



CIARI – Centro de Investigação e Análise em Relações Internacionais

www.ciari.org

The Fifth ASEM Summit – a critical assessment *

By Rui Pereira

This year has been a particularly difficult one for ASEM. Adding to the perception of a progressive lack of interest by some partners and the subsequent need for engagement at the highest level to revitalise this informal dialogue process, the division on Burma/Myanmar's admission to ASEM has severely conditioned activities and events in 2004. This was clearly demonstrated by the EU decision not to participate in the Finance and Economic Ministers Meetings, scheduled for July and September respectively.¹

To be sure, the divergence on Burma/Myanmar was not surprising, for a number of reasons. To begin with, the more interventionist European approach on issues related to the protection of democratic values, human rights and rule of law, is hardly compatible with the ASEAN diplomatic principles, which determine that ASEAN member states should not interfere in each others' internal affairs. The so-called "principle of non-interference" is formulated in the ASEAN-Charter. Such differences had already become clear in other *fora*, such as the EU/ASEAN Ministerial Meetings and the Bangkok Forum.²

Thus, while the European partners pushed for the establishment of 'political criteria' on Burma/Myanmar's admission, given the EU sanctions in force against the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the Asian side had fewer reservations. They considered that as a full member of ASEAN, Burma/ Myanmar should be eligible to join ASEM without any pre-conditions.

The different views on this issue were quite clear during previous ASEM Foreign Ministers' Meetings.³ There were some bitter divisions among the European partners themselves, with

¹ General Affairs and External Relations Council Conclusions of 14 June 2004.

² Further to a proposal by Thailand, in August 2003 the newly appointed Prime Minister General Khin Nyunt announced a seven-step Road Map for Democratic Transition in Burma/Myanmar. In December 2003, Thailand hosted a meeting (known as the Bangkok Forum), which gathered 12 countries including some EU member states (Austria, Germany, France, Italy). Contrary to expectations, the Bangkok Process didn't have any subsequent meetings, due to the radicalisation of SPDC position as regards the participation of Aung San Suu Kyi and her party in the National Convention, held 17 May last.

³ 5th Meeting held in Indonesia, July 2003, and 6th Meeting held in Ireland, April 2004.

the United Kingdom and the Netherlands pushing for a harder stance while countries such as France advocated a softer line.⁴

The European partners agreed to accept Burma/Myanmar's accession to ASEM only a month before the Summit under the condition that it would be represented at the Hanoi Summit at a lower level than that of the Heads of State and Government.⁵ This condition was not well received by some ASEAN members, particularly Indonesia, which in its current position as ASEAN Chair, stated that the selection of a representative to the Summit was up to Burma/Myanmar itself.⁶

Hence, the fifth ASEM Summit held in Hanoi, Vietnam, last 7-9 October, was inevitably marked by the Burma/Myanmar issue. Notwithstanding the strong EU resolve to use the Summit as an opportunity to express its serious concern over the situation in Burma/Myanmar, such determination has apparently not been fully reflected, either in discussions or in the final leaders' statement.

However, in a subsequent EU Foreign Ministers' Meeting on 11 October, the EU confirmed the tightening of existing sanctions against Burma/Myanmar, following the non-fulfilment of conditions set at the Tullamore Gymnich Meeting⁷ by the 8 October deadline. The new measures include: (i) an expansion of the visa ban; (ii) prohibition of EU companies financing state-owned Burma/Myanmar enterprises; (iii) extension of loans by international organisations to Burma/Myanmar (vote by EU Member States).

To be sure, 'the Burma/Myanmar issue has come to disproportionately preoccupy Asia-Europe political exchanges and has become an obstacle to seeking common ground on other strategic issues.'⁸ In fact, 'while Asian partners regard dialogue in itself as an achievement and prefer to talk about non-contentious issues, Europeans tend to press for tangible results and are interested in taking up contentious issues in order to arrive at conclusions. This cultural gap still exists, sometimes leading to misunderstandings.'⁹

It is indeed problematic that the Asia-Europe partnership as a whole has been held hostage by the Burma/Myanmar issue this year. Nevertheless, I would argue that, despite the well-known differences with regard to principles, perspectives and priorities, both Asia and Europe still stand to gain from furthering their inter-regional linkages at all levels, especially in a post-9/11 world.

As adequately noted by Yeo Lay Hwee, 'the key challenges that both Asia and Europe face – international terrorism, transnational crimes, lopsided development – are not that different.

