

The role of education and culture in contemporary international relations. A challenge for the Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM)¹

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When the Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) was launched at the Bangkok Summit in March 1996, Heads of State or Government agreed that cultural, intellectual and people-to-people exchanges between Asia and Europe should be at the core of the future bi-regional relationship. “[B]uilding greater understanding between the peoples of both Asia and Europe” was defined as a shared responsibility². Unlike other processes, such as APEC, the ASEM process has been designed from the outset as a comprehensive relationship taking into account all aspects of life and granting importance to the cultural dimension as the one which influences strongly the other two pillars of ASEM, politics and economic. Thereby Leaders seem to have taken into consideration the late *Susan Strange’s* warning that “The power derived from the knowledge structure is the one that has been most overlooked and underrated”³.

The informal rule book of ASEM, the Asia Europe Cooperation Framework 2000, lists “education” as one of the key priorities of ASEM. Leaders recognised the crucial importance of education and agreed that a key priority should be to enhance the contacts and exchanges in this field, including student and academic exchanges, inter-university co-operation and the facilitation of electronic networking between schools in the two regions. In this regard, they undertook to explore the possibility of mutual recognition of degrees, licences, etc., between educational institutions of the two regions. They also recognised the potential for the ASEM Education Hubs (AEH) and the Asia-Europe University (AEU) and other related activities in expanding educational co-operation, promoting greater cross-cultural contacts and fostering mutual understanding between Asia and Europe.⁴

¹ This article is an updated version of the keynote address given at the ASEM Symposium on Educational Exchange (Tsukuba/Japan; November 2003) and draws partly on Michael Reiterer. *Asia-Europe: Do They Meet? Reflections on the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM)*. Singapore, 2002: World Scientific/ASEF; especially pp.231–251. The author expresses his own views which should not be attributed to the European Commission

² ASEM 1 Chair’s Statement, paragraph 4. http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/asem/asem_summits/asem1.htm

³ Susan Strange. *States and Markets*. Pinter, London, 1994: p. 117

Politics and business influence each other. *Nicholas O'Brien* in tracing the process of perceiving the lack of understanding between the two regions, points out that “[c]ultural differences began to cause difficulties in trade negotiations and business partnerships...It also became evident, particularly for Europeans seeking to do business in Asia, that it is essential to build up personal ties and networks which would provide a basis of trust”.⁵

Susan Strange argues that while production and financial structures are important, the “knowledge structure determines what knowledge is discovered, how it is stored, and who communicates it by what means to whom and on what terms... so power and authority are conferred on those occupying key decision-making positions in the knowledge structure”.⁶ The rapid development and distribution of knowledge and globalisation more generally, enhanced by the progress of technology influences the security structure. “Knowledge has become more important in the competition between states than their crude manpower or crude gun power”.⁷ Therefore, states compete for leadership through competition for the “place at the leading edge of advanced technology”.⁸ Education and knowledge are highly political issues, having a strong impact on the actors in the international system.

Culture

Linked to education and knowledge is culture which could play a particularly important role in the ASEM process as ASEM is an attempt to establish and facilitate cooperation among culturally very diverse partners. This can only be done successfully if cultural pluralism is accepted, “drawing strength from diversity” as AECF 2000⁹ puts it. *Bhikhu Parekh* offers a good analysis for the need for dialogue: “Different cultures represent different systems of meaning and visions of the good life. Since each realizes a limited range of human capacities and emotions and only grasps a part of the totality of human existence, it needs others to understand itself better, expand its intellectual and moral horizon, stretch its imagination and guard against the obvious temptation to absolutize itself... Since each culture is inherently limited, a dialogue between them is mutually beneficial. It both alerts them to their biases, a gain in itself, and enables them to reduce them and to expand their horizon of thought”.¹⁰

This need for dialogue is not only between Asia and Europe, but also among Asian ASEM partners which perceive themselves as being more diverse than European countries. ASEM partners include the largest Muslim country of the world, Indonesia, while Buddhism and local religions such as

⁵ Nicholas O'Brien. *ASEM: Moving from an economic to a political dialogue?*. European Institute for Asian Studies, Briefing Papers, September 2001; pp.23–24

⁶ Strange, op.cit., p. 121

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 134

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Art. 12 AECF 2000

¹⁰ *Bhikhu Parekh, Rethinking Multiculturalism – Cultural Diversity and Political Theory.*

Shintoism are important in Japan, Korea and Indonesia; the Philippines is the only country in the region where Catholicism is a strong societal and even political force.

