

ASIA-EUROPE FOUNDATION
– 4th Connecting Civil Societies of Asia and Europe Conference –
Key Note Speech by Vice-Prime Minister & Minister of Foreign Affairs Steven VANACKERE
Brussels – 2 October 2010

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends from Civil Society, Dear Guests,

Some of you have come a long way to exchange views on issues of shared interest between Asia and Europe. After all, this gathering brings together civil society representatives from Asia, the thriving region of these times, and from Europe, the single most advanced integration project in the world. It used to be the “East end” of the Eurasian continent meeting the “West end”, overcoming a long distance. Now, with the accession of Russia, Australia and New Zealand, whom we warmly welcome to the ASEM and the ASEF family, we are linking up.

Let me first of all express our common gratitude to Ambassador Dominique Girard, Executive Director of the Asia-Europe Foundation, Dr. Yeo Lay Hwee, Senior Research Fellow, Singapore Institute of International Affairs and Dr. Philippe Peycam, Director of International Institute of Asian Studies, for organising this Asia-Europe Connecting Civil Societies Conference in this recently refurbished SQUARE facilities, in the heart of our capital.

The Connecting Civil Societies Conferences have been there since 2004. They have provided over the years some outstanding examples of bringing together Asian and European civil societies, stimulating exchanges and doing their part in bringing Asia and Europe closer together.

I would dare to go a step further. The success of Connecting Civil Societies Conference is in itself an expression of the high degree of commonality that exists between Asia and Europe. Political structures in both regions have grown out of a long and turbulent history. Both can pride themselves of age old traditions and both present a wealth in cultural diversity. We have a common predilection for organized and structured relationships which foster security and stability between nations. We both strive for an economic model that is balanced between consumption, saving and investment and that can prove sustainable over the long

term. Also, we both, I hope, place human development at the centre of our policies and favour multilateral and equitable governance of the world.

The truth is that Asia and Europe “face forward” together in the quest for greater wellbeing and more dignity for all citizens, the guiding idea announced by Belgium two years ago at the ASEM 7 Summit in Beijing. Captured in short as “Quality of Life”, the idea points to more than just material prosperity. It points to the essence of the human being, namely that he have the opportunity to live a dignified life, the possibility of conceiving projects and of implementing them, in short that he have the perspective of accomplishing his own destiny in life.

Indeed the last twenty years, enormous progress has been achieved (at least in the statistics) in raising the quality of life of Europeans and Asians alike. It is the result of a flourishing Asia and Europe have now become each other’s main trading and investment partner. Still, it is a secret to no one that now is not the time for complacency. We face important challenges. Two of them are at the top of the agenda of the ASEM 8 Summit next week.

The first challenge remains the financial and economic crisis. Millions of citizens still suffer from its consequences. Government stopped the downward spiral in economic activity and in employment levels by rescuing the financial sector and by stimulating the real economy with increased expenditures. However, public finances are showing the strain, particularly in Europe. In spring, the Euro crisis forced the European governments to pursue accelerated fiscal consolidation and we will be busy with that kind of work for many years to come. Asia for its part faces the dangers of overheating economies, rising inflation and speculative bubbles. It is of utmost importance that Europe and Asia face these challenges without playing the blame game. In Beijing two years ago, the Third Connecting Civil Societies Conference, on managing the global financial crisis recommended that, and I quote, “ASEM should promote greater co-operation in monetary and financial affairs within Asia and Europe and between the two regions.” This recommendation remains very valid today, with a view to sustaining the recovery, putting order in the public finances and completing the reform of banking regulation and supervision. As Asia and Europe have flourished together, they have to challenge the present difficulties together as well.

Moreover, next November, about a month after ASEM 8, the G-20 gathers for a Summit in Seoul, the first such Summit to take place in a non-G-8 country, demonstrating that the G-20 is taking on a life of its own. Considering also that 12 ASEM members are simultaneously members of the G-20, ASEM 8 strikes me as a good opportunity for Asia and Europe, in view of the Seoul meeting, to show leadership and promote the kind of measured and balanced responses to which both are historically inclined.

