

Book Review

Voices from Asians and Europeans on "the Future of Asia-Europe Cooperation"

“Voices from Asians and Europeans on the Future of Asia-Europe Cooperation” is a publication comprising 68 essays selected from over 120 entries in an Essay Competition organised by the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) to commemorate its 25th anniversary. ASEF was founded in 1997 following a decision taken by Asian and European leaders during the inaugural Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM)ⁱ summit held in Bangkok in 1996.

The 68 essays in the book were divided into 2 categories – Category 1 comprising essays written by people born before 1997 and Category 2 for essays written by a younger cohort born after 1997. The essays from both categories all echo the importance of deeper Asia-Europe cooperation for global peace and prosperity and the need for peoples of the two regions to work together to address global problems and common challenges.

Broadly there are three categories of essays – the essays that provide a broader generalisation on what Asia-Europe cooperation entails; essays that focus on what the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and other formal Asia-Europe frameworks such as the EU-ASEAN inter-regional dialogue can do to strengthen dialogue and cooperation between the two continents, and the group of essays that look specifically at the role of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF). It is also interesting to note that words like multilateralism, sustainability and connectivity appear in many of the essays – perhaps a reflection of concern on the current stresses on the multilateral system and the desire for Asia and Europe to work together to support multilateralism; the recognition of the importance of the sustainability agenda in the face of climate change; and the desire for more economic development and people to people connections with the connectivity agenda.

For those authors who wrote more generally on Asia-Europe cooperation, the economic interdependence, technological advances, and the long-term trends of geopolitical shifts in power and uncertainties are compelling reasons for Asia and Europe to increase their dialogue. With globalisation in retreat and regionalisation likely to become the dominant trend, it is even more important to engender cooperation between the two different regions. As one author puts it, with the world “moving from open-ended globalism towards regionalisation” inter-regionalism become even more important (p 114).

Several of the essays in this category also recognise that there are challenges and impediments to the strengthening of Asia-Europe cooperation. Cultural differences, ideological differences over issues of human rights, political instabilities and rising protectionism are barriers to fruitful engagement. To overcome these difficulties and build a constructive relationship, one author cautioned against imposition of cultural values on others and called for mutual respect and added that “disagreements between Asia and Europe will be the norm and not the exception. The future of their cooperation rests on how well they can compromise and come up with solutions that can benefit both parties” (p 257). This perspective is somewhat similar to the view of another author who remarked that “cooperation is not convergence, and that Asia-Europe cooperation will be a balancing act of contestation and coordination” (p 115).

For the few essays that focused on the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and other formal frameworks for Asia-Europe cooperation, there is a common strand in desire for ASEM to go beyond government-to-government contacts and official meetings to more people-to-people engagement. There is recognition that with the rise of civil society movements, collaboration should perhaps be less state-driven and that there should be more emphasis on collaboration driven by civil society, citizens, and corporations.

Besides ASEM, some essays focused on the importance of EU-ASEAN dialogue partnership as an important subset of the broader Asia-Europe relations and explore how EU-ASEAN ties can help drive the ASEM process. However, another essay highlighted the importance of ASEM’s connectivity agenda as a framework for boosting EU-ASEAN cooperation.

There is general agreement on the important role of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) in promoting exchange of ideas, cultural and education exchange in the few essays written on ASEF. One essay even remarked that ASEF as the only permanent institution to emerge out of the ASEM process, it has “a critical role to play in enhancing mutual understanding, promoting dialogue and cooperation, and addressing common challenges” (p 27).

The book is interspersed with essays calling for various areas of cooperation between Asia and Europe – from the broad remit of maintaining the world order to promoting economic integration, sustainable development and good governance and more specific areas such as mitigating impacts of climate change, energy transition, education and improving mobility of talented and smart people.

This book of 68 essays is an interesting read of broad perspectives and wish list of Asia-Europe cooperation, general recognition of the importance of ASEM and ASEF for promoting understanding and strengthening dialogue between the two regions and an appreciation of the challenges in realising the full potential of Asia-Europe cooperation. Geopolitical realities of power shifts, connectivity agenda such as the Belt and Road initiative, etc all have real impact on the interactions and exchanges between Asians and Europeans

ⁱ ASEM is an inter-governmental forum comprising 51 partner countries from Asia and Europe and 2 regional organisations – the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)