EU experience can benefit Asia as it explores regional integration

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WorldView: 'Asians have begun to discuss Asia." This recent remark by the Singapore foreign minister was quoted by a German moderator at a conference between European and Asian journalists in Hamburg this week. In discussing or arguing about their region, Asians are in an important sense creating it.

And since the idea of Asia was originally not an Asian but a European notion in modern history, constituted by Enlightenment and imperial-colonial discourses, it matters in a globalising world that Asians are now taking ownership of it - and learning from Europe's new self-definition and political organisation as they do so.

Held on the margins of the biannual Asia-Europe meeting (Asem) between foreign ministers, the increased scale of the conference echoed that of the ministerial gathering, which had 45 members participating: Japan, China, India, Mongolia, Pakistan, South Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei Darussalam, Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia, the 27 member states of the European Union and the European Commission.

The first meeting in 1996 brought together the original six members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) - Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand - plus China, Japan and South Korea and the then EU15, now grown to EU27. Asean has since grown to include Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar, and its association with China, Japan and South Korea - Asean+3 - has significantly strengthened.

India, Pakistan and Mongolia joined the Asem talks for the first time this week in a huge territorial and demographic expansion of the group. As the German foreign minister observed, Asem now accounts for 50 per cent of the world's gross domestic product, 58 per cent of its population and 60 per cent of international trade.

Such figures cannot be pressed too far in what is a loose and flexible encounter between very different entities. But European participants were impressed by the political level and commitment of the Asian participants and their willingness to go beyond bland contributions on climate change, Myanmar, world trade and foreign policy issues.
Headlines from the summit spoke of a German failure to secure an agreement on climate change ahead of next week's G8 summit in Heiligendamm. The Chinese foreign minister, Yang Jiechi, spoke for all 16 Asian participants when he rejected German proposals for limits on carbon gas emissions by 2009. He stressed differentiation between the developed world responsible for most of the emissions and the need for the developing states to have the means to catch up through financial and technology transfers. This may have been a political failure, but it also confirmed Asem's role as a vehicle for bargaining.

If bargaining and disagreement help constitute political identities just as much as consensus, this encounter registered a certain mutual development. A Chinese journalist compared the Asian economies to energetic, risk-taking teenagers in contrast to the more thoughtful, mature, but cautious Europeans.

Both have much to learn from each other. While the European model of integration cannot be copied, it is influential elsewhere. Institutions and the rule of law are central, he recognised.

A Thai editor had fun with changing Asian self-definitions. It is extraordinary that India and Pakistan are only joining Asem now, he said - for the Chinese, these countries used to be seen as the beginning of the West.

Mongolia's participation raises the issue of central Asia - why should the "-stans" be left to the Russian sphere of influence? - and how to define Russia itself. As he said, the concept of Asia is not yet determined - unlike that of Europe.

European participants disputed whether this was altogether the case. Quite aside from Russia, which should not be seen as a potential EU member, there is the question of Turkey, Ukraine, and where the EU's boundaries are to be drawn.

Strong partnership with neighbouring European states rather than a medium-term membership perspective would better express their interdependence. But that needs a much greater commitment of resources and a willingness to share some aspects of sovereignty short of membership - in energy, security and migration, for example - with Russia, Ukraine or north African states than has so far been realised. This will be an increasingly topical EU issue in coming months, pushed by greater tension with Russia and over Turkish membership.

A German diplomat argued that the EU should, can and will play a larger role in Asia. Economic and security interests increasingly argue for this. So do the EU's human rights and multilateral norms, its commitment to international solidarity and the relief of poverty, and the growing importance of global issues such as climate change. Europe can be an experienced partner for Asian states committed to multilateral solutions rather than a bric-a-brac of bilateral relations. They should be willing to begin the process of sharing sovereignty in small ways such as food safety. It does not hurt and makes for win-win outcomes.
The German diplomat asked an interesting question: how will the large Asian states respond to the smaller ones taking an integration road? It took a long time for the Germans to realise that Europe's "glorious nations" (such as France and Britain) would not disappear in a new federal Europe but had to be brought along and preserved in a larger setting. Other participants made the point that Asean was a non-threatening grouping. Its impressive ability to form the core of a new regional entity in Asia, becoming Asean+3+2+1 as others are grafted on to its structures, could be a key to its future development.

A German journalist asked whether such regional integration was compatible with growing nationalism in China, Japan and India. As for China's sheer scale, will Asian integration be used to engage or contain it? What will the US role be? It has worked through bilateral means as an indispensable off-shore balancer of power in the region. But the Asian political and economic integration process excludes it. Will there be an attempt to form a new collective security system there?

These questions were not answered, but they reveal how much is at stake in these debates.

An inescapable conclusion is that spreading its method of regional integration has become a major goal of EU foreign policy.

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