

## **Covid-19 as a catalyst of asymmetric bilateralism: ASEM's vulnerable position and economic salience as a saviour of the EU-Asia multilateral relations**

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### **Abstract**

*The unprecedented global health crisis caused by COVID-19 has unleashed individual, self-centred responses in most states, including Asian and European countries. Multilateralism may be more imperative than ever, but the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) does not seem to epitomise a feasible international platform to guide cooperation. This article attempts to assess whether the ASEM still constitutes a relevant instrument of intercontinentalism, as there seem to be indications suggesting that EU-Asia relations will not abandon their apparent multilateral stalemate. In fact, ASEM could rather deepen asymmetries between a highly institutionalised EU and an institutionally devoid Asia. Notwithstanding, the current pandemic offers ASEM an unprecedented opportunity to recover some salience as a relevant multilateral EU-Asia platform, namely, the centrality of economics. Given the irremediable necessity to strengthen economic cooperation to alleviate the impact of COVID-19, this is a unique opportunity to strengthen connectivity as well as a multilateral cooperation and governance that would otherwise blur.*

**Keywords:** ASEM, asymmetric bilateralism, COVID-19, economic relations, multilateralism

### **Introduction: turning inward? COVID-19 as a global game changer**

Over a year after the World Health Organisation officially declared a pandemic, COVID-19 continues to be the utmost challenge to our world order. Without a clear global frontrunner to take the lead, the multilateral framework has been completely side-lined. COVID-19 has unleashed self-centred, inward reactions across the globe. European and Asian countries have been no exception. The existence of regional, multilateral cooperation institutions, like the European Union (EU) or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), could not prevent states from taking unilateral responses, especially given the initial passivity of the EU and the intrinsic nature of non-interference of the ASEAN. The ongoing mechanisms of cooperation between both

continents, such as the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), had little or virtually no power to promote a common strategy to overcome the crisis (Kliem, 2021).

At the beginning, the EU was harshly criticised due to the lack of solidarity between its own Member States (see Deen & Krujiver, 2020; Toygür, 2020). Countries adhered to their competences in health to act on their own, risking the functioning of the single market and unprecedentedly closing internal borders. Nonetheless, as the economic implications became more obvious the EU took the extra step and looked towards a united reply: the 750-billion-euro recovery fund finally did the trick. The hope for recovery was what moved the European states to act as one.

The reality in Asia-Pacific countries was quite similar. In the absence of a supranational institution, each country sought its own ways to address the challenges. The ASEAN played no role; only the Asian Development Bank provided some additional money to those countries in need while China supplied medical equipment in the region (Cameron, 2020). Countries responded without coordination, unilaterally shutting borders, despite the specific ASEAN mechanisms set in place to respond to public health emergencies (Yeo, 2020).

In essence, states resorted to applying the traditional ‘everyone for themselves’ approach. It is what Kliem (2021, p.2) has labelled as the ‘self-fulfilling prophecy of realism’, “a vicious cycle of national self-help responses paralysing regional cooperation”.

COVID-19 has posed the greatest challenge to date for the EU and ASEAN. The inward turn of its members was just a consequence of the current weaknesses of the EU, afflicted by Euroscepticism and the tense interplay between supranationalism and intergovernmentalism, and a poorly structured Asia-Pacific region. In Europe, the European Commission was finally able to surmount the paralysis and responded remarkably astutely with the first common debt of the Union, overcoming large discrepancies between the so-called frugal four and the Southern countries (Sapir, 2020). In contrast, although ASEAN also became more pro-active with time, “the association quickly met its institutional limits and many agreements remain on paper” (Kliem, 2021, p.2).

