

continued from page 3 >

the Gulf, and ACP countries combined (17.1 per cent).

Even more remarkable is the increase in importance of Europe's market for Asia. After the financial crisis of 1997, we promised we would keep our markets open to Asian exports and resist domestic calls for protectionism. We kept our word, and one result has been a ballooning of the EU's trade deficit with Asia from ff 13.3 billion in 1996 to more than ff 121 billion in 2000.

Finally EC cooperation programmes with the developing countries of Asia have also grown moderately in recent years, averaging some ff 410 million per year in the period 1996-2000. Overall, the EU and its Member States account for some 30 per cent of global overseas development aid going to Asia - after Japan (50 per cent) but well ahead of the USA (9 per cent).

But if a week is a long time in politics, as British Prime Minister Harold Wilson famously said, seven years is an eternity. Against this background of ever increasing political and economic bonds between our two regions, the world stage on which these developments have played themselves out has also changed enormously. In Europe, preparations for the single currency, enlargement and the development of the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Rapid Reaction Force have all increased the EU's importance as a global actor. In Asia, the financial crisis in 1997 has had a major economic, social and even political impact. Our growing interdependence itself calls for stronger partnerships to address both the challenges and opportunities that we both face.

That is why last month (September 2001), seven years after the original Asia Strategy document, the Commission adopted a Communication setting out a new strategic framework for EU relations with Asia during the coming decade.

The Communication sets out six overarching objectives which give overall EU-Asia relations a more coherent framework. It then provides specific action points to focus EU initiatives in Asia's sub-regions and regional fora. These action points also aim at improving relations with individual countries in each region by addressing bilateral issues. I am confident that this will allow the EU to develop a forward-looking agenda which will strengthen and raise its profile across Asia to a level commensurate with the growing global weight of an enlarged Union.

So what are these six key objectives? First, we have to develop our trade and investment relationship, not least by getting Asian countries to agree on the need for another multi-lateral trade round.

The second objective is to promote the development of less prosperous countries in the region. The EU can be proud of its record here, with the bold trade initiatives and 30 per cent share of all foreign development assistance in Asia already mentioned. But more could be done to address the root causes of poverty. For example, at the EU-India Summit in Delhi next month (Nov), we will be signing an agreement to contribute ff 200 million to Indian efforts to make elementary education available for every Indian child by the end of the decade. This raises to more than ff 0.5 billion the sums committed by the EU to the social sector generally in India since 1995.

A third objective is for the EU to contribute more to peace and security in Asia by broadening our engagement with the area. More could be done to support conflict prevention efforts, strengthen our cooperation in the field of justice and home affairs, and play a more proactive role in regional cooperation fora such as the ASEAN Regional Forum.

Peace and security are more likely to flourish in regions where free and fair elections are the norm, where administrations are not blighted by corruption and where laws are not subordinated to the day-to-day whims of those in power. So spreading democracy, good governance, and the rule of law is our fourth objective. Yes, this includes upholding the universality and indivisibility of human rights. It also includes encouraging the development of civil society and promoting a broader civil society dialogue between our two regions.

All this can only make our societies stronger, providing a firmer base for our fifth objective, which is to build global partnerships and alliances with Asian countries so we can shape global agendas and better tackle the new types of problems which beset us all. This should include improving our cooperation in the United Nations and the World Trade Organisation, but also working together to tackle environmental and health challenges, and to fight international crime and terrorism. We should also exploit the opportunities offered by new technologies, help to diminish the digital divide, and reinforce scientific and technological cooperation.

Finally, and this has taken on a sudden, grave importance in an atmosphere where madmen are straining to provoke some apocalyptic clash of civilizations, we should strengthen awareness of Europe in Asia, and vice versa. This is not an optional extra. This is about promoting genuine educational, scientific, cultural - and yes, political - exchanges at all levels. Of course, the EU cannot force Asia to promote itself here, but we have taken the lead by, for example, launching a scholarship scheme in China, funding cultural programmes across Asia, and extending the network of European Commission delegation offices in the region to Malaysia, Singapore, Cambodia, Laos, and Nepal. It is my sincere hope that the nations of Asia will reciprocate these efforts - they have much to share.

And what about those more specific action points adapted to the different regions of Asia? These reflect the underlying diversity of that massive continent, and will no doubt change and be adapted as things evolve. But it is possible to discern key issues today, to which emphasis must be given. China, more than any other country, has been subject to a maelstrom of change in recent years, which has led to the development of new areas of shared concern with, for example, illegal immigration, food hygiene, and genetically modified organisms all rising up the agenda. Combined with the fact that China is the world's second biggest consumer of energy and the third largest producer, and that the EU is now the largest foreign direct investor there, it is evident we have moved far beyond the trade and development themes which have traditionally formed the basis of EU-China relations since their establishment in 1975.

