

NEW ZEALAND'S ASEM MEMBERSHIP: ACCESSION, BENEFITS AND FUTURE STRATEGY

Mathew Doidge

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New Zealand's ASEM Membership: Accession, Benefits and Future Strategy¹

Abstract: *This paper explores New Zealand's place in the Asia–Europe Meeting, examining three elements. First, it considers the membership issues, exploring both the formal path to New Zealand's accession and the evolving calculus by which its views of forum membership were structured. In so doing, it focuses on factors such as the enabling context provided by a change of national government in 2008, the impact of the global financial crisis, and the position of Australia. Second, drawing on a series of interviews undertaken within the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, it examines perceived benefits of the Asia–Europe Meeting for New Zealand, and the extent to which these have been delivered. Third, it addresses the issue of a New Zealand ASEM strategy, outlining potential priority areas for future engagement.*

Introduction

In 2010, at its eighth Summit, New Zealand joined the Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM) process alongside two other new entrants – Australia and Russia – bringing the number of participants to 48 from an initial 26.² New Zealand's path to membership was a long one – 15 years from its first expression of interest preceding the inaugural Summit in 1996 until its formal accession in 2010. Despite this long timeframe, however, its accession was in the end something of a rush job, a scramble to respond to events rather than the product of any genuine enthusiasm for the forum. This paper explores New Zealand's engagement with ASEM, and in so doing addresses three core questions: (i) what was New Zealand's path to membership, and what were the key factors underpinning its final decision to join?; (ii) what potential benefits does New Zealand see as stemming from its engagement with the

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² From ASEM 9 in November 2012, this number increased to 50 with the accession of Norway and Switzerland.

process, and how has it performed in this regard?; and finally (iii) what shape should a New Zealand strategy for engagement with ASEM take?

The Path to New Zealand's Accession

The issue of extending membership has always been a thorny one for ASEM. One motivation for the European Union's initial engagement in the process was its exclusion of Myanmar at a time when conflict over its human rights record had effectively hamstrung cooperation in the EU–ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) framework. This raised the prospect that future accessions to the Asia–Europe Meeting would be carefully considered and potentially contentious. Further complicating the enlargement issue was the binary nature of the forum, premised upon two groups cohering around particular identities and effectively requiring that new member states be demonstrably European or Asian. This was reinforced when early on agreement was reached on a 'double key' approach to expansion, with each side selecting its own members subject to approval by all ASEM states.

New Zealand's approach to ASEM membership was tentative at best. In part this stemmed from prior experience. When Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad had proposed an East Asian Economic Caucus in 1990, he had firmly rebuffed expressions of interest from New Zealand and Australia, prompting a certain amount of caution on the part of New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) when approaching the Asia–Europe Meeting (interview with senior MFAT official, May 2012).³ In the event, the concern over Mahathir proved to be well-founded. When New Zealand and Australia expressed an interest in joining the forum in the mid-1990s, the views of the Malaysian Prime Minister proved an insurmountable obstacle. While firm support was forthcoming from the European states, Japan, South Korea and the Philippines, opposition from Malaysia and Thailand (Baker 1996: 20, Baker and Murdoch 1996: 9, Skelton 1997: 21) meant an effective veto on entry. Less consistently supportive were Indonesia and China. Despite providing early backing for membership (Baker and Murdoch 1996: 9), Indonesia endorsed Malaysia's veto at ASEM 2 in 1998, a fact that caused some embarrassment when it subsequently became

³ When it came to membership of the EAEC and ASEM, New Zealand is described by one senior MFAT official involved as having been effectively caught in the crossfire of Malaysia–Australia relations. Having itself historically had a positive relationship with Malaysia, on this issue New Zealand was tarred by association with Australia, whose engagement was of a far more 'robust' nature (interview with senior MFAT official, May 2012).

public through the leaking of diplomatic cables (*Illawarra Mercury* 1998: 27), provoking an angry exchange of views with the Australians before Indonesian support was eventually restated. China offered general endorsement for New Zealand and Australia as candidate countries, but also proved itself willing to link this to criticisms of its own human rights record (Skehan 1997: 1). Nevertheless, the key remained Mahathir's opposition which, when filtered through ASEAN's consensus principle, meant that the Association stood as an effective block to any prospect of expanding the forum southwards.

While a number of arguments have been proffered to explain the motivations underpinning Mahathir's opposition,⁴ it was around the issue of identity that his specific objections were built. Given their geographic location, it was expected that any enlargement to incorporate New Zealand and Australia would see their inclusion on the Asian side of the ASEM equation, the European grouping having effectively (though contentiously) defined itself as the member states of the European Union. This was a fact the Australian government had been quick to recognise, with the Keating administration in 1995 suggesting that Australia was a nation of the 'East Asian Hemisphere' (Terada 2003: 254), an idea that failed to gain traction among opponents of its membership.⁵

For New Zealand, Mahathir's position led to the shelving of its early ASEM aspirations, a fact reflected in diplomatic communications of the time: 'the key to movement on this issue ... remains Prime Minister Mahathir ... We believe that any chance we might have of gaining some early concession would not be enhanced by more vigorous representation at this stage which [he] might feel compelled to resist, even publicly' (quoted in Rolfe 2005: 47–8). In short, the potential benefits of ASEM were considered insufficient to outweigh the effort of campaigning for membership. A conscious decision was therefore made to set aside the ASEM issue until the Mahathir problem had been resolved (interview with senior MFAT official, June 2012).

⁴ One suggested motivation for Mahathir's strong position, voiced by officials in Japan though denied by Malaysia, was a 'myopic and vindictive' retaliation for Australian opposition to the East Asian Economic Caucus proposal (Hewett and Skelton 1997: 9, Hiebert 1995: 26) which had been crushed under the weight of opposition, most notably from the US. The ASEM process made something of a reality of the concept, positing an Asia grouping whose membership coincidentally mirrored that of Mahathir's earlier proposal.

⁵ Asserted Mahathir, 'I cannot agree, accept the definition, that Australia and New Zealand is part of East Asia or a part of Asia even' and 'To say that Asia should not be recognised unless it includes Australia and New Zealand would imply that Europe should not have a European Union unless it includes maybe the Arab countries' (quoted in Baker 1996: 20).