The second challenge equally concerns the quality of life of millions of European and Asians. We all know that the production and consumption patterns of the last years are not sustainable. Energy saving, resource efficient and clean technologies must be developed and deployed in order to pursue the objective of providing prosperity to all. Also, under the present difficult economic conditions, the preservation of social safety nets and of mechanisms for social solidarity has become an uphill battle. The European social system appeared quite surprisingly not only efficient to promote social justice but also a social stabilising system during the recent crisis.

Climate change, losses of biodiversity and rapid urbanization are endangering the future of our people. The 2nd and 3rd Connecting Civil Societies Conference concluded before, in both Helsinki in 2006 and in Beijing in 2008, that increased dialogue can contribute to address these issues. For instance, Helsinki recommended to expand dialogue on energy security and sustainable development with other key players outside the 2 regions (e.g. Russia, Middle East and USA) while the Beijing Conference urged European and Asian countries to work together towards transition to low carbon energy. I can only agree and we hope that this 4th Connecting Civil Societies Conference will give a further impulse in this direction. The objective is to move together to more sustainable forms of developments, and in this context also, to fight the persistence of poverty more efficiently. The recent UN High-Level Plenary Meeting in New York assessed progress towards the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals. Again, this is not the time for complacency. The crisis of the two last years has had an impact on the prospect of decisive progress towards reaching these goals but not all delays are attributable to it. We hope that this 4th Connecting Civil Societies Conference will look at concrete ways to raise the efficiency of our action.

The truth of the matter is that Europe and Asia are mutually fascinated by each other. This mutual curiosity is a common strategic asset. It is a solid basis to build a tighter relationship in the interest of achieving more sustainable development. Consolidating and enlarging the common ground would allow Europe and Asia to play a greater role in defining the outcome of important gatherings.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The first ASEM meeting in Bangkok in 1996 stated up front that an important goal of ASEM is to build greater understanding between the peoples through closer people-to-people contacts.

True to this mandate, ASEM 8 is proving to be more than the Summit of the leaders alone. The 6th Asia-Europe Parliamentary Partnership Meeting took place earlier this week. The 8th People's Forum is bringing together non-governmental organizations, including trade unions, from both regions, 300 people in all. The 12th Business Forum will meet on the side on October 4th, with a focus on the integration of the respective financial sectors. All these are very important because they assure the continuity of the ASEM process and for the friendship among Asians and Europeans.

Talking about friendship, I cannot but evoke the magnificent exhibition 'A Passage to Asia' which I opened at BOZAR, Centre for Fine Arts of Brussels, a few months ago. The exhibit tells the impressive story of 25 centuries of exchanges between Asia and Europe. There is no better illustration of the historical background to the current ASEM meetings. Yet, the way the exhibit came about is a story in itself. Everyone should know that it results from the collaborative efforts and resources from the participating Asian countries and from Belgium. A nicer symbol can hardly be imagined for the commonality of enterprise which ASEM embodies.

Dear friends,

Belgium is of course particularly proud to host the ASEM 8 Summit and the parallel and outreach gatherings. I say this not only because it promises to be a grand event, one of the greater challenges while my country holds the rotating presidency of the EU. I say this also because I sense an opportunity for Europe and Asia to make new steps forward and towards each other.

In the name of the Belgian Government, I express the sincere hope that this 4th Connecting Civil Societies Conference will contribute to new developments in the relationship, to new plans for the future, to new projects around which to mobilize our people's energies. As we ponder the measures to take in response to the crisis, as we seek to tackle the longer term challenge of fostering sustainable development, we have a duty to be imaginative. We also must produce concrete results, because you know, as one of my favourite saying goes: good ideas not only need wings, they also need landing gear. As we prepared for all these Asia-Europe encounters together with our European and Asian partners, we realized that we can do more and also that we can do better. I would like to call also on you to help us move the comprehensive, equal and mutually beneficial Asia-Europe strategic partnership to a new level.

In my view, the Asia-Europe Foundation plays a specific role in this relationship. Because you are from within the societies and contribute to shape perceptions, your work enjoys natural attention, visibility and, as a politician I would like to add, credibility. You are the opinion makers and what you jointly say carries the authority of a debate held.

Thank you very much.