



DIALOGUE OF CULTURES & CIVILISATIONS
11th ASEF Talks on the Hill

**(a) Political Education:
Revisiting History in Asia and Europe**

7th | 8th | 9th October 2007
Poland

BACKGROUND:

The 'Cultures & Civilisations Dialogue' programme <http://www.civdialogue.asef.org> was established in 2003 by the Asia-Europe Foundation Department for Intellectual Exchange with the realisation that many cultural and civilisational issues need to be addressed in promoting greater understanding between the two regions of Asia and Europe. This programme facilitates leaders of civil society and government meeting, interacting and engaging with one another and with audiences in the opposite region. The relevance of the Cultures & Civilisations Dialogue programme was recently reinforced at the ASEM 6 Summit, where the leaders underlined that dialogue and cooperation among cultures and civilisations are essential means to prevent and overcome ignorance and prejudice.

The "Talks on the Hill" meeting series under this programme brings together 13-15 expert activists, journalists, academics and policymakers to discuss and brainstorm issues of pertinence to the two regions in an open, frank and intense setting. For this reason, "Talks on the Hill" meetings are closed to the media and observers (please see our Ground Rules for further details). The aim of this meeting series is to contribute to a better understanding of key issues on the topic and by doing so, to come up with real and useful policy-oriented recommendations that may be disseminated to the various governments of the ASEM¹ process.

CONCEPT:

The portrayal, treatment or teaching of history is intrinsically political and can be very controversial. This is especially true when **choosing aspects of history for inclusion or exclusion** into history textbooks, displays in museums and even in the creation of myths, music and literature. In some cases, the acknowledgement or visits to historical symbols or places are used politically as an indication of the beliefs of government officials. Often, these actions are inextricably linked to the politics of identity creation, making this a highly political exercise.

¹ ASEM (the Asia-Europe Meeting) is an informal process of dialogue and cooperation initiated in 1996 to reflect the new political climate of the 90's. Now, the EU Member States, the European Commission, the ASEAN Secretariat and sixteen Asian countries (Brunei, Burma/Myanmar, China, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Mongolia Laos, Pakistan, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) participate in the process. The ASEM dialogue addresses political, economic and cultural issues, with the objective of strengthening the relationship between our two regions, in a spirit of mutual respect and equal partnership. The Heads of State and Government summits, held every second year, give the overall political impetus to the ASEM process. Foreign Ministers and their senior officials have an overall coordinating role and are assisted by Coordinators. There is also a range of several ministerial and other meetings and activities at the working level.

CONCEPT PAPER

Portrayals of history have been a potent trigger for present-day tensions and conflicts between states or between communities. Countries in both Asia and Europe remain embroiled in disputes related to one portrayal of history over another. Most recently, tensions between China, Japan and Korea over certain versions of Japanese history textbooks have highlighted the sensitivity of this subject. On the other hand, in recognition of these problems, some countries have set-up joint initiatives between two or more states, to look into establishing common versions of history. For example, a Franco-German joint textbook initiative has been lauded as being particularly successful in bridging a difficult past relationship. Similar initiatives have been established in Poland, the European Commission, the Council of Europe and the UK, among others. As both Asia and Europe move toward closer integration and cooperation, there is an increased need for governments and stakeholders to engage in an open dialogue on history, in order to understand the sensitivities felt by various groups over historical events and episodes, and by doing so, to prevent further conflict.

This “Talks on the Hill” meeting will explore the ways by which governments and communities in Asia and Europe have approached this issue. The meeting will include a case-study from each region, and provide participants with the opportunity to share experiences and best practices. In doing so, it is hoped that the outcomes of this meeting will be formulated into concrete policy recommendations that could be disseminated to the governments in the ASEM process, as well as other interested groups.

This meeting will address, among others, the following issues:

Anybody can make history; only a great man can write it”

- *Oscar Wilde*
(*Irish Poet, Novelist, Dramatist and Critic, 1854-1900*)

This quotation indicates how history is often presented according to the priorities of those writing it – often the victors. However, with time and more information, there is a need to discuss and debate history in order to represent it fairly. Using some examples of particularly sensitive or contentious periods, can a balanced version of history ever be established? Are there situations where it is improper to re-open historical facts or incidences for debate?

“If we haven’t forgiven, we keep creating an identity around our pain, and that is what is reborn.”

Buddhist Quote

Is the acknowledgement of historical acts by aggressors linked with them taking responsibility for their actions? Why are governments sometimes reluctant to acknowledge or address historical wrongdoings by their countries – even when the present international system has completely changed? This topic is particularly relevant in but not confined to post-colonial contexts. How can history serve as a tool for reconciliation?

“We do not merely teach, we educate”

- *quote from European Seminar for Educational Staff “Teaching about the Holocaust”*
Vilnius, 2000

While the youth develop their thinking through the media, family and numerous other sources, the task of educating is seen to fall mainly on teachers. Are teachers equipped to deal with highly sensitive historical incidences? Is it the function of a history teacher to deal with political and/or moral issues? How does society arrive at moral judgments with regards to episodes in the past? Can history be taught without imposing, conditioning or manipulating?