This cost–benefit calculation became more firmly entrenched over the following decade as New Zealand’s view of the utility of the process gradually dimmed. Early interest in membership had been conditioned largely by the expectation that ASEM would deliver substantive results, particularly around trade liberalisation. The failure of such cooperation to eventuate meant that the resourcing calculus remained unchanged. Indeed, the low priority accorded to the Asia–Europe Meeting is evidenced by its total absence from key documentation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade at the time. Thus, for example, the 2007 White Paper *Our Future with Asia* which established a framework for engagement with the region, while urging greater integration into the Asian architecture and highlighting the ‘need to be included in the new regional structures that are being put in place’ (MFAT 2007: 19), notably excluded ASEM from its consideration.⁶ Further, the sixteen *Annual Reports, Statements of Intent, and Briefs to the Incoming Minister* published by the Ministry between 2002 and 2010, while routinely emphasising the need to participate in regional structures, failed to mention the Asia–Europe Meeting once, a situation acknowledged within MFAT as indicative of the level of importance accorded to the process by the Ministry at that time (interview with senior MFAT official, May 2012). As a consequence, it was largely Australian efforts that kept the membership issue, even if only intermittently, on the agenda. For MFAT, so long as Australia was also excluded from the process, there was no pressing need for New Zealand to push for accession (interview with former senior MFAT official, April 2012). In other words, responsibility for policy on ASEM membership had effectively been abdicated to the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

The events of 2008/2009 were therefore something of a surprise for MFAT. In mid-2008, Australia applied to join the Asia–Europe Meeting, doing so in a rather ‘blunt’ and ‘heavy-handed’ fashion (interview with senior Commission official, July 2011) with Foreign Minister Steven Smith sending a letter directly to all 45 members asserting a strong ambition to join the process as part of the Asian grouping.⁷ Having received no warning from their counterparts, the Australian application left MFAT ‘to some extent, scrambling’ (interview of former senior MFAT official, April 2012). The subsequent quick extension of feelers to the European Commission as to the value of New Zealand membership further

⁶ The focus instead falling on ASEAN, ASEAN+3, APEC and the East Asia Summit.

⁷ This was a contrast with the accepted process under the ‘double key’ membership system of approaching one grouping which, if in favour, would then put the proposal to members of the second of ASEM’s two regional groups. This method was also used by Russia.

reinforced the view that the Ministry had been wrong-footed by the Australian move and had no real policy in place to cater for the eventuality. In the event, the Ministry resolved to adopt a wait and see approach, with a final decision to be made only when the prospects for Australia's entry were clearer.

The Australian approach to ASEM was complicated by the concurrent application of Russia. Malaysian opposition had largely dissipated after Mahathir left office (interview with Malaysian Foreign Ministry official, June 2012), meaning that there were no substantive objections on the Asian side. Nevertheless, with Russia as a complicating factor, it was recognised by states such as Singapore that the broader issue of membership would need to be dealt with before Australia could be admitted. While Russia had applied to join on the Asian side, the Asian states were somewhat dubious as to its Asian credentials, arguing instead that it should enter as part of the European grouping. The Europeans in turn made the case that membership of their grouping was restricted to EU member states: that ASEM was, in fact, the Asia–EU Meeting.⁸ The compromise reached at the ninth Foreign Ministers' Meeting (FMM) in May 2009 was a 'Temporary Third Grouping', neither European nor Asian, but instead comprised of these leftover states. On this basis, Australian membership was approved.

While New Zealand's membership was not formally addressed at the Foreign Ministers' Meeting, informal discussions between Asian and Commission officials suggested that no objections would be raised in principle. However, when New Zealand's application was lodged in September 2009, it was complicated by the prospect that its wait and see approach may have led it to 'miss the boat' (interview with senior Commission official, July 2011). Indeed, a number of Asian states made the case that membership matters could only be decided by a Foreign Ministers' Meeting, which would in effect have placed the application on hold until it could be considered by the tenth FMM in June 2011. New Zealand's earlier accession came down to the action of the Cambodian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, which argued that approval could be given by Foreign Ministers outside of a scheduled Ministerial Meeting. In practice, as one of the two Asian Regional Coordinators, the Cambodian Senior Official on ASEM, in the face of some opposition, took it upon himself to contact all member state Foreign Ministers by letter,

⁸ Indeed, expressions of interest by EU candidate countries (e.g. Poland) had previously been rebuffed until such time as they were full members of the Union itself (interview with senior Commission official, July 2011).

declaring that unless specific objections were raised, assent would be presumed and New Zealand would become a member (interview with former senior MFAT official, April 2012). No objections being forthcoming, New Zealand officially joined the ASEM process as part of the Temporary Third Grouping alongside Australia and Russia at the eighth Summit in 2010.

The Changing Calculus of New Zealand's Accession

Setting aside the formal path by which New Zealand joined the Asia–Europe Meeting, a range of factors influenced the decision to join, and indeed historically not to join, the process. What follows, therefore, is a more detailed consideration of the calculus of New Zealand's accession, examining the elements underpinning its early interest, subsequent disinterest, and the final volte-face which saw it joining ASEM from the eighth Summit in 2010.

As previously noted, intrinsic to New Zealand's early expression of interest in the Asia–Europe Meeting was a set of expectations as to what the process would deliver. A number of factors in the early 1990s framed the agreement to establish ASEM, and indeed structured many of the expectations as to the role it would perform. For the Europeans, for example, it offered an alternative to the deadlocked and rather stale dialogue with ASEAN which had become effectively moribund under the weight of disagreements over human rights and the membership of Myanmar in the Association. For the Southeast Asians it offered a foundation for increased cooperation and integration within East Asia, making a reality of earlier proposals for an East Asian Economic Caucus. More significant, however were the motivations relating to addressing a perceived 'missing link' in the global triadic architecture, and concerns about economic marginalisation.

The conception of ASEM as filling a 'missing link' was prominent from the outset, being a key element in Goh Chok Tong's proposal. A new Asia–Europe dialogue was seen as a necessary complement and balance to existing relationships among the triad of regions, embodied in the EU–US Transatlantic Partnership and in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) framework. It was as a mirror to the latter that Goh particularly envisaged ASEM, advocating the creation of 'Pacific-style' ties between the two regions (Pou Serradell 1996: 186). And indeed it is APEC that helped to structure early expectations for the functioning of ASEM. By casting the Asia–Europe Meeting as a mirror and response to

APEC, a link was drawn directly between the functioning of Asia-Pacific cooperation and that of the new forum. This was further reinforced by the absence of any precedent for the transregional ASEM framework. In the context of this absence, the nearest analogue – the mega-regional APEC forum – helped to structure expectations.⁹ As such, the evolution of APEC through the early 1990s played a significant role in framing perceptions as to the likely role and functioning of the ASEM process. While APEC had been operative since 1989, it had only convened its first Summit in 1993, on which occasion it agreed for the first time a set of reciprocal trade concessions. This was followed in 1994 by the tabling of plans for a Pacific Free Trade Area (PAFTA) to be completed by 2020. As a consequence, APEC was increasingly seen as leaving behind its reputation as a talking shop, pushing instead towards the delivery of substantive results. With the link to ASEM drawn, these initiatives helped to raise clear expectations that the Asia–Europe Meeting too would move rapidly towards the achievement of concrete goals, notably in the area of trade liberalisation.

