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“Multilateralism Light”?

**The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and the Rescue of
a Rules-Based International Order**

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“Multilateralism Light?” – The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and the Rescue of the Rules-Based International Order*

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Abstract:

Multilateralism has come under siege. The current crisis of multilateralism is the result of fundamental changes in the global power equation and the rise of an aggressive nationalist populism in many parts of the world. Major international organizations and institutions such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the Climate Change regime and regional organizations have become increasingly paralyzed. In that situation it was welcome that the ASEM 12 Summit held in October 2018 in Brussels came out with a chair statement which strongly called for the preservation of multilateralism and a rules-based international order. Yet this paper shows that the Asia-Europe Meeting’s (ASEM) seeming unity for the maintenance of a multilateral international order is fragile. Europe, Russia and major Asian ASEM members such as China pursue diverging ideas how a multilateral order should be shaped and reformed. They meet on the lowest common denominator which is variant of what has been called in the literature “diminished multilateralism.” If multilateralism is to be more than a talk shop, ASEM and other global fora must increasingly move towards the adoption of binding “hard law” elements.

Keywords:

Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), multilateralism, interregionalism, European Union, ASEAN, China

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1. Introduction

Multilateralism has come under siege (Weiss 2019). Major international organizations and institutions such as the United Nations (UN), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Climate Change regime and regional organizations including the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are increasingly paralyzed. While US President Donald Trump's "America First" policy and Brexit are the most visible symptoms of this development, the trend itself is not new. With the rise of new powers such as the BRICS states China, India, Russia, Brazil and South Africa and the failure of the West to accommodate them adequately and fairly in the existing global institutional architecture, strains emerged in the post-Cold War international order. This order is primarily shaped by Western liberal norms and decision-making procedures which in the international financial institutions (IFIs) in particular privilege Western nations. Starting in the late 1990s, due to lack of ownership, newly emerging regional and global powers began to consider this order to be illegitimate. In the process, existing international fora increasingly became arenas for power contests in which membership, decision-making procedures, norms and mandates are contested, with the result that negotiations of urgent global and regional policy issues were relegated to a backseat and often deadlocked (Rüland 2012, 2018; Pisani-Ferry 2019).

The emergence of right-wing nationalist populism in many parts of the world further jeopardizes multilateralism. These forces intentionally utilize fake news, oversimplification and blatant lies, and are hostile to globalization, globalism and global governance, which they regard as processes curtailing national sovereignty.² While in Europe right-wing populist parties in government have so far mainly been phenomena in Eastern European accession states including Hungary, Poland and Austria, since 2018 they have also governed in Italy, a founding member of the EU. But also in Western and Northern Europe, vocal Euro-skeptic parties, which disdain the inevitable complexities and compromise-prone, often lengthy and complicated negotiation processes of cross-border governance, have been voted into national and local parliaments. Even mainstream politicians such as the chairman of the German Christian Social Democrats (CSU), Markus Söder, approvingly declared the "end of orderly multilateralism."³ Outside the EU, Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, Vladimir Putin in Russia, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil also stand for mercurial populist foreign policy agendas, which show little regard for principled multilateral policies. With the election of US President Donald Trump and the decision of the British electorate to leave the European Union, the swing towards nationalist populism has reached a preliminary climax. As the leader of the world's most powerful nation, the contempt US President Trump has expressed for multilateral institutions is particularly worrisome. Within hours of assuming office, he withdrew from the Transpacific Partnership (TPP), a 12-member free trade agreement of Pacific Rim nations, followed by abandoning the Paris Climate Change Agreement of 2015 and rescinding the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran. In 2018 he also terminated the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, pulled out of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, withdrew from the UN Human

² Emblematic is US President Trump's speech to the United Nation's General Assembly in September 2018 in which he stated: "We reject the ideology of globalism, and we embrace the doctrine of patriotism," available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/09/1020472>, (accessed 20 April 2019).

³ Die Zeit, 29 June 2018.

Rights Council and repeatedly threatened to leave the WTO, complaining that the organization does not treat the US fairly. This went hand in hand with unilaterally slapping punitive tariffs on Chinese and European products, thereby commencing a trade war which involves hundreds of billions of US dollars.