In cultivating such a dialogue ASEM could contribute to highlighting the importance of cultural diplomacy.¹¹ This aspect of public diplomacy should be recognised as an integral and important part of diplomacy not least because of its important strategic implications.¹² This relationship is based on the hypothesis that

“...the politics of culture is integrally tied up with the politics of power because culture is itself institutionalized power and deeply implicated with other systems of power”.¹³

In the ASEM context this could take the form of a dialogue on cultures and civilisations,¹⁴ building on a first exchange among heads of state or government at the Copenhagen Summit (2002) followed by the ASEM Conference on Cultures and Civilisations in Beijing (2003).¹⁵ Such a dialogue could become the intellectual cornerstones of ASEM at the highest level, contributing to easing the growing tensions between what is perceived as the fundamental difference between “Western” and “Oriental” culture. The sixth ASEM Foreign Ministers’ meeting in Kildare (2004) picked up on the issue in agreeing that “the Dialogue on Cultures and Civilisations is an essential part of international peace and stability.”¹⁶ In accepting a French offer for the next ASEM Conference on Cultures and Civilisations in 2005 and a preparatory meeting in Malaysia this particular important aspect of the ASEM dialogue process fostering inter-cultural understanding seems to have taken on. In targeting opinion leaders like think tanks, academics and religious leaders and in reinforcing Asia Europe Higher Education cooperation and exchanges a climate allowing the free exchange of opinions and more inter-faith interaction should be established, which in turn could lead to some form of “ASEM soft power”.

Education

The third pillar of ASEM in general and of the Asia Europe Foundation (ASEF) set up in Singapore in particular are the nuclei to be used in this endeavour. They should contribute to a political and an intellectual climate between Asia

¹¹ “Cultural diplomacy is a domain of diplomacy concerned with establishing, developing and sustaining relations with foreign states by way of culture, art and education. It is also a proactive process of external projection in which a nation’s institutions, value system and unique cultural personality are promoted at a bilateral and multilateral level.” <http://textus.diplomacy.edu/textusBin/BViewers/oview/culturaldiplomacy/oview.asp>

¹² For an analysis of US shortcomings in conducting a cultural policy after the Cold War see Helena K. Finn. “The Case for Cultural Diplomacy”. *Foreign Affairs*, vol.82, no. 6, 2003; pp. 15–20 and Joseph Nye, “The Decline of America’s Soft Power”. *Foreign Affairs*, vol.83, no. 3, 2004; pp.16–20

¹³ Parekh, op.cit.; p. 343

¹⁴ Michael Reiterer. “ASEM: The Importance of the Forth ASEM Summit in Light of 11 September”. *European Foreign Affairs Review*, vol. 7, no.2, 2002; 133–152

¹⁵ http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/asem/min_other_meeting/chaio3_0412.pdf

and Europe in which educational exchanges can prosper. Education is one of the key components essential for mastering the challenges posed by the 21st century. The Third ASEM Summit¹⁷ recognised the need for sustainable development to cope with the still widening gap of poor and rich, all the time enhanced by the widening digital divide, as one of the key challenges for ASEM which can be met by enhancing education.

Paul Kennedy makes the point that “[b]ackwardness has many causes, but a leading one is that education is regarded as less important in many cultures than it is in East Asia.” In his view education “also implies a deep understanding of why our world is changing, of how other people and cultures feel about those changes, of what we have in common – as well as what divides cultures, classes and nations.” In order to achieve this goal he points out the need for open societies, because “[i]n societies where fundamentalist forces block open inquiry and debate, where politicians, to attract the support of special interests, inveigh against foreign people or ethnic minorities, and where a commercialized mass media and popular culture drive serious issues to the margins, the possibility that education will introduce deeper understanding of global trends is severely limited”.¹⁸

Thus, education plays a major role in securing an open political system, in achieving civic responsibility, social cohesion and last but not least economic success. Conversely, all these factors feed back into the international system, in the case of ASEM the relationship between two regions.

Therefore ASEM rightly incorporates this link of education and politics and grants all three pillars at least in theory equal importance. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, this danger of demonising ethnic or religious groups of people, facilitated by the religious camouflage that is used, has come to the forefront. The ASEM process in general and ASEM in particular are well equipped to contribute fighting this danger: within ASEM all major religions of the world and what is left of the “ideologies” are represented at various level of economic and social development, ranging from the highly developed partners to developing partners, from large countries like China to small ones like Brunei and Luxembourg. In its work ASEM is challenged to make use of this comprehensive richness to contribute to an understanding of multiculturalism in the bi-regional context. Even *Samuel Huntington* sees some merit in multiculturalism, as long as Western identity is renewed “A multicultural world is unavoidable because

¹⁷ “Leaders shared the view that information and communications technology have become pivotal engines of growth in the world economy and also that the resulting digital divide would deepen economic and social disparities in and among countries. With this in mind, they agreed to accelerate efforts to address the digital divide to promote the joint prosperity of the two regions and instructed Economic Ministers to review the progress made in this area. In this context, they also emphasized the need to establish and expand information and research networks between the two regions and among ASEM partners in order to facilitate the flow of knowledge and information as well as research exchanges.” Chairman’s Statement, para. 10 (emphasis added). Furthermore, Leaders adopted an Initiative to Address the Digital Divide. http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/asem_summits/asem1_stat.htm

global empire is impossible ... The security of the world requires acceptance of global multiculturalism”.¹⁹

Thus, although human resource development in general and fostering education in all its aspects in particular is recognised as one of the most important tasks of the process, the sector comprising educational exchanges of students, trainees, teachers and researchers belong to a sector which has nevertheless been relatively neglected in ASEM but especially in international relations in general. One of the reasons might be the lack of a powerful lobby.

