

EU Centre Commentary Series

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ASEM Day – What does it say about Asia-Europe relations?

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A quick search on “daysoftheyear.com” reveals an incredible list of holidays and commemorative days all around the world, reflecting our diversities and development. There is Data Privacy Day observed mainly in Western countries to raise awareness and promote best practices in privacy and data protection. There is World Emoji Day to celebrate the ubiquitous use of emojis in many of our daily communications. And there is International Yoga Day, perhaps signifying the “arrival” of India on the world stage.

A look into the UN website on its observances of International Days reminds us of the multitude of issues that still require our attention, awareness and action – from Human Rights Day to World Day against Human Trafficking, from International Day for Elimination of Racial Discrimination to Elimination of Violence against Women, and from Suicide Prevention to Safety and Health at Work.

A search on ASEM Day (“Asia meets Europe/Europe meets Asia Day”, 1 March) brings us to the ASEM Infoboard, ASEF website, and websites of a number of ASEM member states (but not all). But what is ASEM Day supposed to be? A celebration of blossoming Asia-Europe relations, or a reminder of the need for more engagement between Asia and Europe? Is it supposed to be commemorative occasion or a call for action?

We believe that ASEM Day is BOTH. We can take heart from the fact that the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) process has come a long way since it was first launched in 1996 with a leaders’ summit in Bangkok. Besides the biennial summit and the foreign ministers’ meeting, there is now a plethora of meetings between ministers and senior officials covering education, culture, transport and migration. From an initially East Asia-Western Europe bias, ASEM has developed into a trans-continental Asia-Europe framework encompassing the Eurasian landmass. Connectivity – between countries, people, businesses and institutions – is the name of the game.

At the same time the need remains for Europe and Asia to step up their cooperation and engagement on a range of issues, bilateral, regional and global. As times get more uncertain and unpredictable and the list of challenges facing nations and regions grows longer, Europe and Asia need to work together to reduce geopolitical tensions, tackle climate change, implement the

Sustainable Development Goals, fight terrorism and radicalization, and address the challenge posed by refugees and illegal migration.

Complementing rather than duplicating work carried out in other multilateral fora, ASEM should make full use of its informal approach as well as of the involvement of different stakeholders including non-state actors, businesspeople, and civil society to create “networks” of policy entrepreneurs and practical problem-solvers. The summit-level dialogue provides the blueprint for focussed initiatives and projects at the intergovernmental level to address all the above-mentioned common challenges.

Yet, it is true that ASEM is still not known widely by the public, and ASEM Day does not have the same resonance as Earth Day or Human Rights Day. There will be celebrations in Brussels and maybe some other capitals in Asia and Europe but ASEM is still hardly known beyond a small cluster of senior officials, academics, experts and policy makers. We have to work harder to make ASEM more visible, credible and relevant.

ASEM Day should serve to remind us that there is much more that Asia and Europe can do together to shape our future destiny – whether it will be one of incessant conflicts and unfulfilled potential, or one of dialogue and development towards the fulfillment of people’s sense of justice and prosperity.

Furthermore, ASEM Day should be a call to political leaders, business executives, civil society activists, scholars and youth that Asia-Europe relations need more attention as well as action.

Last but not least, ASEM Day should remind us that ASEM is not just a meeting of governments, political leaders and senior officials. It is a platform for the people of Europe and Asia - for all of us to do our part to increase awareness of our connected fate and security, to understand the price of inaction, and to foster joint actions towards a common future.

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About the EU Centre

Established in 2008, the EU Centre in Singapore was a joint project funded by the European Union (EU), the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and the National University of Singapore (NUS). From 2017, the Singapore Management University (SMU) has also become a partner in contributing to the operations of the EU Centre. The EU is now a joint partnership of these three local universities.

The primary mission of the EU Centre is to promote knowledge and understanding of the EU, its policies and development of its relations with Singapore and Southeast Asia through research, publications and different outreach programmes.

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