It will take a long time to restore the trust, social capital and goodwill accumulated in the emerging global governance system of the immediate post-Cold War period if it gives way to what high-ranking Chinese officials have criticized as “zero-sum mentality” and “isolationism,” referring specifically to the United States.⁴ The current situation thus requires urgency in the search for defenses for a multilateral global order. One of the candidates for such a defense is the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), an interregional forum founded in 1996 in Bangkok.⁵ The twelfth ASEM Summit held in October 2018 in Brussels ended with a strong call for the persistence of a multilateral world order. According to the chair’s statement “recent international developments have boosted the relevance of ASEM as a building block for effective multilateralism and the rules-based international order anchored in international law and with the United Nations at its core.”⁶ The question addressed in this article is thus how far ASEM is indeed adequately prepared to act as a proponent and savior of multilateralism. The article will first discuss the assets of ASEM to contribute to such an objective, before evaluating its limits in a second step. The article ends with a conclusion, discussing concrete steps enabling ASEM to promote multilateralism beyond mere rhetoric.

2. How ASEM Helps to Protect Multilateralism

The twelfth meeting of the ASEM Summit took place under the theme of “Global Partners for Global Challenges,” a thinly veiled allusion to the unilateral, protectionist, and nationalist-populist tendencies in global politics cited above. It indicated that in a rapidly globalizing world with intensifying cross-border pathologies, international cooperation is beset by serious problems. Unsurprisingly, thus, the chair’s statement designated ASEM as “the main platform for Europe and Asia to strengthen dialogue, foster cooperation including on multilateralism and tackle global challenges together.”⁷ Although the chair’s statement did not mention the United States, and EU High Representative for European Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini was quick to declare that ASEM is not directed against anyone,⁸ many observers including the Chinese media regarded it as an important opportunity for Asian and European countries “to push back against US unilateralism.”⁹ Trump’s beggar-thy-neighbor foreign policy and essentially bilateral deal-making approach was certainly also on the mind of Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, when during an ASEM Summit plenary session titled “Reinforcing the Multilateral System” he explicitly warned that “if countries take a purely *realpolitik* approach, acting on the basis that might is

4 See an article contributed by Assistant Foreign Minister Zhang Ye to China Daily, 11 October 2018, and a speech by Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Opening of the Symposium on the International Situation and China's Foreign Relations in 2018, Thai News Service, 14 December 2018.

5 Including membership of the EU Commission and the ASEAN Secretariat.

6 ASEM Chair’s Statement, available at: <https://asean.org/chairs-statement-12th-asem-summit/>, (accessed 21 April 2019).

7 Ibid.

8 Federica Mogherini in an interview with Premium Official News, 19 October 2018.

9 Global Times, 19 October 2018.

right, they may gain in the short term, but they will forego many more opportunities for win-win cooperation in the long term. This will ultimately not be sustainable.”¹⁰ His words were echoed by EU Council President Donald Tusk for whom “a world without rules is by definition a world of chaos”¹¹ and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker who opined that “only the multilateral approach allows us to confront global challenges.”¹²

ASEM leaders shared the view that the United Nations Charter must remain the cornerstone of a multilateral order.¹³ Of similar significance for them is the preservation of the WTO and the multilateral trading system, which is a precondition for free, fair and non-discriminatory trade. Leaders thus highlighted “their commitment to comply with WTO rules, cooperating on rendering its dispute settlement system more effective, and redoubling on-going efforts aimed at WTO reform.”¹⁴

ASEM leaders also identified the Paris Climate Change accord, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the Iran nuclear deal, and the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula as significant multilateral achievements. In other words, they explicitly recognized that instabilities that arise from developments cutting across the political, military, economic, environmental and human dimensions can only be addressed effectively through a dense web of international dialogue and cooperation platforms.¹⁵

ASEM’s potential to champion multilateralism emanates from the fact that it is a large international forum by any standard. After five rounds of enlargement, it now counts fifty-three members.¹⁶ This represents more than a quarter of the globe’s nation states. Among ASEM’s members are some of the world’s most influential powers. Four of five permanent members of the UN Security Council – China, Russia, the United Kingdom and France – and three of five BRICS states – China, India and Russia – belong to the forum. Japan, Germany, Australia, South Korea, the EU and ASEAN are also active and influential international players. ASEM represents half of the world’s population and, economically, it stands for 50 percent of global GDP. Hosting the globe’s most dynamic economies, it handles 55 percent of worldwide trade. A forum of that size and stature that unanimously and vociferously supports multilateralism thus sends out a strong signal to the world that the dismantling of a rational, cooperation, dialogue, compromise and institution-based international order by its populist detractors is not a forgone conclusion.

