

Asia-Europe relations in a changing world

By Shada Islam

Asia-Europe relations will remain high on both regions' agenda in 2013, with the focus on trade, business and investments expected to widen to include a stronger dialogue on security as well as joint action to tackle 21st century challenges.

It will be a busy year. Plans are underway for bilateral European Union summits with the leaders of India, Japan and China and high-level discussions with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Negotiations on free trade or framework agreements are continuing with India and Japan and several ASEAN members.

Significantly, 51 European and Asian foreign ministers or their representatives will gather in New Delhi on November 14-15 for an Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) aimed at deepening and expanding ties between the two regions – and preparing for a summit meeting of ASEM leaders in Brussels in autumn 2014.

Over the coming months, European and Asian policymakers, meeting within the ASEM framework, will discuss issues as diverse as green growth, enhancing peace and prosperity, human rights, education and urbanisation.

All this comes in the wake of intensive contacts in 2012, including a meeting of EU-ASEAN foreign ministers in Brunei, EU High Representative Catherine Ashton's participation at the 19th ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Cambodia and the 9th ASEM summit in Laos in November with high level participation from both regions, including the President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, and President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, which confirmed the relevance of a Europe-Asia dialogue in today's globalized world.

Working in tandem, Asia and Europe have enhanced clout. Taken together, Asia and Europe represent almost 60 per cent of the world population, 52 per cent of global GDP and 68 per cent of world trade.

Increased Asia-Europe engagement - within ASEM and outside it - is no surprise. For one, economic interdependence between the two regions is growing. There is no doubt that Europeans need Asia's still-growing markets to boost flagging growth while Asians recognise their vulnerability to Eurozone woes and the impact of falling European demand on their exports.

As Asia's share of the global economy increases, Europe has naturally emerged as a leading economic partner. EU trade with ASEM partners has increased by 50% in the last 6 years. The EU is also the biggest source of foreign direct investment in the region while EU development cooperation with Asia's poorer nations is helping to lift people out of poverty.

As highlighted at the recent 9th ASEM summit, Asia and Europe are bound by their search for strong, job-generating, sustainable and inclusive growth. As such, both sides need to ensure continuing trade liberalisation by fostering domestic demand and avoiding protectionism.

Asia and Europe also have a joint commitment to ensuring global stability and security by working to prevent conflict and tackling non-traditional security threats effectively at regional and global level.

A recent surge in tensions in the East China and South China Seas as well as the nuclear tests by North Korea have once again convinced European governments that they cannot remain on the sidelines of security developments in Asia.

Europe can offer the region its expertise in regional integration, but also crisis management, conflict resolution and preventive diplomacy. In fact, the EU is developing broad security dialogues with many Asian countries focusing on issues like combating piracy, terrorism and cybercrime.

The EU has also helped consolidate democracy in the region by working with ASEAN to secure peace in Aceh and substantially contributing to the peace process in Mindanao in the Philippines.

These and other issues are discussed in the EU's bilateral discussions with individual Asian countries. They are also high on the agenda of ASEM.

Set up in 1996 to encourage regular dialogue and exchanges between Asian and European leaders, ministers and senior officials, ASEM remains a vital channel of communication and contact between Asia and Europe.

Despite critics who say ASEM lives in the shadow of other platforms such as the G20 which also brings together industrialised and emerging nations, ASEM has weathered the passage of time relatively well, keeping pace with much that has changed in the last 17 years and offering a natural link to the missing triangle of Europe-Asia-America.

The agenda has become more comprehensive, participation by leaders and ministers at meetings has increased, and ASEM has retained its key asset of informal but comprehensive and regular exchanges between Europe and Asia.

While the public and media focus is unsurprisingly on ASEM summits, momentum is maintained between the two-yearly top-level meetings through regular political and diplomatic dialogues between foreign ministers, senior officials and a great number of sectorial experts.

ASEM membership is expanding, reflecting a rapidly changing global environment where countries with different political, economic and social structures – as well as different priorities and values – feel the need to work together. Russia, Australia and New Zealand were welcomed as new partners in 2010 and Bangladesh, Norway and Switzerland took their seat at the table in Vientiane demonstrating attractiveness and relevance of the ASEM process.

Certainly, the increased membership and diversity of ASEM pose a challenge but often behind the scenes, ASEM also works as an invaluable incubator of new ideas, allowing the creation of “mini alliances” of like-minded nations and encouraging participants to pursue common interests together, even in other fora.

As policymakers on both sides begin preparations for the 10th ASEM summit in Brussels next year, European and Asian governments know the focus must be on rebooting the world economy and the challenge of ensuring sustained global growth. The spotlight is also on dealing with climate change, pandemics, humanitarian disasters and poverty and preventing tensions and conflicts which endanger global peace and security.

Over the next two years, policymakers in Asia and Europe will be seeking to craft a forward-looking strategy for the future development of ASEM. Efforts to make ASEM more transparent and open and reflection on how to improve Asia-Europe Meetings are underway. Discussions also focus on improving ASEM working methods and resources.

ASEM was set up and is still a forum for dialogue among partners without virtually any institutional support. Since it is not an international organisation, it cannot be judged on so-called “deliverables” and concrete output. The real value lies in its ability to bring together European and Asian representatives to brainstorm on key challenges of the day.

Discussions are on-going to ensure even more involvement of the public, civil society and academia - possibly via the media and the internet - to enhance ASEM’s credibility, legitimacy and sustainability.

Just as at the last ASEM summit in Laos, the meeting in Brussels next year will help design new Asia-Europe connections and strengthen old ones. Leaders will talk, consult and brainstorm, rather than take quick decisions. There will also be many bilateral meetings between presidents and prime ministers.

As the international environment becomes more complex, the challenges facing Asia and Europe also look set to increase, making ASEM even more relevant and important.

In the end, it’s very simple: In an inter-dependent, globalised world where no one nation, bloc or region can claim to lead the rest, where security is about more than military spending and where nations are connected to each other by a dense web of trade and investments, Europe-Asia cooperation is a compelling necessity.

March 2013