Regional Identity and Belonging: Australia’s Case in ASEM

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ABSTRACT

Initial attempts of Australia to join the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in the 1990s faced considerable opposition by Malaysia and other East Asian countries in pursuit of an East Asian Community. Considered ‘un-Asian’ and rather ‘Western’, Australia’s interest in joining ASEM as part of the ASEM Asian-Group raised various practical and ideological questions. Facilitated by the enlargement of the European ASEM group and the decade-long lobbying of Australian leaders, Australia was finally welcomed to join ASEM in 2009. This working paper is an attempt to make sense of Southeast Asia’s acceptance of Australia into ASEM and discuss the issue of Australia’s identity dilemma in the neighbourhood through the case of this new institutional site for Australian interaction with European and Asian leaders.

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Introduction

In 1974, Australia became the first official dialogue partner to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Forty years of Australia-ASEAN dialogue have witnessed integrative as well as disintegrative dynamics within the relationship, raising the question of Australia’s identity in the Southeast Asian neighbourhood. This paper is an attempt to make sense of the extent to which Australia belongs to this neighbourhood through the case of Australia’s relatively new membership in the Asian-Group of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM).

ASEM is a region-to-region dialogue forum between 49 Asian and European countries, as well as the ASEAN Secretariat and the European Commission. This multilateral forum is divided into two groups – the European and Asian groups – and, hence, belonging to this forum stresses Australia’s identity dilemma between European and Asian identities. On the one hand, Australia is member of the ASEM-Asian-Group and has an Asian institutional identity. On the other, Australia’s cultural heritage is predominantly European and its liberal-democratic agendas within ASEM display its closer sense of belonging to the ASEM-European-Group than the ASEM-Asian-Group.

Delving into this question of identity through the case of Australia’s membership within the ASEM-Asian-Group is an innovative attempt to portray Australia’s East-West identity issue, complementing existing scholarly publications on this matter (FitzGerald 1997; Paul 1999; He 2011). This study offers insights into how Australia can belong to Asia effectively, not least because ASEM constitutes a case in point of East Asian identity-building through process and discourse (Gilson 2002; Lawson 2002; Gilson and Yeo 2004; Manea 2008; Fitriani 2011). This paper focuses on the identity question by discussing whether Australia is an accepted member within the ASEM-Asian-Group or not. This query relies on the perspectives of Australian and Southeast Asian officials, the few existing scholarly publications in this area and the official activities of Australia within this grouping.

It is noteworthy that Australia’s accession to the ASEM-Asian-Group in 2010 is relatively recent, and therefore, it is difficult to gauge the degree of acceptance on the basis of the official activities of Australia within ASEM. Thus, in this paper, acceptance is not understood as effective engagement and activism, but rather along the lines of attitudes and perceptions; specifically, from Southeast Asian officials towards Australia’s ASEM membership.

It is worth noting here that, while Australia is also the “odd one in” the East Asian Summit (EAS), Australia’s identity and regional belonging there is not torn between two different blocs as in ASEM. Because the United States of America (USA) is involved in the EAS as

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2 This refers to the ASEAN Plus Three countries, including the ten south-east Asian ASEAN member states and the three north-east Asian countries Japan, China and South Korea.
the regional hegemon, the fault lines are more complex than the East-West divide within ASEM, and necessitate further consideration of variables including strategic alliances, hegemonic influence and the Trans-Pacific Partnership. This paper will only focus on the case of ASEM and invites to further comparative explorations of Australia’s identity dilemma within other international fora.

The examination of the case of Australia’s membership within ASEM is subdivided into two parts. The first section begins with a general outline of Australia’s identity dilemma, Australia’s long way to acceding ASEM and a discussion of ASEM’s function as a forum for East Asian regional identity-building (Gilson 2002; Gilson and Yeo 2004; Fitriani 2011). This characteristic of ASEM is put into perspective in the second part of the paper, which considers geo-economic and institutional settings as decisive moderators of national interests and identity within ASEM. The Asian member states of ASEM do not consider Australia as having an Asian identity, but they have accepted its geo-economic belonging in the region. The second part of this paper also introduces the concept of “participative pragmatism” to describe Australia’s short-to-medium-term behaviour within ASEM. In this paper, this concept is understood as follows: Australia is interested in being an engaged actor within the ASEM-Asian grouping, but at the same time, it refrains from pushing its national interests and ambitions within this dialogue forum. This implies that since Australia’s accession to ASEM, Australia has not articulated a clear vision of its expectations in the ASEM-Asian Group and is pursuing a pragmatic middle-way to ensure its belonging to the ASEM-Asian Group.