Alongside the influence of APEC, ASEM was also the product of fears of economic marginalisation. The European Union’s reappraisal of its relations with Asia, as embodied in the 1994 *New Asia Strategy*, highlighted the centrality of economic concerns in its approach to the region. The document made it clear that the primary factor motivating the European push for closer relations with Asia in the 1990s was concern at missing out on the growth that was occurring there, asserting that the Union needed ‘as a matter of urgency to strengthen its economic presence in Asia in order to maintain its leading role in the world economy ... [and] to ensure that its interests are taken fully into account there’ (European Commission 1994: 1).

Similarly, economic priorities were a motivation for the Asian states, and particularly the members of ASEAN. The opening of China to foreign direct investment, for example, had seen a significant shift of FDI and production in its favour at the expense of other regional states. Concern over the ongoing economic impact of an emergent China was, therefore, a key factor particularly for the ASEAN states: the incorporation of their competitor into a structure premised greatly on global trading rules was seen as a useful mechanism for

⁹ The difference between transregional and mega-regional fora is one of organisational principles. Transregionalism (a subset of interregionalism) is premised, at least notionally, upon a binary group-to-group structure (Doidge 2011: 2–3). Mega-regional fora, on the other hand, lack this group-to-group basis. Instead they are premised on a group of states drawn from specified regions, and pursuing some kind of integrative agenda – in the case of APEC, this revolves around trade liberalisation.

allowing Southeast Asian economies to work towards greater trade and investment penetration of the Chinese market. Further, with Maastricht's ambitious goal of achieving Economic and Monetary Union, closer ties with Europe were seen as increasingly necessary. For the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, therefore, a link with Europe mirroring the economic and commercially focused tie with the United States embodied in APEC was essential (Pou Seradell 1996: 186–8).

Expectations for ASEM, then, were from the outset high. The European Council made this clear when it asserted that the new institution must pursue 'concrete and substantial results' (European Council 1995: 43). While the process was clearly also a political one, the prominence of economic concerns made substantive cooperation in trade and financial matters the primary anticipated outcome of Asia–Europe engagement, and indeed this expectation structured the early history of the process. The years following the first Summit saw the establishment of separate Economic and Finance Ministers' Meetings, a Senior Officials' Meeting on Trade and Investment, a Customs Directors-General and Commissioners' Meeting and an Asia–Europe Business Forum, as well as the first steps being taken toward the creation of a Trade Facilitation Action Plan (TFAP) and an Investment Promotion Action Plan (IPAP). The launching of the TFAP and IPAP initiatives in particular raised the spectre of the possible emergence of institutionalised rules and procedures to guide the facilitation and liberalisation of trade and investment relations between the two regions (Yeo 2003: 155).

This institutional proliferation of the early years of ASEM quickly became a characteristic of the process, coming to reflect a form of 'cooperation malaise': the creation of new structures was increasingly a substitute for the anticipated substantive engagement. The result has been the increasing breadth of the Asia–Europe Meeting process, while depth of cooperation has remained limited and substantive outcomes have failed to eventuate. In part this failure has been the product of a capability–expectations gap. Simply, the functions that the Asia–Europe Meeting was expected to perform were premised upon a level of cooperation, a level of agency, that has proven beyond the ability of the ASEM partners to achieve (Doidge 2009: 13–14; Doidge 2011: 172–4). Additionally, however, and exacerbating this first difficulty, is the informal nature of the cooperative process itself, embodied in the lack of an administrative secretariat, non-binding and consensual decision-taking, and the preference for soft law instruments such as benchmarking when pursuing specific policy

goals. The lack of institutional memory in the form of a secretariat has, for example, meant that meetings under the ASEM umbrella have frequently been characterised by a lack of awareness of the content of prior discussions (or even who was present), and have therefore often ploughed the same turf, impacting upon the pace of cooperation (interview with Commission official, cited in Doidge 2011: 119). Added to this, the non-binding nature of any decisions taken has meant that agreements can be read only as indicative rather than substantive. Given these norms of cooperation, it may be argued that ASEM's structure was from the outset suited more to dialogue than to the delivery of concrete goals.

It is in this context that New Zealand's view of the ASEM process must be seen. Its early expression of interest in joining was a product of the heightened expectations surrounding the establishment of Asia–Europe cooperation. From the 1990s, issues of trade liberalisation and market access gained particular emphasis in New Zealand's external relations, reflecting both a general cross-party political consensus that had emerged since the neoliberal turn of the fourth Labour government (assumed office in July 1984), as well as the direction being taken at the global level, embodied for example in the founding of the World Trade Organisation and in the new APEC agenda. New Zealand had signed its first comprehensive Free Trade Agreement in 1983 – the Closer Economic Relations (CER) arrangement with Australia – and the establishment of similar frameworks was to become a core element in its trade strategy over the subsequent decades. Alongside this was its increasing strategic focus on Asian markets. The Asia–Europe Meeting, then, seemed to offer a framework within which a small player like New Zealand could pursue these policy goals effectively. This impetus, however, waned over time: when the ASEM process failed to deliver the anticipated results, it became somewhat devalued in the eyes of MFAT. There was, quite simply, a lack of any sense that ASEM had proved significant, particularly around priority issues for New Zealand (interview with former senior MFAT official, April 2012). Reinforcing this decline in enthusiasm for ASEM membership was the issue of resourcing, and the calculation that the cost of engaging in the process to the level likely to be expected by other participants was beyond the capacity of MFAT to meet (interview with former senior MFAT official, April 2012). Such issues of resourcing continue to have resonance for New Zealand's engagement.