The ASEM chair’s statement has revived an early scholarly debate about the forum’s functions in the emerging global governance architecture. In the 2000s, interregional fora were seen as a novelty in an increasingly vertically and horizontally differentiated system of global governance, in which interregionalism became an intermediate level of agency, linking regional and global politics (Rüland 1996, 2001, 2002, 2010, 2014; Doidge 2011). So-called “multilateral utility” functions (Dent 2004) were regarded as crucial for an effective multilateral order. “Multilateral utilities” boost global fora by making them more efficient,

10 The Straits Times, 20 October 2018.

11 Euractiv, 19 October 2018.

12 The Straits Times, 20 October 2018.

13 Chinese Politburo member Yang Jiechi at the Munich Security Conference. See China Daily, 17 February 2019.

14 ASEM Chair’s Statement, available at: <https://asean.org/chairs-statement-12th-asean-summit/>, (accessed 21 April 2019).

15 Hurriyet Daily News, 25 October 2018.

16 Including the EU Commission and the ASEAN Secretariat.

more democratic, more legitimate and more “nested,” that is, better integrated into the existing global governance architecture (Aggarwal 1998).

Interregional fora act as “multilateral utilities” if they facilitate international institution building, rationalizing global fora and agenda setting. Institution building refers to the fact that interregional fora constitute a new layer of action in the emerging system of global governance, complemented by subsidiary dialogue platforms, i.e. regular summits, ministerial meetings, senior official meetings, conventions of business leaders and *ad hoc* working groups. “Rationalizing” denotes the streamlining of overburdened global organizations by shifting unresolved problems downward to interregional or regional fora, and “agenda-setting” the advancement of new themes in international negotiations (Rüland 2006). However, viewed from hindsight, while interregional institution building has indeed been prolific (Hänggi 2006), it has only partly strengthened global governance. Interregional fora tend to be shallow and examples of effective rationalizing and agenda-setting are difficult to find (Yeo 2003; Bersick 2004; Loewen 2004; Robles 2008; Doidge 2011; Fehrmann 2014; Hulse 2017). Whether European-Asian policy coordination in global organizations and fora such as the WTO, the IMF, the World Bank and the G20 will thus intensify after the ASEM 12 Summit and its unreserved support for a multilateral order, as predicted by Chinese observers, remains to be seen.¹⁷

Normally, bilateralism is at variance with multilateralism and tends to entrench *realpolitik*. Great powers in particular prefer bilateral relations in which they can extract greater benefits for themselves than in multilateral settings due to their superior political leverage. However, under certain conditions, the bilateralism inherent in multilateral fora through informal meetings at their sidelines may also become a building block for regional and global multilateralism. In the absence of binding global or regional multilateral agreements, they may preserve rule-based politics as a second or third best option. Cases in point are the EU-Singapore free trade area (FTA) concluded at the ASEM Summit in Brussels¹⁸ and the Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) with Vietnam.¹⁹ The FTA is the first bilateral trade and investment deal between the EU and an ASEAN member state and thus may act as a precedent for additional agreements between the EU and ASEAN member states or even an incentive to create a so far elusive region-to-region FTA between the EU and ASEAN.²⁰ The “element of certainty”²¹ that Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong attributes to the FTA is certainly a key property of multilateral politics that can facilitate the transformation of bilateral agreements into multilateral policies. ASEM also facilitated the policy coordination at the sidelines of other multilateral fora such as the G20, for which the Asian members of ASEM – unlike the EU – did not have an established mechanism.²²

17 Statement by Chinese ambassador to the EU, Zhang Ming, in China Plus, 7 April 2019.

18 Channel News Asia, 19 October 2018.

19 Bridges Weekly, 25 October 2018.

20 Negotiations over an EU-ASEAN free trade area were put on hold in 2009 due to disagreements between the EU and ASEAN on Myanmar and the economic diversity among ASEAN member countries which militated against agreeable rule-making.