It is important to capitalize on this. Our political dialogue with China is constantly increasing, and could go further still. We should work together with other international partners to encourage a rapprochement between the two Koreas. Burma, as a major drug producer and potential source of instability, should concern us both. The maturing of our relationship also allows franker discussions of our differences. This is the basis for the human rights dialogue we have pursued since 1996.

Of course, 11 September changed everything. If we were drafting the new Communication today, we would say rather more than we have about Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the problems faced by the central Asian region.

I was in Islamabad the other day, and the EU is obviously pleased that the Pakistani government, faced with a choice between siding with the modern, pluralist world or with the enemies of decency and international cooperation, unhesitatingly chose the former. We are also pleased that in August, President Musharraf set out in such detail his plans for a return to democracy next year. We have in the lock a co-operative agreement with Pakistan. There has been no progress on it for two years. We are now prepared to sign that agreement, although obviously the process of ratification would be affected were Pakistan to abandon the path to democracy (which I hope will not happen). The agreement also includes the usual suspension and human rights clauses which indicate the priority we attach, in any relationship, to pluralist values.

We have also been considering how we can help Pakistan to deal with the impact of refugees on its society - a burden it has been carrying, largely unnoticed, for almost two decades - and how we can restore effective, long-term, development cooperation.



Wim Vreeburg

Clearly, the return of democracy in Pakistan also presents a challenge to President Musharraf, not least because the sorts of democracy frequently practised in the past in Pakistan were not always characterized by transparency, efficiency and a determination to meet the needs of the whole community.

Caption caption caption caption caption caption.

But the future of Pakistan is only one of the issues that we will need to address more energetically in the wake of what we are all committed to making a successful operation to uproot terrorism. We will also need to facilitate the establishment of a broad-based government in Afghanistan and then to give it the sort of long-term development assistance which will enable it to survive. The EU has already provided more than ff 450 million in humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan since 1991, making us the second biggest donor in the world to this battered country. But more must be done, by ourselves and the international community, if the people of Afghanistan are to have any chance of recovering from the barren rubble to which their beautiful country has been reduced, thanks to a ferocious medieval tyranny and long years of conflict.

However, encouraging a political settlement in Afghanistan should not mean imposing a government. Nor should it mean meeting all the demands of neighbouring countries which have often used Afghanistan to fight their proxy wars. If that happens, then the cycle of violence will only continue.

Beyond Afghanistan, we will need to look at developing a more coherent and sensible regional approach in the Central Asian Republics, focusing in particular on helping them in the campaign against drugs and assisting them in the development of adequate border controls.

Of course, one country in the region provides a beacon of optimism. It is the largest democracy in the world, and it has been leading the way in the fight against terrorism by sponsoring an anti-terrorism resolution at the United Nations. India, like China, will always be central to EU relations with Asia. As a major trading partner and an important regional and global player and a country that shares many of our values, it would be utterly crazy to ignore her. Building on this relationship will pay dividends for both sides. That is why the Communication calls for an enhanced partnership with India on global issues, alongside strengthened bilateral cooperation in the political, economic, and social spheres.

The growing links which exist between Asia and the West, links rooted in our shared, common values, make us fit to face down those who want to destroy those values. The Commission's Communication on a new strategic framework for Asia builds on this. The unprecedented international cooperation we are seeing today is not only strengthening those bonds within the international community, but creating new windows of opportunity as old suspicions and barriers are cast aside at an astonishing rate.

A strong East and West; borders no longer acting as barriers in a world where distance is decreasing; a partnership of the decent against those who would bring us low. Was globalization, with all the good and bad it brings with it, necessary to achieve this? Maybe. But Kipling - without airline travel, the Internet and satellite television - would have understood the challenges we face. And, I think, he would have approved of the way we are seeking to overcome it. <

Questions >

IIAS Annual Lecture: Questions Round

To read the transcripts of the question round which followed the IIAS Annual Lecture by Commissioner Patten, please see the IIAS Website at: <http://www.iias.nl/iiasn/27/general/qround.html>



Editors' note >

This is a shortened version of the Annual Lecture delivered by Chris Patten. For the full text, please see the IIAS website at: <http://www.iias.nl/iiasn/27/general/patten.html>.