**Outlining the Dilemma: between East and West**

Australia is an ASEM-Asian middle power with a Western heritage and has to balance this “awkward” identity on multiple levels (He 2011). It is challenged by this difficulty domestically and externally. Its foreign policy is a balancing act to circumvent issues that can arise from its dual identity and avoid the diplomatic affronts of the past with its neighbourhood. These range from the legislative restriction of non-European immigrants in the early 1900s to the more recent diplomatic faux pas in asylum-seeker policy and other issues, particularly the tensions with Indonesia in regards to the Schapelle Corby case, the live cattle trade and espionage. At the same time, Australia is trying to steer clear from domestic controversies that could impact on its external behaviour: Australia’s interests in the Southeast Asian region need to be finely attuned to domestic attitudes and expectations.

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3 In this context, geo-economics originates in Edward Luttwak’s conception that refers to the relationship between territory and economic rationales of states as international actors. His understanding implies that the economic interests of states are subject to the geographical limitations of the state, but, at the same time, they are shaping the extra-territorial engagement of state actors.
The management of Australia’s dual identity within multilateral fora of Western and Asian groupings is particularly complex. In the worst case scenario, within these types of dialogue frameworks such as ASEM, the ambiguities of Australia’s identity could be reinforced. In the best case scenario, these multiple layers of belonging could be building blocks to strengthen Australia’s putative gateway and bridging role to Asia for the USA, the European Union (EU) and other Western powers (Milner and Percival Wood November 2012: 19).

Australia understands that its accession to ASEM raises questions about identity beyond geo-economic interests. Being in proximity to rising Asia places “Australia near the centre of one of the world’s great, ongoing contests, the battle for supremacy between East and West” and encourages a geopolitical master narrative about global power (Walker 2002: 65). From an institutional perspective, ASEM officials understand that Australia is the only Western country alongside New Zealand to be within Asia. Therefore, the Asian members of ASEM expect that Australia as part of the ASEM-Asian-Group shares and supports the positions of this Group; even when these positions do not align with Western or European perspectives.

**Australia’s Long Journey to ASEM**

When ASEM was initiated in 1994, Australia under Prime Minister Paul Keating was “undertaking a commercial and diplomatic crusade to become part of Asia” (Westfield April 1994: 44). Westfield described that Keating already recognised the signs of the times and the inevitable rise of Asia against the backdrop of a declining Anglosphere. Initial attempts by Keating and his successor John Howard to have Australia join the ASEM process in the mid-1990s faced considerable opposition from Malaysia and some other East Asian countries in pursuit of greater East Asian regional cohesion. Malaysian Prime Minister Mohamad Mahathir launched a personal campaign championing an East Asian region exclusive of Western members. Mahathir instructed Malaysian officials in 1995 and in 2000 to use the consensus rule to prevent ASEAN from launching free trade negotiations with Australia and further Australian involvement in any high-level ASEAN-led regionalism (Richardson 2005: 352).

Against this backdrop, there seemed to be little room for Australian inclusion into ASEM in the 1990s. Considered “un-Asian” and rather “Western”, Australia’s interest in joining ASEM as part of the ASEM-Asian-Group raised various practical and ideological questions among the Asian participants (Interview, ASEAN official 1). In particular, given that ASEM has been the site of intensive cultural clashes an Australian admission to the ASEM-Asian-Group seemed impossible. Most prominently, Myanmar’s controversial accession to ASEAN and the issue of human rights have been the main source of criticism and conflict in the past.