21 Asia Times, 23 October 2018.

22 East Asia Forum, 8 March 2009.

3. Why ASEM Cannot Be a Savior of Multilateralism – At Least Not Now

While it is very welcome that ASEM argues for a rules-based multilateral global order, further examination suggests that the forum has its limits in promoting and protecting multilateralism. The forum's size may legitimate its pro-multilateral stance and add force to it, but it is at the same time also an impediment as the call only rudimentarily glosses over great differences in the conceptualization of multilateralism (see also Christiansen & Tsui 2017: 246). Unsurprisingly, thus, ASEM's call for multilateralism is rather vague, barely concealing the great diversity of member interests.

The majority of old EU members are more oriented towards what can be described as a “principled” or “thick” multilateralism (Christiansen & Tsui 2017: 234); a multilateralism that is inspired by Ruggie's seminal post-Cold War definition denoting an

“institutional form which coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of generalized principles of conduct – that is principles which specify appropriate conduct for a class of actions, without regard to the particularistic interests of the parties or the strategic exigencies that may exist in any specific occurrence” (Ruggie 1992: 562).

Such a multilateralism prioritizes international law and relegates *realpolitik* and cunning political pragmatism to a secondary priority. This means that international law and its evolution should not be subordinated to short-term particularistic interests and strategic concerns as *realpolitik* and political pragmatism would demand. Rather should it facilitate the increasing legalization, contractualization and constitutionalization of international politics, thereby gradually transforming the essentially anarchical character of world politics into a system that would approximate the rules-based process of domestic politics characteristic of Western liberal democracies (Abbott & Snidal 2000; Zangl & Zürn 2004). As such a view of multilateralism assumes the existence of universal norms including (liberal) democracy and respect for (individual) human rights, it inevitably unfolds behind-the-border effects such as those inherent in the “responsibility to protect” norm if governments are not able or willing to implement such a normative order.

Asian states in their majority take issue with the Western brand of multilateralism, which they suspect as an attempt to establish “value hegemony” (Rüland 2012) and exert “soft” imperialism (Yeo 2018: 52). In other words, Western-type multilateralism is in their eyes precisely what Western governments deny: a subtle tool to shape the global institutional order and the power distribution within institutions in favor of the West. In particular, they resent the behind-the-border effects as a thinly veiled attempt to curtail the sovereignty of states that only a few decades ago had been colonized by Western powers.²³

It is thus no coincidence that Chinese representatives refer to the UN Charter with its emphasis on the equal sovereignty of states as the “cornerstone of the modern international order,”²⁴ as Politburo member Yang Jiechi did at the Munich Security Conference in February 2019. For China, and many other Asian states, sovereign equality including the non-

23 On the significance of sovereignty for non-Western states, see Mohammed Ayoob in his concept of “subaltern realism” (Ayoob 20002).

24 The full text of the speech was published by China Daily, 17 February 2019.

interference norm are “the most important norm[s] governing state-to-state relations.”²⁵ Although China insists that it is at the forefront of building “a new type of international relations featuring mutual respect, fairness, justice and win-win cooperation, and the building of a community with a shared future for mankind,” its actual behavior suggests that it is firmly rooted in a traditional Westphalian type of order that at best retains what could be described as a “diminished,” “selective” and “executive” multilateralism. While emphasizing that its gigantic infrastructure and connectivity project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is a Chinese production of public goods and a “win-win” endeavor for all participants, the reality is far from this lofty rhetoric. The BRI policy that “if you cannot repay Chinese investment economically, you repay politically,” shows how far the BRI is from an equitable distribution of gains. Economically, it cements an asymmetric relationship in which recipients of BRI investments repay with raw materials; politically it tends to replace US-centric dependencies with Sino-centric ones.

