

## EU-ASIAN Dialogue: An Italian Perspective\*

Margherita Boniver \*\*

Mr. Chairman, Your Excellency, Ambassadors, Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all I wish to thank the University of Chulalongkorn for organising and for hosting this event, and for giving me the opportunity to talk about a topic – the Asia-Europe relationship – that has turned out to be crucial in the aftermath of the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001.

The relations between Asian and European countries have evolved tremendously over the recent years, as well as the global context in which they operate. What is new about globalising is its speed and its intensity, and both these trends have been reflected in the dialogue between our two regions.

Traditionally, the dialogue between Europe and Asia has been supported by a series of Multilateral Institutions, which constitute the fora where our countries meet and discuss issues of common concern.

Indeed there are similarities between Asia and Europe as far as Multilateral Organisations are concerned: both ASEAN and the

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## វារសារយុទ្ធបេរិកសាខា

European Union, for instance, share a common history of growing up in the context of the Cold War, but, at the same time, of developing towards an economic dimension by creating big regional markets. The ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA) by aiming at the establishment of a free trade area, marks a first step towards economic regional integration pursuing, though by a different path, the same goal that characterized, with the European Common Market, the first stage of European integration.

1. It is not surprising that the most spectacular results of the Europe-Asian relations are found in the *economic field*. Trade and investments have expanded substantially. Asia accounts for more than 20% of the total of EU exports, making it the third largest regional trading partner (after the rest of Europe and North America). On the investment side, Asia is Europe's fourth-largest regional investment destination.

As far as cooperation funding is concerned, the European aid efforts account for a third of the total development aid flows to Asia.

These figures are also the results of an ever-diversifying dialogue that has been going on –and increasingly so- after the financial and economic crisis that erupted in 1997.

Moreover, the Asia-Europe Meeting, by including North East Asian countries, offers a broader framework for economic dialogue. As a matter of fact, originally ASEM responded to the need for better economic partnership that would close the ideal triangle connecting Asia, North America and Europe. The second ASEM, held in London in 1998, adopted a plan that was meant to deal with some of the consequences of the East-Asia crisis, by

creating the ASEM Trust Fund. It has been so successful that it is now being replenished in order to start a second phase of activity. In Copenhagen, during the last ASEM Summit, our Leaders decided to further strengthen our economic cooperation, especially on the financial side. Much has been said about the possible use of the Euro as a reserve currency for central banks.

2. The second pillar of the dialogue between Asia and Europe is the *political* one. The European Union has been the first regional organisation to establish relations with ASEAN, first informally, then, from 1980, as a Dialogue Partner. Meetings with the European Troika occur on an annual base at the margins of the ASEAN Ministerial and a Ministerial EU-ASEAN Summit is planned every two years. The last one, where I had the honour of representing my country, took place in Brussels last January.

Political dialogue between Asia and Europe on security issues takes place within the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). ARF also meets at the margins of the ASEAN Ministerial but encompasses many more countries – 23, including, incidentally, both North Korea and the United States – and works with a progressive approach based on confidence building measures. It also involves civil society. In less than a decade, ARF has come to play a central role in the security of the Region.

Starting in 1996, the political dialogue between Europe and Asia marked a further step forward by creating the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) to which I already referred to under the economic pillar. Let me underline that the first ASEM Summit took place right here in Bangkok, and under the Italian Presidency of the European Union.

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ASEM provides an original formula for dialogue, at different levels. From Senior officials (that meet every year) to Foreign, Economic and Finance Ministers, as already mentioned, up to Heads of Government and Heads of State, that get together on an informal basis every two years. ASEM represents not only a mere inter-governmental forum, although it offers the image of traditional summit diplomacy, it is also slowly evolving into an instrument of regional integration and co-operation.

Moreover ASEM has led to some concrete results in intra-regional cooperation. It is now usual to have Political Declarations issued at the Summits and at the Foreign Affairs Meetings. These statements touch not only “domestic” issues like the situation in the Korean Peninsula, but also problems arising outside the natural borders of ASEM, like the relations between India and Pakistan or the Middle East. Another, less spectacular but yet important, concrete outcome of the ASEM process are the ASEM initiatives. By sponsoring seminars, workshops and conferences on technical issues, ASEM guarantees a follow-up to the discussions held at political level. An example is the “home affairs” cluster, which includes topics such as migration flows and transnational crime. There is no doubt that addressing such issues contributes to the practical work aiming at reducing the root causes of instability and violent conflict, including what represents the most despicable and dangerous mode of violence: terrorism.

