



NEXT TIME, AT ASEM!

Theory and Practice of Interregional Relations: Russia, Take Note



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Overtaken by the world crisis, many countries and regional centers of power are looking around for more opportunities they could use in international economic cooperation. The crisis, though, reveals snags in the established integration models that call for hard thinking and bold decision-making to cope with.

Emergence of a group of growth economies was a clear pointer that geoeconomics is coming to play a central role in international relations. The new growth centers are not so much individual spearhead countries as nations advancing within regional boundaries. Hence the importance of giving more thought to regional and interregional connections and, in particular, the potential of the dialogue-oriented Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and Russia's relationships with it.

INTERREGIONAL COOPERATION CONCEPT

The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is one of the earliest forums that put substance into the idea of cooperation between several regional organizations. Understandably enough, the summit meeting gave much food for thought to journalists and theorists alike. They viewed ASEM as a step toward globalization



through regional integration, and discussed prospects for combining the world's three economic growth centers – Europe, East Asia, and North America.¹

Uncertainty that set in following the end of the Cold War made the idea of a tripartite union of this type look overwhelming and overoptimistic at the same time. In fact, the links between the U.S. and Europe, or between the U.S. and East Asia were much stronger than they were between Europe and East Asia. Anyway, the U.S. was squinting skeptically at ASEM from the start.² As for Russia, it was just ignored. It was almost axiomatic that Europe and Asia could manage well without it.

The approach to an analysis of ASEM that is already a tradition grew out of interregional studies that focused on institutionalized relationships between groups of countries in different regions of the world.³

A group of researchers considers interregional relations as a stage on the way to global multipolar unity. The poles, though, are not great powers; rather, they are large and relatively homogeneous regional clusters.⁴ Co-hegemony of the three political and economic powers referred to above is a variant of this system.⁵

Another group of writers links interregionalism to a search for regional identities. This is, perhaps, less of a problem for Europe than it is for East Asia where regional integration follows an indigenous scenario.⁶

Next comes a school of research that sees interregional initiatives as part of a multi-tiered global management structure taking form just now.⁷ Along with the new global formats such as the Group of 20 and BRIC, these initiatives gain development impetus from the world crisis. Within these initiatives the interests of burgeoning centers of power are tied in with those of the old development centers.

Interregional (and regional, too, for that matter) associations can provide discussion platforms for debating and settling all manner of issues before they are introduced at higher levels.⁸ In this sense, they can be more effective than groups of interests arising spontaneously at the global forums proper. Indeed, one way or another, members of such associations have agreed already to cooperate, sketched a roadmap for their continued development, and settled on decision-making methods.

The phenomenon of interregional associations and studies devoted to them are a sign that the long-lived views of regions and regionalism are badly in need of reviewing. It is time already to look at Europe and Asia as macro-regions in formation. And to see them as areas involved in the global political and economic context, just as Russia is, too. Taking note of all



that, let's look back upon the history of ASEM and weigh up its chances of expanding in 2010.

ASEM YESTERDAY AND TODAY

The ASEM core is made up of the European Union and ASEAN, above all. It will hardly take a long time to understand that the geographic, cultural, and historical boundaries of Europe and Asia are larger than those accommodating these integrated groups. Why then do they have a special role in this situation?

The idea of interregional dialogue between Europe and Asia did not crop up overnight. It goes back to the 1970s when dialogue between the European Community and ASEAN was fine-tuned. Sometime later, the dimensions of incipient Europe-Asia dialogue were discussed at a World Economic Forum in Switzerland, and the EU and ASEAN delegates borrowed this idea for themselves.

Following preliminary arrangements at the ministerial level, the first ASEM summit gathered in Bangkok in March 1996. The successive summits were hosted every two years in rotation by countries representing the European and Asian parts of the forum.* Different views were voiced on ASEM membership criteria. Criteria formalized for new members by the end of the 1990s required a country to be located geographically in either Europe or Asia, maintain close political and economic ties with ASEM members, and be able to contribute to forum development. It was also assumed that a country applying for membership was to be approved by the countries in its area.⁹

For all that, Russia, the biggest country straddling the dividing line between Europe and Asia and having vital interests in both, was kept waiting for its turn to be admitted to ASEM for a long time, notwithstanding its desire to join the forum. The delay called into question the adequacy of Europe-Asia cooperation unless Russia was involved.

Today, ASEM comprises the European Commission, the Secretariat of the Association of Southeast Asian Countries, and forty-three countries – EU and ASEAN members, the Association's partners in the ASEAN+3 formula (China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea), India, Pakistan, and Mongolia. ASEM discusses political and economic cooperation, security, culture, and education. Apart from collaboration at the interstate level, contacts are developed

* The forum convened its summits in London in 1998, Seoul in 2000, Copenhagen in 2002, Hanoi in 2004, Helsinki in 2006, and Beijing in 2008.



between businesspeople and the general public. The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) financed by ASEM members has been made responsible for planning joint projects in cultural, educational, and scientific exchanges.

The Eighth ASEM Summit has been scheduled to take place in Brussels on October 4 and 5, 2010, under the motto “Improving the Quality of Life.” Its agenda covers issues such as promotion of cooperation between the regions in the face of the world crisis, problems caused by climate change, and cultural dialogue. The summit is expected to stimulate expansion of ties between Europe and Asia by admitting new members – Russia, Australia, and New Zealand – at the Brussels ASEM Summit.

