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## **Southeast Asians and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM)**

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# **Southeast Asians and the Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM)**

**State's Interests and  
Institution's Longevity**

**EVI FITRIANI**



**INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES**

*Singapore*

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*For my daughters, Hana and Zirly,  
for their love and company during the steep path*

*And for my parents  
for their love and prayers*



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# FOREWORD

There is already a very large literature on regional institutions. Why should Evi Fitriani's new book, *Southeast Asians and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM): State's Interests and Institution's Longevity*, merit the attention of readers? In my view, there are two core reasons why this book deserves attention and, indeed, is quite likely to win attention.

One is the volume's distinctive focus. Fitriani examines one of the least explored and least appreciated of the major regional bodies — the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) — and she brings to it a self-consciously Southeast Asian perspective. ASEM has received relatively less attention than the other high-profile regional groupings in part because its trans-regional nature has been seen by many as having an inherent implausibility about it. Could a body that aimed to link two very large and very different regions — each of which is highly heterogeneous — really amount to anything, or even sustain high-level political engagement for more than a brief period?

Fitriani explores the reasons ASEM has endured despite widespread scepticism. She supplements her assessment of the scholarly literature with a valuable body of empirical evidence arising from an extensive range of interviews she conducted with key players across Southeast Asia. This offers a distinctive window onto the dynamics of ASEM that has not previously been available to us.

If one reason to pay attention to this book is the distinctive focus of the scholarship, a second — perhaps less immediately apparent — reason is what this author represents. Evi Fitriani is in the vanguard of a rising cohort of Indonesian social scientists who are not content to speak only to local debates inside Indonesia, but seek also to engage with global scholarly

discourse. There is a determination and confidence in this cohort that cannot be overlooked.

This is an altogether welcome development. Indeed, international research ventures and funding bodies are now keen to engage with Fitriani and her cohort. We can all look forward to hearing more from this new wave of Indonesian scholarly voices, and Evi Fitriani's will be prominent among them.

*Andrew MacIntyre  
Deputy Vice-Chancellor International and Vice-President  
RMIT University, Australia  
June 2014*

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The study of the relations between Asia and Europe in the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) that underlines this book is an actualization of my interest in and passion for the two regions. Having lived and studied in both regions, I have captured some of the pain, neglect, suspicion, and misunderstanding as well as admiration and respect of the Asian and European people towards each other. The establishment of ASEM in 1996 seemed to be a long-needed remedy for the Asians and the Europeans. However, ASEM does not shine robustly in bridging the relationship and seems to have been marginalized in global affairs. With these concerns and questions, I have studied ASEM for the last six years.

This book is the result of my learning process to which many people have contributed. My supervisors, Professor Andrew MacIntyre and Professor Jennifer Corbett, are deeply instrumental in this learning process. Rather sceptical about ASEM but very supportive of my study, Andrew has motivated me to overcome the challenges along the way. Jenny's supportive advice and trouble-shooting approach have maintained this learning process in several stages. In addition, many people from the Australian National University (ANU) have also helped me during my research. I want to thank Professor John Ravenhill, Dr Wendy Noble, Assistant Professor Yusaku Horiuchi, Professor John Uhr, Professor Richard Mulgan and Dr Sue Holzknicht. Moreover, several people and institutions need to be acknowledged for assistance during data collection. The late Dr Hadi Soesastro was instrumental in helping me formulate the initial idea of this research and gave his continued support. I want to express my sincere gratitude to all of my interviewees and resource persons, the management and staff of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF)

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Several institutions have made this study possible through financial support. The AusAID through the Australian Development Scholarship (ADS) and its liaison officer Mrs Billie Headon provided generous support for me and my family. The ANU vice chancellor's office and the Crawford School funded my fieldwork and my travels to conferences in Melbourne and Kyoto. ASEF sponsored my observation in Copenhagen.

It would have been impossible to finish the research for this book without the support and prayers of my family. My parents, my sister, and my husband are very important in this learning process. My two angel daughters, Anisa Hanawari Sukarno (Hana) and Anindhita Nayazirly Sukarno (Zirly), are the source of my spirit and strength; it was a desire to motivate them to achieve their dreams that sustained me in many hard times and challenges during this research.

Last but not least, I want to thank the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), including the reviewers and editors, for publishing this book. I hope it is useful.