3. The Europe-Asia dialogue is finally at *people*. Mutual knowledge and understanding probably constitutes the most important, although less spectacular, field of inter-regional cooperation. Cultural diversity both between and within the two regions has led to different perceptions and has inspired theories centred on the existence of different, and contrasting, “values”. I

think that there are ways of addressing this issue that are misleading and counterproductive insofar as they depict an imaginary world of self-contained cultural entities which are able to interact only in a mode of suspicion and hostility. We believe, on the contrary, that the difference of cultures and traditions is not only a fact, but it is a positive contribution to a world in which diversity is a value in itself as well as the necessary source of dynamism and change. But how could one imagine that the fundamental aspirations and qualities of human beings can diverge? Dignity, devotion to family and community, compassion for the disadvantaged are traits that form an essential part of all cultures and of all ethical and religious heritages. Certainly the languages in which they are formulated are different, the institutions which are bulky to guarantee them are not the same, but if it is true – as I strongly believe – that such common human foundation is there, then our task is to seek the maximum degree of convergence through a dialogue that is conducted on the basis of mutual respect. This is even more necessary, I would say urgent, at a stage when globalisation is challenging all of us, irrespective of our differences in traditions, approaches and institutions, with the same opportunities but also the same risks. How to have rapid change without social disruption? How to open our borders while countering the menace of organised crime? How to pursue the national interest of our own country while strengthening the international system? How to have peace without condoning the activities of those who threaten it? These are the pressing questions of our time. None of us can elude them. No one can pretend they are not relevant. Dialogue and cooperation, in this situation, are not a possible option but an objective necessity. And in this dialogue and cooperation it belongs to Europe and Asia – rich both in ancient traditions and in faith in the future – to play a very significant role.

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Here again, ASEM has been chosen as the framework for dialogue between the two regions on social and cultural affairs. As a matter of fact, there has always been a social pillar, next to the economic and political ones, in the ASEM agenda. ASEM also fostered the creation of an institution, the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), working since 1997 in Singapore, that organises cultural events, conferences, and what is named “people to people exchange”. This is, in my view, a most interesting experience: ASEF targeted younger generations to build a future closer Asia-Europe relationship. ASEF organises an annual meeting aimed at young people that are leaders in their field, the Asia Europe Young Leaders Symposium. ASEF also organizes a Young Parliamentarians Meeting: last year’s edition was hosted by Italy in Venice. The younger generation may be showing us the preview of the world to come: a world of persistent national pride and cultural specificity, and yet one of cosmopolitan ease in traveling, relating, understanding, finding common ground. We have an extraordinary occasion of fostering this natural talent of young people. We should make it a priority to give them the opportunities and the channels for realising what is their natural tendency toward dynamism and their vital appreciation of difference and change.

And this finally leads me to hint to the role of Italy in the Asia-Europe dialogue.

First of all, let me state that Italy fully endorses the policy towards Asia set out by the European Union, as made public by the paper “Europe and Asia: A Strategic Framework for Enhanced Partnership”, published by the Commission in September 2001. It encompasses a new approach, in which both political and

economic issues are taken into consideration. It will guide the European policy for the next years.

This means that we should try to build on the existing dialogues that I have already mentioned. Amongst the initiatives for 2003 that will take place during our presidency, let me recall the ARF Meeting, the UE-ASEAN meeting and the ASEM Foreign Affairs Ministers' Meeting. These will be important opportunities to broaden the field of our cooperation. In this regard, let me single out an Italian initiative, the ASEM Ministerial on Environment that will be hosted in Rome in October 2003.

