

The Asia-Europe Meeting and the ASEM Research Platform

The fourth edition of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) took place in Copenhagen (22–24 September). This is old news you may think but for many Western readers there is a big chance it is not. Whereas the major Asian newspapers covered the ASEM extensively, there was hardly any coverage in the Western press. One can come to the conclusion that Asia views the process with more interest than Europe.

Forum >
General

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By Paul van der Velde & Rima Sondaite-van Soest

What then – a Western journalist may ask – happened that I should know? Answer: a lot. Two important declarations were adopted: the ASEM Copenhagen Political Declaration for Peace on the Korean Peninsula and the ASEM Copenhagen Declaration on Cooperation against International Terrorism. The former directly influenced the attitude of the US administration towards North Korea in the sense that direct lines of communication were reopened with this member of the so-called ‘Axis of Evil’. The second declaration stressed the need to weed out the root of international terrorism: poverty. This is a topic that is not so popular in the current anti-terrorism rhetoric prevalent in the Western press. Another issue, which was debated in the corridors during ASEM 4, was the position of the Palestinian people. Yasser Arafat turned to ASEM to plead his cause, and behold the Israeli army withdrew under ‘tremendous American pressure’, which was ignited by ASEM. To some this may be of little significance but the fact is that the ASEM is beginning to play a vital role in world politics. A study carried out in Germany in relation to the voting behaviour of ASEM member countries will be published in the beginning of next year. This study is likely to show specific tendencies in the voting behaviour of ASEM countries in the United Nations on certain issues.

Closer political cooperation is further boosted by economic cooperation. It was decided in Copenhagen to establish a Task Force on Closer Economic Cooperation as an outcome of the positive experiences gained from the ASEM Trust Fund (1998–2000), which played a crucial role in containing and partly solving the Asian crisis. With the growing optimism resulting from the Sunshine Policy of the South Korean government towards North Korea, the idea of the Iron Silk Road connecting Korea to Europe was launched. This new road will considerably lower the transport costs between that country and Europe.

Underlying the political and economic rapprochement is cultural rapprochement. Although not in the limelight, significant progress has been made during the past six years. The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) plays an important role in this process by stimulating people-to-people exchanges and by encouraging the intellectual debate between Asia and Europe. Aware of the importance of the cultural dialogue, ASEM member countries decided to organize a conference entitled ‘Unity in Diversity’, which will be held in 2003 in China. So far China, Denmark, France, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore sponsor this conference and more countries are expected to follow suit. During a two-day meeting representatives from think-tank institutes

from ASEM countries will concentrate on delineating common ASEM values. This is the second phase in the process envisioned by the Prime Minister of Singapore Goh Chok Tong in his speech ‘The Asia-Europe Dialogue: The Road to Greater Understanding’, delivered in Brussels in October 1996. The first phase, being one of networking in which big gaps in knowledge about each other’s cultures should be filled, is followed by a consensus-building phase in which shared values ought to be further developed. The conference report resulting from the ‘Unity in Diversity’ conference will be the key document for discussions about shared values among the ASEM Ministers of Foreign Affairs that will be held at the end of 2003.

A Eurasian research culture

There are two major reasons why academia in Asia and Europe should be linked to the ASEM process. First, the need for a creative and well-informed policy on both the European and Asian sides has in many cases outstripped the capacity of government administrations to deliver it. The Asia-Europe rapprochement has caught officials and policy makers across a wide range of fields unprepared. They are more often than not forced to rely on aphorisms and stereotypes as tools for ordering the complex New World in which they find themselves. As policy making at the ASEM level grows, there needs to be a visible Asian and European Studies presence to ensure that officials and policy makers can quickly lay their hands on the best advice on complex inter-regional issues.

The second major reason is the need for cross-national cooperation. The distinctive national traditions of research and scholarship in various aspects of Asian and European Studies that exist throughout the ASEM community are a precious resource. In the present environment of globalization, however, these traditions need to be brought together in complementary partnerships. No single nation can sustain a research endeavour on the scale needed to address fully the issues arising from globalization. Cooperation and collaboration could raise the awareness of the richness of each other’s research cultures. By bringing Asian and European Studies in Asia and Europe into a facilitating framework, it will be possible to evolve further creative synergies without in any way detracting from the current strengths of the national research efforts. The ASEF could play a key role in this.