*Jakarta, July 2012*  
*Evi Fitriani*

# ABBREVIATIONS

AECF	Asia-Europe Cooperation Framework
AEPF	Asia-Europe People Forum
AEYNSD	Asia-Europe Youth Network for Sustainable Development
AEYPLS	Asia-Europe Young Political Leaders' Symposium
AEVG	Asia-Europe Vision Group
AFTA	ASEAN Free Trade Agreement
ASEF	Asia-Europe Foundation
ASEAN	Association of the Southeast Asian Nations
ASEM	Asia–Europe Meeting
APEC	Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation
APT	ASEAN Plus Three
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
CAEC	Council of Asia-Europe Cooperation
CAFTA	China–ASEAN Free Trade Agreement
EC	European Commission
EC	European Community
EAEC	East Asian Economic Caucus
EAEG	East Asian Economic Group
EAS	East Asia Summit
Ec. SOM	Economic Senior Official Meeting
EP	European Parliament
ESDP	European Security and Defence Policy
EU	European Union
Fin. MM	Financial Ministers Meeting
FMM	Foreign Ministers Meeting

FTA	Free Trade Agreement
Mercusor	Association of the South American Countries
MFA	Ministers of Foreign Affairs
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NGO	Non-Government Organization
NLD	National League for Democracy
PM UNSC	Permanent Member of the United Nations' Security Council
SAARC	South Asia Association of Regional Cooperation
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SOM	Senior Officials Meeting
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
TAC	Treaty of Amity and Cooperation
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
US	United States
WTO	World Trade Organization
WG	Working Group

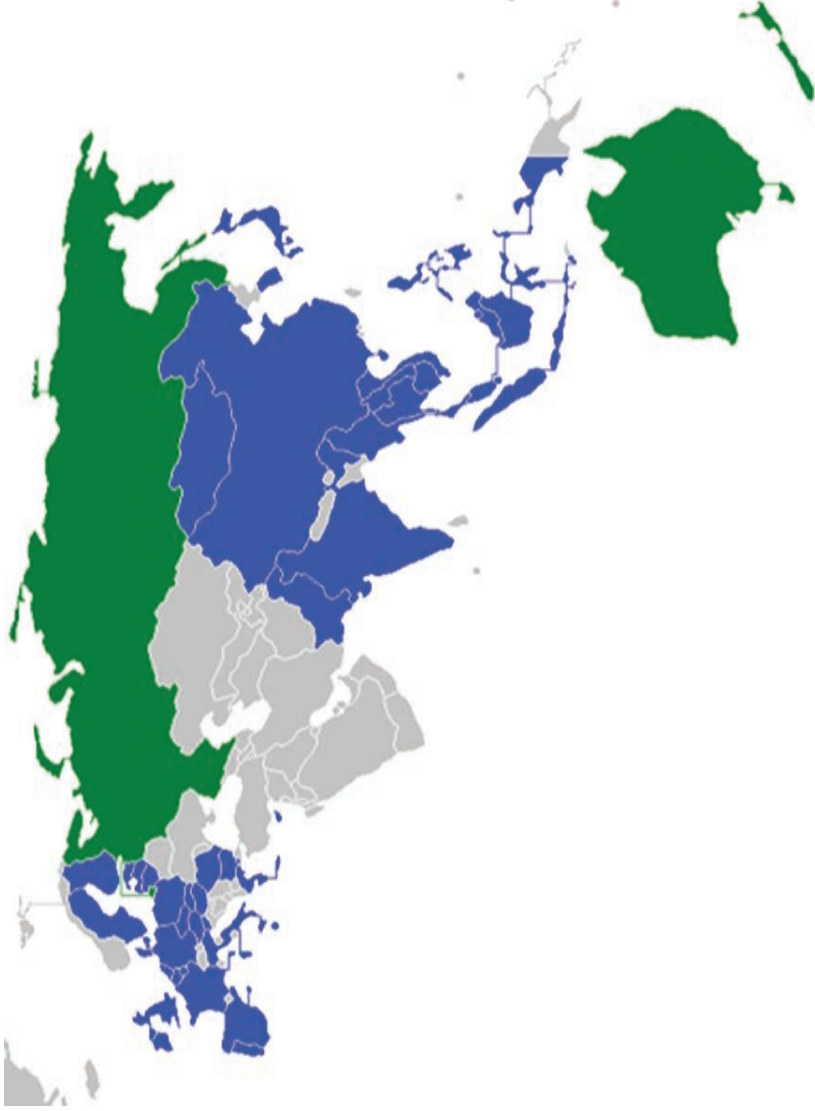


**MAP 1**  
**Map of ASEM Partner Countries 1996–2008**



*Source:* The ASEM Education Secretariat 2010, Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), <<http://www.asem-education-secretariat.org/en/12183/>> (accessed 17 May 2010).

MAP 2  
ASEM Countries After 2010 Enlargement



Source: Wikipedia.org, <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:ASEM.PNG#file>> (accessed 6 December 2011).