Countries preferred to focus on their own struggle paying no attention to their neighbour’s, let alone to partners in a different continent. Inter-continental platforms, such as the ASEM process, have experienced first-hand their own unimportance (see Camroux, 2006; Gaens & Khandekar, 2018). COVID-19 seems to have emerged as a catalyst of the already existing asymmetric bilateralism between both continents. When examining the Europe-Asia relations, it has been noted time and again that multilateralism has generally been pushed into the background, leaving up front a bilateralism far from its traditional concept. The dynamics between both continents stand out for a continuum in which a regional entity, the EU, tends to establish partnerships with particular countries that generally act on their own instead of a representative in a homogenous entity. The nature of the ASEAN, based on the principle of non-interference, differs considerably from the supranational aspiration set at the core of the EU (Haacke, 2003). Besides, the ASEAN is far from embodying all Asian partners of the ASEM, while the EU quite does the trick in Europe. Therefore, there is, as Camroux (2008) highlights, a strengthening of a kind of asymmetric

bilateralism between the EU and major individual Asian countries, which has been deepened with the pandemic.

The aim of this paper is to scrutinise the role of COVID-19 as a catalyst of the asymmetrically bilateral trend characterising Asia-Europe relations, observed through the vulnerable position of the ASEM, while suggesting that the salience of the economic challenge and the need for a global conjoint response may emerge as last-minute saviours of the multilateral tonic among these two regions. The paper is structured as follows: firstly, the concept of the ASEM is briefly introduced; secondly, the underlying trends governing the functioning of the ASEM will be analysed, suggesting that asymmetric bilateral tendencies prevail; thirdly, the article portrays COVID-19 as a catalyst of the aforementioned asymmetric bilateral trend; fourthly, the impact of economic salience as an instrument to overcome global crisis is examined; and finally, the paper addresses the need for an effective multilateralism focused on economic recovery through platforms such as the ASEM to respond to the global challenges that COVID-19 poses.

### **The Asia-Europe Meeting: a quick overview**

In addition to the numerous bilateral contacts between Asian and European countries and the cooperation at a region-to-region level between the EU and the ASEAN structures, a third level of cooperation, continent to continent, exists through the Asia-Europe Meeting.

ASEM is an intergovernmental process which was established 25 years ago to promote political dialogue, reinforce economic cooperation between both continents and foster cultural exchange. “In a spirit of mutual respect and equal partnership” (ASEM, 2019), ASEM addresses several aspects gathered up in three main pillars: political; economic and financial; and social, cultural, and educational. Every two years, an ASEM Summit takes place in which the Heads of State and Government of its 51 countries, the EU (represented by the President of the European Commission and the President of the European Council) and the ASEAN (Secretary General) participate. Moreover, there are several meetings of ministers and senior officials to pursue dialogue in specific sectors (ASEM, 2019).

As Camroux (2006, p.4) notes “ASEM has been described as an attempt to find the missing link between Europe and Asia [...] Yet, from its very birth, ASEM was affected by differing expectations in Asia and in Europe”. While both continents recognised the need to strengthen their mutual relations, they differed in the how. Asian countries preferred to focus on the economic aspects, in which they felt stronger and competitive with China and Japan in the lead. Furthermore, smaller, aid recipient countries saw in ASEM an opportunity to boost relations with large European potential donors, further deepened after the Asian crisis in 1997-98. Europe collectively provided 20 % of the total IMF rescue packages for Asia, a share larger than that of the US and second only to Japan. Moreover, during the second summit of ASEM (1998), the establishment of a European Financial Expertise network and an ASEM Trust Fund to help Asian Pacific countries was proposed, a clear commitment to the region (Bridges, 1999). Together with such economic cooperation, European partners were more inclined to give ASEM a broader purpose and design, which is why three pillars were conceived (Camroux, 2006). The political and social pillars responded to the supranational nature of the EU, in a way to export its regional structure and ‘the European Way of Life’. The multi-

pillar approach aims to provide equal importance to the three key areas. Yet a common gap can often be found between the purpose of cooperation and reality. While projecting itself as a multilateral platform, the prevalence of asymmetric bilateralism makes the project itself vulnerable from its roots, now even more accentuated by COVID-19.

## **X-raying the EU-Asia interaction dynamics through the ASEM: the prevalence of asymmetric bilateralism**

After the Cold War, the EU –frequently seen as the epitome of institutionalised regional integration– sought to play a more salient role in the world by heightening its possibilities for congruent external action. The EU started interacting with other regional organisations, thus bringing the idea of interregionalism to the forefront. Similarly, in Asia, manifold partnership networks were founded, with ASEAN epitomising the homologous “Asianisation” process.