I would like to end by saying that, after September 11<sup>th</sup> and in the present, turbulent and dangerous stage of world affairs, we are convinced that the interrelation between our two regions has become even more crucial. Asians and Europeans have, more than ever, a common task – one that aims at satisfying common interests and is founded on common values. We have to defend our security against the threat coming from a new, vicious brand of transnational terrorism as well as that which arises from the danger of weapons of mass destruction in the hands of reckless, aggressive leaders. And, our worst nightmare, from the possibility that these two threats might combine. Without security there can be no development, no trade, no growth of creative and free societies. But the way in which we pursue our security should be one that is at the same time compatible with our values: those of an open society, a society based on the rule of law, respectful of both material and spiritual needs, capable of recognizing the rights of citizens while eliciting from them the recognition of their duties towards society as a whole. At the same time, Asians and Europeans must work together to restart a global mechanism of prosperity that lately has been less than dynamic, to give new

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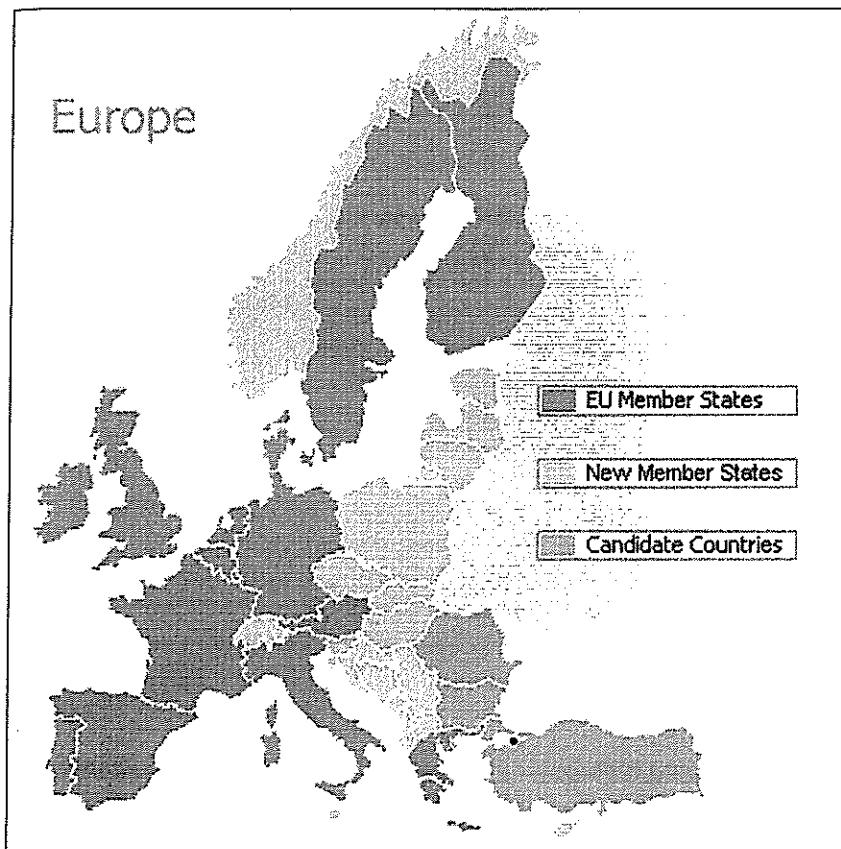
vitality to international trade and economic cooperation. We have the capacity to do it, we have a still unused potential of joint creativity and innovation that must be translated into new, daring initiatives. Pessimism on the future of the world economy is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Let us work together to prove it wrong.

Thank you.



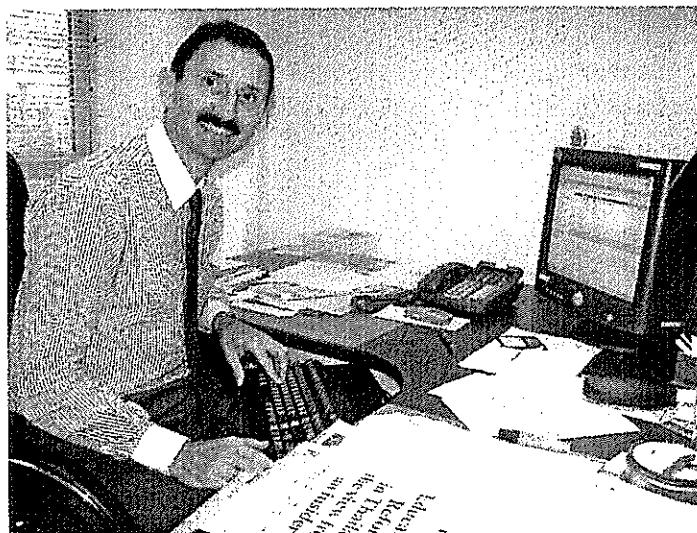
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