



European Council  
The President

**PRESS**  
**EN**

**SPEECH**  
EUCO 180/14  
PRESSE 468  
PR PCE 156  
Brussels, 16 September 2014

**Herman Van Rompuy**  
**President of the European Council**

**Speech at the conference "Asia and Europe Working Together"**

In just a few weeks, quite a number of leaders from Asia and Europe will be meeting in Milan for the tenth ASEM Summit. I am looking forward to chairing this meeting and hope it will get the attention it deserves. This is the second time that I have the privilege to chair the ASEM. The first time was in October 2010 in Brussels.

Today's conference is a good start for the ASEM Summit. Let me start with a personal reflection. Over the last five years I have travelled to Asian countries, met with leaders in their capitals, in Brussels, in New York. I have developed personal relations with a number of them. I represented the European Union in the previous ASEM in Vientiane and I may visit some other key Asian countries in November before the expiration of my mandate. Despite the distance that seems to separate Europe from Asia (Christophe Columbus discovered America trying to find a shorter route to Asia!) and the pressing demands in Europe's immediate neighbourhood, I am convinced, more than ever, that the welfare and future of Europe requires the stability and economic dynamism of Asian societies.

And indeed the development of many Asian countries in the last two decades has been impressive. Hundreds of millions of people have been elevated from poverty. Asian markets offer incomparable investment and trade opportunities for European companies. Asian growth has helped fuel the world economy when Europe has been struggling with fiscal stability and low growth rates.

At the same time, Europe continues to be a primary export market for Asia and a source of technological innovation. Our economies are as interdependent as ever and while Europe is fighting to overcome structural challenges inherent to mature societies and highly developed economies, many Asian nations need to revise their growth model as well in order to adapt it to the rapid and radical transformation their societies have experienced. The most positive trait of these developments is that we all stand to gain from each other's prosperity and each other's success.

But our interdependency goes way beyond economic ties. Our security is interlinked. Many Asian nations value political relations with the European Union as a balancing element in, borrowing words from Christopher Clark, their "continental geopolitical ecosystem". We also face common challenges, such as fighting religious extremism and terrorism, and only joining forces and communicating together on these issues will we achieve success.

It is in this broad context of EU-Asia relations that we have to examine and appreciate ASEM's role. It has the added value of public diplomacy, of stressing the importance of cooperation and the common interests that bind us all. The focus of this year's summit is precisely that. In a nutshell: no sustainable growth without security, and no security without sustainable growth.

While we here worry about tensions around maritime and territorial disputes in Asia, our Asian partners are worrying about strife in our own neighbourhood, be it Ukraine, in Syria or Iraq, or more broadly in the Middle East, to name a few. These conflicts are not isolated, they have repercussions on our respective regions. Stability needs respect for international law and privileging cooperation and dialogue over predominance.

There are a number of other well-known challenges that will feature on our Milan agenda. Trade and economic cooperation are vital, as I said earlier, for the sake of growth and employment in our regions. There's much scope there to learn from each other, to share our experiences. We also need to narrow the development gap and address a wide array of social challenges – rapid urbanization, ageing populations and the need to develop or preserve social safety nets.

While it doesn't claim to be a "model", the European Union is ready to share its own experience in regional integration in all the aspects that could be relevant for Asia.

Better connecting our two continents (and all the benefits that could come with it) entails making it easier to move for goods, capital, services and persons. This has become a priority of our cooperation – dubbed by some as the "New Silk Road". We can draw on a number of experiences, for instance the Trans-European Networks developed over the last decades, or ASEAN's Masterplan on Connectivity. Along more physical connections, one thing we should be developing is more high-speed, high-capacity internet connections; building our e-infrastructure: from e-learning, and e-trade to e-government. This could do a lot to facilitate trade and investment – and further post contacts between people, too.

Plans for Trade and Investment have always played an important role in the earlier days of ASEM, and should get new traction to face today's challenges.

In particular, we need to be attentive that the regional and inter-regional trade agreements which are under negotiations complement and re-enforce each other and do not turn into obstacles to trade or investment. It is in this spirit that the European Union is pursuing a number of free trade and investment agreements with Asian partners and we should all do what we can to advance speedily towards their conclusion. At the same time, Asia and Europe need to push and pull together to re-invigorate the WTO -- not just on paper but in reality. We need to finally get the Doha Round off the life-support system. I am indeed concerned with developments here. So all these issues we will raise in Milan.

In parallel, there will also be a Asia Europe Business Forum, also in Milan – always a useful source of insight and ideas from the business community on how to take ASEM forward.

Especially for SMEs, making sure there is a business environment which allows them to cooperate also beyond trade, for example in R&D, is going to be key. And leaders from both continents know that well. Innovation is a top common concern. *Le nerf de la guerre*, as the French say. Which leads me naturally to education which is also a driver for development, fairness and prosperity.