# INTRODUCTION

The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), established in 1996, to foster inter-regional relations between Asia<sup>1</sup> and Europe,<sup>2</sup> has attracted little attention in either of the two regions, so much so that the longevity of this institution poses a puzzle. On the one hand, the region-to-region relations between Asia and Europe in ASEM are suggestive of a new pattern of interactions in international relations, which may lead to different outcomes in global affairs as compared to traditional state-to-state relations. On the other hand, that ASEM exists at all is not generally known, and ASEM Summits have attracted little media coverage. ASEM has been criticized from inside and outside as being merely a “talk shop” that considers a variety of broad topics, but has no political will to bring the talk to reality, and lacks the capacity to implement its intentions. ASEM has, however, survived until today, and one of the most important reasons for this survival is the persistent attendance of Southeast Asian leaders and participants in the ASEM forums.

For Southeast Asian countries, the region-to-region relations between Asian and European countries in ASEM have some characteristics that are unusual in terms of their engagements in regional and global affairs. ASEM does not include the United States and it was initially expected to balance the United States-European Union (EU)<sup>3</sup>-Asia triangle. In addition, ASEM is the first forum in which Southeast Asian countries have been able to meet and coordinate collectively with countries in Northeast Asia, namely Japan, China and South Korea vis-à-vis another partner, in this case Europe; it may therefore demonstrate the EU’s influence in the formation process of (East) Asian regionalism. Moreover, the ASEM biannual Summit has a high profile as

this is the only forum attended exclusively by heads of states and governments of Asian and EU countries. The climate for inter-regional discourse has also been changing. Despite some downturns at the end of the 1990s and early 2000s, the inter-regional relations between Asia and Europe in ASEM have been constructed during a critical period of world history when East Asia has been developing as an economic powerhouse, while Europe has been seeking an identity as a global actor under EU.

This book investigates the reasons why Southeast Asian countries have maintained the ASEM process,<sup>4</sup> despite criticisms. It uses the richness of interview data to provide broad-based insights into the cognitive processes of ASEM forums, into the pursuit of foreign policy advantage in the ASEM process, and into the flexibility of ASEM's informal institution. This investigation is undertaken wholly from an Asian perspective not only due to constraints of time and resources, but also because the researcher is an Asian national and Southeast Asia is the region she knows best. This observation focuses on the years from 1996 to 2008 when the Asian side of ASEM only consisted of thirteen countries in East Asia. An epilogue at the end of the book comprises some developments after 2008.

This chapter introduces ASEM and emphasizes the significance of this study. The chapter highlights the relevance of this inquiry into the Southeast Asian perspectives on ASEM and shows how these perspectives have contributed to ASEM's longevity. This chapter ends with the structure of the book.

## **ASEM — A JOURNEY INTO INTER-REGIONAL AFFAIRS**

In the post-colonial era, the inter-regional relations of Asia and Europe did not gain an autonomous momentum until the early 1990s. Some efforts were made to link some European and Southeast Asian countries in the 1970s and early 1980s; the European Communities and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) held several formal contacts that led to a Cooperation Agreement in 1980. However, these contacts were more rhetorical than substantial in nature (Leifer and Djiwandono 1998, p. 203; Stokhof and van der Velde 1999). It was the rapid and high economic development in East and Southeast Asia during the 1980s that drew the Europeans' attention to what was perceived as "the world's most dynamic region in the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (Edwards and Regelsberger 1990, p. 5; see also Richards and Kirkpatrick 1999; Forster 1999). Consequently, EU launched "the New Asia Strategy" in 1994 that underpinned the need of European

countries to resume close ties with the Asian countries whose economic growth had been seen as a world phenomenon (European Commission 1994).

In November 1994, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong of Singapore and Prime Minister Jacques Chirac of France proposed a summit of Asian and European leaders. Whether the meeting supposed to be in the region-to-region meeting format is disputable. Interviewee S31 informed that the inter-regional framework was not really the original intention of the Singaporean leader; the inter-regional format was something that developed in the preparation process. The proposal to create a forum for Asian and European leaders seems to have built on the momentum of two previous events: the EU's enthusiasm to strengthen relations with Asian states, and the EU's failure to obtain observer status in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1993 (Forster 1999; Yeo 2000). The first meeting of thirty-five heads of states and governments from ten Asian countries and fifteen EU member states, accompanied by the European Commission (EC) President Jacques Santer, took place in Bangkok in March 1996. A senior Singaporean diplomat, Tommy Koh, commented on the ASEM inauguration (Koh 1998, p. 3), "It was a historic re-engagement of two ancient regions and civilizations". The Summit has been held biannually since 1996: 1998 in London, 2000 in Seoul, 2002 in Copenhagen, 2004 in Hanoi, 2006 in Helsinki, 2008 in Beijing, and 2010 in Brussels. The agendas and issues for each summit are presented in Appendix III. The Summits are the highest level forum and stand as the most important organ of ASEM.

