

ASIA-EUROPE PARLIAMENTARY PARTNERSHIP

Brussels – 26-28 September 2010

Key Note Speech by Vice-Prime Minister & Minister of Foreign Affairs Steven VANACKERE

Brussels- 27 September 2010

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Check upon delivery

Dear Parliamentary friends, Dear Guests,

Today, we meet in a truly remarkable setting. This gathering brings together parliamentary 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 ASEP family, we are linking up. Today however I want to paraphrase the Ghanaian politician Kwame Nkruma by saying: “We face neither East nor West, we face Forward”.

Let me first of all express our common gratitude to Mr. Danny Pieters, President of the Senate and Mr. André Flahaut, President of the House of Representatives, for hosting this Asia-Europe Parliamentary Partnership meeting in the prestigious setting of the Belgian Federal Parliament, in the heart of our capital.

The Parliamentary Partnership has been there since the very start of the Asia-Europe Meeting process in 1996. Over the years, it has provided some outstanding examples of parliamentary diplomacy and stimulating exchanges. It has brought Asia and Europe closer to each other. I would even go a step further. The Partnership 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. Asia and Europe have a common fondness for structured relationships which, by experience, foster security and stability between nations. They both strive for an economic model that is balanced between consumption, saving and investment and that can prove sustainable over the long term. Also, Asia and Europe both place human development at the centre of their policies. They prefer multilateral and just governance of the world rather than zones of influence and relationships based on power.

In my view, the Parliamentary Partnership plays a specific role in that relationship. Because you are elected by the people and contribute to shape perceptions, your work enjoys natural attention and visibility. You are opinion makers and what you jointly say carries the authority of a debate held, of positions having been confronted and tested out.

For this reason, we as a Host country proposed to the leaders that they, in the course of their agenda, examine the recommendations and suggestions issued from your deliberations. This has never been done before. With this initiative, we hope to improve the awareness of the respective views and opinions. We hope to enrich the discussion at Summit level with your insights. We also hope that it will foster the meaning of the work that you as parliamentarians accomplish and the work that government leaders complete, each within their own specific responsibilities.

Over the last twenty years, enormous progress has been achieved in raising the quality of life of Europeans and Asians alike. It is the result of a flourishing relationship : Asia and Europe have now become each other's main trade and investment partner. A nice way to put it is that both regions "owe their success to each other". Still, 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 economic and financial crisis. Millions of European and Asian citizens still suffer from its consequences. Governments managed to stop the downward spiral in economic activity and to control unemployment levels. They rescued the financial sector and stimulated the economy with increased expenditures. However, public finances paid the price for this, particularly in Europe. In Spring, the Euro crisis forced the European governments to pursue accelerated fiscal

consolidation. On the other hand, Asia faces the dangers of overheated economies, rising inflation and speculative bubbles. It is of utmost importance that Europe and Asia see eye to eye on these important challenges. In Beijing two years ago, when the crisis unfolded literally under our eyes, the Fifth Meeting of the Parliamentary Partnership recommended to intensify dialogue and cooperation to restore financial stability. The same recommendation is valid today. Dialogue and cooperation are needed for sustained recovery, putting order in the public finances and completing the reform of banking regulation and supervision. As Asia and Europe have prospered together, they have to address the present difficulties together and I might add: without playing the blame game.

The second challenge is about the quality of life of millions of Europeans and Asians. Present patterns of production and consumption are not sustainable in the long run. Energy saving, efficient use of resources and clean technologies must be developed and deployed in order to pursue prosperity for everyone. It is true that the preservation of social safety nets and mechanisms for social solidarity has become an uphill battle. But climate change, environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity and rapid urbanization are endangering the future of our people in a less visible but no less real way. The Asia-Europe Parliamentary Partnership has concluded before that increased dialogue can contribute to address these issues. I can only agree and hope that ASEM 8 will give a further impulse in this direction.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Europe, it must be said, is fascinated by Asia and vice-versa. Europe admires the growth rates achieved by the Asian economies. It understands that the future of its economic and social model depends on major structural reforms promoting entrepreneurship and competitiveness. Asia, for her part, understands that economic growth alone does not produce stable and harmonious societies. It is interested in the European practice of shared prosperity through the combination of income redistribution and public services.

This mutual curiosity is a common strategic asset. It is a solid basis to build a tighter relationship, which would allow Europe and Asia to play a greater role in defining the outcome of important gatherings such as the next UN Climate Change Conference in Cancun in November or the UN High Level Event on Sustainable Development scheduled in Brazil in 2012.

The first ASEM meeting in Bangkok in 1996 stated up front that an important goal of ASEM is to build greater understanding between the people 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 twelfth Business Forum will meet on the side, with a focus on the integration of the respective financial sectors. The eighth People's Forum will bring together non-governmental organizations, including trade unions, from both regions, 300 people in all. ASEF, ASEM's institution in charge of stimulating exchanges of opinions and

knowledge, is holding its fourth Connecting Civil Society event. All these are very important because they assure continuity of the ASEM process and friendship among Asians and Europeans.

Talking about friendship, I can not 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 common efforts and resources from the participating Asian countries and from Belgium. A nicer symbol of concrete cooperation can hardly be imagined .

Dear friends,

Belgium is particularly proud to host the ASEM 8 Summit and the parallel gatherings. I say this not only because it promises to be a grand event but also because I sense an opportunity for Europe and Asia to make a new step towards each other, recognizing the new importance they represent to each other in the present fluid multi-polar context.

In the name of the Belgian Government, I sincerely hope that this sixth Asia Europe Parliamentary Partnership will contribute to new developments in our relationship, to new plans and projects for the future. As we think about measures to take in response to the crisis, as we seek to tackle the longer term challenge of sustainable development, we have a duty to be

imaginative. We also must produce concrete results, because you know, as the 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 that we can do better. I would like to call on you to help us move the Asia-Europe strategic partnership to a new level.

Let us look at it as a common project, designed to make our societies move "forward", "together", towards balance and stability, towards harmony and peace, towards "greater wellbeing and greater dignity for all", towards societies in which the human person can give the best of himself.

Thank you very much.