⁴ For further information, see Erik Friberg, "ASEM 5 and Burma/Myanmar: Bridging the Asia-Europe Divide", available at: <http://www.asiaeuropevoices.com/upload/files/issue/ASEMBurmaMyanmarFriberg.pdf>

⁵ Informal Foreign Ministers Meeting, held in The Hague, Holland, last 3 September, confirmed by the General Affairs and External Relations Council Conclusions of 13 September 2004.

⁶ See Bantarto Bandoro, "ASEM Moves at a Snail's Piece to Achieve Concrete Progress," *Jakarta Post*, 17 September 2004.

⁷ Held last April 2004.

⁸ Excerpt of a speech delivered by Goh Chok Tong, former Prime Minister of Singapore, at the European Chamber of Commerce gala dinner, reported in *The Straits Times*, 17 May 2004.

⁹ Michael Reiterer, "Asia-Europe: Do They Meet?," Asia-Europe Foundation, Singapore, 2002, p. 52.

And all these challenges can only be effectively met by regional, transregional and international cooperation.¹⁰

To this end, the venue chosen for the fifth ASEM Summit was extremely important. It should be viewed not so much in the light of results obtained but as a political sign that both regions remain fully committed to working together in order to face key common international challenges and to take advantage of inter-regional opportunities.

Although this can be considered a 'transition summit,' it is worth mentioning a number of important aspects. First of all, it served to formalise the first ASEM enlargement since its creation in 1996. Following the accession of the ten new EU Member States, Burma/Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia, ASEM now comprises 38 members plus the European Commission.

Apart from the final leaders' statement and the approval of a number of ASEM initiatives, two important Declarations were issued: one concerning a closer ASEM economic partnership and the other regarding the dialogue among cultures and civilisations. Although these involve no concrete action they are nonetheless key to the desired revitalisation of the ASEM process.¹¹

The members of the Task Force for an Asia-Europe Closer Economic Partnership established two years ago (following instructions by leaders at the fourth ASEM Summit), presented their final report in Hanoi. Its recommendations will be analysed by Economic and Financial Ministers and their Senior Officials within the next few months, in order to decide what recommendations are the most feasible to implementation in the near future. The 9th AEBF¹² recommendations, also presented during the Summit, will undergo a similar process.

Considering the ASEM expansion to 39 members, one of the most pressing issues for the short term is undoubtedly the decision to eventually create an ASEM Permanent Secretariat, as ASEM-39 will pose serious challenges of monitoring and coordination of activities.

During the Summit, the Philippines offered to serve as the site for the ASEM Secretariat. The creation of the secretariat seems to be a more pressing need for Asian partners than for Europeans. The issue will be discussed over the next few months.

As for deepening or widening, which is linked to the definition of ASEM strategic purposes, some important options will also have to be raised. On the one hand, it would be appropriate to define a common strategy for future ASEM enlargements, thereby responding to other countries' declared interest to join, namely Russia, India, Pakistan, Australia and New Zealand. Such a strategy must consider the impact and feasibility of an enlarged ASEM of 50 members or more. On the other hand, a clear decision on the eventual new role of ASEM is also pressing. This entails a clear choice between dialogue, cooperation and policy coordination. An adequate mix of these three components would seem to be the best option.

¹⁰ Yeo Lay Hwee, "The ASEM Story So Far," *ASEM News*, ASEM Research Platform Newsbrief, 2004, p. 2.

¹¹ The documents approved in the Hanoi Summit are available at the European Commission RELEX website: http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/asem/asem_summits/asem5/index_sum_concl.htm

¹² Asia-Europe Business Meeting, which took place back-to-back with the Summit.

Undoubtedly, Burma/Myanmar's chairmanship of ASEAN in 2006 is likely to cause some tensions in bilateral relations between the EU and ASEAN partners. There is, however, potential for a diplomatic solution: ASEAN could opt to pass the chairmanship to another country in 2006. Whether this is a feasible proposal for those ASEAN countries holding out for Burma/Myanmar against European and US criticism will have to be seen in the coming year and a half.

In short, I would argue that ASEM, despite its shortcomings, continues to make a lot of sense. There is still much room for improvement, and consequently Asia and Europe can only gain by continuing to reinforce their links in the post-9/11 world, not least to avoid being perceived as the 'weakest link' in the so-called triad (North America-Europe-East Asia).

**European Policy Centre – EU/Asia Work Programme
17 November 2004**

Rui Pereira is Asia Desk Officer at the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Labour – Portugal. This article reflects the personal views of the author.

*

Artigo de opinião publicado no website do European Policy Centre (Bruxelas, 17 Novembro 2004), acessível pelo seguinte link:

<http://www.theepc.net/en/default.asp?TYP=TEWN&LV=187&see=y&t=&PG=TEWN/EN/detail&l=4&AI=440>, e aqui reproduzido com consentimento do autor.