The official purpose of ASEM is idealistic. The Chairman's statement at the first ASEM Summit in 1996 declares that "this partnership aims at strengthening links between Asia and Europe thereby contributing to peace, global stability and prosperity" (ASEM Infoboard 2006*b*). The principles of the Asian and European countries' relations in ASEM are described as informal, multidimensional, equal partnership, high-level meetings but also include non-state government forums (European Commission 2005, 2006*b*; ASEM Infoboard 2006*e*). In the Asia-Europe Framework of Cooperation (AEFC) adopted in 2000, it is written that ASEM is "to create a new Asia-Europe partnership, to build a greater understanding between the people of the two regions, and to establish a strengthened dialogue among equals" (ASEM Infoboard 2006*e*). The AEFC also identifies the key priorities that later develop into ASEM's three pillars of cooperation: political, economic, and social-cultural. The pillars are upheld by political dialogues, economic cooperation and social-cultural interactions.

The number of countries participating in ASEM has been growing as a result of the enlargement of the EU and ASEAN. Table 1 shows ASEM partners and the year of their accession.

ASEM has developed beyond intra-governmental forums. In the forums conducted to prepare the fourth ASEM Summit in 2002, ASEM started to include representatives of civil society from Asia and Europe and to organize consultative social forums alongside the summits (Reiterer 2002*b*). Therefore, in terms of the actors, ASEM has worked as a mechanism within three concerted channels of interactions: between state officers or government-to-government (G-to-G) level as the “first track”; between business communities as the “second track”; and between civil society and non-governmental organization (NGO) or people-to-people (P-to-P) level as the “third track”. The first track is managed through inter-governmental diplomatic relations whereas the second and third tracks are organized by Asia–Europe Foundation (ASEF). Between ASEM Summits, there have been uncountable meetings and forums with various agenda focusing on the three pillars. All these are called “the ASEM process”, which has developed as a multilateral, multi-field, multi-actor, and multi-level inter-regional forum (Yeo 2003; European Commission 2005; ASEM Infoboard 2006*a*). The structure of the ASEM process is presented in Appendix I, whereas the development of the ASEM process can be seen in Appendix II.

ASEM is a unique inter-regional forum in two respects: first, ASEM was innovatively built as a region-to-region forum between states and peoples from two regions. Although both sides are quite dissimilar in socioeconomic dimensions as well as in the level of regionalism and regionalization, the two regions share some commonalities, allowing partnerships to be nurtured. Europe and Asia have neither geographical proximity nor cultural similarity. Comparing Asia and Europe regionally, one could easily find those differences that have led to divergent values and interests between the countries and peoples of the two regions (CAEC 1997; Palmujoki 2001; Letta 2002; Saberwal 2004; Loewen 2007). In addition, regionalization of Europe is more institutionalized than that of Asia (Fawcett and Hurrell 1995; Palmujoki 1997; Ruland 2001; Fawcett 2004). Whereas EU regional interest and position may be formulated in Brussels, the preference and position of the Asian states have been difficult to crystallize due to the absence of a formal regional institution. Thus, ASEM is a form of inter-regional relationship that tries to link not only two unequal, diverse regional entities, but also two different regional types.

Having said that, two commonalities can be identified between Asia and Europe. First, both are made up of diverse states with a variety of cultures

**TABLE 1**  
**ASEM Partners and the Years of Accession from 1996 to 2008**

Founding partners (1996)	ASEM Asian partners		ASEM European partners		
	Enlargement I (2004)	Enlargement II (2008)	Founding partners (1996)	Enlargement I (2004)	Enlargement II (2008)
Brunei China Indonesia Japan Malaysia The Philippines Singapore South Korea Thailand Vietnam	Cambodia Laos Myanmar	India Mongolia Pakistan	Austria Belgium Denmark Finland France Germany Greece Ireland Italy Luxembourg The Netherlands Portugal Spain Sweden United Kingdom	Cyprus The Czech Republic Estonia Hungary Latvia Lithuania Malta Poland Slovakia Slovenia	Bulgaria Romania
10	3	3	15	10	2

that have resulted in different interests (Palmujoki 1997, 2001; Fatchett 1999; Friedberg 2000; Yeo 2000). Moreover, the regional diversities existing in Asia and Europe have resulted in complex configurations and management of regional identity (Gilson 2002). The second commonality found between Europe and Asia is the fact that they have currently been facing similar challenges due to population, resource and environmental changes, and contemporary security threats.

