

# Director's Note on ASEM

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Since its inception in 1996 the Asia-Europe Meeting has made real progress. The main components of ASEM, which has thus far been organized on an informal basis, are economic cooperation, political dialogue, and education and culture (the so-called three pillars). Certain progress can be said to have been made in all three of these domains, in particular in the economic domain (on trade and investment issues) and in the cultural field, in which the Asia-Europe Foundation is very active. The political pillar, however, has delivered fewer results. The parties involved consider the ASEM process as a way to deepen relations between Asia and Europe and as such it is a time-consuming, sensitive exercise in building mutual confidence. Progress on second domain themes, such as good governance, human rights, sustainable environment, and the rule of law, can only be made on the basis of trust still today. Yet, there are undeniable signs indicating an increasing readiness, on both sides, to discuss these topics, thus I believe the investment in time to have been worthwhile.

By *Wim Stokhof*

The slowly growing process of rapprochement between Asia and Europe is, however, being endangered by recent developments. As we all know, the current fifteen EU member states have invited ten countries from Central and Eastern Europe to join the union. This EU enlargement will undoubtedly have far-reaching consequences for the ASEM process. It can be expected that these countries will, in due time, express their interest in participating in the Asia-Europe dialogue.

On several occasions and informally, the ASEAN members of ASEM have on their part indicated to expect that several new members, namely Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar/Burma, will eventually be given the green light to become ASEM members. Most likely, newly independent East Timor will soon also aspire to ASEAN and, consequently, ASEM membership. A deci-

sion will probably be taken at the sixth ASEM summit in Hanoi. Meanwhile, given the additional EC proposal to enlarge ASEM by accepting India, Australia, and New Zealand, we may wonder in all seriousness what kind of organization the EC and its partners have in mind.

Of course, such a proliferation of members will confront this relatively young configuration of countries with all sorts of practical problems. In fact, I fear that the often praised interactivity and informality of the ASEM process will eventually prove an obstacle to a clear and focused exchange of ideas.

Yet even much more crucial, to my mind, is the fact that the ASEM is still in need of a long-term internally driven strategic vision, which can be translated into clear and concrete objectives, and relevant effective instruments – such as a professional secretariat – to reach those objectives. As ASEM threatens to be overwhelmed by its all



too reactive responses to external circumstances even in its present set up, the enlargement of ASEM seems to be pointless, if such a strategic vision is lacking. <

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