presented in 2017. Its [definition](#) of bringing countries, people, and societies together does not represent a significant policy shift in ASEM's history. Creating connections between the regions has been the guiding policy since ASEM's establishment. Thus, the expenditure of additional resources is absent because the term is already embedded in prevailing structures. And yet the forum is experiencing an awakening following the buzzword. Conferences (like the [AESCON 2020 & 2022](#)), various [publications](#), the development of a "[guiding tool](#)" (TACC), and the establishment of a publicly available [data collection on interregional sustainable connectivity](#) followed. In line with current debates, the concept is focused on [sustainability](#), which now appears more centered in the [ASEM dialogue](#).

The bundling of such energies through clear concept-naming can be used productively – as a motivating moment – for chains of action. Motivation requires the right concept. "Connectivity" includes both the active "connecting" and the passive "being connected" with each other and thus demands the staking out of new spheres and the building on prevailing structures. The view of ASEM as a "laboratory of multilateralism" is conceptually advantageous, as it incorporates past attempts at collaboration and initiates and builds new experimental ideas of collaboration. "Connectivity," interpreted as connecting each other, creates multilateral possibilities for action through a mutual acquaintance and identifies common interests. These aspects are essential building blocks for joint sustainable

development in an ever-changing world.

Increased activity within the ASEM structure has been observed with the introduction of the connectivity concept, according to [Prakash and van der Putten \(2021\)](#). However, there is a lack of solid evidence that these events made a key contribution to promoting connectivity in the regions. The temporal dimension of momentum weighs particularly heavily. The activity curve that was triggered has long since passed its zenith, and the initial motivation that followed the introduction of the term is flattening out.

Dynamic Adaptations are Required

Constant adaptation ensures that a format remains relevant. Even if ASEM's structures are suitable for keeping transformations flexible, ASEM needs the continuous effort of initiatives to keep the process moving forward. Relationships within a network require a level of nurturing to be sustained. Both process and network are under constant threat if actors cease their efforts to collaborate.

Still, even if – or precisely because – the smooth running of ASEM does not work in practice, this case study allows us to draw a map of numerous paths of understanding multilateralism and the forum, for example, as a network, a process, or a catalyst. It provides us with forks in the paths, such as the reinterpretation of regionality or the deployment of a rhetorical term ("connectivity"). And it displays mountains and valleys, i.e. ups and downs of functioning. By conceiving ASEM as a "laboratory for multilateralism," we can find possible multilateral practices in both successful and unsuccessful attempts. This draft maps out areas by reimagining ASEM's multilateral forum specifically or multilateral formats more generally.

ASEM's approaches, as seen from the map, have strength in intergovernmental trust-building and cooperation that could, however, be significantly enhanced. Vertical accountability, for example, must be expanded to use mutual learning more productively. In particular, the results of people-to-people exchanges should be discussed "cross-track." They must experience greater relevance in the political field to tailor topics to concrete regional and social needs. Subsequently, the (digital) forum "[memory](#)" should be further developed (following the model of the [ASEM Info Board](#) or the [Sustainable Connectivity Portal](#)) so that interregional coordination,

transparency, and learning effects (despite maintaining informality) increase. General summit documents (as the visible output at the highest level) are more likely to cause resentment and should be refrained from in the future because they are, above all, "strong in rhetoric but weak in substance". In turn, the rhetorical advantage should be used elsewhere: The motivational force behind "connectivity" lies primarily in its conceptual strength for dynamic reinterpretation. However, it would be necessary to revive this momentum with appropriate initiatives and events or, instead, search for a new rhetorical impetus. In either case, terms and concepts help temper "'forum' fatigue."

The map unveils how additional spaces open up between global and national spheres and how these can be shaped in a concrete way, for example, informally, multi-dimensionally, and openly. The lessons learned from ASEM should serve as a model for different geographically-located exchanges by adopting productive structures such as the principle of open dialogue and by avoiding unproductive structures such as topic overload and a lack of follow-up events and transparency. Viewing forums as laboratories that generate and test new multilateral possibilities encourages the lively reimagining of multilateralism and principles of order. In the shifting of international cooperation, new and equally enduring forums emerge sporadically. One might assume they reveal "adapted" structures. And these forums have the power and ambition to shape. Therefore, these forums will play a role in the further development of international cooperation.

Filename: Blog-Beitrag #14 – ZB – The ASEM Forum as a Laboratory for
Multilateralism_PDF_EN.docx
Directory: /Users/jensbartsch/PowerFolders/Multilateralismus
weiterdenken/Webseite/Blogbeiträge
Template: /Users/jensbartsch/PowerFolders/Multilateralismus
weiterdenken/Eigene Publikationen/01.
Vorlagen/Multilateralismus_weiterdenken_Vorlage_DE.dotx
Title:
Subject:
Author: Jens Bartsch
Keywords:
Comments:
Creation Date: 10/12/2021 11:25:00
Change Number: 28
Last Saved On: 29/08/2022 16:01:00
Last Saved By: Jens Bartsch
Total Editing Time: 89 Minutes
Last Printed On: 29/08/2022 16:07:00
As of Last Complete Printing
Number of Pages: 7
Number of Words: 2.155
Number of Characters: 17.021 (approx.)