

ASEF 15TH ANNIVERSARY PANEL

ASIA AND EUROPE: COMING TOGETHER OR DRIFTING APART?

16 MAY 2012, 5.30PM AT GRAND PARK CITY HALL HOTEL

Keynote Speech by Prof Tommy Koh

Salutation

1 Pak Soemadi, Chairman of the Board, and ASEF Governors, Ambassador Michel Filhol and members of the ASEF Management, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

2 I thank ASEF for inviting me to speak at this roundtable. I feel very privileged to have served as the founding executive director of ASEF from March 1997 to October 2000. I thank some members of my team for being here this evening. I look back on the 43 months I spent at ASEF as a very happy and rewarding period of my life. It has made me a life-long friend and defender of Europe.

ASEF's 15th Birthday

3 ASEF is 15 years old. ASEM is a year older. We are here to celebrate ASEF's 15th birthday. This should, however, be a thoughtful celebration. We are proud of what we have achieved, in the past 15-16 years, in bringing Asia and Europe closer together and in promoting greater mutual understanding between Asians and Europeans. At the same time, we should have the courage to appraise our performance to-date and to ask some hard questions.

4 Let me pose three questions. First, have we succeeded in building a partnership between Asia and Europe which is as strong as Europe's partnership with America or America's partnership with Asia?

Second, have Asia and Europe developed a habit of cooperating with each other? Third, do Asians and Europeans understand each other?

Third Side of the Triangle

5 The vision of our founding fathers was to build the missing third side of a triangle. The three points of the triangle are Asia, Europe and America.

6 Trans-Atlantic ties are based upon history, blood and culture. They are both deep and broad. There is a high comfort level between Europeans and Americans, although it sometimes looks like a love-hate relationship. However, in spite of the ups and downs, the partnership between Europe and America is a very strong one.

7 The relationship between America and Asia is based upon geography, economic inter-dependence and a shared vision of the future. Since coming to office, President Obama has held an annual summit meeting with the leaders of ASEAN. America participates actively in APEC, ARF and the East Asia Summit. It has treaty allies and military assets in the region. Under President Obama, Asia has been given priority over other regions. This is driven partly by his understanding that Asia will be the most dynamic region of the world in this century and partly by the rise of China. The US is determined to maintain its leadership role in the Asia Pacific.

8 In the case of the Asia-Europe partnership, my impression is that it is still the weakest side of the triangle. To be sure, there has been a steady increase in trade, investment and tourism between the two sides in the past 16 years. For example, the EU has become Singapore's second largest trading partner, after Malaysia. The EU is also ASEAN's second largest trading partner, after China. The EU has concluded an FTA with South Korea and is negotiating one with Singapore and Malaysia.

9 On the political side, however, we have wasted too many years quarrelling over East Timor (1995-1999) and Myanmar (2004-2011) when we should have focused our energies on areas in which we have shared interests and new opportunities. We do not have, on the European side, political leaders who have a personal interest in and understanding of Asia. We really miss an earlier generation of European leaders, such as, Helmut Schmidt, Helmut Kohl, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, Jacques Chirac, Valery Giscard d'Estaing and Martti Ahtisaari. Those leaders had an interest in and empathy for Asia. Let me give you an example. The 94-year-old former Chancellor of Germany, Dr Helmut Schmidt, was in Singapore recently. I was very impressed by his statement that before he passes on, he wanted to see again, Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore and Zhu Rongji of China. I cannot think of any younger European leader who would have that kind of admiration for Asia's leaders. The same comment is probably applicable to the Asian side. The result is that the relationship is transactional and lacks warmth. This probably explains why so many European leaders do not turn up for ASEM meetings, even when they are held in Europe.

The Habit of Cooperation

10 We live in an increasingly inter-dependent world. Asia's interests and those of Europe intersect more than ever before. Asia is also rising very rapidly in the world economy. Europe's future prosperity will, therefore, depend increasingly on its engagement with Asia. All this suggests that it is in their mutual interests to cooperate across a whole spectrum of issues and challenges.