In this vein, though originally conceived as an intercontinental forum to enhance cooperation between its members, one of the most salient –and recurrent– findings in the academic literature on the ASEM refers to the unimportance such a platform has conferred to intercontinentalism as a new form of global governance for the past two decades (see Camroux, 2006; Gaens & Khandekar, 2018). ASEM appears to have depicted intercontinentalism as a rather subsidiary sort of international relations dynamics fluctuating between the multilateral and bilateral arenas.

Furthermore, within this multilateral-bilateral continuum, multilateralism has generally been pushed into the background. As Deutsch (1999) anticipated, the EU has only opted for speaking with one voice in multilateral settings where its economic stakes have turned high, since only a united, homogenous European voice could oppose that of competing (super)powers. When it comes to the ASEM, however, the EU’s enlargement as well as the geographical expansion of the Asian grouping have resulted in a rather diffuse Eurasian partnership, where membership asymmetry and state-to-state interactions prevail. Thus, although ASEM’s organisational structure was since its inception meant to follow a continent-to-continent set up, the enlargement decisions made by ASEM –from the ASEAN+3 constellation to currently incorporating global players such as Russia, China, India, and Australasian countries– actually channelled the process into its own irrelevance. The hoped for intercontinentalism has only led to a diffuse and heterogeneous grouping of 53, where the dynamics seem overwhelming and goals are difficult to meet, especially given the large discrepancies between very different partners, with diverse interests (and ideologies). Therefore, the enlargement has only guided the hampering of cooperation itself. The 53 tend to rely more on intergovernmentalism and bilateral relations (Gaens, 2015).

That said, even though ASEM has strategically been instrumentalised to facilitate state-to-state relations, the general bilateral pattern stemming from ASEM does not seem to reproduce the purely symmetric trends typical of state-to-state bilateralism, for which certain limitations emerge. A closer examination of the trade disputes with some Asian countries (especially China) in the second half of the 2000s exemplifies this point. The intervention of the EU through its Trade Commissioner to impose tariffs and quotas on Asian (predominantly Chinese) exporters of footwear and textiles proved more effective than bilateral member-state endeavours. Furthermore, the

institutional momentum that the EU structures have enjoyed for the last two decades constitute a countervailing force to such bilateral initiatives among Member States (Julienne, 2020). For example, the European Parliament's high moral ground on assuming a firm line on human rights issues in China restricts the individual Member States' ability to implement an entirely bilateral policy. This pattern has become apparent since the beginning of the century, as suggested by the maintenance of the arms embargo on China (deriving from Tiananmen) despite strong pressures from France's and Germany's political leaderships. In this case, the combination of hostility within the EU institutions themselves and opposition from some Member States' executives illustrated the compromise character of intergovernmental policymaking (Camroux, 2006). With a considerable number of decisions on Asian matters hence made at the EU level, such a compromise culture does not constrain however the capacity of daily consultations between the European Commission and the Council of the EU to soften the most relevant internal frictions over Asian issues on which divergent standpoints emerge.

The Chinese example must not prevent the reader from seeing the whole forest. In most Asian countries (such as Indonesia or Vietnam), the economic interests of the EU Member States –especially the more powerful ones, such as France and Germany– are such that there might be incentives to develop state-to-state bilateral relations. Nonetheless, even in this realm, the prerogatives of the European Commission in trade negotiations oblige individual EU Member States to defer to Brussels, which has become evident in scenarios such as Vietnam's entry into the WTO (Elsig, 2010). Additionally, the perception exists that a coordinated EU approach turns more effective in development aid and the promotion of democratic reforms (Carbone, 2010). To this must be added, as Camroux (2010) notes, that, on the political level, EU Member States' concerns regarding countries such as Indonesia and Vietnam largely coalesce, hence a supranational EU focus being naturally conceived as less time-consuming and more effective than the implementation of classical bilateral actions.

In light of the previous reasoning, ASEM seems to reproduce an overall bilateral pattern; however, that pattern does not circumscribe to the symmetry typical of state-to-state bilateralism but disguises some asymmetry between a supranational EU and individual Asian states.

