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ROUNDTABLE BRIEFING

ASEM ROUNDTABLE
14.04.2009, Brussels

Roundtable

**„The ASEM Process.
From information sharing to common policies
between Europe and Asia?
Overcoming the complexity of an enlarged
inter-governmental forum”**

On the 4th and 5th of October 2010 the next summit of government leaders from Asia and Europe will take place in Brussels. By now, 45 countries, the European Commission and the ASEAN-Secretary are participating in this ASEM-Summit process, which was first introduced in 1996. The members of ASEM represent more than half of the world population and contribute half of the global national product. ASEM is well-established as a forum for dialogue between the political leaders of Asia and Europe, wherefore more countries have a high preference in participating in the dialogue. In 2010 Russia and Australia will take part for the first time.

Should ASEM be able to play a functional role as a dialogue forum that is meeting practical agreements and decisions for the concrete formation of the bi/regional relations? How will they be able to do so? Which political, organizational and maybe even institutional arrangements does ASEM require, in order to response not only to the new and complex issues as well as challenges in the relation between Asia and Europe, but to the global issues? These are the central questions, which will have a significant influence on the preparation of the next ASEM summit.

As a contribution to the preparation of this summit, the Asia Europe Foundation (ASEF), the Belgium Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is directly involved in the preparations of the ASEM summit, and the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation organized two events in Brussels on the 14th as well as on the 15th and 16th of April this year. On these events representatives of different institutions from Asia and Europe discussed central questions on the functionality and efficiency of ASEM. In addition, they identified arising issues, which will mark the future agenda of the ASEM summit.

On 14th April a public and well-attended roundtable about the current situation of the preparations of the next ASEM Summit and a general appraisal of the hitherto ASEM process took place in the office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Brussels.

Andrew-Thomas Roe, Asia adviser in the Directorate-General for External Relations of the European Commission, attested ASEM as a "remarkable success". Like no other institution, ASEM offers a forum in which discussions about a number of political fields are possible and which has developed a sensibility for new issues as well as needs. However, from the perspective of the European Commission it would be desirable that this dialogue experiences an "upgrade" so that the mutual partnership gains more substance.

For doing so, it might be necessary to have some kind of a permanent coordination between the summits whose task would be to ensure that the agreements and decisions are not only traced, but implemented and the common agenda is developed further. In this context, the advantages and disadvantages of the establishment of such a coordination office had to be discussed openly.

Ambassador Bertrand de Crombrughe, who is the official ASEM adviser of the Belgium Ministry of Foreign Affairs and directly responsible for the preparation of the summit, acknowledged a "good consensus" between the member states with regard to the aims of the summit. The preparations for the next summit had started at an early stage and, concerning the agenda, a high level of agreement could be recognized. Ambassador de Crombrughe pointed out that, among other things, ASEM consists of a many G 20 members, wherefore this summit process could be used for treating issues of global concern and common interest more efficiently. This applies for example for political questions in which Europe and Asia share specific interests, for instance the treatment of North-Korea, Iran or Myanmar.

Ambassador de Crombrughe stated that one needs more discussion on whether and which institutional arrangements would be necessary in order to achieve a "perfect working method", but not to destroy the original character of the ASEM summits. New forms of information and communication would be conceivable. However, de Crombrughe argued emphatically: "ASEM has to remain a dialogue".

The formation of the Asia Europe Foundation (ASEF) in 1997 concluded directly from the first ASEM summit one year before. Until today ASEF is the only durable institution which arose from the ASEM process. The foundation is borne by the ASEM members and its task is to contribute to the communication between Asia and Europe through the promotion of the intellectual as well as cultural exchange and meetings. During the roundtables in Brussels, the executive director of the ASEF, **Ambassador Dominique Girard**, called the ASEM Process an indispensable structure for the organization of mutual dialogue. However, he stressed the necessity of mobilizing the dialogue in order to respond in an appropriated and better way to new questions of concern and to shape the cooperation between the regions more efficiently.

The question of how the ASEM process could be shaped more efficiently for the advantage of its members was a central point in the remarks of **Ambassador Yong-Kyu Park**, ASEM Senior Official, Professor at the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS) of the Ministry of Foreign Relations and Trade of the republic of Korea. Ambassador Park pointed out that ASEM has doubtlessly contributed to the grown international interaction which has developed in many fields between Asia and Europe. Meanwhile, there would be more than 30 initiatives each year only in context of the ASEM, wherefore ASEM would be a significant complementary instrument for the bilateral forums. However, it has to be asked, whether and how the step from dialogue and exchange of information to ballot over common projects could be taken, whether ASEM should be extended into a "substantial institution". Thus, the possible weaknesses of the ASEM process might be reduced. Such weaknesses are the fragmentation of activities,

ineffective management, the missing of a clear defined focus, duplicity and inconsistency of measures as well as the missing of clear results and follow-ups. In order to strengthen the perception of ASEM and its effectiveness, the common agenda would have to gain substance and common projects that have an impact on the global level would have to be pressed ahead. In any case, results-oriented cooperation projects had to be agreed, which then should be supplied into the global governance-structures like G 20, United Nations or WTO. Ambassador Park called for concrete measures to strengthen the working mechanisms on different levels of ASEM.

Compared to this far reaching demands and expectations, **Dr. Yeo Lay Hwee**, Director of the European Union Centre in Singapore, took a considerable less demanding position with regard to ASEM. She pointed out that ASEM has proven to be a dialogue forum between Asia and Europe and a driving force of a various initiatives. But at the same time, she warned not to have too high expectation for the summit process, which ASEM would be unable to fulfill. ASEM would help to build an environment in which the leaders of both continents can get to know each other without any pressure and exchange positions, develop and discuss common ideas. However, it had to be accepted that ASEM cannot replace other forums and its functions would therefore remain limited. One would have to take this limited freedom of action into account when thinking about the further development of the structure of ASEM and its possible institutional enlargement.

As the representative of one of the future members, **Mellisa H. Conley Tyler**, National Executive Director of the Australian Institute of International Affairs, justified Australia's interest in integration into the ASEM process with its conscious efforts under Prime Minister Rudd to participate in various international forums, in which questions of global cooperation and governability are discussed. Australia has a strengthened international interest and has learnt that the collaboration in international forums offers a possibility to bring in ones own interests and conceivabilities into the global dialogue. ASEM is for Australia of high significance since it is politically, economically and socially closely connected with both Europe and Asia.

Several participants of the closing discussion expressed their expectation that the effectiveness and perception of ASEM could be more emphasized. At the same time, skepticism towards the necessity and especially the feasibility of institutional reforms to give ASEM a permanent and tauter structure could be recognized. Nevertheless, there has been a consensus that ASEM is an important forum of dialogue between Asia and Europe which definitely has to be pursued.

Altogether the roundtable dealt with central issues, which will be discussed on the next ASEM summit. The aim of the roundtable was to discuss the central issues of the preparation for the next ASEM summit with a big group of persons and institutions, that are working on the formation of the European relations to Asia and are directly involved in the ASEM process. This goal could be reached.

On the 15th and 16th of April experts from both continents participated in a closed workshop where they discussed about institutional possibilities for reforms and major political issues which will be dealt with on the next ASEM summit. Furthermore, some suggestions to those issues were formulated. The results of this workshop have been presented in a separate report prepared by the Asia Europe Foundation (ASEF) and submitted to the ASEM member states. This report is available at <http://www.asef.be/event/asef-outlook-workshop>.

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