Australia’s unsuccessful attempts to join ASEM and other Asian multilateral arrangements compelled the Howard government to look for closer ties with the countries of Northeast Asia.
and to strengthen Australia’s relationship with the US government, in particular, with the Bush Administration. The relations with the latter have fostered the perception in Southeast Asia, especially in countries with Muslim majorities, that “Australia is a surrogate for the US in the region and less attuned to regional sensitivities and interests” (Richardson 2005: 354).

Generally speaking, the distrust towards Australia was also part of a greater construction of suspicion towards the West in the 1990s. This was further fuelled by the negative experience of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, when many Asian countries felt that the International Monetary Fund had disadvantaged them. In fact, ASEM’s early days were marked by this crisis. The Asian side distrusted the ASEM project, to some extent, and some Asian members even accused the ASEM-European-Group of using politico-cultural values and the prospect of enhanced contact as a pretext for excluding outsiders from prosperity. At the same time, the ASEM framework does not appear to have delivered significant benefits. A number of observers concur that ASEM has created an idea of Asia, which has been used against them in the economic crisis (Forster 2000: 801).

Against this backdrop of crisis and distrust, Australia’s prospects of participation at ASEM were in decline at the end of the 20th century, despite the support that Australia received from some East Asian countries, including Singapore and Japan.

Following Mahathir’s retirement in October 2003, Australia’s relationship with its neighbourhood improved. Decades of re-orientation towards East Asia from Whitlam to Hawke, to Gillard and Rudd have shaped an environment overall conducive to Australian-Asian cooperation. In particular, the recent years have witnessed a considerable rise in Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) between Australia and the region, including FTAs with ASEAN, Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia. The geo-economic reality has become of greater salience to both sides.

In addition to the importance of the geo-economic dimension within this paper, it is vital to take note of the identity-building factor of ASEM as a countervailing force to the geo-economic identity of Australia. In the beginning, it was stated that there have been scholarly publications that have proven that ASEM has served as a means to develop greater East Asian regional cohesiveness. For example, Evi Fitriani observed that there is “the development of regional awareness among Asian participants and […] the construction of Asian identities among the Asians in the ASEM forums” (Fitriani 2011: 55). Fitriani and other scholars have demonstrated this forum’s potential in facilitating intra-regional East Asian identity-building. This complicates the integration of latecomer and Western countries into the Asian equation of ASEM both on the ideological and practical level.

In reference to the ideological level, Julie Gilson described ASEM as a mechanism representing cumulate processes of self-identification through internal dynamics and
interaction with the “outside” (Gilson 2002). Similarly, Fitriani observed the polarisation between the European and East Asian Groups, which was caused by political issues and memories of the colonial period (Fitriani 2011: 43). Fitriani argued that the cognitive processes within the ASEM and related fora resulted in the emergence of “inter-subjective understanding” among Asian participants. This understanding is the outcome of interactive sharing of consciousness, hopes, concerns and fears (Fitriani 2011: 48). She described this as a tacit East Asian acknowledgement of their reciprocal tasks towards each other (Fitriani 2011: 48). This argumentation, however, conflates trust-building with identity-building. Similarly to Gilson, she further underlined the unifying and identity-building momentum inherent in controversial and divisive issues brought up within large groups of states. She stated that, “Asians were unified in a common position to counter and refute the European harsh criticism [on human rights practices in Asia]” (Fitriani 2011: 51).

The argument of East Asian identity-building through ASEM raises the question of whether Australia, known as and claiming itself to be a Western liberal-democratic state on the international level, can share inter-subjective understandings with a grouping whose identity and regional awareness was strengthened through a unique process and set of practices. Indeed, in the immediate years prior to Australia’s admission to ASEM, the ASEM-Asian side found it difficult to imagine how an ASEM-Asian identity including Australia should work (Interview, ASEAN official 1).

