

## **Europe and rising Asia must re-engage in a new partnership**

*Shada Islam*

Europe and a rising, self-confident and economically-resilient Asia must re-engage with each other to build a stronger and more effective 21<sup>st</sup> Century partnership to tackle key global challenges.

Asian and European officials meeting in Brussels this week to prepare for the ASEM (Asia Europe Meeting)<sup>1</sup> summit on 4-5 October must focus on building a strategic partnership between the two regions. Preparations for the two-day ASEM summit have so far been impressive. Leaders will discuss joint action to revive the world economy, review global and regional hotspots and seek ways to tackle sustainable development challenges. Russia, Australia and New Zealand will be welcomed as new members.

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 look more closely at the substance of their ties.

In an interdependent and inter-connected world, Asia and Europe must not drift apart. 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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-Europe trade is booming, European investments in Asia are growing and, increasingly, Asian companies are seeking to set up shop in the EU. Asian cooperation is also 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 organisation, ASEAN.

To revive Asia-Europe relations, 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. 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 recognise that building a real strategic Asia-Europe partnership will require out-of-the box thinking, involving people, not just officials. 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.

Asian countries often tend to bristle at Europe's focus on human rights. However, as ASEAN crafts its own agenda for improving human rights, 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 Asia as regards the training of judges, prison reform and police training.

Europe has so far failed to inject energy and momentum into its bilateral strategic partnership agreements with Asian countries. ASEM offers a good opportunity to correct this - and to allow Asia and Europe to meet the challenge of living together in a rapidly-changing globalised world.

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<sup>i</sup> 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.