This calculus clearly changed in 2008/2009, leading ultimately to New Zealand's accession to the process. Three factors can be highlighted. The first is the enabling context

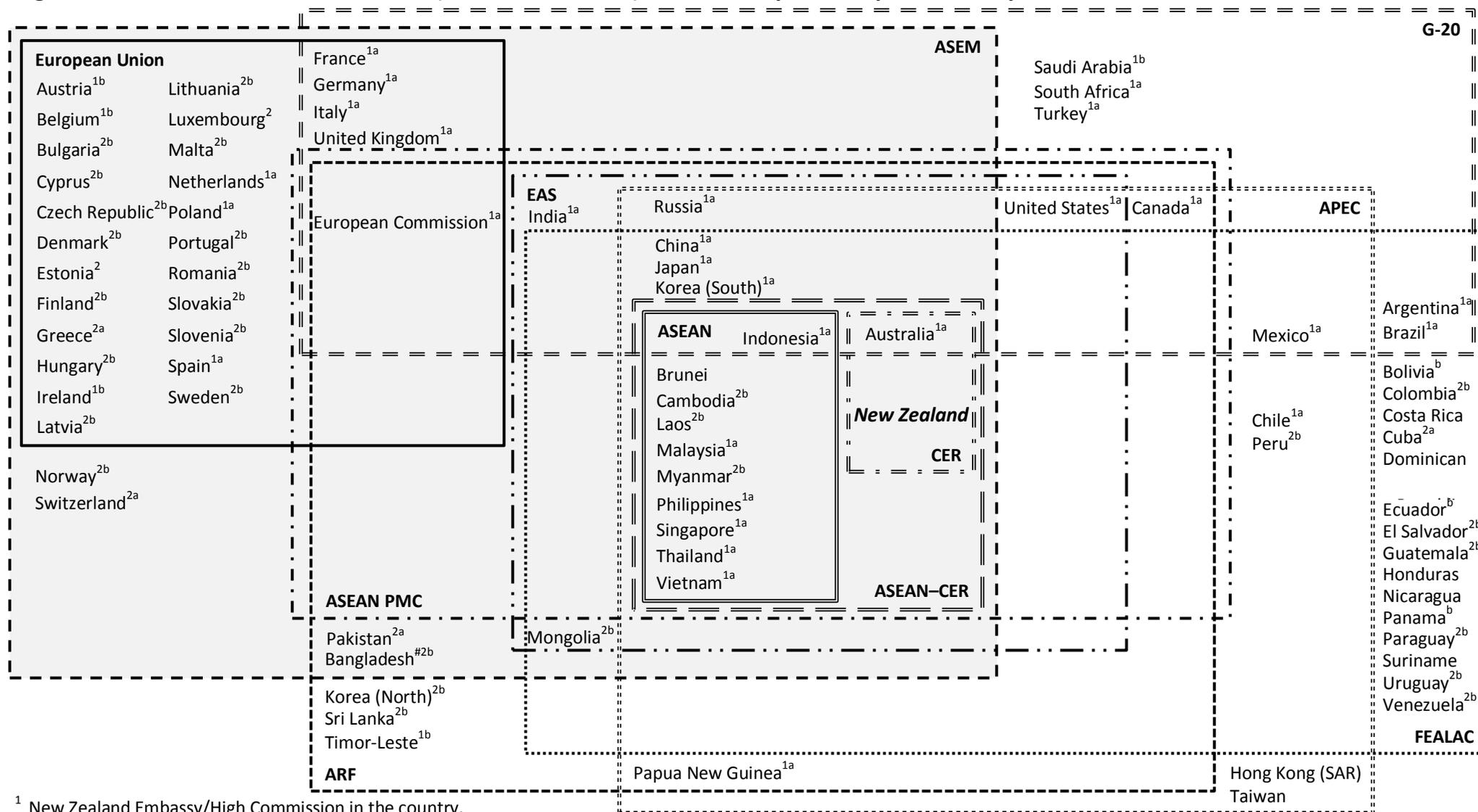
provided by the election of a new government. On the basis of the calculations outlined above, the decision not to pursue membership had become the default setting for the fifth Labour government, in office for the decade from 1999 until 2008. When it was succeeded by the fifth National government, the inertia of that default position to an extent disappeared (interview with former senior MFAT official, April 2012), with the incoming Foreign Minister – Murray McCully – taking a fresh look at New Zealand’s external engagement.

Second, and more importantly, was the changed international circumstance engendered by the global financial crisis, and the apparent impact of this on the ASEM process. Simply, for a brief moment in 2008, ASEM seemed to gain increased relevance and utility in the global context. With the agreement to hold the inaugural G-20 Summit in November of that year to address the financial crisis, the coincidence of the convening of the seventh ASEM Summit in Beijing in the preceding October lent the process added prominence, comprising as it did ten of the European and Asian G-20 members (including the European Commission) (see Figure 1).¹⁰ The ASEM Summit therefore became a useful preparatory forum for the G-20, and indeed was seen to have been particularly useful in generating a level of meeting of minds on issues which could potentially have led to stalemate in the G-20 itself (e.g. on voting reform in the IMF and World Bank) (interview with Commission official, cited in Doidge 2011: 126). In other words, the Asia–Europe Meeting was seen as performing something of a clearing house function for the G-20.

To external viewers, the discussions that took place seemed to suggest that ASEM was becoming increasingly relevant to global governance. This raised the apparent value of forum presence, and indeed it was off the back of the ASEM 7/G-20 concurrence that Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd decided to pursue membership. For New Zealand, too, the Beijing Summit was something of a turning point in its view of the process, raising the

¹⁰ In fact, the first G-20 Summit comprised 22 participants, the Netherlands and Spain being allowed extraordinary presence as representatives of the European Council even though, at that time, France held the rotating Presidency. As such, 12 of the 22 participants were members of ASEM.

Figure 1: New Zealand in Asia: Forum (and selected FTA) Membership, and Diplomatic Representation



¹ New Zealand Embassy/High Commission in the country.
² New Zealand Ambassador Cross-Accredited to the country.
^a Country has an Embassy/High Commission in New Zealand.
^b Country has an Ambassador Cross-Accredited to New Zealand.

APEC: Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation; ARF: ASEAN Regional Forum; ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations; ASEAN PMC: ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference; ASEM: Asia–Europe Meeting; CER: Closer Economic Relations; EAS: East Asia Summit; FEALAC: Forum for East Asia–Latin America Cooperation; G-20: Group of 20 Developed Countries.

prospect that ASEM would build on this experience to become a useful forum for dialogue between European and Asian leaders on matters of substance (interview with senior MFAT official, May 2012). There was therefore a feeling within MFAT that if such was to be the case, New Zealand needed to be involved (ibid.).

Nevertheless, on its own, this apparent increase in the utility of ASEM was an insufficient factor to reverse New Zealand's stance on membership. It was a third element – the membership of Australia – that was the trigger for New Zealand. As previously noted, Australia's position was a significant factor for MFAT – so long as Australia was out, New Zealand's non-membership was no cause for concern. The approval of the Australian application by the 2009 Foreign Ministers' Meeting left MFAT facing the prospect of New Zealand being the only regional state that was not a member of ASEM, a situation seen as untenable (interview with senior MFAT official, May 2012). Asserted McCully: 'We certainly didn't want to be the only East Asia Summit nation not to be there and that would have been the consequences of not joining' (Young 2010).