While the official Chinese global governance philosophy celebrates “consultation and cooperation for shared benefits,” claims to firmly uphold “rules-based multilateralism,” and vows to “support the UN system as the key platform of global governance,”²⁶ it actually uses multilateral institutions for “soft” or institutional balancing and forum shopping, which is only marginally nested with existing institutional arrangements and thus leads to institutional redundancy. The multilateral institutions China and other Asian members of ASEM prefer are flexible broad-band consultative institutions conducive for institutional *realpolitik* and producing “soft law” at best. The BRI is primarily a large-scale balancing exercise to the American Pivot to the Asia-Pacific (Campbell 2016) and more recently the “Indo-Pacific” initiative of the Quad promoted by the US, Japan, Australia and India. Both policies are – not without reason – suspected in Beijing as strategies to contain or even encircle China. Another typical example of soft-balancing is the 16+1 Forum (with the recent accession of Italy, 17+1)²⁷ which China established with Eastern European countries, many of them members of the EU. While Beijing denies any intention of driving a wedge into the EU, it nevertheless consciously exploits “internal inconsistencies within Europe,” as a Chinese observer caustically argued.²⁸ It is no coincidence that states like Greece and Hungary diluted EU declarations on the maritime dispute in the South China Sea where many European and Asian governments see China operating outside the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).²⁹ The 16+1 Forum resembles the shallow hybrid-type interregional fora such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) and the Forum of China and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) that China has established with other world regions in its multilayered version of multilateralism (Feng 2019). Typical examples of forum shopping are the formation of the BRICS New Development Bank Asian Infrastructure and the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB), which the US government and many Western observers, irrespective of emerging cooperative ties, regard as challenges to the rule-setting capacity of Western-dominated IFIs such as the IMF, the World Bank and regional development banks such as the

25 Ibid.

26 Foreign Minister Wang Yi in a speech opening the Symposium on “The International Situation and China's Foreign Relations,” re-printed by the Thai News Service, 14 December 2018.

27 The National Herald, 13 April 2019.

28 China Daily, 12 October 2018.

29 Reuters, 15 July 2016.

Asian Development Bank (ADB), in which Japan has a major stake. While Zhang's assessment is certainly correct that China pursues a multilateralism that is essentially guided by political realism and seeks to establish a multipolar international order (Zhang 2012: 181), it should not be overlooked that the EU, too, has its due share in forum shopping inspired by political realism: the numerous bilateral hybrid interregional relationships, designated as "strategic partnerships" (Drechsel 2015), it has established with China, India, Russia, Japan, ASEAN and others exhibit a considerable amount of institutional overlap with ASEM.

The multilateralism that China and many Asian countries champion is not only a shallow and hence "diminished" multilateralism, but also a "selective" multilateralism: multilateralism is promoted where it serves its adherents. Even the EU – despite pronouncements in favor of a robust multilateralism – supports the selective promotion of multilateralism; at least in the ASEM context. Given the fact that China and the EU regard themselves as the greatest victims of US President Trump's unilateral trade policies,³⁰ it is hardly surprising that they prioritize the retention of WTO-driven trade multilateralism over other multilateral policy fora. Both strongly and persistently emphasize the significance of the WTO for an open world economy and as a defense against Washington's protectionist trade policies. While European and Asian members of ASEM seek to protect global trade multilateralism, they also agree that the WTO needs reform, although details remain vague.

Beyond the common call for retaining and reforming the WTO, major disagreements in the domain of trade policies persist. The EU has so far not accorded "market-economy" status to China, which would relieve it from anti-dumping pressures on low-cost exports, and it shares a litany of American concerns: limited access for European firms to the Chinese market, forced technology transfers for European investors in China, rampant Chinese acquisitions of technology-intensive companies in Europe as a move to facilitate its "Made in China 2025" strategy, poor intellectual property protection, state subsidies for Chinese companies, currency manipulation and industrial espionage.³¹ The acrimonies at the latest EU-China Summit testify to these disagreements.³² Although China vehemently denies these charges, the issues at hand show how difficult it is to agree on global trade rules. The limited trust of the EU towards China is reflected in the EU's new China strategy adopted on 12 March 2019, which describes China as "a systemic rival" employing alternative management models and as an "economic competitor seeking technological leadership."³³

