

ASEM Public Conference on Europe-Asia Inter-Regional Relations, Brussels - 11-13 July 2010. Closing speech by Vice-Prime Minister & Minister of Foreign Affairs Steven Vanackere

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Guests,

Check upon delivery

For two days, you have been exchanging views on relations between Asia and Europe. Let me congratulate you, because to my mind, there is in the contemporary world no more fascinating and more constructive subject to discuss. We are moving at full speed towards the Eighth ASEM Summit. This meeting will bring together the leaders 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 family, we are linking up. We can today truly paraphrase the Ghanaian politician Kwame Nkruma who said “We face neither East nor West, we face Forward”.

Ever since the start of ASEM in 1996, Asia and Europe have kept their two-yearly appointment with remarkable regularity. This is a testimony of the degree of commonality between them: structures in both regions have grown out of a long and turbulent history, both pride themselves of age old traditions and both present a wealth in cultural diversity. They have a common predilection for organized and 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. They similarly place human development at the centre of their policies. They both favour multilateral and equitable governance of the world rather than zones of influence and relationships based on power.

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 Prime Minister Leterme two years ago at the ASEM 7 Summit in Beijing. Captured in short as “Quality of Life”, this 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.

In the last twenty years, enormous progress has been achieved indeed in raising the quality of life of Europeans and Asians alike. In part it is thanks to the thriving relationship between them. In the last few years, Asia and Europe have become each other's main trading and investment partner. A nice way to put it is that both regions "owe their success to each other". Yet, it is a secret for no one that the mood today is gloomier and that the coming months are not times for complacency but times of important challenges. I count two of them which are set to top the agenda of the Summit coming early October.

First, the economic and financial crisis is not over. The livelihood of millions of European and Asian citizens is not secured. 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. But now, in Europe, public finances are showing the strain. The crisis of the common currency has forced accelerated fiscal consolidation upon European governments. Asia faces the dangers of overheating economies, rising inflation and speculative bubbles. In both regions, the difficulty consists of combining reducing Keynesian support with growth friendly policies. It is of utmost importance that Europe and Asia see eye to eye about ways to address the crisis. As they have prospered together, they have to fight the downturn together.

A month after the ASEM 8 Summit, the first G-20 to take place in a non-G-8 country will be held in Seoul. I can not imagine a better occasion for Asia and Europe to show leadership and promote the measured and balanced responses to which both are historically inclined.

The second challenge equally concerns the livelihood of millions of European and Asians. Climate change, environmental degradation, water-, air- and soil pollution, losses of forests and of biodiversity, and massive urbanization are endangering the future of our people in a more surreptitious but no less real way. The holding coming September of a UN High-Level Plenary Meeting in New York to assess progress towards the Millennium Development Goals serves as a reminder that the job of eradicating poverty is still far from completed. A few years ago, when the global economy was thriving, unfortunately social inequalities did not diminish within our societies. Under the present difficult circumstances, the preservation of safety nets and of mechanisms for social solidarity has become an uphill battle of its own. Still, present crisis conditions open opportunities to review how we live, produce and consume. Never waste a good crisis, they say. Mentalities are evolving towards more sustainable economic models. Though these changes take place slowly and progressively, I would like to express again my conviction that Asia and Europe converge on them and that they are the best partner to each other to advance all at once green economic development and social cohesion.

The truth of the matter is that Europe is fascinated by Asia and vice-versa. Europe envies the growth rates achieved by the Asian economies. It understands that the future of its economic and social model depends on major structural reforms unleashing entrepreneurship and competitiveness. Conversely, Asia 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. Also, the management of conflicting economic, social and environmental demands in Europe's pluralistic societies through dense webs of consultation and participatory mechanisms catches attention in Asia.

This mutual curiosity is our, I mean European and Asian, strategic asset. It is genuine and sincere and 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 such as the next UN Climate Change Conference in Cancun in November or, somewhat more remotely, the UN High Level Event on Sustainable Development scheduled in Brazil in 2012.

Dear friends,

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

True to this mandate, ASEM 8 will be more than the Summit of the leaders. In parallel Europe-Asia meetings, the sixth Parliamentary Partnership, the twelfth Business Forum with focus on the financial sector, the eighth People's Forum for non-governmental organizations and a specific trade unions day will bring together more than thousand people of both regions. The leaders have it on their agenda that they will examine the recommendations and suggestions issued from these dialogues. Also ASEF, the ASEM Foundation who holds the mandate to stimulate exchanges among Asians and Europeans, will hold a gathering of civil society representatives in Brussels begin October. This public conference, incidently, has over the last two days contributed in exactly the same vein to better understanding between the people. As host country of the summit, we are especially attentive.

Facilitating, stimulating or even organizing academic exchanges will prove, I am sure, the best long term investment in European-Asian friendship. The Erasmus Mundus program is a success on which the ASEM Education Secretariat, just established by the ASEM Education Ministers in Bonn, Germany, will hopefully build. ASEM 8 will want to be very supportive of this structural effort to entice mutual interest in each other, for it is the young generation of today that will make the collective well-being of Asians and Europeans come true tomorrow.

Talking about friendship, I can not but evoke the magnificent exhibition 'A Passage to Asia' which I opened at BOZAR, here in Brussels, only a few weeks 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 ASEM meetings which will take place in Brussels in autumn. 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,

Let me be frank with you, Belgium is particularly proud to host the ASEM 8 Summit later this year. I say this not only because it promises to be a prestigious event, one of the more challenging ones to take place 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 a new step towards each other, recognizing the new importance, and asset, they represent to each other in the present turbulent multipolar context.

In the name of the Belgian Government, I express the sincere hope that ASEM 8 will lay the way for new developments in the relationship, for new plans for the future, for 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 and above all to produce concrete results. As the saying goes, good ideas not only need wings, they also need landing gear. As we prepare for the Summit together with our European and Asian partners, we realize that we can do more and also that we can do better. Knowing that a number of ASEM Senior Officials are in the audience because they take part in the Senior Official meeting of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow here in Brussels, I call on ASEM members to help us move the comprehensive, equal and mutually beneficial Asia-Europe strategic partnership to a new level.

We think that there is scope for upgrading the quality of the dialogue, for focusing more on the issues of the day, in particular those relating to sustainable production and consumption patterns and for involving a larger variety of stakeholders. Trade, investments and exchanges of technologies between our two regions can be intensified and made to contribute to the emergence of green economies and contribute to social justice.

I would encourage looking at it as a common project, designed to make our societies move "forward", "together", towards balance and stability, towards harmony and peace. It should be our recipe for achieving "greater wellbeing and greater dignity for all", for bringing about societies in which the human person can give the best of himself.

Thank you very much.