

## **ASEM 3: MORE TALK OR MOVE FORWARD?**

*By Yeo Lay Hwee, Singapore Institute of International Affairs*

### **Introduction**

The Third ASEM Summit (ASEM 3) was held in Seoul on 20-21 October 2000. Openly, those who participated in the meeting, and several of the Asian newspapers, particularly the Korean papers, were happy to hail the meeting as a “success”. What does it mean? With the presence of all heavy-weight European and Asian leaders - Tony Blair, Jacques Chirac, Gerhard Schroeder, Zhu Rongji, Yoshiro Mori, Abdurrahman Wahid, and the adoption of three Documents - The Chairman’s Statement; Seoul Declaration for Peace on the Korean Peninsula; and the Asia-Europe Cooperation Framework 2000, it is possibly the best outcome one could hope for under the cloud of rumours of forum-fatigue, acrimonious debates about human rights, increasing divergences and complaints on the slow progress of some key initiatives such as the Trade Facilitation Action Plan (TFAP) during the preparatory process. That the meeting was held smoothly under tight security without any major disruptions from anti-globalisation protestors was another triumph for the Korean government, especially in the wake of a series of street protests and demonstrations that targeted and disrupted several international meetings since the Seattle fiasco in November last year.

For a Summitry, which is usually valued by politicians mainly for their symbolism, propaganda value, and photo-opportunities, the outcome of ASEM 3 in reaffirming the importance of continued dialogue between Asia and Europe, is noteworthy. However, the question in the minds of people who have been observing the development of ASEM since the inaugural meeting in Bangkok would be – how far have we travelled since, and how much have we achieved qualitatively if not quantitatively? ASEM has moved from an idea to a process – but, what next? Are Asia and Europe moving more and more together in tandem and deepening the engagement since ASEM 1 or are we still stuck with more of the same small talks and feel-good rhetoric? Below is an attempt not only to provide a brief overview of ASEM but also to provide a quick post-mortem of ASEM 3.

## **A Brief Overview of ASEM**

ASEM is the acronym for the Asia-Europe Meeting, a cooperative framework established in March 1996 between Europeans as represented by the fifteen European Union (EU) member states plus the European Commission, and Asians as represented by ten East and Southeast Asian states comprising China, Japan, South Korea, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. ASEM was touted as a symbol of Asia's and Europe's rediscovery of each other following the period of decolonization and relative neglect. Unlike past historical contacts between Asia and Europe, ASEM was to mark the beginning of an equal and comprehensive partnership. The overriding theme was building a relationship among equals in recognition of the rising economic power and dynamism of the East Asian countries.

The idea of a summit meeting between Asian and European leaders originated at the 1994 Europe-East Asia Economic Summit organised by the Geneva-based World Economic Forum. In a "Programme of Action" issued at the end of this Summit on 14 October 1994, the opening paragraph hailed "the strengthening of the Europe-East Asia relationship" as an "urgent priority". Several recommendations for actions to be taken at the government and corporate level were made. One of the recommendations was the call for an Europe-East Asia Summit of government leaders.

This recommendation was taken up in earnest by the Singapore leaders. Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong sold ASEM as the bridge between Asians and Europeans to reinforce the weak link in the triangle of relations between East Asia, North America and Western Europe. These three regions were then depicted as the growth engines driving the world economy. While transatlantic and transpacific ties were well-established, strong ties between Europe and East Asia were missing. ASEM was thus intended to fill this missing link.

There were many reasons behind the alacrity with which the idea of ASEM was taken in. Among them were the development of East Asia into an economic powerhouse, the formation

of the Asia-Pacific Economic Forum (APEC) (and specifically, the high profile Seattle Summit in 1993), the continued fears of a fortress Europe, mutual interest in maintaining an open and multilateral trading system to counter what was perceived as increasing US unilateralism, and the increasing interest to expand trade and investment opportunities in each other's region.

The inaugural Summit meeting in Bangkok in 1996 got off to a good start. The range of initiatives and activities that followed engendered an ongoing process involving summit meetings, various ministerial and senior officials' meetings, and also expert meetings in various functional areas of cooperation. All these are now collectively referred to as the ASEM process. The plethora of activities that followed immediately, and the establishment of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) within a year of the Bangkok Summit reflected the initial enthusiasm and optimism of the parties involved.

