

MY ASEM WISHLIST

How Asia and Europe should really be working together

Asia and Europe are in the midst of rapid political, economic and societal change. While some of the volatility is worrying and unsettling, positive developments are also afoot. Asia and Europe are buzzing with new ideas, constructive initiatives and technological innovations aimed at building a better world. This moment of change means that, more than ever before, this is the time for a stronger Asia-Europe conversation on common aspirations and challenges – as well as on differences.

The Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) with its 53 partners across Europe and Asia provides the perfect platform for such a discussion. But while it has evolved into a crucial link between the two regions since its founding in 1996, most participants agree on the need for more ambition and courage to take ASEM into new areas, expand existing cooperation and respond to the challenge of living in a turbulent and unpredictable world.

This discussion paper goes beyond officialdom and draws on the insights of the ‘unusual suspects’ – students, teachers, activists, journalists, think tankers, etc. – who offer their unvarnished views on how to give ASEM more traction in a changing world and explore new dimensions of the Asia-Europe relationship.

THESE RECOMMENDATIONS TO ASIAN AND EUROPEAN LEADERS DRAW ON THE VIEWPOINTS AND IDEAS PRESENTED BY THE AUTHORS OF THE ARTICLES IN THIS DISCUSSION PAPER:

- 1) Emphasise ASEM’s increasingly relevant geopolitical utility and dimension by taking a bold joint stance on defending, promoting and expanding the open, rules-based international order; sustaining multilateral cooperation; engaging in preventative diplomacy; and developing security cooperation, including in the sector of non-traditional security.
- 2) In a world in disarray, give ASEM a central and stabilising role in discussions that aim at improving global governance and cross-border collaboration in areas such as climate change and the Agenda 2030 of sustainable development goals, particularly when it comes to the challenge of finding innovative sources of finance for reducing poverty and promoting education, especially for girls.
- 3) Make ASEM the hub for an expanding conversation on the different facets of Eurasia, with a special focus on developing sustainable, state-of-the-art Eurasian transport and infrastructure links through various connectivity initiatives such as China’s Belt and Road Initiative, Europe’s Trans-European Networks and connectivity proposals made by Japan, South Korea, India and other ASEM partners.

- 4) Given uncertainties surrounding global trade and investment regimes, start exploring the opportunities and challenges involved in negotiating a ground-breaking ASEM Open and Fair Trade Agreement (OFTA), involving Asian and European businesses, as a follow-up to bilateral trade negotiations between the EU and several Asian countries and a potential revival of talks on an EU-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement.
- 5) Encourage more frequent and smoother travel between Asia and Europe by easing current travel restrictions for business, tourism and students in order to ensure better people-to-people contacts and mutual understanding but also to facilitate business relations, cultural links and academic cooperation.
- 6) Make ASEM more people-friendly by improving outreach to civil society representatives; recognising and understanding the importance of local traditions; and investing in academic research across Eurasia to uncover and learn from the two regions' connected pasts.
- 7) Emphasise the role of women in creating stable, peaceful and more tolerant societies, especially through their participation in drafting counter-terrorism strategies and create an ASEM-wide research network to investigate gender implications of extremism and violence.
- 8) With media freedom at risk in many countries in Asia and Europe, create an ASEM taskforce consisting of education and media professionals to share experiences and develop strategies to build an independent, free and credible press and to fight disinformation and fake news, especially through disseminating information in schools.
- 9) Given the shrinking space for human rights activists and defenders in many Asian and European countries, encourage like-minded ASEM partners to initiate joint initiatives and strategies to defend and promote civil society and to ensure that national legislation, policies and practices do not undermine or restrict human rights, media freedom and the rule of law.