ASEF and the Asia-Europe Environment and Technology Centre (AEETC) are the only ASEM institutes founded so far and the ASEM as such remains an informal process without a permanent organizational body. In the long run this poses a problem because if programmes that are beneficial to the ulti-

mate aim of the ASEM are to be implemented successfully, they will need to take place within organizational structures such as e.g. ASEF. To enhance facilitation of the ASEM process, in some of the recent documents (Chairman’s Statement of the Fourth Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, June 2002, and Updated Non-Paper by European ASEM Partners, May 2002) ASEM partners suggested setting up a portal and linking all existing ASEM websites. By establishing the ASEM Research Platform (ARP) in September 2002 and launching a new website embracing diverse aspects of the ASEM process, the IIAS has accomplished the first step in this essential task.

One of the main goals of ARP is to sensitize people at all levels of society in Europe and Asia to the Asia-Europe Meeting process. One of its first activities has been to create an ASEM portal, meant to facilitate the search for information and research on ASEM by structuring all relevant information about this process. Although the portal is far from complete it contains: texts of official documents pertaining to ASEM; all available electronic publications and titles of other relevant publications in its digital library; the ASEM agenda and the civil society activities within ASEM; and other information pertaining to ASEM.

An equally important goal is to inform the scientific community about ASEM research and facilitate the contacts among scholars studying ASEM. Through the establishment of an ASEM Research Platform a division of labour between the ASEF division of intellectual exchange, which could concentrate on short-term projects, and the

ARP, focusing on long-term projects, can be attained. Needless to say, the ARP can build on the expertise in Asia-Europe relations assembled in the past ten years. The Eurasian research culture may directly engage the efforts of a couple of thousand scholars across the ASEM community. The spin off from their endeavours can be enormous. It derives its influence, on the one hand, through the formulation and analysis of the issues that move Asian and European governments and the media, and, on the other hand, through the students trained and educated in this culture who move outside academia to other positions in society. Developing and sustaining such a Eurasian research culture presents a small financial investment in comparison to the fruits that will certainly be derived from it. With the growing unilateralist attitude of the US in practically all matters, it seems more necessary than ever that Europe and Asia rediscover their own rich cultural and intellectual traditions for the benefit of the whole world.

The ultimate success of ASEM will depend on the active participation of the citizens of both continents. Researchers can contribute to this goal by taking a Eurasian stance as a starting point for their research endeavours. We hope that by the time of the next ASEM in Hanoi in 2004 the ASEM Research Platform will prove to be a valuable (re)source for the strengthening of the process as a whole. <

Dr Paul van der Velde is supervisor of the above project.

Rima Sondaite-van Soest, BA is content manager of the ASEM website hosted by the IIAS. iias@let.leidenuniv.nl



ASEM website screen dump.

Asem platform >

The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) was officially established in 1996 at the first summit in Bangkok. ASEM is an inter-regional forum that consists of seven members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), China, Japan, South Korea, and the fifteen members of the European Union (EU). The main components of the ASEM process, which has so far been loosely organized, include political dialogue, security and the economy, and education and culture (the so-called three pillars). In general, the process is considered by the parties involved to be a way of deepening the relations between Asia and Europe at all levels, which is deemed necessary to achieve a more balanced political and economic world order. The process is enhanced by the biannual meetings of heads of state, alternately in Europe and Asia, and political, economic, and cultural meetings and events at various other levels. In the past six years ASEM has been the topic of intellectual debate and much has been written about it. Nonetheless, thus far information about this process has been scattered. With the founding of the ASEM Research Platform (ARP) and its ASEM portal, the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) hopes to facilitate this important process. ARP team Supervisors: Prof. Wim Stokhof (director IIAS) and Dr Paul van der Velde, Content manager: Rima Sondaite-van Soest, BA, Webmaster: Afelonne Doek, MA