

# **The Future of ASEM in Asia-Europe Relations**

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I don't think this will take me long. Taking the floor after the distinguished previous speakers leaves me not much to say.

And, after all, how much can one say about the Asia-Europe Meeting?  
In absolute terms, not much.

In relative terms, more. Relative that is to the time that it has existed. For ASEM is only seven (7 ) years old. A child at this age would have just started to go to school.

Allow me a few remarks about why ASEM has been born only recently. The years after the Second World War saw Europe and Asia, both devastated by the war, preoccupied with their recovery, reconstruction, and development. Geographical distance and the Cold War did nothing to bridge the chasm.

There was another factor: the hangover from a previous traumatic Asia Europe Meeting, the Asian experience of European colonialism. The Philippines was colonized by powers from three different regions, but European colonialism was the worst if only for its sheer length. I think it can be easily established that more human rights atrocities were committed during the colonial era than any period in Philippine history. In fact the Philippine population was decimated in the first century of European colonialism from the hardships inflicted on the native people.

That this occasion brings together representatives of the Civil Society reminds me of a singular feature of European colonization of the Philippines. Foreigners belonging to non-government organizations in the guise of saving souls were among the worst abusers of human rights during

the European colonial era in the Philippines. European colonizers not only pillaged the natural resources of the country but also killed industries competing with those in Europe, no matter how many people depended on them for their livelihoods..

I can therefore fully understand the sentiments expressed by Ambassador Dato this morning over the pronouncements of high European quarters today calling for a “new imperialism!”

And so the inception of ASEM is a historic milestone indeed. At the inauguration of ASEM in Bangkok on 1-2 March 1996, the participants agreed to create “a new partnership, to build a greater understanding between the peoples of the two regions, and to establish a strengthened dialogue among equals. From a “dialogue,” the goal went on to cooperation. That was during the Seoul Summit on 20-21 October 2000, where it was agreed that the ASEM process is only a dialogue but cooperation. Whether ASEM is for dialogue or cooperation or both, ASEM is a new relationship because it is a partnership among equals. I cannot see ASEM continuing if it deviates from the bedrock of equality and mutual respect for each other’s peoples and cultures.

At the inception of ASEM, Asia and Europe were like strangers despite historical associations. The initial phase, in which we still are, can be correctly called indeed “a bonding phase,” as my colleague from Malaysia did this morning.

What motivated the start of the Asia and Europe Meeting? Was it mere coincidence that the Asian region had emerged as the fastest growing, and much ink had been spent heralding the new century as the Pacific century? For those who saw a waning interest among Europeans in Asia after the Asian financial crisis, it appeared that it was for prospects of less than mutual gain that Europeans were in ASEM.

But the Asian financial crisis only proved that Asians and Europeans were on the same boat of globalization and increasing interdependence. I would like to think that Asians and Europeans do realize that dialogue and cooperation between and among them would be better than renewed isolation from each other. Asia and Europe are even today strong trade and economic partners. And economies on both continents are recovering!

There are actually signs of determination in ASEM of strengthening the partnership between the two continents. The last ASEM of Foreign Ministers called on ASEM senior officials to brainstorm on improving the working methods of ASEM.

A modicum of success must be ascribed to ASEM as a young interregional organization. It has had Summit meetings every two years. Foreign affairs, economic, finance, and environment ministers meet every years, despite complaints about high-level attendance. ASEM's Track 2 instrument, the Asia Europe Foundation has together brought from the two continents thousands of students, academics, artists, journalists, policy-makers, and politicians. The initiatives and activities of ASEM and ASEF have brought considerable though immeasurable understanding between the peoples of Asia and Europe.

At this juncture, it is not unreasonable to imagine a future ASEM having increasingly more value-added in the lives of the peoples of the two continents. ASEM may have to move at a level and pace comfortable for each ASEM partner. That may be slow indeed if the partners allow contentious issues to stymie the organization instead of focusing on their shared interests.

Actually, ASEM has a vision for the future . ASEM leaders have approved in the document Asia Europe Cooperation Framework 2000 a medium to long-term vision to help guide the ASEM process through the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the recent special Senior Officials meeting in Rome, the Philippine delegation pointed out that the meeting did not have to ‘reinvent the wheel’ because ASEM leaders had already decided on the future directions of ASEM and prescribed the ways by which they might be realized. According to the AECF, “ASEM leaders envisage Asia and Europe as an area of peace and shared development with common interests and aspirations such as upholding the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, respect for democracy, the rule of law, equality, justice and humans rights, concern for the environment and other global issues, eradication of poverty, protection of cultural heritage and the promotion of intellectual endeavors, economic and social development, knowledge and educational issues.”

The many accomplishments of ASEM so far have been useful particularly in allowing partners to learn from best practices in the various areas identified

as subjects for initiatives and activities. But ASEM will have in time to undertake cooperative activities that will doubtless show that it truly matters in the lives and future of the ASEM area. The Silk Road initiative is such an activity. The Philippines believes that its Oceans initiative to protect the marine environment and promote marine safety co-sponsored by Portugal is another.

ASEM Summits have affirmed and reaffirmed that the ASEM process should “go beyond governments in order to promote business/private sectors of the two regions and , no less importantly, between the peoples of the two regions. ASEM should also encourage the cooperative activities of think tanks and research groups of both regions.” I can only be strongly convinced that Civil Society has an important role to play if ASEM were to realize the vision of its leaders.

I come from a country known for the pivotal role that Civil Society has played in its recent history. Civil Society in the Philippines is represented by numerous organizations. Together, these non-government organizations in mass actions, have restored democracy and brought down a government on the issue of good governance. We call these Civil Society movements People Power.

Unfortunately, for some international quarters , People Power played its hand in the Philippines once too many and see it as a manifestation of political instability. It should rather be thought of as an evidence of a strong democracy. NGOs in the Philippines are doing a lot in support of good governance and the rule of law, the advancement of the peace process, the protection of the environment, the protection of women and children, and other areas.

We in the Philippines are certain that Civil Society, the private sector and non-government organizations, can be of immense help in order that the ASEM vision of the future will be realized. I would like to express our appreciation to the European Commission for holding this auspicious gathering of the Civil Society.