Second, the ASEM process has grown in parallel with other engagements that had already existed before or been developed since the establishment of ASEM. Previously, despite their successful regional integration, EU member states still maintained their own bilateral relations with Asian states. ASEM was also built on pre-existing networks: mainly ASEAN-EU and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) linkages, as well as EU-Japan, EU-Korea, and a previous EU-China engagement (Gilson 2002; Palmujoki 1997, p. 273). According to Westerlund (1999, p. 25), ASEM is a perfect medium “for sending political signals and for the concerting efforts” whose results were settled through bilateral contacts. So, what cannot be solved at bilateral level may be perceived differently at regional level, and perhaps could be answered in an inter-regional forum, or vice versa (Reiterer 2006). Indeed, ASEM has been seen as a breakthrough in the stalemate in EU-ASEAN relations that had arisen due to some political constraints in the early 1980s and 1990s (Leifer and Djiwandono 1998; Forster 1999; Yeo 2007). Yet, instead of localizing their incompatibility in a political setting, the ASEAN countries drove the Europeans into a broader framework of interaction by involving powerful countries in Asia: Japan, China, and Korea.

Thus, the ASEM process can be considered as a breakthrough in Asia-Europe relations. It is in some ways a departure from the previous EC approaches to Asian countries that were mainly conducted at bilateral or sub-regional level such as ASEAN-EU. However, it has been claimed that these regional-to-regional relations are not meant to replace the pre-existing bilateral and sub-regional engagements (Santer 1998). It means that the inter-regional level of engagement has proceeded concomitantly with other EU relations with Asian countries but has provided a more flexible mechanism for settling issues (Forster 1999; University of Helsinki 2006; Bersick 2007). Nevertheless, on the one hand, EU interactions in two or three layers of engagement with each of its Asian partners may become a diplomatic innovation; on the other hand, this would undoubtedly result in more complex relationships<sup>5</sup> among ASEM participating states.



## WHY A BOOK ABOUT SOUTHEAST ASIA AND ASEM?

When ASEM was launched at the first Summit in Bangkok in March 1996, it was met with soaring enthusiasm in Asia and Europe. This was the first meeting attended by so many Asian and European heads of states and governments. The attendees included twenty-five heads of state and government from ten Asian countries; seven members of ASEAN, Japan, Peoples Republic of China, and the Republic of Korea, and fifteen EU member states, accompanied by the President of the EC. Representatives of business associations and scholars from both regions accompanied the leaders to the Summits. It was a unique event as it not only brought together many leaders from the two regions in the post-colonial era (Koh 1998; McMahan 1998; Forster 1999), but also because it was initially expected to balance the U.S. presence in Asia and Europe and to strengthen the Asia-Europe axis within the U.S.-EU-Asia triangle in the post-Cold War period (Forster 1999; Hanggi 1999; Richards and Kirkpatrick 1999; Dent 2001). Aside from its uniqueness, the first ASEM Summit took place when Asian countries were enjoying very high economic growth and the EU states were highly confident after the successful ratification of the Maastricht Treaty. With the exclusion of the United States from the forum, leaders from the two continents nurtured the hope of building an alternative axis, a new economic and strategic partnership. The excitement of prospective collaborations among the ASEM partners<sup>6</sup> in this early period resulted in the establishment of ASEF in February 1997 to generate and facilitate people-to-people contacts among Asians and Europeans.

Towards the end of the 1990s, however, the Asian financial crisis hit many Asian countries right before the second ASEM Summit in 1998, dampening the enthusiasm of Europeans, as if the rationale for ASEM had vanished. Indeed, several officials and scholars who were interviewed for this study consider the institution an insignificant diplomatic forum. Some of them do not see its relevance in current world political settings; others have lost interest in it, and many have never heard of it. ASEM forums have been criticized as involving too much talk and no concrete outcomes (Forster 1999; Lee 1999; Soesastro 2000; Yeo 2000; Dent 2001; Pereira 2007). Sceptical observers also consider that ASEM has lost direction and has no institutional mechanism to safeguard its vision and monitor the results (Fatchett 1999; Yeo 2000; Dosch 2001; Kivimaki 2007; Loewen 2007). Apart from the diplomats in charge of the ASEM process and ASEF staff, people in Asia and Europe are rarely reminded that ASEM exists, let alone acknowledge its achievements in fostering Asia-Europe relations.

