



A fresh start for ASEM or how to revive Asia-Europe relations

By Shada Islam

Preparations for the eighth ASEM summit to be held in Brussels this October must focus on building a stronger and more effective Asia-Europe partnership to tackle key global challenges.

The ASEM meeting on October 4-5 will be the biggest international gathering in Brussels, bringing together 48 Asian and European countries, joined by senior European Union officials and the secretary general of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Russia, Australia and New Zealand will be welcomed as new members.

The agenda drawn up by the meeting's Belgian hosts is long and comprehensive, covering joint action to revive the world economy, a review of global and regional hotspots and efforts to tackle sustainable development challenges. An array of preparatory meetings covering subjects as diverse as education, culture, trade and investment, finance, inter-faith relations and youth exchanges are also being held in the run-up to the summit.

Such activity is impressive. However, meetings do not replace policy, photo opportunities are no substitute for real exchanges and making set speeches is not the same thing as listening and understanding. If the Asia-Europe relationship is to progress and go beyond ritual and process, both sides must stop focusing on style and protocol and look more closely at the substance of their ties.

Developing a strategic Asia-Europe partnership must be a top priority; in an interdependent and inter-connected world, Asia and Europe must not drift apart. Reviving Asia-Europe ties requires that governments in both regions put in time, energy and effort. The rewards will be worthwhile, since both Asia and Europe stand to gain from an enhanced relationship.

Europe cannot meet its aspirations of becoming a powerful global actor without engaging more actively with a rising Asia. Tackling key global challenges of the 21st century – sustainable development, climate change, reforming global governance and anti-piracy measures – requires the active participation of Europe and Asia's leading powers. And as Europe enters a period of economic

austerity and cutbacks, Asia's dynamic economies offer a huge and lucrative market for European technology, services and goods.

Asia is Europe's largest trading partner, surpassing North America as regards trade in goods and accounting for more than a third of Europe's total external trade flows. European investments in Asia are growing and, increasingly, Asian companies are seeking to set up shop in the EU. Asian cooperation is required in dealing with global flashpoints like Iran and North Korea.

Asian countries have weathered the financial and economic crisis much better than anticipated, with China, India and several members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) notching up impressive growth rates. But they need to boost sales in Europe to maintain their impressive growth rates and European development aid is important for Asia's smaller and poorer nations. The European Union is often cited as an inspiration by Asia's oldest regional organization, ASEAN.

As recent top level European meetings with Japan, China, India, South Korea, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Pakistan have shown, Asia is firmly on the European agenda. The spotlight on Asia should increase following the installation of the new External Action Service and there are hopes that Europe will slowly but surely start speaking with one voice.

Belying suggestions that Europe is being sidelined by an ascending Asia engaged in building regional alliances and negotiating inter-regional trade deals, Asian leaders will spend two days at their summit in Brussels talking to their European counterparts about a growing list of common concerns.

To revive ASEM, it will be necessary to rekindle the excitement of the first ASEM summit in Bangkok in 1996 when Asian and European heads of state and government came together for the first time in an informal setting which was a far cry from their stiff encounters of the past. The discussions that ensued were lively and animated. There was a sense of new beginnings and a shared future.

Soon, however, the Asian financial crisis of 1997 and later Europe's involvement in its internal affairs – the launch of the euro and European Union enlargement – took much of the shine off ASEM. Fourteen years on, with both Asia and Europe facing new challenges - and harbouring new ambitions - the Brussels meeting offers an important opportunity to inject new life into the Asia-Europe relationship.

To do so, both sides will have to develop a fresh, inclusive mindset, which focuses on what binds Asia and Europe rather than what divides. Discord may make newspaper headlines but the two regions are connected by history, culture, business and the challenge of living together in a rapidly-changing globalised world.

Asia and Europe must craft a new growth model for their economies and move ahead with much-needed reform of the international economic and financial architecture, including IMF governance, to reflect the rising economic power of Asia. On trade, ASEM leaders must make a compelling case for open markets and an early conclusion of the long-stalled World Trade Organization (WTO) talks on global trade liberalisation.

Fresh approaches are required to help achieve the Millennium Development Goals and move forward on climate change. ASEM provides a good framework for innovative and creative thinking on how to make aid more effective, ensure better coordination among donors, facilitate trade and encourage open markets.

Efforts to combat global warming, meanwhile, would benefit from a shift in the focus of the debate from confrontation on achieving binding emission standards to cooperation on developing a low carbon economy which allows for a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions while maintaining the momentum towards economic and social development

The meeting in October should recognize that building a real strategic Asia-Europe partnership will require out-of-the box thinking, involving people, not just officials. Relations within ASEM cannot really deepen and move forward without building trust and confidence among the people of Asia and Europe. The important role of non-state actors, such as the Asia Europe Foundation based in Singapore, must be highlighted in order to make ASEM more participatory, democratic and focused on societal challenges.

As in the past, ASEM leaders in October will certainly make a joint statement in support of democracy and free and fair elections in Myanmar as well as the release from house arrest of iconic pro-democracy activist Aung San Suu Kyi. However, as ASEAN crafts its own agenda for improving human rights, it may be time to forge a bolder, joint ASEM policy of increased pressure on the junta.

Asian countries often tend to be bristle at Europe's focus on human rights, but Asia and Europe can find common ground by shifting the focus to good governance and the need to establish and respect the rule of law. Europe can provide its experience and expertise to Asians as regards the training of judges, prison reform and police training.

ASEM leaders traditionally tend to address too many issues in too short a time. They should be more selective in identifying their priorities – and then make sure they work hard to achieve them, both within ASEM and in other bilateral and multilateral fora.

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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 and does not commit the European Commission in any way.

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