Practical arrangements complicated Australia’s quest for belonging to the ASEM-Asian-Group. These arrangements foresaw that the Asian participants talked among themselves first, because it was “safer” and avoided conflict on controversial ideological issues (Fitriani 2011: 53). When Australia initiated a third attempt to become an ASEM member at the 7th ASEM Summit in October 2008 in Beijing, some senior officials on the ASEM-Asian side expressed concern that existing practical arrangements such as these pre-meetings of the ASEM-Asian Group were not suited for an expansion to include Australia. Geographically, Australia would belong in the East Asian equation. However, Australia “would have European views, so when we [South and East Asian senior officials] have our Asian co-ordinating meeting”, we cannot talk openly about sensitive and ideological issues that we have with the EU (Interview, ASEAN official 1).

Practically, Australia’s inclusion turned out to be less problematic than initially anticipated.4 While some Asian states considered Australia ideologically too Western to join the Asian side, the ASEM-Asian-Group was technically more open towards new members than the EU side. Firstly, the EU’s enlargement criteria confined the European side (Loewen 2010: 33). Secondly, numerical parity among the Asian and EU participants was urgently needed after the expansion of the ASEM-European-Group following the EU’s enlargement. Last but not

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4 Generally speaking, practicalities within ASEM have been sufficiently flexible and useful to stymie ideological confrontation between the two Groupings. A case in point is the initial location of the human rights dialogue outside of the ASEM Summit format.
least, the decade-long lobbying of Australian leaders facilitated the ASEM-Asian members’ acceptance of Australia.

In 2009, in recognition of Australia’s active participation in various regional fora and constructive involvement in the East Asian neighbourhood, ASEM members extended an invitation to Australia to participate at the 8th ASEM Summit (Capie 2010: 161; Murray 2010: 64; Doidge 2013: 149). In the end, “un-Western” and “un-Asian” Russia posed the main problem for the 2009 ASEM enlargement round, since both the EU and Asia had difficulties in seeing Russia as part of their Groups. A “Temporary Third Grouping” including Australia and New Zealand was established in Madrid in January 2010 to circumvent the dilemma of Russia’s membership application. The initial scepticism among some Asian officials towards Australia’s application in 2008 had subsided by 2009, and there was even active support to integrate the Temporary Third Grouping in a timely manner by some Asian ASEM members who assisted with the approval for the Temporary Third Grouping to accede ASEM on 4 October 2010, outside the scheduled Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in 2011 (Doidge 2013: 149).

David Capie has claimed that Australia’s “admission reflects a changing sense of identity among the members of the Asian group and a growing acceptance of Australia and New Zealand as constructive participants in East Asia’s regional architecture” (Capie 2010: 166). While his observation on acceptance may be right, Southeast Asian officials interviewed for this paper would beg to differ on the extent to which there is a changing sense of identity. Today, Southeast Asian officials have accepted the geo-economic reality, however, they are still cautious and, generally, avoid answering the question of Australian identity in ASEM: Interviewees preferred to refer to Australia’s identity in other multilateral arrangements such as the United Nations, where Australia belongs to Western and European groupings.

While it is acknowledged frequently that Australia belongs to the region and has been a constructive partner, some reservations persist. In the eyes of Southeast Asian officials, identity-building is a lengthy and complex process, and cannot be achieved overnight or merely through membership (Interview, ASEAN official 2). In a nutshell, contemporary Southeast Asian perspectives on Australia in ASEM suggest that the inclusion into ASEM signifies, firstly, an acknowledgment of Australia’s long-standing constructive efforts in the region (cf. Nathan 1991; Thakur 1998; Richardson 2005; Capie 2010). Secondly, it displays the recognition of the common geo-economic narrative.

Since the start of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), Southeast Asian officials have indicated that Australia’s engagement in the region has become more significant and that there may be the opportunity that Australia’s longstanding partnership with ASEAN can shape the ASEM agenda (Interview, ASEAN official 3). The GFC has also been the main catalyst for Australia’s renewed interest in ASEM. Australia realised that ASEM may assist in managing “the process of economic globalization in the policy fields of global finance, investment and trade” (Loewen 2010: 23). Australia became aware of ASEM’s significant role in the wake of
the GFC, when at the 7th ASEM meeting in Beijing a large number of Asian and European leaders exchanged and coordinated ideas prior to the Group of 20 (G20) meeting that then tackled the GFC more directly (Capie 2010: 163). Australia recognised the utility of ASEM as a vital crisis management mechanism to support global institutions. Following the GFC, it has been said,

