

ROUNDTABLE BRIEFING

ASEM ROUNDTABLE

14.04.2009, Brussels

**„The ASEM Process.
From information sharing to common policies
between Europe and Asia?
Overcoming the complexity of an enlarged
inter-governmental forum”**

On the 4th and 5th of October 2010 the next summit of government leaders from Asia and Europe, ASEM 8, will take place in Brussels. By now, 45 countries, the European Commission and the ASEAN-Secretariat are participating in this ASEM-Summit process, which was first introduced in 1996. The members of ASEM represent more than two-thirds of the world population and contribute 60% of the global gross national product. ASEM is well-established as a forum for dialogue between the political leaders of Asia and Europe, wherefore more countries have a high preference in participating in the dialogue. In 2010 Russia, Australia and New Zealand will take part for the first time.

Will ASEM be able to play a functional role as a dialogue forum that leads to concrete agreements and decisions that enhance the quality of Asia-Europe relations? How will they be able to do so? What kind of political, organisational and maybe even institutional arrangements do ASEM require, in order to respond not only to new and complex issues as well as challenges in the relation between Asia and Europe, but to global issues? These are the central questions, which will have a significant influence on the preparation of the next ASEM summit.

As a contribution to the ASEM 8 preparations, the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) and the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation organised a Public Roundtable on the 14th of April 2010 to discuss the current preparations of the Summit and a general appraisal of the ASEM process to date. The event took place in the office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Brussels.

Andrew-Thomas Roe, Asia Adviser and ASEM Counsellor in the Directorate-General for External Relations of the European Commission, attested ASEM as a “remarkable success”. Like no other institution, ASEM offers a forum in which discussions about a number of political fields are possible and which has developed a sensibility for new issues as well as needs. However, from the perspective of the European Commission it would be desirable that this dialogue experiences an “upgrade” so that the mutual partnership gains more substance.

To do so, it might be necessary to have some kind of a permanent coordination between the summits whose task would be to ensure that the agreements and decisions are not only documented, but implemented and the common agenda is developed further. In this context, the advantages and disadvantages of the establishment of such a coordination office had to be discussed openly.

Ambassador Bertrand de Crombrughe, Head of the Belgian ASEM 8 Taskforce and directly responsible for the preparation of the summit, acknowledged a “good consensus” between the member states with regard to the aims of the summit. The preparations for the next summit had started at an early stage and the agenda is now being finalised. Ambassador de Crombrughe pointed out that, among other things, ASEM consists of many G20 members. Therefore, this summit process could be used for treating issues of global concern and common interest more efficiently. This applies for example for political questions in which Europe and Asia share specific interests, for instance relations with North-Korea, Iran or Myanmar.

Ambassador de Crombrughe stated that one needs more discussion on whether and which institutional arrangements would be necessary in order to achieve a “perfect working method”, but should also be mindful that the original character of ASEM – its informality, multi-dimensionality, and flexibility – be preserved. However, de Crombrughe argued emphatically that “ASEM has to remain a dialogue”.

An important component of the ASEM dialogue targets civil society in the two regions. The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) was created in 1997, one year after the first ASEM Summit, to put in place two-way structures of dialogue with civil society to accompany the ASEM process. ASEF Executive Director **Ambassador Dominique Girard** described ASEF as a neutral and open platform for civil society dialogue on ASEM's priority issues, like the global economic and financial crisis, public health and environment. Until today, ASEF is the only permanent physical institution of ASEM. Ambassador Girard emphasised the importance of partnership in ASEF's work as a young organisation, where inter-dependence on its networks and partners remains the ingredient of its success. ASEM enlargement, he noted, poses “a fantastic challenge and a fantastic opportunity”. Enlargement forces ASEM partners to re-think and refresh what has until now been a region-to-region relationship, to address new issues and to seize the opportunity to boost existing relationships and activities. However, he stressed the necessity of mobilising the dialogue in order to respond effectively to new questions of concern as well as to shape the dialogue and cooperation between the regions more efficiently.