This enthusiasm and optimism was to be dampened in the wake of the Asian financial crisis that developed to a greater socioeconomic crisis engulfing almost the whole of Southeast Asia. The initial muted response from the EU countries to the crisis led to accusations from Asia that Europe was only a fair-weather friend. Doubts about the rationale and substance of the Asia-Europe relations surfaced. After a period of reflection and soul searching, common sense and a longer-term perspective prevailed to underlie the continued engagement between Asia and Europe.

Under the firm and energetic chairmanship of Tony Blair, the British were ready to make the most out of the London Summit and were able to steer the meeting towards a generally positive outcome. European leaders took opportunity of the London Summit to reaffirm their interest and intention to remain involved in Asia. The crucial achievement of ASEM 2 was that Europe recognized the importance of continuing cooperation with Asia and the role it could play in Asia's economic recovery by keeping its market open to Asian exports. An ASEM Trust Fund was also set up to provide Asian countries with technical advice and

assistance on the restructuring of their financial sectors and other measures to deal with growing social problems caused by the crisis.

Within a few years of the first meeting of the EU and Asian leaders in Bangkok 1996, the ASEM process has taken off in the sense that regular meetings have been established between various ministers (foreign, trade and finance) and senior officials and a rudimentary structure governing the process has evolved (see Figure 1). The key characteristics of the ASEM process as highlighted in the European Commission Working Document (18 April 2000) are:

- its informality (complementing rather than duplicating the work already being carried out in bilateral and multilateral fora);
- its multidimensionality, carrying forward equally a political, economic and cultural dimension, in conjunction with the three pillars\* of ASEM to ensure a comprehensive partnership;
- its emphasis on equal partnership, eschewing any “aid-based” relationship in favour of a more general process of dialogue and cooperation; and
- its high level focus, stemming from the Summits themselves.

(\*ASEM’s partnership is built on three pillars: promoting economic cooperation; fostering political and security dialogue; and reinforcing cultural links between the peoples of both regions.)

The economic front has been the most active with working groups and trade and investment experts meeting regularly to hammer-out “concrete deliverables” under the Trade Facilitation Action Plan (TFAP) and the Investment Promotion Action Plan (IPAP) endorsed by the leaders during the London Summit. At the non-official level, the annual Asia-Europe Business Forum has been maintained to provide a channel for the business sector to contribute to the ASEM process and hopefully to generate real gains in trade and investments.

Because economic motivation was the initial driving force behind the ASEM process, expectations in the area of economic cooperation are the highest. There is a constant pressure so-call to “deliver”. Hence, when the lowest common denominator prevailed since ASEM is explicitly not a negotiating forum for generating legal-binding resolutions, but only an informal forum for the exchange of information on the trade and investment regimes of the various ASEM partners, over-zealous officials, results-oriented businessmen, and keen ASEM observers often expressed disappointment with the lack of “concrete results”. What these meant also remained fuzzy. For some scholars and trade officials, perhaps it was to see ASEM members agreeing to and implementing market-opening measures; or it might meant serious commitment by ASEM members to push for a new round of WTO negotiations. For the business community, it might simply mean easy access to information and policy-makers to allow for more sound trade and investment initiatives; and the list goes on.

These different expectations have to be addressed in one way or another to prevent waning interest. It must be reiterated that the ASEM process is an informal forum, which has its value in diplomacy but may not be the best place for sealing concrete deals or generating legal-binding rules and regulations at this juncture. This does not necessarily mean that the ASEM process will remain as it is forever, but pushing for the transformation of the ASEM process into a different creature now might be a tad too early.

Political dialogue has been the most sensitive of the three pillars of the ASEM process. During the first ASEM summit, when the Asian countries were riding high on its economic success, their confidence was reflected in a greater openness to various discussions. The Asians were setting the pace in this Summit with their insistence that the dialogue should focus on points of agreement and issues of convergence. A cordial atmosphere prevailed because both sides essentially “agreed to disagree” and skirted around difficult and controversial issues.

