

## **EU-Asia versus the USA?**

by Glyn Ford MEP

In late March, the third meeting of the Asia-European Parliamentary Partnership (ASEP 3) took place in Hue, Vietnam, the site of a number of bloody battles during the Vietnam War. National Members of Parliament from China, Indonesia, Japan and the Philippines met with Belgians, Irish and Swedes, amongst others.

These meetings, designed to give a Parliamentary dimension to the following intergovernmental meetings are taken seriously by the Asian side with high level delegations attending. Asians see these meetings as part of a process of establishing a new global equilibrium to replace the desperate imbalance created since the collapse of the Soviet empire in the late eighties. While economically and industrially Asia and Europe play in the same league as the United States, politically they just do not measure up. There are understandably special historical relationships between the US and Europe on one side and the US and Asia, particularly Japan, on the other.

However, all too often the US plays Asia and Europe off against each other. In the new globalised world it is important for the interests of both to strengthen the third leg of this global triangle as, on many issues, Asia and Europe share common concerns and common interests whether it be Kyoto protocols, WTO issues or the solution to the nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula. While there is increasing criticism by both parties of US global unilateralism and the marginalisation of the UN, it is not anti-American in itself to make the point that Asian and European interests and aspirations are sharply different from those of the US in a number of areas.

High on the meeting's agenda was combating terrorism. Many of the Asian countries represented have large Muslim populations; in fact, Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim State. They were particularly insistent that Islam in itself must not be demonised. In Asia, traditional Islam is a gentler, more tolerant religion than that propagated by the Wahhabi fundamentalists of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. The two sides agreed that there should be greater co-operation between Asia and Europe, including harmonisation of legislation and exchange of information on terrorists and their organisations. Terrorism is not a one-way street. It happens in Asia as well, as the Bali bombing demonstrates. Despite the idea that 'Asian values' give preference to the community over the individual, both sides agreed that it was important to ensure in any legislation the protection of individual human rights.

Fairer trade and more aid was unanimously supported. Levels of debt repayment still outweigh aid in far too many developing countries. Yet, to help to ensure the world's poorest escape from the deep poverty of living on less than EUR1 per day is to drain the sea in which all too many of the terrorist groups swim. As for trade, if WTO membership for China and Vietnam does not lead to an end to counterfeiting, it may at least harmonise the prices of, for example, 'genuine' fake Breitling watches that are currently retailing at \$35 in China and \$100 in Vietnam.

A further area of concern was the ongoing crisis on the Korean Peninsula. Indonesia has recently made it clear to North Korea that the Non-Aligned Movement is totally opposed to nuclear weapons. Vietnam with its own socialist market economy (Doi

Moi) is advising North Korea on how to emulate its path to a socialist market. The two do have a special relationship. Thousands of Vietnamese were sent for education and training in North Korea during and after the Vietnam War. The current Ministers of Construction and Irrigation both benefit from a Pyongyang education.

ASEP 3 recognised in its final declaration that the only way out of the crisis is to simultaneously move forward with the dismantling of North Korea's nuclear weapons capability, accompanied by a step-by-step mutual reduction in conventional weapons under the umbrella of US security guarantees to North Korea and the resolution of the other outstanding issues. This would be combined with continued humanitarian aid and new economic assistance from both Asia and Europe. While the EU has contributed EUR500 million of assistance to North Korea over the past five years, and China loudly proclaimed that North Korea consumes 60% of its total foreign assistance, to date the US, who want a major say, again will not pay.

The final conclusion of the meeting was the agreement that the ASEP process needs to be properly institutionalised. It needs to be the parliamentary wing of the multilateral Asia-Europe Heads of Government meeting alongside a new civic forum. At minimum a small secretariat should be set up and the President of each ASEP meeting should make a formal presentation of ASEP's conclusions to the succeeding Heads of Governments Meeting. Certainly such steps would contribute to cementing Asian-European relations and enable both to speak with a single voice on the global stage, loud enough to be heard around the world. ■

Glyn Ford MEP was a member of the European Parliament's delegation to the ASEP 3 meeting in Hue, Vietnam. He was accompanied by Hartmut Nassauer, Chair of the ASEAN, South-East Asia and Republic of Korea delegation and Lord Inglewood, Vice-Chairman of the China delegation. Mr Ford recently was Chief Observer of the EU's Election Observation Mission to Indonesia. His interim report is presented in this issue of *EurAsia Bulletin*.

See also:

*EurAsia Bulletin*

Vol. 7 No. 12 December 2003

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Vol. 7 No. 8&9 Aug-September 2003

“Asia-Europe relations - forging a stronger partnership”

Vol. 7 No. 4 April 2003

“Asia and Europe: shared values after the Iraq war”