Nevertheless, ASEM has survived to this day; heads of states and governments have continued to attend ASEM Summits and the institution has been enlarged by new partners. Despite the significant absence<sup>7</sup> of some European leaders, the institution has maintained a high-level summit biannually and more countries are joining. The seventh ASEM Summit was successfully held in Beijing on 24 and 25 October 2008 with the theme “Vision and action — Towards a win-win solution”. However, unlike previous Summits, all Asian and European leaders, especially those from the EU, attended the Beijing Summit. Why did the European leaders’ enthusiasm for ASEM suddenly revive when China hosted the Summit? Why have the Asian countries, in particular, members of ASEAN, maintained ASEM despite the seemingly diminished interest from Europe? What has ASEM done for Southeast Asian countries? The last question is relevant especially because it was a Southeast Asian country that first initiated the idea of ASEM.

Previous studies of ASEM have mainly emphasized the apparent “ineffectiveness” and “obsolete role” of the forum. How ASEM is perceived by the people who are involved, directly and indirectly, has not been investigated thoroughly. In particular, the benefits and disappointments that ASEM brings to Southeast Asia have not been specifically investigated from the point of view of the relevant key actors in this area. Similarly, the reasons why East Asian leaders, particularly those from ASEAN member countries, continue to attend ASEM Summits, despite the absence of European leaders, have remained unexplained. This book focuses on the reasons for the longevity of ASEM from a Southeast Asian perspective, and also investigates what benefits ASEM has brought to its Southeast Asian partners.

The significance of observing ASEM from Southeast Asian perspectives derives from several considerations. First, this book represents the newest research on Southeast Asia and the ASEM. Its significance lies in its originality as it uses a broad range of interviews as the main source of data to support the arguments. It digs the insights gained through eighty-two direct, in-depth interviews to obtain a deeper understanding of the meaning of ASEM forums for those involved and those not involved, and the role of ASEM in intra and inter-regional relations. Opinion and reflection from interviews with diplomats, scholars, journalists, business people, and NGO activists are put side by side with secondary data on economic, political and security relations to produce insights and draw implications and conclusions. The interpretive method helps analyse the interview data in their context as the author is aware of the differences in the profiles of interviewees as well as her own possible bias in interpreting them.

Second, the format of ASEM meetings is inter-regional. The region-to-region, rather than country-to-country, relations are a distinctive and new practice in international relations that require an understanding of its merits and limitations. This inter-regional pattern of interactions in international relations has arisen in the last two decades, so it is reasonable to investigate what can work or not work and what can be expected from such relations. In addition, the Asia-Europe inter-regional relationship through ASEM is also a complex setting because it neither replaces the pre-existing bilateral relations between individual Asian countries with EU nor replaces the previous ASEAN-EU long-lasting but strained relations. Moreover, as a region-to-region relationship, ASEM has, to some extent, forced East Asian countries into a group, namely the “Asian side” in the ASEM process. This is the first international forum that has created such circumstances for the Asian countries (Nabers 2003). Furthermore, ASEM membership excludes the United States, creating other significant meanings of ASEM from politico-strategic as well as economic and cultural perspectives. Therefore, an investigation into the longevity of ASEM from Asian perspectives can reveal opportunities as well as challenges to the relations. This will facilitate a more thorough assessment of why Southeast Asian countries have persisted in their engagement with ASEM.

Third, this study employs three working hypotheses to probe different dimensions of the engagement Southeast Asian countries have with ASEM. The first relates to the issue of nurturing the sense of a shared (East) Asian regional identity. The second relates to Europeans’ critics of the Asians’ approach to human rights in Myanmar and the calculation by the governments of ASEAN member countries about making the diplomatic negotiation an advantage. The third relates to ASEM’s institution and the effect it has had on the willingness of East Asian countries to maintain their engagement with ASEM. A distinctive feature of the study is that different theoretical lenses are brought to bear on each hypothesis: the constructivists’ lens to the hypotheses on regional identity, the neo-realist lens to the hypotheses about Myanmar and foreign policy manoeuvring, and the neo-liberal lens to the hypotheses about the institutional design of ASEM. In employing these diverse analytical frameworks the intention is not to pursue some elusive notion of paradigmatic unity but simply to bring the most useful analytical apparatus to the particular issues at hand. It is a more comprehensive approach in presenting various aspects of the Southeast Asian perspectives about ASEM. Thus, the study represents a more holistic approach to examine a phenomenon in international relations.

