



## **Building bridges through more people to people contacts**

**By Shada Islam**

Times change. Foreign relations used to be the exclusive domain of governments. Foreign ministries operated behind closed doors. Diplomats met other government officials, attended receptions and once in a while hosted a “cultural event” showcasing national folk music and dance.

Contrast that with the vast array of non-state actors which drive and influence relations among countries in today’s globalised and inter-connected world.

Diplomats can still do their bit on behalf of governments. But with 24/7 news channels, the Internet, Twitter and other social networking tools, state representatives are fast losing their monopoly on fashioning public attitudes and perceptions.

Today, the reputation of nations can be built or destroyed by the activities of a host of other actors, including business leaders, journalists, academics and scholars, non-governmental organizations, youth associations, faith groups, sportsmen and women, political parties, parliamentarians, trade unions and social activists.

Epitomising a nation’s “soft power”, these are the people who can also foster – or block– understanding and cooperation between states and regions.

People-to-people links are no longer exclusively about encouraging youth exchanges, learning foreign languages and visiting cultural exhibitions. In today’s fast changing world, non-state actors have a vital role to play in discussions on a range of questions which go far beyond the narrow definition of “socio-cultural issues”.

Efforts to craft a global consensus on questions like economics, trade, climate change, security and peace cannot be achieved without mutual understanding between people.

As Asian and European leaders prepare to meet in Brussels on October 4-5 for ASEM 8, they must recognize that building a real strategic Asia-Europe partnership will require out-of-the box thinking, involving people, not just officials.

Summit meetings, communiqués and ministerial visits may be important, but relations within ASEM cannot really deepen and move forward without building trust and confidence among the people of Asia and Europe.

There is no shortage of ASEM initiatives to involve civil society actors. In fact, ASEM's "three pillars" for cooperation include political dialogue and economic cooperation as well as socio-cultural and intellectual exchange. The ASEM summit in Beijing in 2008 pointed to the role played by parliaments, NGOs and civil society in "promoting dialogue among cultures and civilizations and mutual understanding between the people of Asia and Europe."

However, ASEM policymakers' references to engaging civil society need to move beyond routine rhetoric to real engagement. Discussions on promoting people-to-people exchanges are often an add-on and an after-thought, dealt with only after policymakers have discussed other issues which are deemed more important.

The role of non-state actors must be made part of an overall strategy to revive and re-energise the Asia-Europe relationship, making ASEM more participatory, democratic and focused on societal challenges.

The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), established in Singapore in 1997 and funded by voluntary contributions from ASEM governments, is certainly doing a great deal to connect civil society representatives across Asia and Europe. Over the years, ASEF has implemented over 450 projects, engaging over 15,000 direct participants.

Among important ASEF initiatives are the ASEF University which promotes intercultural exchanges among top university students from Asia and Europe. Seminars on human rights, editors' roundtables, inter-faith discussions and civil society seminars are held regularly. ASEF has also played a key role in organizing an exhibition entitled "A Passage to Asia: 25 Centuries of Exchanges between Asia and Europe" which has opened in Brussels as part of preparations for the ASEM 8 meeting.

The Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF), which met for the time in 1996 in Bangkok in parallel with the first ASEM summit, brings together NGOs and social justice networks across Asia and Europe to discuss areas of common concern such as human rights and democracy and to press for the integration of people's rights into ASEM. AEPF has contributed to building stronger networks at national and regional levels and has implemented cross regional initiatives on peace and security, economic and social justice, democratisation and human rights.

AEPF's last meeting in Beijing in 2008 was the biggest NGO conference ever to take place in China since the women's Conference in 1995. Over 500 participants from 40 countries participated, including over 200 from China. A series of events are planned during the ASEM summit in Brussels, with focus on the relation of corporate power to: trade/investment, food sovereignty, climate change, decent work (including social protection) and peace and security.

Asia-Europe business leaders also have their own forum (AEBF) which convenes in parallel with the ASEM Summit and makes recommendations to Asian and

European governments on enhancing economic co-operation between the two regions.

Meanwhile, an ASEM public conference has been organised in Brussels by the European Commission on "Europe-Asia Inter-Regional Relations" on July 12-13 to allow academics, experts and others to input into the key policy challenges facing Asia-Europe relations.

Stepping up academic exchanges is clearly one important way of promoting contacts between young people in Asia and Europe. This is one of the aims of Europe's Erasmus Mundus programme which seeks to promote the EU as a centre of excellence in learning around the world and to encourage intercultural understanding through cooperation with third country partners.

EU Centres, set up in 26 universities in the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan, are also designed to increase awareness about the political, economic and cultural importance of relations between the EU and specific countries.

Other initiatives should be considered, including the organisation of ASEM executive training programmes, regular meetings of parliamentarians from ASEM states, the organisation of think tank meetings and networks and regular and sustained exchanges between media representatives.

If ASEM is to gain credibility and become more visible and relevant to its members, it is important that linkages to civil society are officially acknowledged, made part of the mainstream and further developed. The Asia-Europe relationship is too important to be left in the hands of only governments and officials.

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Note: **ASEM** was launched in 1996 as an informal forum for discussion between Asian and European countries. The current ASEM partners are: Austria, Belgium, Brunei Darussalam, Bulgaria, Cambodia, China, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Laos, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Malta, Mongolia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Romania, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, The Netherlands, The Philippines, United Kingdom, Vietnam, the ASEAN Secretariat and the European Commission.

**Shada Islam** is a journalist in Brussels with a long experience of EU-Asia relations. This is a part of a series of articles being published by "Particip" an independent, internationally-recognised consultancy, which is under contract to the European Commission, to look at different aspects of the multi-faceted Asia-Europe relationship. Other articles of the series can be found on the ASEM 8 website: <http://www.asem8.be/related-documentation>. This article represents the views of the author.

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