However, a certain triumphalism that emerged in the West during the height of the Asian financial crisis has generated a certain defensiveness in the attitudes of some of the Asian

members with regards to issues of democracy, human rights and good governance. The perception that the European partners would make use of the political dialogue to “lecture” the Asians on the virtue of the “European model” has resulted in the hardening of Asian attitudes on the issue of political dialogue with the latter arguing that the dialogue should focus first on “issues that bring us together” - such as the reform of the UN, transnational crimes - “rather than focusing on issues that divide us”. The topics to be included in political dialogue will therefore remain contentious as long as the perception that one party is taking the “holier than thou” attitude remains. A willingness on both sides to listen to each other and conduct the dialogue in the spirit of mutual respect and compromise would make the dialogue more fruitful.

The desire to engage in cultural and intellectual dialogue and promote better understanding between the peoples of Asia and Europe was the fundamental rationale for the establishment of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF). ASEF was launched in Singapore in February 1997. Under the Agreed Principles established in December 1996 at the Dublin ASEM Senior Officials Meeting, ASEF’s role is to promote better mutual understanding between Asia and Europe through greater intellectual, cultural and people-to-people exchanges.

In the first three years of ASEF’s existence, it has implemented over 60 projects in 18 of the 25 ASEM partner-countries. It has developed a few flagship projects. These include an ongoing series of Asia-Europe Lectures, featuring prominent leaders from the ASEM partner states; an annual Europe-Asia Forum bringing leaders from different sectors – business, academic and public – to discuss important issues of the day; ASEF Summer School for University students; ASEF Meeting for Young Parliamentarians; and ASEF Editors’ Roundtable. Besides these flagship projects, ASEF has also organised and support other ASEM’s activities involving people-to-people exchanges in the educational, intellectual, cultural and economic fields, such as the Asia-Europe Young Leaders’ Symposium, the Informal Seminar on Human Rights, EMU Road shows, and many others.

However, despite all that have taken place in the ASEM process supported by the ASEF, criticisms abound. ASEF has been criticised for being too elitist. A lot of its activities have been seen as too highbrow involving a very small target audience. Another common criticism is that the activities seemed to be targeted at the converted – people who are already plugged into the ASEM process and appreciated the importance of Asia-Europe relations – instead of reaching out to the wider segment of society whose knowledge of each other might be colored by stereotypes.

The ASEM process itself has also been criticized for being all talk and no substance; being too top-down in its approach; for having a proliferation of activities with no specific focus; for lack of institutionalization. All these criticisms really reflected the different expectations that politicians, officials, and political commentators or observers have with regards to the ASEM process.

The criticisms could be put into perspective if we are to go back to the Singapore's leaders' original conception of ASEM as providing the missing link between Asia and Europe in an increasingly tripolar world with three dominant economic regions, North America, Western Europe and East Asia. ASEM has provided that linkage, but it remains the weaker link in this triangular relationship among the three regions. The idea that there is this missing or weak link naturally implied that we are starting afresh or from a very low level of engagement. And since this is a case of building up a steady, comprehensive relationship after years of relative neglect, it is not something that can be achieved overnight. The Bangkok Summit has gotten us off to a good start, but lots more need to be done before the relationship can become mature and the benefits of the engagement become obvious. Qualitatively, this would be reflected in the narrowing of our psychological distance, less stereotypical responses, more understanding, better appreciation of each other's positions on various issues and the willingness to compromise. Quantitatively, this would be reflected in increasing trade and investment ties, more students in each other's regions, more engagement of our civil societies, ease of travel to each other's regions, etc.

Critics sometimes forget that international cooperation requires mutual adjustments. In highlighting the differences that surface in the course of dialogue between Asia and Europe, and taking such differences as reflection of limits of cooperation, they are missing the point. As Robert Keohane argued in his book “After Hegemony” (1984:12), cooperation should be defined as mutual adjustment rather than defined as a situation in which common interests outweigh conflicting ones. In his words “Cooperation is contrasted with discord; but it is also distinguished from harmony. Cooperation as compared to harmony, requires active attempts to adjust policies to meet the demands of others. That is, not only does it depend on shared interests, but it emerges from a pattern of discord or potential discord”. In short, cooperation does not imply an absence of conflicts. On the contrary, it is typically mixed with conflicts and reflects the efforts to overcome these real or potential conflicts.