In the situation brought about by the world crisis, relations between the two macro-regions are clearly in need of a new approach. At a time when the European economy is mired in structural problems, developing Asian markets take on special importance for it.¹⁰ ASEM expansion offers a good occasion to reappraise the content of this format and to give a new quality to interregional relations.

ASEM’s performance, no matter how it is assessed today, is basically in line with a key world trend, which is looking for ways of co-development and giving consideration to the competitive strengths of neighbors and partners as an alternative to development within the framework of a single country or region that wants to show off its self-worth. Trends and structures of internal development have been cleared up, more or less, at the main regional integration centers. The experience gained can be used to build up interregional ties and look for ways to institutionalize them optimally. ASEM could be held up as a positive example of interregional cooperation.

Development of new global and regional mechanisms is a sign that the international community is searching for cooperation formats in which members use their resources and capabilities in the best way possible for the benefit of all and everybody. In turn, this suggests that formats patterned on ASEM will be more and more in demand. Hopefully, Russia is not seeking ASEM membership just for the sake of being put on the list of yet another international club, but is really running with the times.

RUSSIA IN ASEM: MORE THAN A COURTESY CALL?

After Russia applied for ASEM membership, it was told to cool its heels in reception for some time on the pretext that its geographical location did not make it fully European or fully Asian. No one seemed to remember, though,



that its Eurasian landmass joins these two continents physically together, and thus the Asia-Europe Meeting without Russia is a challenge to commonsense. No wonder that down here, in Russia, ASEM was viewed as an example of closed regionalism.¹¹

Interestingly, Russia is about to be admitted to ASEM at a time when the traditional concept of regions and integration models is changing under the impact of macro-regionalization. Nor is it important any longer to give a precise answer to the question where a country belongs geographically. Brussels does not insist on hearing it from Russia, or Australia, or New Zealand.

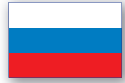
In a sense, accession to ASEM is a sign of “normalization” in Russia’s foreign policy, and, by the same token, “normalization” of the attitude to Russia itself and recognition of its potential to contribute to interregional cooperation. If both Europe and Asia are regarded as macro-regions in the making, Russia as an area full of opportunities to link the EU and East Asia is not going to be an also-ran in ASEM. It won’t be a stranger at the party – it already has a treaty of partnership and cooperation with the EU and many years of experience of involvement in APEC and ARF, and it is also a dialogue partner of ASEAN.

The idea of linking Europe and Asia across Russia is nothing new, of course. Nevertheless, it would be strange not to use ASEM membership for promoting and completing infrastructure projects of Eurasian scale with Russia’s involvement. Russia would do better making haste before China and Central Asian countries build their own tracks where it suits them best.

How realistic is it for Russia to use ASEM as an additional mechanism for integrating it into world economic relations on fair terms?¹² This is a question not so much of theory as of practice. Russian business companies are to give an answer to themselves and us, too. ASEM business forums offer them an opportunity to seek out suppliers of technologies and investments, and buyers of both, and put forward initiatives to many potential investors in the East and West at a time.

In humanitarian cooperation, we expect, among other things, Russian experts and scientists to be in high demand for science research programs sponsored by ASEM.

Finally, accession to ASEM is a reminder to the Russian government and political elite of the need to coordinate the country’s Western and Eastern policy, an important task that has not yet been grasped by all. To put it in simple terms, Russia’s Asian policy has to be related to its basic foreign policy objectives in the Atlantic area, and the other way around. The opportunities



available to Russia for co-development with ASEAN and EU (and, in a broader sense, with the Asian and European macro-regions) with accession to the Asia-Europe Meeting are to be put in this context only. ■

NOTES:

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2. D.B. Bobrow, "The U.S. and ASEM: Why the Hegemon Didn't Bark," *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 12, #1, 1999, p. 106.
3. J. Gilson, "Asia Meets Europe: Interregionalism and the Asia-Europe Meeting," Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2002, pp. 1-8.
4. M. Reiterer, "Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM): Fostering a Multipolar World Order through Inter-regional cooperation," *Asia Europe Journal*, #7, 2009, pp. 179-188.
5. C. Dent, "The Asia-Europe Meeting and Inter-regionalism: Toward a Theory of Multilateral Utility," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 44, #2, 2004 (March/April), pp. 213-236.
6. J. Gilson, *Op. cit.*, p. 3.
7. J. Ruland, "Interregionalism and the Crisis of Multilateralism: How to Keep the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Relevant." *European Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 11, 2006, pp. 45-49.
8. M. Reiterer, *Op. cit.*, p. 181.
9. S.M. Trush, *Tret'ya vstrecha ASEM i Rossiya* [Third Meeting of ASEM and Russia], *SSbA Kanada: Ekonomika, politika, kul'tura*, #9, 2000, pp. 80-81.
10. Sh. Islam, "Asia, Europe Must Not Drift Apart," *Asia Sentinel*, July 13, 2010.
11. See, for example: S. Sevastyanov, *Regionalism v Vostochnoy Azii i Rossiya* [Regionalism in East Asia and Russia], *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnyye otnosheniya*, #12, 2008, p. 103.
12. For more about Russia's basic goals and interests in the Far East, see: *Stenograficheskiy otchyot o soveshchaniy po sotsial'no-ekonomicheskomu razvitiyu Dal'nego Vostoka i sotrudnichestvu so stranami Aziatsko-Tikhoookeanskogo regiona* [Stenographic Report on the Meeting on Socioeconomic Development of the Far East and Cooperation with Countries of the Asia-Pacific Region], July 2, 2010, URL: www.kremlin.ru/transcripts/8234.