The question of how the ASEM process could be shaped more efficiently for the advantage of its members was a central point in the remarks of **Ambassador Yong-Kyu Park**, ASEM Senior Official at the Ministry of Foreign Relations and Trade of the Republic of Korea and Professor at the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS). Ambassador Park pointed out that ASEM has doubtlessly contributed to the growing inter-regional interaction which has developed in many fields between Asia and Europe. With over 30 initiatives each year under the ASEM framework, ASEM also served as a significant complementary instrument for the various bilateral forums. However, it has to be asked, whether and how the step from dialogue and exchange of information to concrete cooperation on common projects could be taken, whether ASEM should be developed into a “substantial institution”, and if the possible weaknesses of the ASEM process might be reduced. To enhance the value of ASEM, a few measures could be made: rationalisation of activities, more effective management and coordination, a well-defined focus to ensure consistency across initiatives, and concrete follow-up action from

the dialogue. In order to strengthen the perception of ASEM and its effectiveness, the common agenda would have to gain substance and joint projects that have an impact on the global level would have to be developed. In any case, results-oriented cooperation projects have to be agreed, which then could be channeled into global governance-structures like G20, United Nations or WTO. Ambassador Park called for concrete measures to strengthen the working mechanisms on different levels of ASEM.

Compared to these far reaching demands and expectations, **Dr. Yeo Lay Hwee**, Director of the European Union Centre in Singapore, took a considerably less demanding position with regard to ASEM. She pointed out that ASEM has proven to be a useful dialogue forum between Asia and Europe and a driving force of various initiatives. But at the same time, she warned not to have too high expectation for the summit process, which ASEM would be unable to fulfill. ASEM would help to build an environment in which the leaders of both continents can get to know each other without any pressure and exchange positions, develop and discuss common ideas. However, it had to be accepted that ASEM cannot replace other forums and its functions would therefore remain limited. She reminded that ASEM is just one of the many institutional instruments that are available to Asia and Europe, and as an analogy, she likened ASEM to a multi-purpose Swiss Knife that is “good” to have and can be useful when the need arises. One would have to take this limited freedom of action into account when thinking about the further development of the structure of ASEM and its possible institutional enlargement.

From the perspective of one of ASEM’s future members, **Melissa H. Conley Tyler**, National Executive Director of the Australian Institute of International Affairs, explained Australia’s interest in integration into the ASEM process as a conscious effort by Prime Minister Rudd to participate in various international forums, in which questions of global cooperation and governance are discussed. Australia has a strengthened international interest and has learnt that the collaboration in international forums offers a possibility to broaden one’s potential and bring in one’s own interests into the global dialogue. ASEM is for Australia of high significance since it is politically, economically and socially closely connected with both Europe and Asia.

Several participants during the discussion expressed their expectation that that the perception of ASEM should be strengthened and its effectiveness enhanced. At the same time, there is also some skepticism expressed with regard to whether this need and feasibility of institutional reforms to give ASEM a permanent and tighter structure has been recognised by ASEM countries. Nevertheless, there has been a consensus that ASEM is an important forum of dialogue between Asia and Europe which definitely has to be pursued.

Altogether the roundtable dealt with central issues, which will be discussed at the next ASEM summit. The roundtable met its aim to discuss the central issues of the preparation for the ASEM 8 summit with a diverse audience from various institutions working on Asia-Europe relations and individuals who are directly involved in the ASEM process.

Following this public roundtable, experts from both continents continued the discussion in a two-day closed-door workshop organised by the Asia-Europe Foundation and the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation, with the support of the Belgian Federal Public Service for Foreign Affairs. The workshop discussed institutional possibilities for reforms and major political issues which will be dealt with at the ASEM 8 summit. Furthermore, some suggestions to those issues were formulated. The results of this workshop have been

presented in a separate report prepared by ASEF and submitted to ASEM partners. This report is available at <http://www.asef.be/event/asef-outlook-workshop>.

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