In recognising this problem the Third ASEM Summit in Seoul (2000) has established a cluster²⁰ including various Human Resources Development initiatives which could be helpful in finding cross-cultural solutions. These initiatives were the DUO Fellowship Programme,²¹ Human Resource Development in Information and Communications Technology, Life-Long Learning, Overcoming Cultural Nuances: Towards a New Public Management, Seminar on Asia-Europe Co-operation on the Applications of Information Technology to Human Resources Development in the Mekong sub-region.

At the Fourth ASEM Summit in Copenhagen (2002) Leaders put education in the context of addressing “the adverse consequences of globalisation. They stressed the importance of human resources development and education as factors for employability and alleviation of poverty and encouraged increased educational exchange to foster mutual understanding between the two regions. They welcomed the broadening of the ASEM-DUO Fellowship Programme and encouraged expansion of educational exchange among ASEM partners by building on this and other such initiatives”.²² They also endorsed the PM Koizumi’s initiative of the ASEM Seminar on Educational Exchange aimed at collecting and disseminating information on ASEM-wide exchange schemes.

In Europe, ministers from 32 European countries have already started the so called “Bologna Process”²³ and agreed in 1999 to launch the “European higher education area” by 2010 and agreed on the importance of enhancing the attractiveness of European higher education to students from Europe and other parts of the world. The readability and comparability of European higher education degrees world-wide should be enhanced by the development of a common framework of qualifications, as well as by coherent quality assurance and accreditation/ certification mechanisms and by increased information efforts.

The European Union when adopting the Lisbon strategy in March 2000, built on the Bologna process and set itself the objective of making its education and training systems a world reference for quality by 2010. Furthermore, Europe should become the first choice of students and researchers from the rest of the world. President Prodi said in a speech to the European Parliament: “[W]e shall urge the Member States to invest much more in education and training for young and old alike. Life-long learning is essential if we are to

¹⁹ Samuel P. Huntington. *The Clashes of Civilizations – Remaking of World Order*. Touchstone, New York, 1996; p. 318

²⁰ http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/asem/cluster/chr.htm

²¹ <http://www.asemduo.org>

²² http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/asem_summits/asem4/stat.htm

constantly update people's skills and enable them to adapt to our rapidly-changing world".²⁴

Education and lifelong learning should empower people to become flexible, to adjust to a globalised world, to prepare for and realise the emerging knowledge society in learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together - as the G8 Education Ministers put it in 2000.

Fostering educational exchanges is about money, but not only about money:

- Access to information on conditions for studying abroad
- Evaluation, recognition of curricula, credits and qualifications for studies
- Assuring financial conditions which allow students to concentrate on their studies
- Access to adequate and affordable housing
- An environment conducive to welcome foreign students - ranging from practical things like facilitating immigration procedures and at allowing for at least part time working for longer staying students to a generally welcoming atmosphere indicating an interest in learning about foreign cultures.

Studying, researching, working and living together in another culture normally is a highly stimulating and rewarding experience with long-term effects: Having forged a personal relationship in a time when the human personality is especially open for formation, many "buddies" remain in contact and turn to one another later as professionals, managers or politicians seeking business or advice.

Exchanges always have to work both ways in order to successful - xenophobic attitudes, racial prejudices or any other attitude of academic or cultural superiority have no place. In this context, the work started at the ASEM Conference of Ministers of the Interior in Lanzarote also has a bearing²⁵ on educational exchanges insofar as it aims at the creation of the positive framework and could help avoiding that students are exploited especially when forced to gain money.

Furthering education has also been recognised as the primary agent of transformation towards sustainable development in fostering values, behaviour and lifestyles required for sustainable development. In the smaller world of 26 but soon to be more partners, ASEM could make an early contribution to the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development from 2005 to 2015;²⁶ ASEM Foreign Ministers at Kildare welcomed the "progress at UNESCO in preparing the first draft of the International Convention on Cultural Diversity."

²⁴ Speech by Romano Prodi, European Parliament, Strasbourg, 14 March 2001: http://europa.eu.int/rapid/start/cgi/guesten.ksh?p_action=gettxt=gt&doc=SPEECH/01/h18|o|RAPIDlg=EN;

²⁵ http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/asem/min_other_meeting/mig.htm : "Ministers stressed the importance of enhancing the social integration of legal migrants, protecting their rights and ensuring them fair treatment while fully respecting the sovereignty of individual countries. Ministers agreed furthermore to encourage steps to fight against xenophobia, discrimination, labour and sexual exploitation of aliens in ASEM States."

On the bilateral level between the EU and Japan the EU-Japan Year of People-To-People Exchanges 2005 and the EU-Japan Institutes, one already set up in Tokyo and a second one in preparation, will also contribute to intensifying educational exchanges.

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