Yet the EU also only reluctantly gives up unfair trade practices affecting many developing countries such as agricultural subsidies and its strong role in the WTO's non-transparent mini-lateral decision-making process which also works to the detriment of developing countries. Given their inconsistent policies, which are guided by the desire to realize short-term gains, it cannot be excluded that in the end the EU as well as China may negotiate bilateral agreements with the US, which would further weaken WTO-based trade multilateralism.³⁴

30 Global Times, 19 October 2018.

31 Euractiv, 8 September 2006; Fondation Robert Schuman, 29 May 2017; CGTN, 16 October 2018.

32 Euractiv, 5 April 2019.

33 Modern Diplomacy, 7 April 2019.

34 East Asia Forum, 4 February 2019.

ASEM also champions multilateralism in the environmental domain, strongly pleading for upholding the Paris Agreement on Climate Change which the US has left. But here, too, the track record of Europe and Asia is not persuasive. The EU as a self-declared trend-setter in environmental policies is far behind its targets for CO₂ reduction. In the wake of rapidly increasing air and water pollution, China and other Asian states have undertaken major steps towards a cleaner environment at home. However, while China is in the process of becoming a global leader in renewable energies including solar, wind and hydropower, neither China nor Japan have ceased exporting coal-fired power plants to neighboring countries (Zou & Zhang 2017). Although both claim that they export the latest carbon capture and storage technology, it is questionable whether the latter delivers what its adherents promise. Documents and scholarly accounts abound that show that environmental concerns are grossly neglected not only in Chinese BRI infrastructure projects, but also in competing Japanese, South Korean and Thai projects in the Asian region. Environmental impact assessments are either completely missing or based on the poor standards of the host countries.³⁵

Disagreements over international law and rule-based policies can also be found in the security domain. China's maritime claims in the South China Sea are not compatible with UNCLOS. Aided by Russia, which claimed the "West was hectoring,"³⁶ China did not accept the ruling of the International Court of Justice on the South China Sea in July 2016. During past ASEM Summits Beijing made clear that it did not want to see the issue on the summit agenda as it does not regard ASEM as the appropriate venue for discussing maritime disputes.³⁷ Furthermore, China vocally opposes any activity that undermines its sovereignty and security interests under the pretext of freedom of navigation and overflight, the position taken by the US and other Western as well as Asian countries.³⁸ ASEM member Russia also, with its objective of creating a "post-Western world order" (Brunnée 2018: 337), its *realpolitik*-driven attitudes towards multilateralism (Utkin 2018), its annexation of the Crimea, its support of insurgents in eastern Ukraine, the downing of Malaysian airliner MH17 over eastern Ukraine in 2014 and the non-implementation of the Minsk agreement shows disregard for the UN norms of non-aggression and peaceful conflict settlement and make it a strange bedfellow for strengthening a multilateral global order.

Another area where Asian and European interests at first sight coincide is connectivity. Infrastructure development as promoted by the BRI and the EU Asia-Europe Connectivity Scheme finalized in September 2018 may – if well-coordinated and sustainably implemented – accelerate trade between Asia and Europe, which already exceeds Trans-Pacific trade.³⁹ While the EU maintains that the European connectivity scheme and BRI are complementary, others are not so sure and rather view the European scheme as a competitive response to the BRI. At stake are norms of development policy, which differ markedly. While the Chinese concept claims to avoid conditionalities and other forms of intrusion into the sovereignty of host countries, with the effect that many projects are beset by severe environmental,

35 Inter alia, Phnom Penh Post, 24 November 2016; Myanmar Times, 4 September 2017; Earthrights International, "Don Sahong Dam," available at: <https://earthrights.org/case/don-sahong-dam/> (accessed 28 November 2018); South China Morning Post, 16 August 2018.

