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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Where's Europe?

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HANOI — Europe wants to be taken more seriously as a player in world affairs. But viewed from the perspective of the biannual meeting of foreign ministers of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) group held here this week the ambition is laughable.

Here were the foreign ministers of China, Japan, South Korea and most of the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to put their names to a timely condemnation of the North Korean nuclear test.

And Europe? Missing were the foreign ministers of France, Germany, Britain, Italy and Spain. Two thirds of E.U. member states sent junior officials. The best Europe could muster were the almost-powerless E.U. commissioner for external relations, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, and foreign ministers from the current and next countries holding the E.U. presidency, the Czech Republic and Sweden.

Perhaps these big ministerial gatherings — ASEM has 45 participants — are always more about providing a place for bilateral discussions than specific agreements. However, face and presence matter, and Europe's attitude as displayed here was demeaning to Vietnam in particular and Asia in general.

At the last such meeting two years ago, in Hamburg, foreign ministers from China, Japan, India, Pakistan and almost every other Asian nation showed up for some stern European lecturing on the need for joint action on climate change.

This time the Europeans wished to focus on the treatment of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the political prisoner in Myanmar. She is a worthy cause, but not the most important issue in relations between Europe and Asia. The British looked particularly silly, issuing high-sounding condemnations of the Myanmar government but dispatching only a junior minister to the meeting.

Although the ASEM ministers did call for Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi's release and for elections in Myanmar, the statement went no further than ASEAN's position, so there is scant evidence that European focus on her had any impact.

Europe's low-level presence in Hanoi was compounded by a repeat performance in Phnom Penh, where EU foreign ministers are currently meeting their counterparts from ASEAN.

Again, the E.U. members are mostly represented by junior ministers and officials. Perhaps Europe views its relations with the ASEAN region as driven by trade and economic rather than political issues.

But in practice, Europe has focused on human rights and democracy issues, so low-level attendance in Phnom Penh suggests that European governments prefer to play to domestic galleries than to bring real weight to bear on the Asian issues.

ASEM may be an unwieldy grouping, and it will become even more so with the admission soon of Russia

and Australia — two nations that are European in culture and Asian in geography. Meanwhile, some large Asian countries, such as Bangladesh, remain on the outside.

ASEM's value may be more in fostering non-official links and cultural exchanges. It does have an agenda of practical issues, including health, education, trade and migration, where it can contribute modestly to cooperation in the same way that the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) group does for Asia-Americas links.

But lack of a significant role in high-level diplomacy is no reason to treat ASEM so lightly, especially when Asian countries make a point of being there in force.

The excuse of upcoming European parliamentary elections is feeble. Europe's failure to take the Hanoi and Phnom Penh meetings seriously is viewed in Asia as typical of Euro-centricity — not just in Brussels, but Europe in general — and of an unwillingness to appreciate the role of Asia — and not just China — in today's world.

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