

Asia-Europe officials kick start new season of political and economic talks

By Shada Islam

Senior Asian and European policymakers meet in Delhi on September 4-5 for a review of the two regions' expanding political, security and economic ties.

The discussions in the Indian capital kick start a new season of formal and informal contacts within the framework of the Asia-Europe Meetings (ASEM) launched in Bangkok in March 1996 to build stronger region-to-region ties between Asia and Europe.

India, which joined ASEM in 2008, will host the meeting of senior officials and – later this year – also welcome ASEM foreign ministers in Delhi on November 11-12.

The 51 ASEM partners are set to meet for summit talks in October 2014 in Europe.

ASEM senior officials are seeking to inject fresh dynamism into a unique region-to-region partnership which covers issues as diverse as economic cooperation, green growth, global peace, security and prosperity, human rights, education and urbanisation.

The talks in Delhi, following up on an informal brainstorming on ASEM organised in Yangzhou, China, in April are expected to underline the strategic significance of Asia-Europe relations in the 21st Century.

The challenge is to maintain ASEM's unique informality, networking and flexibility but also make it more pragmatic, effective and result-oriented – and more relevant to partners' economic and social priorities.

As highlighted at the meeting in Yangzhou, ASEM meetings over the years have become more formal and ritualistic, with ministers and leaders reading out well-prepared statements instead of engaging in direct dialogue.

Meetings of ASEM senior officials have also become long and drawn-out as participants talk more about procedures and dates than substantial questions.

ASEM senior officials in Delhi will seek to change past practice by agreeing on working methods to streamline ASEM deliberations in order to make them more effective. This will allow ASEM foreign ministers and leaders to engage in a real, in-depth and focused conversation on key concerns.

When they meet in Delhi in November, in addition to attending official plenary sessions, ASEM foreign ministers should also engage in a "retreat" to ensure more intensive and interactive dialogue, a format well-known in Brussels as in Asia.

There are also efforts to ensure that chair's statements and other documents issued at the end of ASEM meetings are short, readable and to-the-point rather than long and procedural.

Following the recent membership of Norway, Switzerland and Bangladesh, ASEM expansion is expected to continue as Croatia, which became the 28th member state of the EU on July 1 2013, formally joins ASEM next year.

Turkey has also voiced interest in joining ASEM showing the continuing attractiveness of ASEM.

ASEM partners are also anxious to ensure stronger public understanding, awareness and support for the Asia-Europe partnership in the run up to the ASEM summit in 2014.

As such, senior officials in Delhi will discuss ways of enhancing ASEM visibility, especially ahead of ASEM's 20th anniversary celebrations in 2016.

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