As mentioned above, most European partners in ASEM are part of the European Union. The European side of ASEM is composed of the EU-27, plus the UK (until recently a Member State), Norway and Switzerland, non-EU states but traditionally within the EU's umbrella. The European partners share views and goals in a European Union that seeks a united Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), in which the defence of the European values (democracy, human rights, rule of law, freedom) prevails and is meant to be exported abroad. In ASEM, a supranational EU contrasts the poorly structured Asia. "European interventionist practice within Europe clashes with ASEAN's sacrosanct principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of a member country" (Camroux, 2008, p.22). Despite ASEAN's rhetoric of solidarity and cooperation, this entity, unlike the EU, has no real capacity to deal collectively with challenges, nor do the members really have the willingness. For example, while the EU is closely watching the possible breaches on the rule of law in Member States like Hungary or Poland, ASEAN has been incapable, at least until recently, of having a common position towards the recent military coup d'état in Myanmar. While Indonesia and Malaysia condemned the violence, the reluctance of other members,

such as Thailand and Vietnam, called into question ‘ASEAN’s centrality’ (see Barber, 2021; Mishra, 2021). The difference in nature of both institutions predetermine the dynamics for ASEM, in which other large Asian non-ASEAN countries come to play, like India or China, thus dividing even more the Asian response. It is this unevenness that is at the core of the struggles in ASEM’s endeavours at inter-continental partnership.

The bilateral nature characterising ASEM does not strictly allude to relations between distinct states, but to the pan-European framework with which the EU as a whole bilaterally engages with individual Asian states. What is more, although this trend may have been furthered throughout time, with the higher leverage for Brussels institutions on the European side and the higher heterogenisation of the Asian side because of successive enlargements (Gilson, 2012), it was latent from the very outset of ASEM. As Allison (2015) argues, at first, many Asian countries were seen as poor developing nations requiring significant development assistance, which led EU States to “play the EU game” or channel aid and influence through the EU as a more effective –while also more economical– strategic undertaking. Thus, even though donor-recipient type relations were originally assumed to be more conducive to intercontinentalism, closer examination of such dynamics points to the prevalence of some sort of asymmetric bilateralism.

In sum, the intercontinentalism that was aimed for between Europe and Asia when ASEM was founded, which was meant to be a new layer in the system of global governance, has instead reinforced asymmetric bilateral relations. On the one hand, in Europe, it is increasingly clear that the EU can be more than the sum of its parts. Certainly, with the increase in the number of Delegations of the European Commission, the visibility of the EU as a distinct entity and actor in Asia has increased. Today, moreover, the EU has much advanced in the definition of a CFSP as well as with the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS), which tend to discourage solitary adventures by self-purpose-driven individual EU Member States in Asian territories. Despite continuing tensions between intergovernmentalism and supranationalism in the *modus operandi* of the EU, the fact that in the end it functions as a unitary regional identity is out of the question. On the other hand, Asia does not follow this same route. We have the lack of a coherent Asian region with which the EU can dialogue, a problem accentuated by the expansion of participation of members in Asia (Pakistan, Mongolia).

Asymmetric bilateralism thus seems to accurately capture the dynamics underlying EU-Asia relations within ASEM: bilateralism between the EU as a whole and Asian states, asymmetric because of the imbalance in power in these relations, with the former highly institutionalised and coordinated and the latter devoid of strong institutions, an asymmetry which is even more exacerbated by significant disparities in capacities and levels of political will amongst the Member States of both regions.

## **Reinforcing tendencies: COVID-19 as a catalyst of asymmetric bilateralism**

The Asia-Europe Meeting’s vulnerable position given the existing asymmetric bilateralism remains a tendency that has been even reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic. At least at the beginning of the crisis, regionalism was replaced by unilateral or at most bilateral mechanisms. Therefore, it is needless to say that

intercontinentalism, through platforms like ASEM, was not the first nor the second option on the table.

On November 2020, the 13<sup>th</sup> Summit of ASEM was meant to take place in Phnom Penh. In ASEM Senior Official Meeting in July, the Cambodian Government, chair of the summit, decided to request a postponement. The meeting has been rescheduled for the last quarter of 2021 due to the “unabated risks” posed by COVID-19 (ASEM, 2021). The theme the Cambodian Government had chosen was “Strengthening Multilateralism for Shared Growth”. Although selected before the pandemic began, the purpose was more imperative than ever. The need to revive both economies was and still is essential. Yet, the postponement of the summit reflects a lack of grit of ASEM, and how COVID-19 has further exposed its vulnerability.