Together, then, these three elements altered the ASEM calculus for New Zealand: with the incoming National government looking afresh at the country's external engagements, with the seventh ASEM Summit raising the prospect that the process might be evolving in a useful direction, and with Australia applying and being accepted for membership, New Zealand accession became a priority for McCully. This was not, however, a wholehearted endorsement of the process: rather than on any substantial belief in the efficacy of the forum, the decision to join was premised upon a wish not to be absent should the process begin to deliver substantive outcomes (interview with senior MFAT official, May 2012). It was, in other words, a defensive response – membership as an insurance policy.

New Zealand's Engagement with ASEM

New Zealand is almost an accidental member of the Asia–Europe Meeting: while it has a long history of flirting with membership, its final decision to join was in large part a response to Australia's application. With its accession to the process being seen as an insurance against ASEM's potential future significance, rather than being the product of a clearly articulated view of the value of the process itself, there was no expectation on the part of MFAT that New Zealand would be a particularly active player in ASEM cooperation

(interview with former senior MFAT official, April 2012). Rather, New Zealand's touch would be a light one – a flag on the table and not much more (ibid.). This approach would require the minimum resource commitment, while continuing a tradition in New Zealand's foreign policy of keeping a finger in every pie to the extent possible (ibid.). Nevertheless, despite this low level of commitment, and the absence of a coherently structured strategy for engagement with the process beyond the minimum, a number of potential benefits of membership are recognised within MFAT. These fall into two broad areas: (i) dialogue and access; and (ii) reinforcing presence.

ASEM as an Arena for Dialogue and Access

Despite continuing rhetoric around substantive ASEM engagement, in recent years the underperformance of the process in this respect has been generally recognised: in 2006, for example, Finnish Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen acknowledged that 'It is true that ASEM is not a process that leads to concrete decisions' (Ries 2006). Instead, what has become increasingly evident in the years since its inception is a progressive evolution in ASEM, a transformation in the expectations for the dialogue, moving beyond the initial view that the process should deliver 'concrete and substantial results' (European Council 1995: 43) and toward a certain satisfaction with its role as a framework for dialogue without preconceptions. This is a transformation underpinned by recognition of the limited capacity of the partner groupings to achieve those elements initially envisaged. As the structure of ASEM has become progressively more dense, it has gained added value in the eyes of participants, with a view emerging its utility as a political space, an ideational and discursive process, acting as a framework for dialogue, as a filter for global fora, as an arena for socialization and norm diffusion, and as a mechanism for securitisation, fostering integration and identity within and between binary groupings (Doidge 2011: 142–3), increasing 'comfort levels' and building trust and understanding among participants (interview with senior MFAT official, June 2012; interview with senior Commission official, July 2011).

ASEM's utility in this respect is recognised within MFAT, with a view that there is benefit in developing a greater understanding of regional perspectives on a variety of issues, and that, in the absence of substantive outcomes, this may prove to be the *raison d'être* of the forum (interview with senior MFAT official, May 2012). Indeed, ASEM's informality

fosters this process, providing members the opportunity to raise issues and discuss matters in an open fashion, with the understanding that this does not constitute a firm commitment in the global arena. As a consequence, ASEM has proven useful for addressing topics, sometimes of a sensitive nature, which are not considered elsewhere – the Myanmar issue, for example (interview with Malaysian Foreign Ministry official, June 2012). Governors’ Meetings of the Asia–Europe Foundation (ASEF) have been identified in this respect within MFAT, facilitating dialogue on a range of issues in a manner not often seen in other fora (interview with senior MFAT official, June 2012).

Beyond this general process, for New Zealand two specific benefits are identifiable, both of which are related to the expansiveness of the dialogue and its broad membership. The first is the potential use of the forum as a mechanism for addressing priority issues. This could, for example, involve utilising ASEM as a framework through which to identify partners with whom cooperation on global issues may be beneficial (interview with former senior MFAT official, April 2012). As a small player, New Zealand’s foreign strategy relies heavily upon the ability to form such coalitions of interest in the broader global system (see for example MFAT 2011: 3). In addition, however, is the facility for arranging meetings and working groups on issues of interest, which may involve a small or large subset of member states, may occur in single or multiple iterations, and may involve simple information sharing or act as a seed for deeper cooperation (interview with senior Commission official, July 2011). This has been particularly evident under the Social, Cultural and Educational Pillar (the ASEF Pillar) of ASEM, with events addressing labour relations, child welfare, education and so on seen as providing significant value to membership (interview with Malaysia Foreign Ministry official, June 2012).

The second broader benefit is the ability to access European and Asian leaders and officials, with the opportunity to arrange bilateral, or even minilateral, meetings in the margins of the various ASEM fora.¹¹ Most obviously this means gaining access to the larger powers, facilitated by the fact that ASEM is a smaller pond than other fora in which New Zealand is involved (e.g. the UN General Assembly). But it also means accessing smaller and more peripheral (at least as far as New Zealand is concerned) partners. This is potentially the greatest single benefit of New Zealand’s participation (interview with senior MFAT

¹¹ This relates directly, for example, to the Asia White Paper’s call to raise the tempo of engagement with Asia through *inter alia* increased leadership diplomacy (MFAT 2007: 8).

official, May 2012). Multilateral institutions have always been important to New Zealand in this respect, helping to supplement what is by necessity a limited network of High Commissions and Embassies scattered around the world. Resource constraints mean that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade has fewer than 700 offshore staff, spread across 53 delegations, with further cross-accreditations providing a light touch on most states.¹² Among the ASEM members, MFAT has formal delegations in 23 states (including the European Union) with cross-accreditations to a further 22, while 22 states (including the EU) have embassies in New Zealand with cross-accreditations from a further 21 (see Figure 1). ASEM therefore provides an opportunity to regularly engage with officials from an array of states with which, cross-accreditations notwithstanding, existing relationships are extremely shallow (interview with senior MFAT official, May 2012),¹³ allowing MFAT to build up something of an understanding of these actors and their priorities.

Nevertheless, the potential for New Zealand to gain the benefit of ASEM in these respects is currently undermined by the low level of its engagement. As previously noted, a light touch approach to the Asia–Europe Meeting has been preferred, limiting exposure to the ongoing interaction that would make a reality of the dialogue and access elements highlighted as of significance. This in turn is a product of the relative level of importance accorded to ASEM when compared to other fora of which New Zealand is a member: more significant for reasons of utility and potential economic benefit are APEC and the EAS, while ASEAN and its associated fora remain the priority focus in Asia, acting as the primary vehicle for engagement with a number of New Zealand’s important trading partners (interview with senior MFAT official, May 2012). Here again the resourcing calculation plays its part. With only 1340 staff (split roughly 50/50 between Wellington and offshore delegations) and a budget of NZ\$500 million (US\$400 million) (Government of New Zealand 2012: 120), the resources of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade are limited. With a low level of priority, the resources dedicated to ASEM are correspondingly small – currently only a desk officer in Wellington with a part-time responsibility for ASEM matters. While this clearly contrasts with the high resourcing allocated by states such as China and Indonesia (with a dedicated division within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) which are actively seeking to

¹² Though this touch may be very light indeed: only two delegations are present in Africa – in Cairo and Pretoria – which between them are tasked with engagement with 16 states. A seventeenth African state – Nigeria – is covered through the accreditation of the High Commission in London.

