ASEM 4: What may be expected?

In September 2002 the heads of state of ten Asian countries, and of the fifteen member states of the European Union, along with the president of the European Commission, will gather in Copenhagen, Denmark, for the fourth Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM). As the reader may remember, the ASEM process was set into motion in March 1996 in Bangkok at the instigation of Singapore and support of France. The official raison d’être given for this series of summits between Southeast and East Asian countries and the European Union was to launch a new and comprehensive partnership between these regions to complement Europe’s strong ties with the United States and the growing web of relations between the latter and East Asia (See: ASEF: Connecting Asia and Europe 1997-2000; Singapore, 2000).

In Bangkok, the meaning of ASEM t was embodied in the meeting. In the following years ASEM developed into an interregional platform for consultation and discussion between Asia and Europe. Although the momentum was nearly lost due to the Asian economic crisis, in London (1998) it became increasingly clear that ASEM remained useful to both regions as a forum to stimulate dialogue at a range of levels. The aims of ASEM are, of course, necessarily vague and somewhat ostentatious. Moreover, there seems to be little connection between the measures taken or the instruments chosen by the heads of state to obtain these goals. Basically, the whole ASEM process is still waiting for a crucial idea or concept that will boost its development. Until now, it has lacked vision and been less than pro-active: in London it had to cope with the Asian Crisis; in Seoul (2000) it was drowned in the quagmire of North and South Korean politics; and in Copenhagen it will, of course, discuss security issues arising out of 11 September.

ASEM is said to have three pillars: the economic domain, the political domain, and ‘the rest’, in which civil society issues, culture, education, and research are heaped together. Needless to say, ASEM is first and foremost an economically driven forum. This can clearly be seen from the plethora of meetings concerning trade, investment, finance, and business, as well as from the activities developed within this first domain: the Asia–Europe Business Forum, Trade Facilties Action Plan, Investment Experts Group Meetings, Investment Promotion Active Plan, the ASEM trust fund, and the European Financial Partnership Network to mention a few. In the political domain the situation is less concrete: the Asian partners appear to be apprehensive whenever such topics as human rights and good governance are suggested for the agenda. At the third summit in Seoul, however, commitments were made to strengthen the political dialogue, giving special attention to human rights issues, and to address the global implications of such problems as the illegal trades in weapons, drugs, and workers and of regional and interregional migration.

It is difficult to perceive what has actually been done about these issues in the ASEM framework, in the ASEAN +3, in the EU or in the individual ASEM member countries. No report linking the Seoul statements and intentions with what actually has been accomplished, two years later, is likely to be forthcoming. In the third domain, a lot of fine work is being done by the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) in Singapore. Its mission and financial means, however, are limited. Indeed, ASEM cannot possibly handle all the activities which have sprung from the ASEM initiative. Starting as a dialogue between heads of state, it triggered actions and reactions from various groups within various civil societies in Asia and Europe (NGOs, unions, academics, parliamentarians, artists, etc.). Pointing to the free exchange of views between European and Asian heads of government, the EC is quick to proclaim the ASEM process a success. Still, sceptics might point out that economic relations between Asia and Europe would have prospered without the ASEM. In the second domain, less progress can be demonstrated. In the third domain - the most important dimension of my mind - many opportunities have neither been seen nor seized.

I believe in fact, that ASEM should concentrate on the third pillar. Indeed, there is a tremendous disparity of emphasis between the first and the third pillars in terms of activity. ASEM is in want of a common concrete goal: this goal can be found in the third domain. It is from this very diverse and varied storehouse that new joint activities are to be expected. Right now, the existence of ASEM is barely noticed by the people of ASEM member states. If we would like to improve this situation and make our ‘ASEM situation’ more aware of each other and of ASEM, we should not concentrate solely on...