Different historical background and the different paths of development taken by Asian and European countries naturally result in different conceptions of world order and interests. The potential for discord between the two regions is therefore very real. At the same time, there are enough shared interests to provide the basis for cooperation. Both regions share the mutual interest of ensuring a multipolar world and to uphold the open, multilateral trading order. In addition, many key ASEM partners are keen to expand trade and investment opportunities in each other’s regions. ASEM is precisely to provide that forum or channel for discussion and making necessary adjustments to ensure the optimal outcome for both regions.

While the problem remains that ASEM partners are still at variance with one another and have different expectations, what is important is to cut down barriers to information and increase communication and recognize enough shared interests to come together to seek cooperation. In short, the ASEM process would continue as long as political and business elites genuinely believe in the growing interdependence of both regions and hence the increasing need to coordinate policies to ensure optimal outcome. The future of ASEM depends not only on shared interests, but also how well its members handle their differences.



How should we respond to the criticisms that without institutionalization, the ASEM process would falter and fade? As some would argue, the mere existence of common interests is not enough to induce cooperation. There must be institutions set up to see through and govern commitments. Again, this boils down to the question of what we meant by institutions and institutionalization.

If by institutions and institutionalization, we meant brick and concrete buildings, and legal-binding, enforceable rules and regulations, then ASEM is far from that. However, if we defined institutions broadly as a set of practices and expectations that helped shape interactions, and can be formal or informal, rather than in terms of formal organizations, ASEM has already exhibited certain degree of institutionalization. Also, we tend to forget that ASEM in its short existence has already produced two formal organizations – the Asia-Europe Foundation and the Asia-Europe Environmental Technology Center.

There is also an answer for those people who took issue on the so-called elitist nature of ASEM with its high-level focus stemming from the Summits. Since ASEM's objective is to strengthen relationship between Asia and Europe, with the underlying assumption that a stronger partnership and increased cooperation between the two regions would be a positive step towards global peace and prosperity, such lofty goals inevitably required wise statecraft, strong leadership and the political will to carry through.

The real challenge is whether the ASEM leaders can identify enough common values and common interests to want to move forward together. The next step is whether they have that will to move beyond rhetoric to bring about greater convergence in their policies to achieve the desired outcome. The road to this would naturally be a long-drawn process and would depend very much on the elites of the two regions – political, intellectual, business and civil society organizations. Beyond the political elites and the bureaucrats involved in the ASEM process, the question would be - are the leaders of the other sectors of society sufficiently engaged to bring about a real rapprochement of Asia-Europe relations?

### **A Post-Mortem of ASEM 3**

The first ASEM Summit in Bangkok was an important symbol of East Asia's new status in the world scene and a demonstration of Europe's recognition of this status. It was symbolic as it marked the beginning of a new equal partnership after years of relative neglect following Europe's retreat from its colonial possessions in Asia. The meeting was intended to be exploratory – the emphasis was on re-acquaintance, exchange of views and increasing awareness. Hence, one of the major outcome of the meeting was agreeing to further meetings. The bonus was in the form of agreement to draw up trade and investment plans to bring about more substantial gains in these areas, and the agreement to establish the Asia-Europe Foundation and the Asia-Europe Environmental Technology Center.

ASEM 2 in London was held in the eye of the Asian financial storm and looming economic crisis. In the midst of gloom and doom, it was important at least that the meeting did take place and was given a high profile by the host country, Britain. Another significant gesture was the adoption of the ASEM 2 Financial statement and the bonus was the establishment of the ASEM Trust Fund to help the affected Asian countries in their financial reforms.

What about the third ASEM Summit in Seoul?

ASEM 3 was held in Seoul on 20-21 October 2000. In the run-up toward ASEM 3, expectations were modest. After swinging from the animated euphorism in ASEM 1 to unwarranted pessimism in ASEM 2, the mood for ASEM 3 was one of tempered realism.

First, there was realization that success in cooperation need not correspond to the legality of the formal structure of the cooperation. The emphasis on the informal nature of ASEM, and the rejection of a proposal to set up an ASEM Secretariat was the recognition that ASEM is also not ready to go beyond the stage of being an informal, consultative process.