¹³ Such a view is not exclusive to New Zealand (interview with Malaysian Foreign Ministry official, June 2012).

exercise influence through the process, a more realistic comparison is the lower but still more significant allocation by a state such as Malaysia, with two Ministry of Foreign Affairs officers assigned, and with further ASEM responsible officers within six other Ministries – a perceived necessity given the expansiveness of the dialogue process (interview with Malaysian Foreign Ministry official, June 2012). While seen within MFAT as being an appropriate level of resourcing (interview with senior MFAT official, June 2012), such limitations have meant that New Zealand has been a reactive rather than proactive participant in ASEM (interview with senior MFAT official, May 2012), so far failing to make a significant impact within the process (interview with Malaysia Foreign Ministry official, June 2012).

ASEM as a Tool for Reinforcing Presence

Beyond the dialogue and access elements outlined above, ASEM is seen to play a part in reinforcing New Zealand's presence in Asia. Two components are identifiable. The first involves reinforcing the engagement of key partners in regions of significance to New Zealand. Harking back to the foundation of the Asia–Europe Meeting itself, for example, is the role of the forum in increasing Europe's presence in Asia, and in particular pushing it to spread its focus beyond China (interview with senior MFAT official, June 2012). In this respect, European soft power engagement, including the contribution of ideas and resources on matters of trade, development and integration, are seen to be an important factor in the future security and stability of the Asian region (ibid.). And indeed, at a more basic level, there is value for New Zealand in seeing Europe – representing its heritage and values – interacting with Asia – with which it is increasingly interconnected (ibid.).

The presence issue is also, however, conceived in broader terms, with ASEM seen as a means of bringing its European and Asian partners into areas of particular interest to New Zealand. It is a mechanism for cementing the EU not simply into a narrowly defined Asia, but into the wider Asia-Pacific region, and for drawing it and the Asian members further south toward the small island states of the Pacific. Asia–Europe engagement on matters to do with the South Pacific – be it on issues of trade, development, or the environment – is seen to be an important potential outcome of New Zealand involvement in ASEM (ibid.).

The second element is the view that ASEM provides a further mechanism for reinforcing New Zealand's own presence in Asia, a central goal of its foreign policy strategy.

Alongside the EAS, APEC and the various ASEAN fora, the Asia–Europe Meeting provides a means by which New Zealand can demonstrate its Asian credentials (interview with senior MFAT official, June 2012), making a claim not to be an Asian state, but to be a part of the broader Asian caucus, fully integrated into the structures of the region (MFAT 2007: 19). What has been evident is the progressive layering of fora within which New Zealand engages with its Asian partners, either explicitly as part of an Asian grouping (EAS, FEALAC) or in a framework engaging with Asian states (APEC, ASEAN PMC, ASEAN–CER etc.). ASEM is seen as one more piece in this puzzle, further deepening New Zealand’s integration into the regional architecture (interview with senior MFAT official, May 2012).

This aspect, however, was initially somewhat undermined by the membership compromise involved in the establishment of the Temporary Third Grouping. New Zealand, alongside Australia, was a casualty of Russia’s application and disagreement over where precisely it should fit, a situation with which it was less than satisfied (interview with former senior MFAT official, April 2012). With a solution found at the Senior Officials’ Meeting in Copenhagen in March 2012 – with the EU dropping its requirement that the European side comprise only Union member states (opening the path for Norway and Switzerland to join at the ninth Summit in 2012) as a *quid pro quo* for Asian acceptance of Russia among their number – the Temporary Third Grouping was dissolved, and New Zealand was folded into the Asian side.¹⁴

While the dissolution of the Temporary Third Grouping and formal integration into the Asian side was a matter of some significance for New Zealand (interview with senior MFAT official, May 2012), in practice it had already begun to adopt strategies that would align it more clearly with the Asian members of ASEM. In 2011, for example, a decision was made to move responsibility for ASEM from the Asia to the Europe Division within MFAT, thus calibrating the administration of the process with its Asian counterparts. This was based firmly on the view that ASEM provided New Zealand with an opportunity to work closely with the Asian countries, and it therefore made greater sense to have an equivalency of representation within ASEM fora (interview with former senior MFAT official, April 2012).

¹⁴ The Asian caucus has, from the outset, been divided into two parts, each with a Regional Coordinator. New Zealand, Australia and Russia fall into what is now effectively the ‘rest of Asia’ section alongside China, South Korea, Japan and other more recent arrivals. The second subgroup is comprised of member states of ASEAN. For the ASEAN states, the inclusion of Russia in a subgroup alongside China, Japan and India is seen to be a useful constraint upon it, and addresses their concern as to the potential dilution of their own influence within ASEM.

Similarly, efforts were made with regard to participation in the governance of the Asia–Europe Foundation to ensure that New Zealand’s regional preferences were clear. From the outset, the New Zealand Governor of ASEF caucused with his Asian counterparts, effectively inviting himself to take part, and in so doing allowing no assumption to emerge other than that New Zealand should be a member of the Asian grouping (interview with senior MFAT official, June 2012). For New Zealand, then, its formal incorporation alongside its Asian partners was the final destination on a path down which it had already been moving.

Beyond the membership and forum layering aspect of New Zealand’s integration into the Asian region is the demonstration of credibility: showing itself to be a serious, committed and vitally engaged participant in the regional architecture (interview with senior MFAT official, May 2012). In the absence of an Asian identity, this is a way to establish the legitimacy of its presence in Asian fora and initiatives, helping to inculcate both a view that it has something to contribute, and a sense that its own interests and those of Asia are intertwined, two elements highlighted prominently in the 2007 Asia White Paper (MFAT 2007: 6). Stated one former MFAT official closely involved in the accession process: ‘If we are to establish and register ourselves as being serious about wanting to build links, and build membership and participation in an Asian forum, we have to be willing to accept that sometimes this will take us into organisations and into spaces which are Asian priorities, even if they are not necessarily New Zealand priorities’ (interview with former senior MFAT official, April 2012). Indeed, it was such engagement with the region that meant that New Zealand’s (and Australia’s) accession to ASEM in 2010 was viewed far more positively by Asian states than was that of Russia (interview with Malaysian Foreign Ministry official, 12 June 2012).