We believe ASEM works best when it responds to topical global issues – for example, when it addressed the global financial crisis at the 2008 Beijing Summit. (Australian member state official 17 July 2013)

The global and macro-economic impact of ASEM was the main motivation behind Australia’s third attempt to gain ASEM membership. In addition to this opportunity, Australia also saw utility in ASEM’s flexible, open and unbinding format that enables ad hoc inclusion and discussion of emerging and topical issues. The intangibility and informality of the ASEM format is considered useful in urgent and crisis situations that require immediate attention. Furthermore, these features allow the discussion of delicate issues – “which might not be broached in a more formal, bilateral setting” (Roe 2010: 14).

ASEM is one of many pathways for Australia to engage with its neighbourhood on global issues. However, a more intimate relationship with its Asian neighbours through ASEM has to transcend the discussion of global commonalities and requires greater engagement with political sensitivities pertaining to the Australia-Asia relationship. The issue of regional belonging persists, although ASEM is no longer “a continuous reminder of the constraints of Australian foreign policy in the region” (Beeson 2001: 3).

**Great Expectations and Participative Pragmatism**

Since Australia’s membership in the ASEM-Asian-Group, scholarly publications have been quick to highlight Australia’s “special” relationship with Asia. They have ascribed various pro-active role conceptions to Australia and re-framed Australia’s ambiguous identity as an opportunity. These role conceptions, or rather role expectations, are based on Australia’s bi-regional identity and portray Australia’s “Asian’-identity as a source of empowerment.

There are scholarly publications that have referred to an enlarged ASEM as a mechanism of global order (Guang 2010: 46). This implies that Australia could act as a facilitator of a higher regional order emerging from the ASEM Groupings or a proxy for US interests (Murray 2010; Guang 2010). Academics who share this view have treated the latest ASEM expansion round as an exemplar that could lead to membership applications of other “juncture” states that are similar to Australia, including Turkey (Guang 2010: 42).
Other scholars have enthused that Australia could hold a significant mediating role in ASEM, “bringing together broad coalitions (as it did in APEC and the Cairns Group)” (Murray 2010: 69). Explicitly, Philomena Murray has referred to the case of agricultural trade and regional order:

The benefits of Australia’s membership of ASEM include the development of close relationships with Asian partners and the lessening of potential tensions with both EU and Asian partners, whether on agriculture with the EU or on the sensitivities of regional architectural design with some Asian partners (Murray 2010: 53-54).

Nonetheless, speaking from an EU perspective, role expectations of Australia as a “bridge” or “broker” may pertain to smaller member states of the ASEM-European-Group only. The big European powers already have extensive ties with the ASEM-Asian members.

Furthermore, Murray foresaw that Australia would take on a leadership role, which “may not be in leadership from the front, but in activism, persuasive diplomacy and taking advantage of its unique relationship with both the EU and the Asia Pacific region” (Murray 2010: 71). In light of the diplomatic faux pas of the past, it is likely that Australia will take into greater consideration a “leadership from the back” approach. It is expected that Australia will assume the role of an activist middle power that exerts quiet diplomacy (Capie 2010: 167; Murray 2010: 53).

From “bridge” to “broker”, scholarly visions for Australia in ASEM have been ambitious (Capie 2010: 168). Thus, it is important to consider these ambitions from an official viewpoint. The official stance of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) builds on a similar middle power narrative as expressed by Murray and Capie. However, DFAT tends towards a more realistic sobriety. It correlates its role in ASEM with the realisation of its national interests and the furtherance of ASEM’s efficacy.