In a statement drafted by the main representatives of the different regions, i.e., Cambodia as host nation, the EU and Germany representing Europe, Singapore representing ASEAN, and Russia representing the NESAs<sup>1</sup> group, the partners expressed their deep concern over the pandemic and the global health and economic crisis that has erupted and insisted on the transboundary nature of the virus which demands transboundary, multilateral responses as well (ASEM, 2020).

It must not go unnoticed that, while the EU has its own representative, together with the rotating leader of the Council of the EU (Germany at that time), ASEAN lacks its own institutional delegate, a position taken by one of its Member States, instead of by the Secretary General. The difference in nature of both regional entities fosters the imbalances in the ASEM process. Neither should we ignore that ASEM closes its statement by reaffirming its commitment to maintain the momentum and visibility of ASEM to strengthen multilateralism, which points to the fact that the policymakers are well aware of the questioning of such relevance, which pushes them to restate it.

Apart from the overview of ASEM’s statement (where the willingness to cooperation clashes with the strong discrepancies within the group), the current strategic policy of the European Union towards COVID-19, on the one hand, and towards Asia, on the other, clearly reflects the asymmetric bilateralism addressed.

During the pandemic, the EU has taken some steps in regionalism. A whole-of-community approach has been established to address COVID-19. Apart from the belated yet unprecedented Next Generation EU fund, the EU’s Joint European Roadmap towards lifting containment measures, the common epidemiological ‘traffic light’ to evaluate the risk in each country and the decision to jointly purchase the vaccine, with the European Commission as a coordinating authority, are clear signs of a bet on regionalism, albeit not exempted from disagreements (Kaiser, 2021).

The ASEAN has long attempted to imitate the European model when pursuing institutionalisation. Yet, little concrete actions have been taken by ASEAN members (Yeo, 2020), let alone by the Asian partners represented in ASEM, which reinforces the asymmetries between both continents. Moreover, the EU continues to engage in substantially funding ASEAN, being the largest donor to its integration: another indication of the unevenness within the ASEM partners. The first EU-ASEAN Meeting on COVID-19 led to the EU’s commitment of over €350 million in support to ASEAN’s

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<sup>1</sup> The NESAs acronym stands for Northeast and South Asia Group, in which non-ASEAN countries from the region are represented. (see ASEM Process site for further information).

pandemic management efforts, which was later upgraded to over €800 million by the ‘Team Europe’ instrument. “ASEAN should leverage its plethora of existing mechanism [...] to better account for the threats of pandemic. However, [...] although ASEAN mechanisms could be effective, significant challenges remain, particularly in the areas of coordination and clarity of mandates” (Kliem, 2021, p.14).

These mechanisms, if used to coordinate domestic responses, could not only restore trust in regionalism and decrease the asymmetric bilateralism dynamics, at least partially, but also reduce over-reliance on external parties, such as China. If there is one common lesson learnt from the pandemic both in Europe and South East Asia (SEA), it is that both regions are highly vulnerable to pandemics, given their deep interconnectedness, especially when it comes to supply chains, trade, investment, and its overdependency on China.

If the EU had already redirected its CFSP amid the US-China rivalry to avoid being considered a secondary player on the global stage, the reliance on China experienced during the pandemic crisis, mainly when it came to health supplies, has further advanced the EU’s search for ‘strategic autonomy’. As Ekman (2020) argues, COVID-19 has reinforced the EU’s concerns about China and the on-going battle of narratives, leading to a diversification of partnerships in Asia and a restructuring of global supply chains. Furthermore, a less dependent Europe could be freer to defend its values. All EU Member States are acting in a coordinated way when pursuing such distancing from China. It is the EU, in fact, pursuing free trade agreements with several SEA countries, such as those already in force with Singapore and Vietnam or the connectivity agreement with Japan. The negotiation, however, is not generally being brought forward as a multilateral approach in inter-continental forums like ASEM, but it is being addressed following the tendencies of asymmetric bilateralism.

