

## **“Dynamic ASEM” and the challenge of peace and prosperity**

By Shada Islam

At their summit talks in Laos last November, Asian and European leaders pledged joint efforts to boost growth and ease global tensions. In China later this month, the two regions' officials, scholars and experts will explore fresh ways to translate those words into action.

“We are looking forward to an open and flexible brainstorming on Asia-Europe relations,” says Ambassador Zhang Xiaokang, China's top official in charge of ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting). “The meeting will be about exchanging views on ASEM: what should we do next, where are we heading?”

With the next Asia-Europe summit set to be held in Brussels in autumn 2014, the meeting in Yangzhou on April 25-26 is likely to kick-start a review of ASEM which many argue is necessary to give fresh impetus to the process. There is no shortage of ideas on increasing ASEM's relevance in a rapidly-changing world. The meeting in Yangzhou looks set to come with still more.

Co-sponsored by China, Laos, India, Poland and the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), the Yangzhou brain-storming will look at the role of a “dynamic ASEM” in ensuring Asia-Europe peace and security. “ASEM is of great strategic importance for peace and development of the two regions,” underlines Ambassador Zhang who will host the seminar.

Zhang believes that seventeen years after its launch, ASEM still plays an important role in enhancing Asian-European understanding. “ASEM's usefulness can be found in its role as a forum for communication and dialogue.”

“Asia needs European experience and technology. Europe needs Asia's growth and wisdom,” Zhang quotes a European leader as saying at an ASEM Summit. She adds: “This great complementarity between Asia and Europe needs to be fully tapped. Only a dynamic ASEM can translate it into practical results.”

The Yangzhou meeting will look at the past achievements and weaknesses of ASEM and the partnership's future development and direction. Best practice and experience will be shared with other key regional and multilateral organisations, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC) and the China-Japan-South Korea trilateral cooperation initiative. “The key question we will be asking is this: how do we proceed in the years to come?” says Zhang.

Recommendations from the symposium will be sent to ASEM senior officials in the summer and then communicated to foreign ministers when they meet in Delhi in November this year.

ASEM has certainly increased Asia-Europe contacts in an array of sectors. There is increased understanding that tackling 21<sup>st</sup> Century non-traditional security challenges like climate change, cyber security and terrorism require closer Asia-Europe relations. Ensuring a robust global economic recovery is also conditional on stronger Asia-Europe cooperation.

Still, ASEM could do better. Zhang says that to achieve the “grand goal” of Asia-Europe cooperation, ASEM must deal with several key challenges. “Asians want practical deliverables which are relevant to their social and economic concerns,” she says. “Asians want this cooperation to produce tangible results.” Europeans are also looking for similar outcomes.

In order to boost their trade and investment ties with Europe, for instance, Asian countries need more detailed information on access to European markets. “Many people still find it difficult to understand and abide by complex EU procedures.” Such exchanges would be more useful than “dialogue for the sake of dialogue.”

European businesses exporting to Asia also need similar market information to overcome obstacles they face in penetrating major Asian markets such as China.

Economic discussions within ASEM must be developed further and business leaders from both sides should meet more often, Zhang underlines, adding that former Chinese premier Wen Jiabao encouraged enterprises to establish joint R&D centres, technology transfer centres, joint incubators and other platforms for long-term and stable cooperation at the ASEM summit in Laos last year.

Participants at the Yangzhou meeting will also be encouraged to reflect on questions like a possible ASEM free trade agreement. Also on the agenda: ways of improving ASEM consensus-building on political issues and enhancing public knowledge and awareness of Asia-Europe relations through stronger ASEM visibility programmes and more intensive “people-to-people” links.

ASEM countries have long discussed the pros and cons of setting up a secretariat to allow more effective follow-up of decisions. Many argue that since ASEM 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 without undermining the need to prioritise.

While the informality and flexibility of ASEM is important, Zhang said she is convinced there must also be an “effective supporting mechanism to ensure systematic cooperation” among all participants. “It does not have to be a secretariat. But for the moment, we have too many subjects with little practical follow-up action. When there are initiatives, we need substantive support.” The strategic coordination role of ASEM senior officials could also be enhanced to provide such support.

After the Yangzhou meeting, European and Asian policymakers will continue to meet within the ASEM framework to discuss issues as diverse as green growth, human rights, education and urbanisation. Efforts to craft a forward-looking strategy for the future development of ASEM will also gather pace.

“I would like to define ASEM as a platform where Asia and Europe work together for peace and development,” says Zhang. “We need cooperation with vision.”

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