As we know well from Erasmus, educational exchanges are fabulous ways of cross-fertilising societies, discoveries and mutual understandings. And Asian students are amongst those that benefit more from this: out of the close to 5 million international students world-wide in 2014, 53% come from Asian countries. This is why ASEM focuses so much on education – and on mobility and culture. There have been a number of meetings of ministries, for instance ministers of education met in Kuala Lumpur in August, and again Culture Ministers will meet in Rotterdam just a few days after the ASEM Summit, to talk about creative industries – not only as a huge potential for job creation, but also as a powerful vector for culture and diversity.

Mutual understanding, encounters, tolerance, trust: all this is so fundamental to truly nourish a relationship. People-to-people contacts are not just a slogan. ASEM can be a meaningful arena for encounters, and there will be a joint meeting of parliamentarians from both regions, as well as a People's Forum.

ASEM also takes up other relevant problems we are collectively facing: human rights are regularly discussed at annual human rights seminars. The most recent one was held in Copenhagen last year with the focus on human rights and the environment. The links between human rights and business will be the theme of the upcoming seminar in Hanoi.

Natural and man-made disasters are all too often in the headlines, and Asia is particularly prone to catastrophes. This is another important area of concrete cooperation, with regular exchanges on disaster risk reduction.

There is an obvious link between natural disasters on the one hand, and climate change and environmental protection on the other. Which is another reason why in Milan we will be striving to forge an interregional consensus to agree on an ambitious roadmap for cuts in global greenhouse gas emissions – an issue where Europeans themselves are working hard at the moment to set a common, ambitious pledge. Our next European Council in October - my last one - will be key in that respect and we will remain ambitious in preparing the COP-21 in Paris next year.

The same approach applies to reaching the Millennium Development Goals and developing a sound post-2015 development agenda. Let me be an optimist: if ASEM leaders were to agree on this we would make a big leap forward – a better understanding will at least help us to get ready for 2015.

I have already referred to the security threats we face in Asia and Europe. We both have to do our homework. Our starting point is the conviction that international rules and dialogue offer us the best framework to solve problems – through diplomatic negotiations, making use of judicial procedures like arbitration or court decisions, and without threat or use of force. This is true for Asia as it is true for the European continent and wider neighbourhood. The retreat session at the summit in Milan should give us the opportunity to discuss these issues. As we all have a stake in each other's security, we can legitimately discuss these problems. While the European Union has no views on the sovereignty issues of the maritime and territorial problems in Asia, we have – as just mentioned – strong views on the methods of dealing with them. International law, the UN Charter, but also the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, which the EU signed, should be the basis for finding a peaceful solution.

Non-traditional security matters like trafficking of persons, cyber-crime, illegal trade in weapons, drugs, wildlife products, food security, energy security, water management facing growing populations, particularly in Asia, are on our common agenda too.

I have walked you on purpose through this comprehensive agenda citing not only the issues but also the meetings and conferences past and future which deal with the problems. This is necessary as ASEM is often criticised as being a mere talk shop. But can you really criticise a dialogue process for providing a platform for meetings, for discussions? It is no secret that the many bilateral meetings in the margins of the plenary are very important and I am happy with that: this improves the ecological footprint of ASEM dramatically – imagine the thousands of additional miles which would be necessary if these meetings took place separately on a bilateral basis.

Does this mean that everything is fine? Of course not – there always is place for improvement and reform but you can also damage a process if you permanently engage in reform and criticism because you create the impression that things are not working as they should. If you take enlargement as a measure of success, then ASEM is hugely successful, as we will increase membership in Milan from 51 to 53 and more candidates are waiting. Here lies one of the added values of the ASEM process: it provides a framework to address challenges of global concern with all of Asia at once on a regular basis between leaders, officials and experts on both sides.

53 participants at the level of heads of state and government and informality – a key word in ASEM – sounds like a contradiction in terms. Therefore, we try informal retreat sessions, without media, without recording and direct translation into the Chair's Statement. That might make the latter less interesting for the press, but the discussions more open.

Another effect of having an increased numbers of participants is a greater variety of opinions, calling for more efforts to reach agreement or consensus – also logistics become more difficult. Not all participants are equally interested in all issues, another reason why the number of subjects treated is ever increasing. Streamlining and giving more focus to meetings is a necessary remedy. Providing a bridge between representatives of politics, economics, business, trade unions, civil society, parliamentarians to facilitate network diplomacy should become another strength of ASEM and we should think about how to increase their interaction – the fact that each of the three fora will get their few minutes of fame during the Summit itself by getting an opportunity to address the leaders directly is just a step in that direction.

One Asian high official said at another curtain raiser event here in Brussels: "If we were to ask ourselves today, if we did not have ASEM whether or not there would be a need to form it, the answer would be a very strong yes, there is a need for Europe and Asia to talk to each other."

So we shall do this in a few days in Milan and I will try to steer the process in a way to achieve the goals briefly outlined here – and I hope that then, the meeting could make a difference.

---