The EU is determined to sharpen its ‘strategic autonomy’ and aims at reinforcing its sovereignty in several strategic sectors, such as digital and telecommunications. To play in the same ‘strategic autonomy’ league as the United States and China, the EU needs strengthened unity, multilateral pro-activity, a recovered economy and its Indo-Pacific partners, with whom the EU shares concerns and interests. As Oertel and Small (2020, p.5) point out, “investing in economic partnerships in Asia beyond China could help new markets to emerge, thus increasing the demand for European business in the broader Indo-Pacific region”.

This would also be beneficial for Asian states, who are also looking to rely less on China and are trying to avoid a Chinese-based playing field, which would limit other states’ capacities, as has happened with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Both the EU and SEA countries can rely on multilateralism to enhance security against the BRI (García Cantalapedra, 2021). Yet, the EU institutionalisation and its capacity to work as one grants it the possibility to project power and provides greater leverage than what each individual Asian state has. Such advantage leads the EU to preferably resort to bilateral relations (or to a lesser extent to inter-regional with ASEAN), rather than to inter-continental mechanisms like the Asia-Europe Meeting. China’s presence in ASEM and its political and geostrategic stance hinders the process as well. While the European countries seek a common autonomy framed in the EU, regardless of the slowdown of the process, the Asian partners look for their autonomy on their own, as the institutional vulnerability of ASEAN often hampers common strategies.

## **When economics come into play: revitalising multilateralism as a realistic way out of the century's largest crisis**

Thus, with COVID-19 arguably functioning as a catalyst of the recurrent asymmetric bilateral relations prevailing in the heart of the ASEM, the remarkable economic impact of the pandemic, together with the failures of multilateral platforms to respond to previous crises, might forecast an obscure fate for multilateralism. Yet, there are some elements of the crisis which could lead one to argue the opposite, namely, that the present economic juncture constitutes a unique opportunity for multilateral relations to revive. In this regard, the first question that arises is how multilateralism, based on an economic focus, could potentially embody a way out of the crisis.

To begin with, advanced economies appear to have abandoned the fiscal tightening reforms seeking to bring down public debt to embrace expansionary macroeconomic policies for as long as it takes for the private sector to regain its confidence to spend. Similarly, through significant fiscal stimulus, most governments have shown themselves willing to engage in deficit spending for the coming years for the sake of avoiding a double-dip recession (Thakur & Kumar, 2021). Beyond public spending, as Ferrannini et al. (2021) note, industrial and innovation policies, together with the reversal of wage repression, will be required to raise productivity growth, while strong(er) labour market institutions seem a precondition to the alignment of wages with productivity, the support for structural change and the reduction of (income) inequalities. Furthermore, all these actions may ideally be complemented by broader central bank mandates and tighter financial regulation to tame speculative investment and channel credit to productive and necessary activities, from manufacturing medical equipment to production of renewable energy. And, in this vein, international coordination and even cooperation turn central to foster a comprehensive recovery from the pandemic (see Hoekman et al., 2020; Kokudo & Sugiyama, 2020; Pevehouse, 2020).

For the time being, advanced economies are experiencing the highest absolute drops in output (OECD, 2021), whereas the greatest economic damage is likely to take place in developing countries, where health and social protection systems are generally weaker, levels of informality turn high, and commodities and tourism remain considerable sources of foreign exchange. As Wright (2020) argues, this situation becomes even more sensitive when considering that many developing nations' fiscal spaces have been squeezed by increasing debt pressures already apparent before the pandemic. This is in part a consequence of the lopsided global recovery from the Global Financial Crisis but also of decades of premature capital account liberalisation and financial deregulation that have turned developing country debt from a developmental policy tool into a speculative financial asset, with external borrowing relying more strongly on private, rather than bilateral and multilateral creditors. Yet, countries could resort to multilateral forums, such as the UN Industrial Development Organisation, the WTO, or the OECD to increase resilience, in aspects such as supply chain diversification (Gehrke, 2020).

