

It's time Europe paid serious attention to Asem

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HOW important is Asia to Europe? How serious is Europe in engaging Asia? Perhaps not very. This conclusion, rightly or wrongly, is based on the European presence -- or rather absence -- at the recent Asia-Europe Ministerial Meeting in Hanoi, Vietnam, and the Asean meeting in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The European participation at the Asem meeting was "pathetic", according to a European journalist in Hanoi. Two-thirds of European Union member states were represented by junior officials. The current president, the Czech Republic, and the incoming president, Sweden, were represented by their foreign ministers.

The major European powers -- Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Spain -- were absent. Benita Ferrero-Waldner, the EU commissioner for external relations, represented the Brussels-based commission.

And this after Jose Manuel Barroso, the European Commission president, had declared at the Asem meeting in Beijing last October that "we swim together, or we sink together". But the Europeans sent an entirely different message with their low-key presence at the Asem meeting in Hanoi.

"The excuse of... European parliamentary elections is feeble," Philip Bowring commented in the International Herald Tribune.

"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."

Bowring wrote that Europe's "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".

Asia, which is usually lectured by the Europeans, was fully represented in Hamburg two years ago, with ministers from China, India, Japan and all the Asean 10.

Asem was seen as Europe's response to Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), as it did not want to be left out for its lack of engagement with emerging Asia and its "miracle economies". It was felt that the relationship between the two regions had to be strengthened to reflect the new global context of the 1990s.

The rapid growth of economies in Asia saw many courting the region -- Europe included. The first Asem summit was held in Bangkok in March 1996.

At present, Asem's 45 members are the European Commission, 27 EU members, the Asean

secretariat, the 10 Asean members, China, Japan, South Korea, India, Pakistan and Mongolia. Asem is the main multilateral channel for communication and dialogue between Asia and Europe. It followed hot on the heels of another forum -- APEC, which brings together Asia Pacific nations here and in the Americas.

The first meeting of the 21-nation grouping was held at the invitation of former United States president Bill Clinton on Blake Island, the US, in November 1993.

Numerous statements have been made by political and business leaders on the need for cooperation and coordinated efforts to deal with the current global economic and financial crisis.

Described as the worst crisis in decades, the economic meltdown is just one of the many crises that the world needs to deal with. Others include climate change, the influenza A (H1N1) virus, migration and piracy issues. All these represent an unprecedented challenge.

According to Dr Brigid Gavin of the European Institute of Asian Studies, "the effects of the economic crisis will be far-reaching and prolonged if governments do not act in a determined way to cut the vicious circle of ailing banks, spiralling government deficits, faltering industry and rising unemployment".

Certainly, there are competing agendas demanding governments' action, attention and funding. This is true for all -- emerging Asian nations as well as developed European countries.

"The current global economic and financial crisis (also) demands that both sides engage in very close cooperation," Shada Islam, senior programme executive at the European Policy Centre, said in a presentation at an EU-Asia forum.

But Europe seems to be turning inwards. Could it be because of the "leadership deficit" within the EU, which has revealed tensions within the community and given rise to major upheaval in Europe's internal balance of power?

European leaders need to take a close look at their collaboration and cooperation efforts. They should pay serious attention to Asem and not just lip service and token attendance. It is time to "explore ways to enhance and reinforce the substance and content of ties" with Asia.

hardev@alumni.ksg.harvard.edu