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Young officials from Asia and Europe meet in Singapore to boost inter-regional cooperation

April 14, 2005



Much of the world's political disagreements today can be attributed to a lack of understanding of the diverse cultures, values and interests between global citizens.



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So how can this so-called 'clash of civilizations' be minimized or avoided altogether?

Through interaction, shared experiences and inter-regional cooperation. And this is exactly what the Asia-Europe Foundation or ASEF, and the Civil Service College of Singapore want to achieve with their Programme for Emerging Public Sector Leaders.

This inaugural event brought together young officials from the Foreign Affairs Ministries of 38 Asia-Europe Meeting or ASEM countries. These young diplomats met in Singapore this week to come up with fresh ideas and new perspectives on good governance and public sector leadership, and discussed the prospects for stronger ties between the two regions.

Ambassador Wonil Cho is the Executive Director of the Singapore-based Asia-Europe Foundation.

WC: In a globalised world, and also in an era of the Internet, it is very important that people begin to realise that it is crucial to establish networks among public sector leaders, particularly young ones. So this is a unique and very valuable opportunity for young public sector leaders, to meet each other and get to know each other and begin to work together for further collaboration and cooperation between Asia and Europe.

What are some reasons why Singapore has been chosen as venue to bring these public sector leaders together?

WC: Singapore is a good example of good public administration. Also, the Civil Service College and other prominent institutes of Singapore, have been very active participants in the programmes and projects of

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ASEF. That is why Singapore was chosen. You mentioned networking and collaboration. Can you give me some specific activities that they have engaged in during this meeting?

WC: This people are mainly Foreign Service Officers, but they are participating in this seminar in a personal capacity. So they can get themselves more deeply involved in the intellectual discussions for all kinds of important, current issues, and also many other issues. So that's how they can form a very good foundation for long-term collaboration and friendship.

Some of these countries that these various public sector leaders are from, are currently involved in perhaps some disagreements. I can use ASEAN as an example, in terms of Myanmar's chairmanship in 2006. Has this kind of difference in opinion come up at all during the debates and exchanges of information?

WC: Yes, they've participated in the intellectual debates deeply and also, these young diplomats can understand what other diplomats are thinking. This sharing of experiences and the exchange of ideas can be a very, very useful thing, not only for themselves, but also for their own governments in a different way.

From what you've observed of the exchanges so far, in the meetings, have you found that there've been very frank and open discussions, considering that they're all from very diverse backgrounds as well?

WC: Exactly, they're not here to represent any diplomatic negotiation or a problem-solving process. We've just invited them to engage in intellectual discussions, so that they can go much deeper into the core of these matters.

I also caught up with Ahmad Abdul Rahman, one of the young officials who participated in ASEF's Programme for Emerging Public Sector Leaders.

Ahmad is Deputy Permanent Secretary in the Prime Minister's Office of Brunei.

AAR: We had our first discussion today where all the participants were required to brainstorm about the challenges to the public service, in terms of pursuing the dreams of our leaders. There were a lot of ideas.

What were some of the ideas that came out of this brainstorming session?

AAR: We recognized the need for enhancement of the integration of our region – ASEAN or Asia, so that we can have a better platform from which to cooperate with Europe.

All 38 of you have come from two diverse regions, from Europe and Asia. Was that a problem? Were there some challenges posed by this?

AAR: People can see this as a challenge or problem, but in the end, in every challenge, there is opportunity. For me personally, it is no good to dwell on challenges or the problems. For me, it is better to look at the opportunities.

So speaking of opportunities, what were some of the opportunities that were discussed, perhaps collaborations for



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the future?

AAR: Some of the opportunities that we recognized, is that with globalisation, for example, we have to capitalize on our differences, in terms of trying to impose certain values on others. But we've tried to do is to bring out our uniqueness. So when we recognise our various values, we begin to appreciate them, and begin to respect each other's values. But if you don't understand the values, when we see other people behaving differently from us, we see them as different, and we begin to compete with them. It would be better to complement than to compete.

To get a European perspective, I spoke to Ben Ladd from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London.

BL: I was very much hoping to draw on a broad range of perspectives, and people who've had different experiences and come from a slightly different point of view, in order to better inform my thinking in future, particularly with regards to cooperation in this region.

Do you think that the understanding that you had of the Asian mind was very different, now that you've met so many people from Asia from the same line of work that you're in?

BL: I don't think you can say that there's one single Asian mind, just as you can't say there's one European mind. It's a short-hand that we all use. I think that what both Asia and Europe represent is a degree of a very diverse society, but that has identified within themselves, shared values that you can then put forward and talk about an Asian set of values or European set of values.

Are there any shared European-Asian set of values?

BL: I think we're discovering more and more all the time, and I think that one of the interesting things about the dialogue that's developed over the last few years is that it has been far more about cooperation. We were talking earlier today about how there's been a paradigm shift in inter-cultural dialogues, from competitive dialogues where one culture had to prevail, to move towards respecting the values of others, and learning from them and having a cooperative dialogue. I think that today's been a very good example of that.

Europe has, from time to time, tried to influence events that are happening or have happened here in the region. Do you foresee a time when Asia might have that much clout to try and influence events in Europe?

BL: I think Asia already does. I think there are different dynamics going on here, and not only are we talking about a dialogue that's flowed from a political imperative, from leaders of both countries, but you have very significant people-people exchanges outside of these formal programmes. We're thinking immigration and just people journeying to different places. I think that in some ways, this political process has moved forward so much because there's already that underlying social dialogue going on, that we never really recognise. So I think that Asia influences Europe more than perhaps, Asia realizes.

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