However, as Wright (2020) points out, a true economic recovery and reconstruction of Asia/Europe also requires a new set of principles for the global economy that can deliver prosperity for all and revive the health of a planet under increasing environmental stress. The 'Geneva Principles for a Global Green New Deal' advances an urgent research and policy agenda for a New Multilateralism to calibrate the global

economy toward a 21<sup>st</sup> century vision of stability, shared prosperity, and environmental sustainability (Kozul-Wright & Gallagher, 2019). According to those principles, 1) universal guidelines ought to be adjusted towards sustainability, shared prosperity, and social and economic stability, and be guarded against capture by dominant powers; 2.) in the multilateral structure, whose aim is to advance and defend worldwide public goods, countries share common yet differentiated responsibilities; 3.) nations have a right to a policy space to seek their own development plans, which ought to be preserved in these universal guidelines; 4.) these rules are meant to reinforce a vigorous global division of labour and to avoid damaging individual economic actions which keep other states from achieving mutual targets; 5.) universal public organisations must be accountable to their full affiliation, open to diverse and innovative perspectives, and ensure fair conflict resolution mechanisms (Kozul-Wright and Gallagher, 2019).

These principles may be interpreted as a guide to policy initiatives that will be implemented by local and nationally accountable institutions, and as a working basis for collaboration at the international level in support of those initiatives. In this spirit, the ASEM epitomises the perfect continent-to-continent tool for the EU and Asia to multilaterally work on these projects and row in the same direction. The aforesaid principles suggest several areas of reform to the multilateral architecture that will be key to recovering better from COVID-19 and advancing a global new green deal. In conclusion, a full *21<sup>st</sup>-century* recovery from a *21<sup>st</sup>-century* crisis seems to require a bold impetus to a (rebuilt) multilateral scene.

## **Conclusion: any hope for multilateralism?**

In summary, COVID-19 has posed a great challenge to our world order as a whole and to multilateralism in particular. The existence of regional platforms such as the EU or the ASEAN did not prevent countries from turning their backs on multilateral approaches, including the Asia-Europe Meeting, whose vulnerability has become more evident with the pandemic. COVID-19 has arguably functioned as a catalyst of the asymmetric bilateral relations prevailing in the heart of the ASEM. The EU's coordinated response regularly contrasts with the individual response of Asian countries. This points to an unbalanced ASEM, where the European side acts virtually as one, while the Asian side is very heterogeneous, hence reinforcing the asymmetries of bilateral relations among the two continents.

However, it is now the time to reverse this trend, through economic salience. A global crisis demands a global solution, that can only be achieved through effective multilateralism, where all countries row in the same direction to leave no one behind, placing the focus on economic recovery. The different economic mechanisms required call for multilateral platforms. However, it is imperative that such platforms in fact respond to multilateral dynamics: theory must be put into practice.

The COVID-19 crisis offers ASEM a chance to redefine its *modus operandi*, to focus on eliminating the existing asymmetric bilateralism and reorient its activity towards a real multilateralism. However, perhaps, to do so, it must lose some of its members along the way, such as China (or even Russia), who at times prevent greater cooperation from happening. This could also be beneficial for the EU and SEA countries to reinforce (digital) connectivity while seeking their strategic autonomy. If the economic factor is placed at the core of the tactics, the EU and the ASEAN countries could gain great

advantage from the economic interactions, while reducing their overdependency on China. Facing this adversity could be a good point of departure.

ASEM was founded to respond to the kind of multilateral challenges that COVID-19 is now posing. It is a mechanism to create more networks of trade, people and commerce, to build greater resilience and ensure swift economic recovery, to share information and experience. If ASEM is incapable of tackling the task, a new inter-continental platform, an institution where economic salience is placed at the core to be the saviour of the EU-Asia relations, needs to be established.

Given the time and space restrictions that we have faced in writing this article, it is not possible to deeply address this last issue, nor to fully address all the steps taken by European and Asian countries, at state-to-state, region-to-region, or continent-to-continent level, to reinforce cooperation. Yet, given the asymmetries and vulnerability observed, we encourage further research to focus on these elements and on whether the Asia-Europe Meeting could really become an effective platform for multilateralism, where the asymmetric bilateralism continuum is eradicated, or else a new institution must be established to achieve the multilateral dynamism that a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic demands.

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