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**Speech by the President of the European Council
Herman Van Rompuy
at the closing session of Asia – Europe Business Forum (AEBF)**

It is a privilege to be in the wonderful city of Milan today to address the business communities of Asia and Europe shortly before the launch of tenth ASEM Summit. I wish therefore to start by thanking wholeheartedly Prime Minister Renzi and his Government for their generous hospitality.

This afternoon, I will have the pleasure of welcoming the representatives of this business forum to the summit itself. They will be invited to present your agreed recommendations to the leaders of the 53 ASEM members. I thank you in advance for this valuable contribution. Indeed, we are convening under the theme: 'Responsible Partnership for Sustainable Growth and Security'. Your input for our discussions is therefore most valuable. The voice of the business community is a voice that matters.

My main message to you is that today more than ever European and Asian nations need each other to achieve growth and development and to guarantee security and preserve stability. The times of zero-sum game approaches or those of dominant positions are long gone. We will only advance and benefit if we do it together, if we cooperate. This is what gives this summit its title. This will be the essence of our discussions and conclusions.

Europe needs Asia. A strong Asian economy is a driver of world growth. Many of its economies continue developing at impressive rates. The coming of age of successive waves of Asian countries has kept the high rhythm of economic growth in Asia for decades. At the same time, Asia needs Europe, its technological innovation and know-how, the biggest and richest market in the world, the largest investor in Asia.

Leaders today will recommit to an open world economy, to strengthening trade and investment relations, to resist protectionist temptations. The European Union's engagement with the region in trade and investment matters has never been as strong as now. It has concluded free trade agreements with the Republic of Korea and Singapore. Negotiations are ongoing with India, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand and Japan. An investment treaty is being negotiated with China. Other projects are in the pipeline.

The role of small and medium-sized enterprises will be particularly highlighted. In Europe SMEs are considered an essential part of the economic recovery and creation of jobs. They are also a source of technological innovation, including in the extremely relevant field of environmental protection. Important initiatives to promote eco-innovation among SMEs are being taken in the ASEM context. When addressing you, responsible business leaders, I can not omit underlining that a healthy business climate is based on the respect of the rights of the workers and the promotion of their well-being. This will benefit overall social development and growth itself.

Finally, I want to underline the importance that this summit will give to connectivity as an overarching theme. The European Union supports a broad-based concept of connectivity in its three dimensions: physical (transport, energy, digital), institutional (rules-based governance) and people-to-people (youth, education, research, tourism, civil society, etc.). It is about linking Europe and Asia, but also about enhancing intra-regional connectivity.

The European Union has a rich experience to share in fostering free movement of people, goods, services and capital and in developing Trans-European Networks. It supports Europe-Asia connectivity through a web of actions and projects across policy areas. The European-Asia relationship is a very very strong relationship. China's New Silk Road initiative, Republic of Korea's "Silk Road Express" or ASEAN's own Master Plan on Connectivity show that the scope of cooperation and development in this field is immense. It will bring greater opportunities for investment, growth, development and what is even more important, understanding.

The times ahead are full of challenges, also on the field of security. Nations have to stand together and combat terrorism, such as the one that is affecting Iraq and Syria. They have to put an end to violence that tears nations apart. But there is no alternative to dialogue and cooperation. I am confident that European and Asian States, joined together in the ASEM Summit, can make an important contribution to these efforts.

Stability and peace are key for economy, and economy matters and links us. Asia needs Europe and Europe needs Asia.