Second, there was realization that many differences remain even if there are shared interests. However, the divergence between the different ASEM members does not mean cooperation is

impossible. It just means a lot more work and will to make the necessary adjustments for cooperation to be possible. And for such mutual adjustments to take place, access to information, and communication are important. This brings us therefore to the next point on the need to continue dialogue.

There was realization that differences must be addressed in a genuine dialogue where all parties are willing to listen to one another. There can be no dialogue if two sides argue at cross-purposes or have little interest to find common ground. The defensiveness of some Asian members when it comes to issues of human rights, democracy and governance, and the sanctimoniousness of some European partners in their discussion on these issues would not be helpful towards cooperation. Patience and mutual respect are important.

With such tempered realism, political leaders no longer excited by the ASEM process practically left every detail of the preparations for the Summit to the senior officials. This is especially so on the European side where much of the coordinating work was done by the Commission officials, and also for those Asian leaders too beleaguered with their own domestic crisis to pay too much attention to ASEM 3. Indeed right up to the month before the Summit, there were indications that several key European leaders, including Britain's Tony Blair and Italy's Giuliano Amato, might not attend the Summit. It was also rumored that up till the last minute that Dr Mahathir of Malaysia would not be attending the Summit.

Preparations for ASEM 3 were marked by differences on the issue of expanding the political dialogue. Europe was very eager to deepen dialogue on security and issues of human rights and democracy, but some Asian countries were reluctant to do so. Even in the area of economic cooperation, the progress on TFAP and IPAP was seen as unsatisfactory by some ASEM members. Another issue of contention was the launch of a new round of multilateral trade negotiations under the WTO. In short, there were enough differences during the preparatory stage to make one wonder what sort of compromises would have to be made and what would be the outcome of the Summit. The reluctance on the part of some ASEM members to discuss controversial issues meant that after more than 4 years, real problems

could not be seriously discussed. There was therefore concern that the momentum of the ASEM process could no longer be sustained.

Since ASEM 3 was the very first international diplomatic meeting that South Korea has ever hosted, naturally, they were anxious that the meeting should be “a success”. The non-appearance of key European leaders would not augur well for the meeting. Besides the issue of face for the Koreans, it would probably send the signal that the lack of interest and importance attached to the ASEM process, something that the Koreans as host, and other Asian players like Singapore, who were committed to the process, would not want to see. After much cajoling, most leaders and key leaders did show up for the meeting. Probably the fact that just a week before the Summit, South Korean President was named the Nobel Peace Prize winner helped give some European leaders another reason to be in Seoul. There were some expectations that since the host of ASEM 3 has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, there might be more willingness to discuss about issues of democracy, human rights and peaceful reconciliation.

How much did the third summit in Seoul succeed in confirming and enhancing the importance of the partnership between Asia and Europe? Did ASEM 3 reinforce and reinvigorate the momentum of the ASEM process? Was it just more talk, or did it signify a move forward for the ASEM process? To try and assess the success of summits is necessarily an unscientific process as the late scholar and keen observer of Asian affairs, Gerald Segal, had once commented. Though it is a subjective exercise, I would nevertheless attempt a quick assessment of ASEM 3 from two different angles – the outcome of ASEM 3 as a diplomatic event, and the contribution that ASEM 3 has made towards the whole process of rapprochement between Asia and Europe.

As a diplomatic event, one could not help feel that ASEM 3 was hijacked by the peace process in the Korean Peninsula. This, however, only confirmed the importance of the role of the Chairman in setting the agenda. The Summit gave an opportunity for Kim Dae Jung to get recognition for his efforts on the peace process. Many European leaders also took the

opportunity to announce the establishment of diplomatic relations with North Korea as an encouragement for Kim Jong-Il to continue the process of opening up his hermit kingdom. While some members, particularly those from ASEAN, might have been a little unhappy about the dominance of the Korean issue on the agenda, the Seoul declaration was important in itself in international diplomacy as reflecting the support of the developments in the Korean Peninsula.

