This volume provides an overview of Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) activism from the European perspective in nine chapters. It was in 1994 when Goh Chok Tong, a former Singaporean prime minister, put forward the proposal to institutionalise interactions between the European Union (EU) and Asia. Such a communication channel would better serve to create understanding and facilitate cooperation involving the two regions.

In Chapter 1, entitled ASEM’s Background and Rationale, Bart Gaens describes the origins of Asian-European collaboration. Indeed, nonparticipation would have meant a loss of competitiveness to the USA, which was already active there within the framework of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, as well as a voluntary relinquishment of any influence in this part of world. Regrettably, the author articulates EU strategy aimed at setting up closer relations with Asian countries in an unsystematic way.

Chapter 2 focuses on ASEM as an Economy-oriented Partnership. Bart Gaens excessively analyses the instruments elaborated within the forum which were conducive to supporting commerce and industry. Although fruitful, the dealings have never been simple, bearing in mind the different attitudes Europeans and Asians have towards the ways and means of doing business. This discrepancy sharply manifested itself during the Asian Financial Crisis which struck in 1997. The long term results of the recession extorted certain reforms in the functioning of ASEM. The subsequent chapters track down the after-effects of this process.

Chapter 3 is devoted to ASEM, Multilateralism and the Security Agenda. It explains the political environment in which ASEM operates. Timo Kivimäki explores the ASEM engagement in relation to traditional and non-traditional threats as well as the measures it can utilise to prevent and combat them. While assessing its pursuance of security, he asserts that despite the expected limitations, the

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1 Katarzyna Łasak LL.M., LL.D., is a lecturer and researcher at the Chair of Public International Law, University of Gdańsk, Poland, a former legal expert of NSZZ ‘Solidarność’, International Department, Gdańsk, Poland and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Law and Treaty Department, Warsaw, Poland.
Asian-European dialogue in this field should be continued, taking into account the advantages it brings. The ensuing chapter, concerning Human Rights and Burma/Myanmar in the ASEM Dialogue, illustrates how difficult this task is. Silja Keva presents the principles which the EU and its Asian partners apply in regard to human rights and shows their clash in the case of Burma/Myanmar. It could be said that the joint statement on Burma/Myanmar at ASEM 6 2 provided a convergence of some kind in the realm of human rights. However, the continuing infringements upon human rights within the country as well as the present violence against Christians in India, not to mention other cases, which have been accompanied by a lack of any ASEM involvement, prove it is controversial.

In chapter 5, Bart Gaens looks into ASEM as a Tool to 'Bridge the Cultural Divide'. He assesses the work of the Asia-Europe Foundation, which has begun to define the cultural and social agenda of the ASEM. The author discusses the mutual representations of the parties concerned and their dimensions. It is hard to agree with his final remark that the recognition of distinct Asian characteristics will help the EU in its own perception of Europe since these two notions of the EU itself and Europe as a whole differ and the Europeans themselves have still not agreed on the identity of the former. Thus, it is inappropriate to suggest the EU could offer Asia an organisational basis to imitate. Moreover, it may be slightly naïve, because of the cultural reasons outlined in the next chapter on ASEM and Civil Society by Silja Keva. She sketches the differences in understanding of civil society and consequently its role in EU and Asian organisational structures of societies. The author underlines, for example, how non-governmental organisations are not involved in any official stream of ASEM. Syndicalism represents a good example. As trade unions inside most Asian countries are not permitted to act freely, it is unreasonable to expect that their governments will agree to let them participate at an international level. Finding a solution which will satisfy all the partners is a major challenge because, as Teija Tiilikainen in Chapter 8 on ASEM in the Context of the European Union’s External Relations notes, the Asian block is not as homogeneous as the European block. The matter is even more complex, since European integration happens most slowly in the area of foreign policy. Hence, the author explains accurately the risk of settling particular matters between individual European and Asian countries, which may prevent the adoption of a coherent EU policy in regard to ASEM and within.

Chapter 7 deals with ASEM’s Institutional Infrastructure. Silja Keva and Bart Gaens show to what extent this initially informal partnership has become institutionalised. They demonstrate how the cooperation between the ASEM participants has become typical for international organisations like meetings, workshops or committees. The authors also scrutinize initiatives taken within ASEM, consider representation and attendance at its summits and include other issues such as enlargement of partnership and soft law acts enacted. The chapter approaches the subject of ASEM’s coordination in the near future. The authors

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2 The sixth summit meeting of the group.