CONCEPT PAPER

EXPECTED OUTCOMES:

In meeting the objective of serving as a mechanism to inform and deliver civil society recommendations to the governments of ASEM, the final report of this meeting will be tailored towards real policy issues and will be disseminated widely to the relevant Ministries and agencies. The final report will also be posted online on the dedicated Cultures & Civilisations Dialogue website at <http://www.civdialogue.asef.org>.

TARGET PARTICIPANT GROUP:

There will be 15 participants at the meeting, including legal experts, policymakers, activists, academics and journalists.

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Groundrules

The objective at ASEF “Talks on the Hill” is to have an open and frank discussion. We can check our official hats at the door and come to the meeting as individual minds, free to say what we want, express ourselves without fear of quotation or misinterpretation. It is a retreat from everyday work and an occasion for all of us to focus our attention on the subject philosophically, in some aspects, but grounded in the purpose of mutual understanding and respect among different cultures and civilisations in Asia and Europe. Even if it is an intellectual brainstorming, the final outputs are envisioned for practical use, for instance in helping policy-makers clarify their ideas.

We hope to set a few guidelines, which we can discuss together and seriously accept as principles to follow during the two days.

Feel free to change your mind.

We hope that you will feel free to change your mind at any time, without any loss of face. It is a challenge to genuinely keep an open mind, especially on those aspects of the debate where we have already formed a strong personal view. We hope that you will be ready to use this opportunity to challenge your own assumptions.

Our sense is that the growing Asia-Europe dialogue on cultures and civilisations illustrates one very fundamental point: that there is no single right answer to the questions of our differences and similarities.

Please see yourself as a free spirit.

We find that people are most ready to move on in their thinking when they see themselves as free spirits, not bound to defend any particular position or fight any particular corner.

As free spirits, we can use this venue to explore some difficult issues that we are genuinely unsure about. It is also as free spirits that we can best accept difference; secure in the knowledge that there is a range of possible options for moving forward, each with their own strengths and weaknesses.

Building ideas through "buzz groups"

We want to have a few rounds of what we term "buzz groups" during our time together. We will ask you to leave the circle for your buzz group, and remain standing, please, unless you have a physical need to be seated. Buzz groups last for 10 to 15 minutes each, usually with three people in each group, and are literally intended just to take us all out of the main group for long enough to help energise the process of generating new ideas. This requires us all to feel free to pursue a minority view without worrying that we might be incurring the displeasure of others for the fact that we have a different view from them.

We hope that when you return from your group, ideas will still be in a state of movement and nothing will be fixed. Also, when you rejoin the circle we will ask you to sit in a different chair from the one you were in before, and not remain with the other members of your group.

If you can think it, you can say it.

This maxim is also crucial to create a truly open agenda and avoid an atmosphere where people have little trust in the other members of the group. At this discussion, we really do want to apply the maxim that if you can think it, you can say it! We don't want this to be one of those events where the person next to you at dinner on the last evening says “now let me tell you what I nearly said...”

CONCEPT PAPER

All comments in debate are unattributable.

This principle is crucial if we are all to feel that we can be completely open in our discussions with each other. The only circumstance under which it is possible for someone to be quoted afterwards is if they give their explicit permission for something that they say to be repeated.

Apart from this, please respect the anonymity of everything that is said throughout our time together at the "Talks on the Hill." We all need to feel that we can speak freely, without any risk of being misquoted, taken out of context, or used unfairly.

Put clarity before consensus.

We are sure that there will be much that we agree on during our discussions. We also suspect that there will be a number of issues on which we disagree, and we hope that we will all be relaxed about that. We believe that diversity is strength, and that we need to be truly open to disagreement to ensure that any consensus at the end is genuine. If at any stage there is a choice between greater clarity, or some sort of woolly consensus, we hope that we could all push for greater clarity.

Live in the moment.

We want you to feel able to 'go with the flow'. As part of this process, we will ask that during our discussions people try and respond to the person who has just spoken, and avoid the temptation of saying "I want to respond to what someone said a couple of hours ago, and then I have five more points."

Please try and 'live in the moment'. We usually find this works best if we all imagine that when people speak they are passing the baton to each other in debate. To come in on debate, you need to be prepared to take the baton from the previous speaker - rather than taking out of your pocket one that you have been keeping warm!

Avoid acronyms.

We hope that from the outset of the discussion that we will all agree that we want to keep jargon down to a very minimum.

We also hope that we will try and avoid as many acronyms as possible. The danger with acronyms is that we can very quickly find ourselves forgetting the meaning of the words behind the letters. That is why we want to go into our discussions expecting that the moment someone uses an acronym that doesn't command immediate recognition, others will dive in and ask them to describe the term in full. It really makes a huge difference if the first person to use a cumbersome acronym finds themselves stopped in their tracks, and asked what the letters stand for!

Let yourselves be pushed.

We have learnt that if brainstorming events are to be creative, they also need to be enjoyable. It is only when people are enjoying themselves that they let themselves be pushed, maybe quite a bit harder than they expected before embarking on the process.

Our ambition is that by the end of our time together we will have developed a range of ideas that could be used for action by governments, scholars or practitioners to try and overcome those divisions that stand in the way of greater understanding between Asia and Europe in advancing our shared concerns. We think that it's worth pushing ourselves pretty hard to try and achieve that goal.