However, agreeing about peace in the Korean peninsula proved easier than reconciling some of the above differences over the deepening of political dialogue. It was thus no mean feat that the paragraph on leaders' commitment to "promote and protect all human rights, including the right to development, and fundamental freedoms, bearing in mind their universal, indivisible and interdependent character ..." was finally accepted by all members to appear in the final Chairman's Statement. This was a trade-off to China's demand to include a paragraph on the role of ASEM "in building a new international political and economic order in light of the growing interdependence of Asia and Europe and the changing international environment" through multilateral dialogue and cooperation.

While no timetable was agreed on the launch of a new round of WTO negotiations, members did agree on the point that efforts should be intensified "to launch such a round at the earliest opportunity". This was also significant as several members such as Malaysia and Indonesia have initially expressed strong reservations about the launch of a new round and the pace of trade liberalization. These two important concessions highlighted the spirit of compromise that prevailed and hence augur well for the continuation of ASEM as a process.

Another positive outcome of ASEM 3 is the agreement to extend the ASEM Trust Fund. The ASEM Trust Fund was established during the London ASEM to help countries affected by the Asian economic crisis in addressing problems in the financial and social sectors

On the management of ASEM 3, there was a general feeling among senior officials that the leaders' meeting was a disappointment in that the discussions were rather banal, and the

setting was too formal. The organizers did not succeed in creating a conducive environment for leaders to be a bit more relaxed to encourage more free-flowing discussions. The Chairman also lacked the skills to steer the discussions and provide some coherence to the range of topics being discussed. This probably led to the suggestion by some leaders that the discussion should be more interactive and focused. And there were even suggestions of a sort of retreat for the leaders. Indeed, as one senior official from the European Commission admitted, the challenge for ASEM is to maintain the informality in the Summit and not let it become too “bureaucratize”.

ASEM 3 took place in Seoul amidst tight security, generated by fears that the parallel ASEM People’s Forum organized by NGOs might result in violent demonstrations. The anti-globalization demonstrations in Seattle, in Melbourne, and the violence in Prague were fresh in the minds of the people. Determined to avoid such a specter, the Korean government took the precautionary step of denying entry to almost 300 foreign radicals blacklisted for their protest violence. All people who were registered for the ASEM People’s Forum were screened and the Korean government took no chances with security. About 30,000 riot police and several anti-protestors equipment such as tear-gas spray and water cannons were mobilized. Even helicopters and armored vehicles were mobilized to deal with possible violence. Riot police in armored uniform wielding baton and shield sealed off all public access to within more than a kilometer of the official meeting site. The tight security paid off. Demonstrators were overwhelmed by the police, and the rally and march organized by the organizers of the ASEM 2000 People’s Forum ended without any serious violence.

Something positive did come out from the People’s Forum. Though not all ASEM members were keen about the NGO participation, the door to greater involvement of the civil society was kept open when senior officials from some ten ASEM countries agreed to meet the NGO representatives from the Forum.

As part of a process, ASEM 3 did serve to confirm the importance of a dialogue between Asia and Europe. The adoption of the Asia-Europe Cooperation Framework with sufficient

mechanisms, principles and priorities provides a solid basis for the process to move forward from an exciting idea to a mature dialogue.

The flurry of bilateral meetings that took place has also become a prominent feature of the Summit. A record of 55 bilaterals between leaders and 35 bilaterals at ministerial level were reported in Seoul. The Summit has become an important opportunity and avenue for countries to engage in bilateral meetings to cut deals or discuss issues affecting bilateral relationships. Indeed, one can argue that such bilaterals are as important as the Summit. The bilaterals contribute to the overall process of rapprochement between Asia and Europe. Together with the Summit, they are avenues for leaders to build up personal relationships that could help future decision-making. Such high-level meetings of leaders whether in bilateral or multilateral settings provide an opportunity for leaders not only to exchange views and ideas, but could sometimes act as impetus for breaking any bureaucratic impasse or resolving difficult issues.

The Summit has other procedural advantages. In the case of ASEM, one could even argue that it is the extensive preparations leading up to the Summit that provide the focus for Asia-Europe relations. Without the Summit as the focus and catalyst for various initiatives, the number of meetings and engagements might actually fizzled out before Asia and Europe could attain a certain level of comfort and understanding when dealing with each other. It was therefore significant that Denmark has confirmed its hosting of the next Summit in 2002, and that commitment has been made by the leaders that ASEM 5 will take place in an Asian country to be decided later. The challenge for the ASEM process is therefore the ability to generate enough reasons and momentum to convince leaders of the importance to appear in Summits and show their leadership in encouraging engagements between Asia and Europe until such time when ties between the two societies are comprehensive and deep enough to be sustained without such high level impetus.