Nevertheless, New Zealand’s subsequent performance within the process has done little to reinforce a view that it is a serious and committed partner. The eighth ASEM Summit in October 2010 provided the first opportunity for New Zealand to engage with forum members at the highest level and, notwithstanding attendance at some prior officials’ meetings, constituted in effect its formal debut in the Asia–Europe Meeting. In the run-up to the Summit, while never declaring Prime Minister John Key’s non-attendance, MFAT had been careful to avoid committing to his presence (interview with former senior MFAT official, April 2012). Such caution notwithstanding, when Key did not appear at the meeting, with New Zealand instead represented by Deputy Prime Minister Bill English and Foreign

Minister Murray McCully, questions were raised as to its commitment to the process.¹⁵ Indeed, a number of Asian states, less than pleased with this scenario, raised the prospect of instituting a rule for new members requiring them to attend their first Summit at the Head of State or Government level, with one representative going so far as to suggest that the accession of new members be put on hold until such time as they are able to do so (interview with senior Commission official, July 2011). Questions as to the seriousness of commitment were further reinforced when the Foreign Minister failed to attend the tenth FMM in Hungary in June 2011 – the first convened since New Zealand’s accession – and, despite criticisms of his earlier absence, Prime Minister John Key again opted not to attend the Summit in November 2012. While such non-attendance has been acknowledged to be ‘a bit odd’ (interview with senior MFAT official, May 2012), it is also a clear indicator of the level of importance of ASEM within the hierarchy of New Zealand engagement with Asia and Europe.

Conclusion and Recommendations: A Future Strategy?

New Zealand’s approach to the ASEM process has therefore been somewhat underwhelming. Fifteen years after its initial expression of interest, New Zealand was finally accepted into the Asia–Europe Meeting, but with no clear sense of the value of process or strategy of engagement. Rather, its membership was an insurance policy against potential marginalisation should the forum eventually grow wings. Nevertheless, a number of potential benefits of membership are recognised within the Ministry, even if they are not necessarily actively pursued. ASEM is seen: (i) as a means for addressing priority issues for New Zealand, and for gaining access to leaders and officials; and (ii) as a mechanism for reinforcing its engagement with the Asian region, demonstrating itself to be a serious and committed partner. Its performance in each of these areas has, however, been somewhat lacking, a consequence largely of the resourcing issue: with ASEM low on the list of regional priorities, there is no sense that the allocation of scarce resources will deliver sufficient results. Nevertheless, these three elements can be seen as constituting a bare-bones framework on which to found a more proactive New Zealand strategy, one in which it

¹⁵ John Key’s non-attendance provided a particularly stark contrast to the enthusiastic involvement of Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard, who used the Summit as an opportunity to engage with a number of leaders, including a first meeting with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao.

demonstrates its commitment and resolve to the Asian region while pursuing specific priorities in a manner ideally light on resources. This in turn falls into three parts:

1. Increasing participation;
2. Defining and engaging in priority areas where a contribution can be made or benefit gained; and
3. Supporting reforms to ASEM beneficial to New Zealand in the context of a light touch approach.

As an underlying requisite, New Zealand must engage more. If it is to gain any benefit from ASEM, and if it is to portray itself to be a 'serious and committed' participant, it must at a very basic level be involved. There are a number of ways this can be achieved. The most obvious is to attend fora at the senior level, at least some of the time. An ongoing bugbear for the Asian states is the relatively low level of representation at key ASEM meetings – the Summit and the FMM – particularly of European states. For the Asians, attendance at the appropriate level is an indicator of commitment to the process, and to relations between the regions (interview with Malaysian Foreign Ministry official, June 2012). Beyond this, however, if New Zealand is to gain the benefit of access to key leaders in the margins of Summits, it needs itself to be there at the appropriate level.

Setting aside the issue of official representation, an emphasis on ASEM involvement is a simple and cost-effective mechanism for engaging with the process, putting as it does the emphasis on the involvement of institutions other than MFAT. New Zealand is an active participant in the ASEM Board of Governors, and punches above its weight in terms of the resourcing of the Foundation, providing SG\$100,000 (US\$82,000) per year in financing (ASEM 2011) – the sixteenth highest amount among the 48 ASEM members, and a significantly larger contribution than that of Australia, for example, a fact that has not gone unnoticed (interview with senior MFAT official, June 2012).¹⁶ ASEM itself is a forum for intellectual, cultural and people-to-people engagement, and therefore provides a structured mechanism through which to help make a reality of the Asia White Paper's call for 'more New Zealanders who are confident in their dealings with Asia and Asian societies, [which] will only come through greater familiarity and knowledge of the region and its peoples' (MFAT 2007: 45). More therefore needs to be done to apprise, in particular, New Zealand

¹⁶ New Zealand began contributing to ASEM in 2010. Australia began contributing in 2011 at a rate of SG\$76,615 (US\$62,000) per year (ranking twenty-third on the list). Figures are for 2011.

secondary and tertiary education institutions and relevant civil society organisations of the opportunities available under the ASEF umbrella which can foster new, or support existing, engagement with the Asian region.

To a certain extent, the bread and butter of ASEM engagement is the formulation of initiatives, the establishment of meetings and working groups to address priority issues for member states. It is in this framework that the ideational and discursive aspects of ASEM that are increasingly highlighted take place. New Zealand engagement in such structures has, however, been low, and it has so far not proposed any new initiative,¹⁷ a consequence of its reactive rather than proactive approach. While resourcing limitations mean that New Zealand is unlikely ever to be a major participant in such structures, one or two priority areas may be manageable. And indeed there are a range of issues that would seem ripe for engagement, and for which involvement could usefully extend beyond MFAT to other Ministries or stakeholders (thus, to an extent, defraying costs). Three areas in particular can be identified: (i) education; (ii) Pacific development; and (iii) institutional reform.

In 2011, New Zealand hosted more than 97,000 foreign fee-paying students at its secondary and tertiary institutions,¹⁸ 70 per cent from its Asian and 9 per cent from its European ASEM partners, generating more than NZ\$730 million (US\$600 million) for the education sector (MinEdu 2012). ASEM therefore offers a significant opportunity to engage collectively with countries accounting for more than three quarters of foreign students on matters of education. And indeed, the ASEM framework has a history of dialogue on education matters, be this through the ASEM Education Ministers' Meeting held annually since 2008,¹⁹ ongoing seminars on Quality Assurance in Higher Education, or the range of fora targeting matters such as cooperation between the University and business sectors. For New Zealand, issues such as quality assurance in feeder states are an important element in recruiting foreign students to postgraduate study, as is ensuring the recognition of New Zealand's own qualification framework, particularly as it relates to private education providers such as language schools. Additionally, ASEM may provide the opportunity to address issues of priority to the New Zealand education sector including, for example, the

¹⁷ This lack has been noted by other ASEM partners, and identified as an area where an improved performance would be welcome (interview with senior Commission official, July 2011; interview with Malaysia Foreign Ministry official, June 2012).

