



Roundtable Discussion on “Voices from Asians and Europeans: The Future of Asia-Europe Cooperation” - 29 December 2023

The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), founded in 1997 as one of the key outcomes of the inaugural Asia-Europe Meeting Summit, celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2022. To commemorate 25 years of ASEF, the only concrete institution of the ASEM process dedicated to promoting ties between the peoples of Asia and Europe, an essay competition on “The Future of Asia-Europe Cooperation” was organised. 129 entries from 26 ASEM countries were received, and 68 essays were selected to be published in an edited collection as one of ASEF’s ASEM Infoboard (AIB) book project.

A Roundtable discussion featuring four panellists¹ deeply involved in the study, writing and promoting of Asia-Europe cooperation was organised on 29 December 2023 to discuss some of the important concerns and perspectives, and highlight some of the interesting views and the wishes and aspirations expressed in the essays published in the book “Voices from Asians and Europeans: The Future of Asia-Europe Cooperation”.

The essay by Julija Loginovich from Lithuania contained a number of points that resonate with the panellists. Contrary to popular view that “multilateralism has failed” and that “Covid has killed globalisation” Julija believed that a new pattern of multilateralism and globalisation was emerging that “is less western-centric” and where “extreme openness is giving way to stronger links underpinned by mutuality and trust.” The sense that we were moving away from a western-centric order as Asia rises was a theme that appeared in several essays. However, the panellists also cautioned against the simplistic cliché on the decline of the West or Europe and the rise of Asia. A more constructive approach in promoting Asia-Europe cooperation would be one built on trust and mutual respect that goes beyond narrow economic interests. A relationship built on trust and mutual respect would also appreciate the fact that cooperation is not necessary convergence. Diversities and differences were to be expected and they should not be obstacles towards building stronger relationships.

As noted by the panellists, many of the essays were incredibly positive about the future of Asia-Europe cooperation. While recognising that the challenges posed by the geopolitical tensions, many of the essays seemed to gloss over the difficult global conditions and the intensifying rivalry between big powers. One way of looking at the optimism expressed by the authors would be to recognise the fact the younger generation and the authors from smaller nation-states were not as consumed by the big-power rivalry. Afterall, competition is a fact, and that should not stop people and nations from moving pragmatically towards cooperation for mutual interests. There was the recognition that as long as interdependence is a reality, cooperation is a necessity, not a choice.

A note of caution also from the panellists that multilateralism is under stress and that there is need for Asia and Europe to do more together to shore up multilateralism by adopting an open and inclusive approach.

The Chinese Belt and Road initiative, the EU's Global Gateway programme were mentioned in several of the essays which led to discussion amongst the panellists on the importance of enhancing connectivity – both hard and soft - between Asia and Europe. The role of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) in strengthening soft connectivity between Asia and Europe was also an important theme in several of the essays. Panellists also reaffirmed the importance of ASEF in promoting greater mutual understanding and expressed the wish to see ASEF do more in bringing about stronger cooperation amongst young people. Educational exchanges and cooperation in science and technology, innovation are also areas in which there is enormous potential for improving Asia-Europe relations.

During the question-and-answer segment and interactions with the participants of the Roundtable, several interesting observations were made. One observation was that as Europe becomes more integrated and focus on its own internal dynamics, this might translate into difficulties in interacting with the “outside world.” Institutional differences and different expectations might become obstacles in forging closer ties with Asia. However, on a more positive note, if political leaders were willing to put “people / humans” at the centre of cooperation, then the obstacles could be overcome.

There was also a certain lament over the lack of leadership in driving Asia-Europe cooperation. Leaders must learn to listen and be able to look beyond differences to find commonalities to move forward.

How to reconcile competition and cooperation was a frequently asked question. Cognizant of the increasing geopolitical tensions, and the increasing steps taken by countries to de-risk and diversify their supply chains, some participants wondered about the long-term impact of these trends on Asia-Europe cooperation. There was also a pointed question on how the stalled ASEM process could be made relevant again in the changing political and economic dynamics and with the proliferation of other forums.

Another participant also warned on making commitments on Asia-Europe cooperation that could not be fulfilled or realised. To him, it was more important to focus on communicating the right messages. He lamented that while there was a recognition by the EU on the need for better communication and the importance of public diplomacy, things had not improved much.

The key takeaways from the hour-long discussions amongst the panellists and between the panellists and participants are:

- The essays reflected the recognition of the realities of shifting geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics and an increasingly challenging environment, but at the same time, many of the authors also believed that it is precisely in this difficult environment that Asia-Europe cooperation is much needed.
- The importance of ASEM and ASEF was reaffirmed during the discussion and there is hope that more could be done through the ASEM platform and through ASEF to strengthen Asia-Europe cooperation.

- Differences and diversities per se are not obstacles to cooperation as cooperation does not mean convergence. In fact, the very realities of differences amidst our interdependence demands that we learn to listen more and look for pragmatic ways to cement our cooperation.

ⁱ The four panellists were: Prof Dr Evi Fitriani (Professor of International Relations, Universitas Indonesia); Dr Eva Pejsova (Japan Chair at the Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy of the Brussels School of Governance and Associate Fellow at the Foundation for Strategic Research, France); Dr Vannarith Chheang (President of Asian Vision Institute, Cambodia and Chairman of the Advisory Council of the National Assembly of Cambodia) and Mr Richard Werly (award winning journalist and currently International Correspondent for Blick Daily Newspaper, Switzerland's largest media outlet). The Roundtable was moderated by Dr Yeo Lay Hwee (Director of EU Centre and Senior Fellow, Singapore Institute of International Affairs)