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: ASEM: Connecting Asia and Europe 1997-2000; Singapore, 2000).

In Bangkok, the meaning of ASEM 1 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 uten- tious. Moreover, there seems to be lit- tle 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, dis- cuss 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 devel- oped within this first domain: the Asia–Europe Business Forum, Trade Facilities Action Plan, Investment Experts Group Meetings, Investment Promotion Active Plan, the ASEM trust funds, and the European Financial Partnership Network, to mention a few. In the political domain the situation is less concrete: the concrete partners appear to be apprehensive whenever such topics as human rights and good governance are suggested for the agen- da. At the third summit in Seoul, how- ever, commitments were made to strengthen the political dialogue, giv- ing special attention to human rights issues, and to address the global impli- cations of such problems as the illegal trades in weapons, drugs, and workers and of regional and international 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 state- ments and intentions with what actu- ally 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 Founda- tion (ASEF) in Singapore. Its mission and financial means, however, are lim- ited. Indeed, ASEM cannot possibly handle all the activities which have sprung from the ASEM initiative. Start- ing 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 suc- cess. Still, sceptics might point out that economic relations between Asia and Europe would have prospered without ASEM. In the second domain, less progress can be demonstrated. In the third domain - the most important dimension to my mind - many oppor- tunities 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 activi- ties 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

Director’s note

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business and state; in addition, we should first develop mechanisms for interregional communications between all kinds of groups of civil society and next, introduce several consultative forums for ASEM: a workers platform, a NGO platform, an ASEM research platform, and so forth. It is in these forums that decisions should be shaped. Through these platforms, ASEM member states will be informed in a more relevant and nuanced way, and will be able to make wiser decisions on a regional, national, and global scale.

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Question: Why do you write that USD 50 million will be a disaster in terms of economic recovery? How is the economic recovery going in Afghanistan?
Rais: We have been doing our best to have an economic recovery. But so far, so bad. We called the gentlemen from the IMF to bail us out of the IMF debt but at the same time we do not want to be dictated directly by the IMF. We cannot get rid of the IMF, so we have to be a good boy. If we do not balance up on the IMF, then we have to sue our way for mula to get rid of the economic and financial crisis.
And then last, but not least, I am very deeply concerned that my government has very tight hands to sell all the healthy government enterprises to foreign companies. Such as car, and Hatta, rising up from their graves, will be very angry seeing the Indonesian people now, who inherited a beautiful country and very rich natural resources and who are behaving stu-pidly. They do not understand and are even selling out the beautiful country. For example: big cement factories. Even some Pertamina (the state oil company) officials were talk- ing to me: ‘Pak Amien, probably in 2006 Pertamina will also be sold out to foreign hands.'

Before I leave this podium I want to say something that is more optimistic than pessimistic. I believe that Indonesia will not only survive, but will be much more successful in the future. Let’s stay at modern history. We proclaimed our independence in August 1945 and then in 1947 the Dutch forces came back to invade us. And then in 1948, when we were crawling to stand up again, there was a very bloody com-munist coup d’etat in Moscow. One year later, in 1949, again, the Dutch forces came back to Surabaya, to Yogyakarta, to other places to recolonize us. Then in 1956 and 1957 there were many rebellious movements in both Java and the Outer Islands. And in 1965, there was an abortive coup d’etat committed by the communist party. But our country, praise be to Allah, survived again and again, up to now. So, if we are facing now multi-dimensional problems of an economic, political, and social nature, again with the creativity of our leaders and the togetherness of our people we will survive again.

‘Round-table’
Following the à l’improviste presentation above, six select- ed scholars were given the opportunity to ask questions. The term ‘round-table’ used in the announcement was somewhat misleading, because Amien Rais stood on a nostrum and the six scholars - Martin van Brunssenn, Nasser Abu Zaid, Freek Colomijn, Thomas Lindblad, Fridus Steijlen, and Kees van Dijk - were seated on the left and the right. Despite the encouragement by one of the six speakers to question the forum as a detached academic, Rais continued to give answers like a politician. He scored his political points with unequivocal standpoints and skillfully escaped the unwelcome questions in the posed questions. Since there was no time for follow- up questions, Rais could get away with it. Although some people in the audience might be disappointed by the lack of debate, one could admire his mastery of the situation.

Question: Do you think that the attack on Afghanistan, starting on 7 October, has a negative effect on pluralism in Indonesia?
Rais: Here and now, and then, there are some offen- sive, xenophobic statements made by Muslim teachers in the mosque. But, I can assure you that they are only very small, insignificant pockets. When the Taliban regime collapsed after the American attack, I think all people in my country were happy and excited. Why? Because to us, Taliban is a very bad advertisement for Islam. It is anti-Islamic. Islam does not promote violence, nor does it promote war. It is peace-loving. But, I can assure you that they are only very small, insignificant pockets. When the Taliban regime collapsed after the American attack, I think all people in my country were happy and excited. Why? Because to us, Taliban is a very bad advertisement for Islam. It is anti-Islamic. Islam does not promote violence, nor does it promote war. It is peace-loving.

The Question: In your columns in the weekly DeTik you write that the present government does not care about the ordinary peo- ple, but only nurses corporate and foreign interests. Will such words not stir up a lot of emotions, which make the country ungovernable?
Rais: We cannot afford to have a change in presidency. The world sees us as a stub-in nation. In five years, we have had four presidents. I think this is absurd. This is ridiculous. That is why there is an unwritten consensus among the politicians in Jakarta, that we have to guarantee that the present Megawati government must survive until the year 2004. But at the same time, of course, we still have to make criticism to Megawati. Because if we just stay idle, it is not right at all. Indonesia needs a change, but when the change is too abrupt, we will not be able to manage as a country.

Notes
1 In the terminology of ASEM, East Asia comprises Southeast Asia as well as Korea, Japan, China, Taiwan.
2 Recently renewed in Seoul- so much more for ‘equal partnership, setting aside any donor - recipient relationship’.

General news

Amin Rais and the audience during the discussion, 2001

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Nasser Abu Zaid during the discussion