36 Reuters, 16 July 2016.

37 Ibid.

38 China Daily, 17 February 2019.

39 Asia Times, 23 October 2018.

economic and fiscal problems, the Europeans – similar to the Japanese with their concept of “Quality Infrastructure” – highlight “sustainable, comprehensive and rules-based connectivity” as well as connectivity based on “sound regulatory frameworks,” “fiscal responsibility” and “open-market rules,”⁴⁰ a thinly veiled allusion to the divergent views on the economic policies discussed above. The EU thus seeks to protect Western development policies as laid down by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which the Chinese government disdains due to their sovereignty-curtailing nature and long gestation periods.⁴¹

Finally, ASEM-driven multilateralism – as ASEM itself – is “executive” multilateralism. It is dominated by governments and bureaucracies. Other stakeholders play a marginal role at best. The Asia-Europe Parliamentary Partnership (ASEP), ASEM’s parliamentary platform, has only symbolic value and is regarded as ineffective by European parliamentarians (Rüland & Carrapatoso 2015: 209). Dialogue with civil society is outsourced to the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), which organizes useful meetings, but with limited resources and led by diplomats it is hardly able to organize credible and institutionalized government-civil society interfaces. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang argued that there should be more exchanges between “our parliaments, social organizations, think tanks, universities and media outlets,” but the purpose of these interactions is in the first place the fostering of mutual “understanding and friendship between our peoples,”⁴² and not the debate of crucial themes shaping Asian and European relations. Rather than democratizing interregional relations, ASEM is a case of interregional corporatism.⁴³

4. Conclusion

This article has argued that the promotion of multilateralism by ASEM is welcome. ASEM’s call for a multilateral global order at the ASEM 12 Summit has certainly increased the forum’s relevance and stature and made it a rhetorical antipode to US President Trump’s protectionist and unilateralist “America First” policies. Yet the article also shows that the common stance for multilateralism is fragile. European and Asian states differ markedly in their conceptualization of a multilateral global order. While the EU at least rhetorically seems to opt for a robust, “thick” and “principled” multilateralism based on liberal norms, many Asian states opt for what may be characterized as a “diminished,” “selective” and “executive” multilateralism. As a large, 53-member forum, which acts on the basis of the lowest common denominator, the prospects are slim that ASEM’s plea for multilateralism goes beyond a “thin” version of multilateralism. A pluralist “multiplex” order as favored by Acharya (2018) or the club-based institutional architecture proposed by Pisani-Ferry (2019) may chart ways for avoiding an international order based on the law of the jungle as preferred by irresponsible right-wing populists, but whether it contributes effectively to the solution of increasingly pressing global and regional cross-border problems remains to be seen and depends on whether proliferating “regime complexes” indeed stand for modernization-driven and

40 Ibid.

41 Statement by a Chinese scholar at a BRI conference in Brussels, 16 and 17 November 2018.

42 China Daily, 18 October 2018.

43 On the concept of “regional corporatism,” see Rüland (2014).

problem-oriented specialization and differentiation of international institutions as expected by Zürn and Faude (2013).

Moreover, as ASEM itself is a typical example of “diminished” multilateralism, it cannot be a role model for a robust multilateral order. If it wishes to be such a role model, bolder institutional reforms will be required. In that case, ASEM must move beyond its non-binding, basically consultative format and must enter the realm of “hard law.” Binding decisions and reliably coordinating Asian-European policies in global fora – as demanded by the concept of “multilateral utility” – are likewise required. Its members must withstand the ubiquitous temptation of forum shopping and seriously engage in the existing structure of multilateral institutions.

With more ambitious functions and mandates, which credibly promoting a robust multilateral order would entail, ASEM must also professionalize and overcome its still laundry list-like programmatic work, which strongly depends on summit hosts. Therefore, the creation of a secretariat, deeper institutionalization and democratization in pursuit of the “most affected principle” are urgently needed for consistent policy generation and monitoring purposes. Yet diplomats from both regions are wary of such institutional reforms, which would undoubtedly weaken government influence on the agenda of ASEM.

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List of Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEF	Asia-Europe Foundation
ASEM	Asia-Europe Meeting
ASEP	Asia-Europe Parliamentary Partnership
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
CASCF	China-Arab States Cooperation Forum
CELAC	Forum of China and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States
CSU	Christian Social Union
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
EU	European Union
FLEGT	Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade
FOCAC	Forum on China-Africa Cooperation
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
IFI	International Financial Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
OECD	Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development
TPP	Transpacific Partnership
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
US	United States
VPA	Voluntary Partnership Agreement
WTO	World Trade Organization



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