Australia appreciates the talk-shop format of ASEM, but it is critical of some features of Asian-style institutions. It recognises that ASEM’s fluidity and unbinding nature may be an obstacle in realising Australian interests through ASEM, to some extent. Australia takes an interest in overcoming these issues and facilitating working methods to enhance substantive dialogue in ASEM (Interview with Australian official 1). It is in coalition with the majority of ASEM members across the two regions who seek to promote ASEM instruments for greater efficacy. This is not to say that ASEM does not generate tangible and effective cooperation. In recent years, ASEM has, in fact, acted as an umbrella framework for a variety of “mini-multilateral” cooperative efforts involving two or three countries across the two continents (Guang 2010: 48). However, Australia has noted that ASEM serves as a mechanism to advance national interests and this demands greater efficacy.
Furthermore, the question of efficacy cannot be advanced through ASEM’s aforementioned function as a facilitator of information exchange and rationaliser of common positions for global fora. This opportunity of large numbers is a hindrance to those ASEM member states, which want tangible benefits and achieve more than a coordinated stance on an issue. Large numbers pose logistical problems and could undermine effective coordination aimed at tangible cooperation.

Australia also understands that ASEM holds value as a tool for socialisation. In this context, socialisation is understood, firstly, as the induction of new ASEM members into the ASEM working mode and format, and, secondly, as the communication and familiarisation of norms and values among member states, informing their behaviour and identity (cf. Barnes et al. 1980; Checkel 2005; Park 2014). ASEM allows the promotion of national interests and burden-sharing with the neighbourhood and European partners through socialisation. At the same time, socialisation is a lengthy and complex process that requires convergence of all of the levels and channels of interaction between Southeast Asia and Australia. Already in 2001, Mark Beeson cautioned:

> It might be supposed that given the apparently imminent retirement of Dr Mahathir, that one of the most significant obstacles to Australia’s closer economic, and by implication political integration with Southeast Asia will be overcome. But it is important to remember that this sort of more intimate interaction is a two way street; engendering a more positive attitude toward Australia in the region will depend as much on Australia itself, as it does on any change of sentiment in the region more broadly (Beeson 2001: 3).

In spite of the complexities of Australia’s socialisation with its neighbourhood directly or indirectly through arrangements like ASEM, socialisation processes are taking place on multiple levels and have increased Australia’s opportunity to present proposals, build broad coalitions, engender informal discussions and build common understandings of norms and values within ASEM and other fora (Murray 2010: 70). In particular, this positive development within ASEM has been enhanced by the substantive non-governmental level of socialisation within the sectors of business, education and tourism between Southeast Asia and Australia. These have been government-fostered in the 1970s, but are now more broadly based and stemming from people-to-people interactions (Richardson 2005: 356).

Currently, from a general as well as ASEM perspective, the underlying East-West tension of Australia’s identity is not a severe political stumbling block. Geo-economic calculations shape the interaction within ASEM and questions of regional identity and belonging remain important, but mainly implicitly. For the time being, the question of identity seems unlikely to cause incoherence within the ASEM-Asian-Group and Australian officials value the opportunity to meet both European and Asian leaders on these occasions and entertain dialogues devoid of the East-West divide. The Australian official perspective is content with
the ASEM-Asian position on sensitive issues. Nonetheless, Australia may well differ from multilateral ASEM-Asian stances, when it comes to expressing its interests within the ASEM bilateral meetings.

The East-West tension is inherent in the ASEM process and invites pragmatism on the part of Australia to avoid conflict. One could say that, over the years, Australia has advanced from constructive and pragmatic engagement with its neighbourhood for the purpose of inclusion into East Asia/ASEM (pragmatic participation) to participative pragmatism. This is not a diplomatic understatement of the cultural and political issues *per se*. Rather, ASEM’s format is both low-opportunity and low-cost, thus lacking incentives for an ambitious Australian approach that could step on the toes of Southeast Asian member states, which consider themselves in the driver’s seat of many regional integrative arrangements in the Asia-Pacific. Australia’s contemporary approach to Asia may be criticised as “cultural relativism”, as has happened in the past by various authors and scholars in regard to human rights in Southeast Asia (Paul 1999: 288). Participative pragmatism circumvents political confrontation on cultural sensitivities between Australia and its neighbourhood. However, it raises normative concerns and puts into question Australia’s Western identity.