¹⁸ Of these, 16 per cent are in secondary education providers, 31 per cent in Universities, and 53 per cent in other tertiary education providers (English language schools etc.).

¹⁹ A New Zealand representative attended the third Education Ministers' Meeting in Copenhagen in 2011.

provision of offshore education services, a core element in its international education strategy (see e.g. MinEdu 2011). Encouraging the participation of the Ministry of Education could therefore be a useful mechanism both for increasing engagement without drawing heavily on MFAT resources, and for addressing priority issues around New Zealand's international education strategy.

Secondly, ASEM may offer a useful framework through which to address New Zealand's regional concerns around the issue of development. ASEM is a constructed reality, and the enlargement of its Asian caucus has, to an extent, involved a progressive redefinition of Asia, at least as far as engagement with Europe has concerned. This has involved a transformation from an Asia of great powers and Tiger economies, to one increasingly inclusive of developing countries, and it is this transformation that has seen the issue of development emerge on to the ASEM agenda (Holland and Doidge 2012: 176). Development was addressed in detail for the first time at the sixth Summit in 2006 (a noted change from the rhetorical statements of earlier meetings), with an ASEM Development Conference convened for the first time in 2009, demonstrating an awareness at the least of the pressing need to engage with the issue.

Nevertheless, while its importance has been recognised, development still remains relatively under-considered, leaving significant space to introduce issues onto the agenda that are of specific interest to ASEM members. One such example, from the New Zealand perspective, is that of Pacific development. ASEM includes six of the top seven donors of foreign aid to the Pacific,²⁰ including China, the aid programme for which has been the subject of considerable debate among other donors and the broader development community. While exact figures are difficult to come by, estimates place the Chinese aid programme at around US\$3.75 billion in 2010 (Brant 2011), of which 4 per cent goes to the Pacific states (Government of China 2011: 10). The role of China in the Pacific has been an object of increasing concern for the governments of New Zealand and Australia, and more recently also the US and the European Union, particularly around the nature of projects funded and the provision of soft loans (see e.g. McCully's comments in AFP 2011, or those of Key in Trevett 2012). ASEM may provide a useful umbrella under which to engage regional donors, pushing if not for the alignment of developmental approaches, at least for

²⁰ The top seven aid donors to the nations of the Pacific Islands Forum are, in order: Australia, US, China, Japan, New Zealand, European Commission and France (Hanson and Fifita 2011: 5).

some level of agreement on regional development priorities, and in particular working towards the establishment of multinational development projects incorporating China alongside other donors. And indeed New Zealand has something to offer in this area, having in August 2012, for example, agreed a joint project with China for a reticulated water mains system in the Cook Islands (*Xinhua News Agency* 2012). ASEM therefore provides a potential framework through which New Zealand can both draw the attention of its Asian partners further southwards, and position itself as a bridge between Europe, Asia and the Pacific on issues of development (see Pacific priorities outlined in MFAT 2011: 7).²¹

Finally, given its limited resourcing, it is in New Zealand's interest to be supportive of efforts to readdress the institutional structure of ASEM, a process which should help to maximise the impact of those resources able to be dedicated by MFAT. The most prominent theme in this respect is the debate concerning the establishment of an ASEM Secretariat, an issue that has been on the agenda since the 1999 Asia–Europe Vision Group Report unsuccessfully called for the establishment of a 'lean but effective Secretariat' (AEVG 1999: 32) to address the institutional deficiencies of the then 26 member ASEM. As the Asia–Europe Meeting has progressively expanded its scope and membership, the absence of an institutional structure has become more problematic for reasons of coordination, cooperation and institutional memory, impacting the quality of ASEM engagement (Doidge 2011: 118–119). This is particularly true for the majority of states unable or unwilling to dedicate significant foreign affairs resources to the process. In response, a number of 'band-aid' solutions have been attempted, with limited results. The structure of Regional Coordinators – an imperfect early solution to the problem of a lack of a Secretariat – has been largely ineffective in overcoming the asymmetry in coordination and cooperation on the European and Asian sides of the ASEM equation, a product of the institutional imbalance between the two groupings, one a regional integration arrangement and the other a looser aggregation of states. The sixth Summit in 2006 again sought to address this problem, agreeing to establish a 'Virtual Secretariat' – in effect an online repository of documentation accessible to member states – though this was never put into practice. And indeed when a similar self-service model was put in place – a European Commission

²¹ Such a bridging role might also be extended to include the US, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton having highlighted New Zealand–China cooperation as a good example for the United States (*Radio New Zealand News* 2012).

sponsored database of ASEM activities and documentation, which became operational at the beginning of 2010 – member state utilisation was very low (interview with senior Commission official, July 2011). The most recent effort to address the issue of coordination, building on an *ad hoc* initiative of Belgium as Chair of the eighth ASEM Summit, was the agreement at the tenth FMM for the creation of an ASEM Chairman Support Group (ACSG) to provide technical support to the ASEM Chair. With a maximum of six staff seconded from member states (FMM 2011: §3), this is a limited innovation unlikely to provide sufficient solution to the pressing problems of ASEM engagement. With a process as expansive as it has become, the most effective solution to the problem of ASEM cooperation, coordination and institutional memory is to cross the institutional Rubicon and establish some form of Secretariat structure to monitor and coordinate ASEM activities, maintain records, and disseminate information. In addition to streamlining the ASEM process itself, such a Secretariat would be an invaluable supplement to the resources allocated by member states to their own engagement.

With all of that said, the future role of New Zealand in the Asia–Europe Meeting remains uncertain. As has been outlined, it seems at least feasible that New Zealand can develop a clearer and more active strategy for engagement while maintaining a relatively light touch from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Setting aside the issue of attendance at Summits and Foreign Ministers’ Meetings, this involves encouraging and facilitating the engagement of other actors in the broader ASEM process, thus to an extent lifting some of the burden from MFAT itself. From a base level of fostering people-to-people engagement through ASEF, to the more complex process of identifying priority issues and facilitating the participation of relevant Ministries in Wellington, there are a range of options open to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. What will largely determine New Zealand’s level of engagement, however, is the performance of ASEM itself, and its ability to deliver substantive cooperation. Ultimately, therefore, when it comes to New Zealand’s role in the Asia–Europe Meeting, as one MFAT official commented, ‘we’ll just have to suck it and see’ (interview with senior MFAT official, June 2012).

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