Fourth, one part of this study addresses the use of ASEM inter-regionalism for foreign policy advancement through a case study. This case study of Myanmar's accession to ASEM reveals the power bargaining between Southeast Asian countries and EU members in the inter-regional institution of ASEM. The case study, based on a broad range of in-depth interviews combined with documents and news studies is used to examine the bargaining behind the differences in their political values; it does not treat the problem arising from Myanmar's accession as the focus but uses it as a case study to demonstrate the manoeuvring of ASEAN member countries to take advantage of the inter-regional framework of ASEM to obtain foreign policy pay-offs.

Finally, this book examines the perceptions of states and people from Southeast Asian countries regarding not only the government-to-government relations but also the people-to-people relations in an inter-regional institution such as ASEM. This investigation of the utility of ASEM for Asian states in the words of ASEM official participants as well as scholars and observers can reveal what functions and interests ASEM has served for the Southeast Asian participants and ASEAN member countries. The findings will not only help provide understanding as to how Southeast Asian state and non-state actors perceive such an international institution as accommodating their quest for intra- and inter-regional cooperation but will also shed light on why an apparently unimportant and heavily criticized institution might survive amidst the complexity of regional and global relations.

In short, this study investigates the role of an informal institution in Southeast Asian regional affairs and Asian relations with another region, the EU. It goes beyond the commonly known political reasons behind the aversion of the Asian countries to formal institutions (Kahler 2000; Hettne and Soderbaum 2002; Acharya and Johnston 2007; Khong and Nesadurai 2007) by elaborating the complexity of the cooperation in the Asian context and by incorporating broad-based insights from Southeast Asian people's points of view.

This research uses several key concepts whose definitions have little consensus and are debatable. For clarity and consistency, however, those key concepts need to be defined, using the most common meanings. The term "inter-regionalism" refers to region-to-region relations which in this study relate to a group of countries in East Asia vis-à-vis EU countries. East Asian countries consist of countries in Southeast and Northeast Asia. Southeast Asia comprises Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Brunei, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar; the ten countries are members of ASEAN. East Asian countries in this study refer to China, Japan, and South Korea. "Regionalism" refers to the design and implementation of a set

of preferential policies among countries within the same geographical area in order to build harmonious relations in any or all aspects such as politic-security, economy, or socioculture. Regionalization is defined as “the growth of societal integration within a region and to the often undirected process of social and economic interaction” (Hurrell 1995). Thus, what differentiates regionalism from regionalization is the design; while the former is directed by governmental agreements the latter is officially undirected and grows more naturally among non-state actors. The term “institution” in this study refers to the concept of “international institution”, defined as a set of agreed norms, rules, and principles that govern states’ relations and depict expected behaviours of its member states. Institutionalization can be defined as the process of strengthening or building the institution through the development of its structure/organ as well as the legalization of its agreements. The term “civil society” refers to participants of ASEM forums that come from NGOs or other societal or cultural organizations.

In Chapter 1, the role of ASEM in Asian identity building is examined based on the recorded perceptions of involved persons from Southeast Asian countries. A constructivist framework, depicting that identities and regions are socially constructed through institutive processes (Smith 1997; Ruggie 1998*a*), is used to analyse the role of ASEM in the development of East Asian identities in the 1990s and 2000s. It also explores the meaning of ASEM forums for Southeast Asian participants. ASEM has been perceived to have facilitated the development of East Asian identity but this perception has only been communicated by those directly involved in the ASEM process. The importance of the cognitive process and the development of inter-subjective understanding among Asian participants at ASEM/ASEF forums are highlighted. Although frequent ASEM forums provide opportunities for intra-Asian socialization and the emergence of a regional consciousness among East Asian participants, they also provoke what Ruggie (1998*a*) describes as a “collective intentionality” among the Asian participants, which differentiates them from their European counterparts. The shared regional awareness among Asian participants in ASEM and ASEF forums has strengthened their intra-regional linkages, and this has been used by Southeast Asian countries to increase their engagement with Northeast Asian countries in regional framework beyond ASEM. Regional identity in Asia, however, is frequently questioned because there is no single fixed Asian identity. Thus, because of the different scopes of inter-government engagement among Asian countries, several layered identities have emerged among the Asian participants in the ASEM process. These layered identities reflect different levels of contacts and engagement involved the East Asian countries inside and outside ASEM.<sup>8</sup>

Chapter 2 assesses what ASEM has provided to key actors in Southeast Asia based on the interview data that perceived the success of ASEAN countries and China in supporting Myanmar's accession to ASEM as an Asian victory over the EU countries. These data are analysed through the framework inspired by the neo-realist concepts of traditional power games and the state's interest in international institutions. States may cooperate if they "realistically" see benefits in such a strategy to advance their interests (Jervis 1988); within the neo-realist framework, international institutions are "the object of strategic choice by states" (Simmons and Martin 1998, 2002). Myanmar's accession becomes the case study to investigate the building of Asia's common position in ASEM and the role of ASEAN and China in the ASEM process.