In addition to this issue of de-emphasising the cultural dimension, it is questionable whether avoiding the discussion of political sensitivities and focusing on a pragmatic strategy are sufficiently visionary. Australia’s national interests may not necessarily be realised through this approach in their entirety. Circumventing any form of potential controversy mitigates tensions, guarantees Australia’s successful socialisation process in ASEM and may smooth the way for Australia’s “arrival” in the ASEM-Asian-family. Australia as a new member is aware that it needs to restrain and align its activism within ASEM. However, the opportunity for meaningful and constructive engagement with the political sensitivities of Asian states is purposely curbed. One wonders why/whether decades of re-orientation towards Asia have not crystallised sufficient familiarity to address these issues candidly.

For now, within ASEM, participative pragmatism is the underlying rationale and enhancing effectiveness is the most important practical objective of Australia’s interaction. This rationale and objective work towards realising Australia’s national interests and seeing “that it [ASEM] remains an effective and attractive forum for dialogue between Asian and European countries” (Interview with Australian official 1). Seemingly, Australia has managed the dilemma posed by its politically Western and geo-economically Asian identity through participative pragmatism within ASEM. Participative pragmatism is the main strategy within the multilateral setting of ASEM. By contrast, Australia pursues less pragmatism and greater furtherance of its core national interests within the bilateral setting of ASEM. Finally, it needs to be noted that, seemingly, the contemporary geo-economic narrative appears to be off-setting the significance of ASEM as a vehicle for lasting identity-building within East Asia. This invites us to delve deeper into research that investigates ASEM’s actual and substantive impact on East Asian cohesion and regional identity-building.
in the first place. Whatever outcome such an exploration implies, it is important to understand that Australia’s contemporary pragmatic approach only contributes to an effective Australasian identity in the long-run.

**Conclusions**

In the beginning of this paper, it was outlined that Australia is facing the difficulty of managing its Western-Asian identity on the domestic and external level. The premise was that Australia’s quest for belonging is intriguing, particularly within multilateral fora of Western and Asian groupings. In these fora, Australia has to balance very skilfully its Western and Eastern identity. On the one hand, such multilateral fora like ASEM could reinforce underlying tensions and ambiguities of Australia’s identity. On the other, they can be building blocks strengthening Australia’s bridging role.

Thus, this paper treated the accession of Australia in the ASEM-Asian-Group as a case in point to provide an introductory discussion of the question of Australia’s regional identity and belonging. Whereas existing scholarly literature has portrayed Australia’s accession as a success story and ascribed ambitious role conceptions to Australia as a “bridge” or “broker” between Asia and Europe, this paper has adopted a nuanced approach that takes greater account of Southeast Asian perspectives.

Furthermore, it was argued that ASEM de-incentivises a pro-active middle-power approach and encouraged Australia to enter into a pragmatic partnership with Asia. Initially, building on pragmatic participation to win over the states of its neighbourhood, Australia now seems to have embarked on participative pragmatism to ensure that it remains “within” the Asian grouping in ASEM. ASEM is invaluable as a means to foster diplomatic ties with other participants and eventually strengthen governance efficacy in the Asia-Pacific. It acts as a mechanism that assists the rationalisation of global issues within the region. Australia has a vision and national interests that it would like to see realised through ASEM. However, for the time being, it is a new member to ASEM and has to steer clear of ambitions and sensitivities that could jeopardise its belonging to the ASEM-Asian-Group.

This pragmatic middle-way is not a diplomatic de-emphasis of the political and cultural sensitivities of Australia’s identity *per se*. Indeed, Australia needs to keep in mind that its neighbours are expecting Australia to find solutions to these sensitivities with the region. For Australia, it should be about anticipating, understanding and embracing change, before societal and geo-economic pressures compel change. Australia’s future role in ASEM strongly correlates with the Asian setting that Australia is within, yet, to some extent, still without.


Communication with Australian official (17 July 2013).


Interview with ASEAN official 1 in Bangkok (2 November 2008).

Interview with ASEAN official 2 in Australia via telephone (4 July 2013).

Interview with ASEAN official 3 in Australia via telephone (5 July 2013).

Interview with Australian official 1 in Australia via telephone (12 July 2013).


Second Technical Implementation Report and Financial Statement

For the period 1 May 2011 - 30 April 2012

Report to the European Commission Foreign Policy Instrument Service