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Asia, what Asia?

Director's note

While few previously appreciated the extent of the interconnections between Europe and Asia, this all changed within hours on 26 December 2004 when a tsunami hit the shores of South and Southeast Asia, causing terrible suffering and enormous devastation. The amateur video images of the tsunami and its victims, Asians and Europeans alike, imprinted on everyone's memory the human ties binding the continents. Although the tsunami generated a worldwide charitable reflex of unprecedented proportions, the lack of effective political structures to direct relief operations reinforced negative images of Asia where 'Asian' is a pejorative label - as in 'Asian crisis', 'Asian values' or 'Asian flu'.

Be this as it may, there is also a growing tendency to view Asia in a more positive light, due in large part to impressive economic growth in China and India, and new impulses in scientific cooperation. In my previous director's note I reflected on how to establish Asia-Europe collaboration in research and education, and how European countries - instead of trumpeting unrealistic statements about Europe's future as the world's foremost knowledge-economy by 2010 - need to begin organizing a pan-European structure for scientific education and research, and to channel significant resources to secondary and tertiary education.

I do not have the illusion that my director's note is avidly read in Brussels. Nonetheless, the Secretary General of the Council of the European Union, J. Solana, admitted in January 2005 that statements about Europe being the foremost knowledge-economy by 2010 were rhetorical and unrealistic. Instead, the EU should take on the role of catalyst. According to Solana, the EU should fuel and stimulate promising new initiatives in all realms of society, including research and education.

I sincerely hope this line of thinking on the EU's role will blossom, as only then can bottom-up initiatives develop. This will take time, as it will involve a change in mentality among European civil servants, who have been trained to implement and execute (research) programmes adhering to narrow criteria. These programmes are the result of extensive lobbying in the corridors of power: the outcome, for example, of the *Sixth Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development 2002-2006*, in its almost exclusive fixation on the hard sciences and information technology, mirrors the interests of the 'powers' which have the upper hand in Brussels. The meagre amount of money ear-marked for the 'soft' sciences is spent on politically correct research following the latest trends, which are, in nature, short-term in outlook.

The voice of the human and social sciences needs to be heard. Before this can happen, we need a Euro-Asian proto-structure of education and research that can make a strong case for cooperation between Asia and Europe. This will be no easy task, though the rapidly growing research and development capacities of Asian countries make the creation of such a platform realistic. A promising initiative in this direction is the one by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences for an Asian alliance of research institutes, which in combination with the European Alliance for Asian Studies could become the first step in the formation of such a proto-structure.

It is important to reinforce these initiatives but we need to, at the same time, keep on creating more favourable conditions for Asia-Europe cooperation to flourish. European secondary schools should be offering courses in Asian cultures and languages, thus acquainting pupils with Asia in their formative years. When they leave school in 2010, European universities should be offering an array of courses on Asia combined with disciplinary specializations. To attain the critical mass to achieve this objective, education and research on Asia should be co-ordinated at the pan-European level. But before we can start thinking about this, we need to take stock of existing Asian Studies in Europe, so that in the future we will not be tongue-tied when asked: 'Asia, what Asia?' <

Wim Stokhof
Director, IIAS

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