Four propositions from *foraus* on how the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) can better live up to its mission

The *foraus* Asia Program has been invited to speak about the future role of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), an intergovernmental process established in 1996 to foster dialogue and cooperation between Asia and Europe. It comprises 53 partners including the EU and the ASEAN Secretariat; Switzerland has been a member of ASEM since 2012.

This text is based on a speech delivered by Markus Herrmann, Co-head of the foraus Asia program, at the ASEM Senior Officials Retreat on 3/4 May 2018 in Zurich. It invokes three geopolitical trends and makes four propositions about areas in need of deeper, or more prominent, dialogue and collaboration among ASEM partners moving forward.

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Inflection point for ASEM's role and public profile

First trend, the world is easternizing. 50% of the world population lives in a circle with 3300km radius and centered in Myanmar. 1/3 of global GDP and 45% of growth are contributed by the Asia-Pacific region. And, to single out one Asia Pacific nation, China is becoming a global economic and political power.

Second trend, US global engagement is receding, as it is challenged by populism and growing social inequality from within, higher "costs" for global leadership in the face of an increased number of militarily capable states and non-state actors and finally: eroding Western soft-power, which in itself triggers important questions: Do we prefer to live in a G-Zero world without hegemon, or what kind of balance of powers do we envision? Is the free-market superior to state-led capitalism? Do we prefer democracy over authoritarian models of leadership?

Third trend, the EU aspires to becoming a more global actor. Certainly, the EU is facing challenges at home and may still primarily be perceived as an important trading partner, investor and supplier of development and humanitarian assistance by Asia Pacific nations, but first larger-scale EU actions, like Operation Atalanta, have reaffirmed this trajectory.

I believe today's situation, which is the result of these three trends, constitutes a *geopolitical inflection point* that urges for a more important role as well as a higher public profile of ASEM. The question is: *where should the Asia Pacific region and Europe deepen its dialogue and collaboration via the ASEM forum?*

Four propositions for more prominent ASEM collaboration areas

My four propositions for more, or more prominent, ASEM dialogue and collaboration areas are: *Growth & connectivity, Global governance, Asia Pacific security, and Global challenges.*

Firstly, and one of the three pillars of ASEM today, there is an important economic agenda that ASEM can proactively drive. Sustainable Eurasian growth has substantial headroom for more liberalization on trade and more and stronger bilateral investment protection regimes that ensure transparency, predictability and a fairer level playing field. Furthermore, higher connectivity across the Eurasian landmass can increase productivity and spur growth and economic development. Connectivity initiatives, such as the BRI or the EU's trans-European networks (TENs), should be coordinated for synergies, interoperability and sustainable impact under an aligned and inclusive governance. Africa is projected to have about 4x the population of Europe by 2050 (vs. today's 1.6x). Hence, economic development and security across the African continent are key priorities for Europe. With the increasing engagement by Asia Pacific nations on the African continent, this should also become an ASEM priority.

Secondly, ASEM as a dialogue forum can weigh-in more on global governance. Fundamentally, there is a need to strengthen effective and rules-based global multilateralism with the existing UN system at its heart, respect for international law and open markets – to avoid slipping back into "spheres of influences". But there is also a need to actively facilitate the process of adequately transferring both the "fair share" of responsibility and influence in global governance to Asia Pacific nations. To achieve these two elements, ASEM can act as a forum where the normative consensus underpinning global multilateralism is reinvigorated via frank political value discussions.

Thirdly, ASEM could become a forum to more prominently discuss Asia Pacific security, as an element of global governance. The increasingly competitive great powers relations in the Asia Pacific region are creating more uncertainties, also in terms of the regional security situation. Today's Asia Pacific regional security architecture represents a collection of organizations including the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the SCO, the CICA and different US security alliances. It does, however, remain uncertain whether those organizations are capable of effectively resolving larger emerging tensions, or geopolitical competition.

Acknowledging the direct correlation between the Asia-Pacific's security and Europe's prosperity, Europe and the Asia-Pacific have collaborated to address non-traditional security threats to both regions, including maritime security, state-building and reconciliation processes, counter-terrorism and non-proliferation efforts. Building on cooperation in the Asia-Pacific's non-traditional security sphere and acknowledging Europe's historic experience, in particular with the OSCE process, ASEM could become an important forum for such a security dialogue.

Fourthly and finally: As we all have to take responsibility and work together to achieve the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, ASEM is well positioned to drive relevant global convergence and pre-alignment on key responses to global challenges: the devastating effects of climate change, migration and health crises, but also new governance challenges related to cyber, the digital economy, artificial intelligence or internet governance which can only be solved through a coordinated and unified effort.

Opportunity to define an ambitious ASEM agenda

To conclude, I realize that ASEM is currently working towards more substantive outcome documents and a more strategic engagement of Leaders at the ASEM Summits. I believe by recognizing the geopolitical inflection point as described, ASEM can evolve its self-positioning and formulate a value-adding and strategic agenda revolving around a sustainable and globally shared economic logic which is aiming for mutual benefit, an effective and fair multilateral global governance, as well as a cooperation on global-scale problem-solving capabilities

However, impact and effectiveness of ASEM's positions will depend on its ability to align its positions cross-regionally with – in particular – the Transatlantic Partnership and APEC, while being able to foster dialogue, trust and innovative solutions among its own 53 partners.