The case study on Myanmar's accession to ASEM is used for two reasons: it represents perhaps the most difficult political obstacle to ASEM that could have terminated the inter-regional relations; and the Myanmar case took place during the first ASEM enlargement which created the most critical point in ASEM's longevity, reducing the relations to, arguably, the lowest point. By taking the conflict between Asian and EU countries in this first ASEM enlargement as a case study, this chapter explores the most difficult phase of the relations and examines how the two regions sought a solution. Data from interviews, news, ASEAN documents and ASEM documents are used to shed some light on what happened behind closed doors and in the tough negotiations over ASEM's first enlargement in 2004. As the Myanmar case study reveals, ASEAN member countries and China took advantage of the ASEM enlargement in 2004 to gain political advantages in their relations with EU countries and with each other. ASEAN countries were, for the first time, able to negotiate a common position to advocate Myanmar's accession and to obtain China's support, leaving the EU countries with no other choice but to give in. China also took advantage of the Myanmar case by appeasing the ASEAN countries to strengthen its own regional relations and to send a strong political message to the EU countries. This chapter thus highlights the success of Asian countries in extracting foreign policy benefits from ASEM as an inter-regional institution, underlining the notion that multilateralism actually works for the realist.

In Chapter 3, the complexity of ASEM inter-regionalism, especially with its enlargements, and the role of the informality of the ASEM institution are examined. An institutionalist framework is applied to investigate ASEM's informal institutional arrangement that has seemingly been used to overcome the challenge of cooperation in inter-regional relations and to cope with ASEM growing membership. Data from interviews, documents and meeting observations are used to help explain the significance of adopting

such informal arrangements to overcome the challenges that ASEM has been facing. ASEM's design, that is, inter-regional relations managed by an informal institution, influenced by the "ASEAN way", is preferred by Southeast Asian countries and apparently encourages them to remain in the ASEM process. This argument is based on two considerations. First, the informality of the ASEM institution, which is described by some scholars as a "soft institution" (Soesastro and Nuttall 1997; Dent 2001; Yeo 2003; Reiterer 2004), creates flexibility for ASEM, allowing the inter-regional forums to accommodate the diversity, varying interests and different capabilities of its growing number of partners. Second, ASEM's soft or informal institutional arrangement seems to reduce the cost of maintaining cooperation through region-to-region relations between the Asian and European states, while opening up opportunities for the two regions to develop different kinds of strategic relations. Therefore, for Southeast Asian countries, ASEM is a cheap form of diplomacy.

In the conclusion, the arguments shaped by the three working hypotheses are drawn together as a basis from which to answer the question of what ASEM has delivered to Southeast Asian countries. The usefulness of ASEM, as the channel of regional building and developing regional awareness, as a strategic forum to pursue foreign policy advantage, and as a less costly, informal linkage with regional countries and with the EU, has made ASEM a valuable forum from Southeast Asian perspectives. Terminating the ASEM process would be a risky action for states and leaders; maintaining ASEM is more useful than getting rid of it. The very fact that ASEM has been established also helps sustain it. Thus, for Asian leaders, there is seemingly nothing to lose by maintaining ASEM. ASEM has apparently delivered significant outcomes that suit Southeast Asian countries.

## Notes

1. For the purpose of this book, "Asia" refers to Asian countries that participated in ASEM until before the seventh Summit in 2008 (Table 1).
2. For the purpose of this book, Europe refers to the EU countries that participate in ASEM (Table 1).
3. For consistency, the term European Union (EU) is used throughout the book despite the fact that the term was only officially used to replace the term European Commission (EC) on 1 December 2009 when the Treaty of Lisbon entered into force.
4. The ASEM process refers to a series of meetings, forums, initiatives, activities in politics, economics and social areas involving state and non-state actors organized for ASEM partners.

5. The complex relationship among ASEM partners is explained in Chapter 3.
6. ASEM uses the term “partners” for participating countries.
7. There are no data available on the leaders’ attendance of ASEM Summits except for the first and the seventh Summits. But the absence of many EU heads of states and government from ASEM Summits is a telling point made by Asian countries’ officials and scholars from Asian and European countries (Letta 2002; Pereira 2007; also interviewees S35; S20; D01; S10; D48; D50; I42; I45) to indicate the lack of serious commitment by EU countries in ASEM.
8. Consequently, the term “identity” in the first and second sections of Chapter 3 will be replaced with “identities” in the last section as it refers to these layered identities.