11 What is the track record? The track record is very modest. Asia and Europe have cooperated bilaterally and in international fora on a few issues, such as, counter-terrorism. The two regions have yet to develop a habit of cooperation. The potential is enormous. The areas in which Asia and Europe could cooperate to their mutual interests include climate change, food security, non-traditional security challenges, such as, piracy, human-trafficking, pandemics, biodiversity, fisheries and the oceans, combating rising protectionism and economic nationalism, reforming the governance structures of the IMF and World Bank, etc.

Do Asians and Europeans Understand Each Other?

12 ASEF's mission is to "promote greater mutual understanding between Asia and Europe through intellectual, cultural and people-to-people exchanges". In the past 15 years, ASEF has organised more than 500 projects, involving 15,000 Asians and Europeans. ASEF has launched many wonderful projects bringing together students, young parliamentarians and other young leaders, journalists, artists, museum directors, university professors and other thinkers, etc. Let us give ASEF a well-deserved round of applause.

13 Is it possible to say that, as a result of ASEF's good work, there is better mutual understanding between Asians and Europeans? I think ASEF has helped, but, fundamentally, Asians and Europeans still do not understand each other. What is the problem? I think there are several problems. First, in order to have mutual understanding, each party to a dialogue must be willing to listen to and understand the other, without seeking to impose one's views on the other. The problem is that Europe sees itself as a "normative power", ie, as a region which sets the universal norm, whether it be on the death penalty or on the environment. This role often makes Europe a very poor interlocutor because its mission is not to appreciate alternative views but to impose its view on the world.

14 Second, Europe is often unable to appreciate that there is more than one way to deal with a problem, for example, Myanmar, and that the European way may not be the only way or even the best way. On Myanmar, I think ASEAN's policy of active engagement has proven to be more productive than the EU's preference for isolation and sanctions. The European narrative is, however, that Myanmar has changed because of the pressure from and sanctions by Europe. Perhaps ASEF can hold a symposium to discuss this question.

15 Third, Asia has been learning from Europe for centuries. Asians continue to want to learn from Europe. For example, thousands of Asian students go to Europe each year for their tertiary education. Thousands more study at the Asian Campuses of

European Universities. I wonder if the day will ever come when Europe will be humble enough to want to learn from Asia. When I heard three European leaders say, in quick succession, that multiculturalism is a failure, I wish that their advisers had suggested that they should visit Southeast Asia to see how other countries have made a success of multiculturalism. When I saw pictures of Europeans demonstrating against austerity measures, my mind goes back to 1997. I recall that, in 1997, when Asia was in crisis, ordinary citizens in South Korea and Thailand brought their gold and jewellery to give to their respective governments in order to help save their countries. Is there a lesson here which Europe can learn from Asia on love of country and the willingness to accept short-term pain for long-term gain? Is there a cultural explanation for the different ways in which Asians and Europeans have responded in times of financial crisis?

Conclusion

16 Let me conclude by making three suggestions for ASEF's consideration.

17 First, in order to grow the business and economic links between Asia and Europe, I suggest that the current Asia-Europe Business Forum be re-invented as the ASEM CEO's summit. The inspiration for this suggestion is the highly successful APEC CEO's Summit.

18 Second, in order to nurture a future generation of political leaders, in Asia and Europe, who would have a deep interest in and understanding of the other side, I suggest that ASEF considers launching a new forum for young political leaders to meet one another and to network. The forum would meet twice a year, once in Europe (summer) and once in Asia (winter). Those who agree to attend should be encouraged to make a commitment to attend the forum for two successive years. This would enable them to become friends.

19 Third, since the media plays such an important role reporting on and interpreting the developments in the two regions and in shaping the mindsets of their readers, viewers and listeners, I suggest that ASEF consider launching an internship programme for young journalists. European journalists would be attached to an Asian media organisation, both mainstream media and new media, and vice versa.

20 Thank you very much.

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