This brings us therefore to the point on the need to engage a wide spectrum of society to convince also the peoples of Asia and Europe the value of the ASEM process. This is by far

the greatest challenge. Only if initiatives such as the DUO Scholarship, combating transnational crimes, that directly benefit the peoples, are properly carried through would the impact be seen. This is still the weakest node of the ASEM process that has to be strengthened.

## **Conclusion**

If we are to be entirely objective with our assessment of ASEM 3, then we have to recognize ASEM for what it is, and not what we expect it to be. ASEM for now is a high-level multilateral diplomatic forum comparable to all other regular multilateral summits such as the G8, and the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM). One can look at the record of all annual G7/G8 and the biennial CHOGM summits and ask what have they achieved? Perhaps this would help us look at the ASEM Summit with a clearer perspective.

As a diplomatic event, ASEM 3 is successful in its participation since 22 out of 25 state leaders from 2 different continents and the President of the European Commission turned up for the meeting. In contents, issues including sensitive ones such as situation in East Timor, Burma, South China Sea, were mentioned. The process of Asia-Europe rapprochement was intensified with the numerous bilaterals that took place. The confirmation of the Finance Ministers' Meeting in Kobe in January 2001, the Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Beijing in May 2001, and the Economic Ministers' Meeting in Autumn 2001 in Hanoi; and Denmark's hosting of ASEM 4 provided the continuity of the process for another two years.

While no earth-shattering decisions were taken, the adoption of 3 key documents – the Chairman's Statement that reflected several compromises; the Seoul Declaration for Peace on the Korean Peninsula, and the Asia-Europe Cooperation Framework – is also significant in diplomatic terms.

Beyond the Summit, attention will be turned to the various initiatives that surfaced. It is in the implementation of the various initiatives and the "incoherence" of some of these initiatives themselves that gave critics the ammunition for attack. Without effective



implementation of some of the initiatives, the credibility of the ASEM process would be questioned. Hence, beyond process, there must be enough commitment to carry through some of the priorities identified. There must be better a review and stock-taking of the various initiatives so that there is certain focus, follow-through and build-up towards a certain goal or destination.

Whether ASEM would move beyond an informal multilateral forum to a more formal institution is yet to be seen. While some are content for ASEM to remain nothing more than an informal forum for dialogue, some expect ASEM to be more than a dialogue process. This stemmed from the belief that “an ASEM that made process its product would be poorer and more ignorable” (Segal, 1998). The process of transformation would hinge very much on the leaders and elites of society. If the political, business and intellectual elites of both Asia and Europe shared a common understanding of the need to move beyond rhetoric and polite engagement to more concrete and specific undertaking to achieve a common vision shared by the peoples of Asia and Europe, then it is not impossible for the transformation to take place. The reality is perhaps the Asians and Europeans are still psychologically and physically distant from each other to make that definite leap towards a binding partnership. It would take many more meetings and many more dialogue among the different sectors of society, or perhaps a significant external impetus to bring Asia and Europe closer together. The recognition of the need for intensified dialogue to enhance Asia-Europe relationship during ASEM 3 is therefore an achievement on its own. It is as Jacques Chirac put it “one step further towards making up for the weak relations between Europe and Asia”.

#### *References:*

European Commission Working Document COM 2000 (241). *Perspectives and Priorities for the ASEM Process into the New Decade*. 18 April 2000

Robert O Keohane. *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.

Gerald Segal, “Assessing ASEM” in *Bangkok Post* (21 June 1998)

\*\* I would also like to thank Dr Michael Reiterer (ASEM Counsellor) and Mr Alistair MacDonald (ASEM Coordinator) of the Directorate General for External Relations, European Commission, for their candid comments.

**Figure 1: The ASEM Structure (Source: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/dg01/euasem.htm>)**

### THE ASEM STRUCTURE

