

Asia-Europe Meeting
High-Level Policy Dialogue

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ASEM At 25: Positioning A Role In A
Resetting/Transforming World

Session II: ASEM Cooperation: A Strong Platform For
Multilateral Engagement

Chair: Ambassador Ivo Sieber of Switzerland to
Vietnam

Keynote Speaker: Tommy Koh, Ambassador-At-Large, of
Singapore

Salutations

I congratulate Vietnam for hosting this high-level policy dialogue.
I thank Vietnam for inviting me to deliver one of the keynotes in
Session II. I look forward to learning from the chairman of my

session, Ambassador Ivo Sieber, Vietnam's ASEM Senior Official and the five speakers of this session, namely, Ambassador Nguyen Nguyet Nga, Ambassador Xie Bohua, Ambassador Kirill Barsky, and Ambassador Christina Romila.

Introduction

The focus of this session is on multilateralism and multilateral cooperation. I want to put forward three suggestions for your consideration:

First Suggestion

My first suggestion is for ASEM to endorse multilateralism and to reject unilateralism and bilateralism. The 45th President of the United States of America, Donald Trump, was of the view that multilateralism undermined American sovereignty. He preferred to act unilaterally. If a problem could not be resolved unilaterally, he opted for the bilateral approach. In a bilateral negotiation, the bigger country enjoys the advantage. The weaker negotiating partner will often have no choice but to yield to the bigger country's demands. Fortunately, the Biden Administration has returned to multilateralism. It would be very helpful for ASEM, a

grouping of 53 countries, big and small, to state clearly that it supports multilateralism and rejects unilateralism.

Second Suggestion

My second suggestion is for ASEM to support, in words and in deeds, our multilateral institutions. I ask you to pay particular attention to two of them, namely, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Trade Organization (WTO).

WHO

The WHO is a specialized agency of the UN, responsible for international public health. It was founded in 1948 and has its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. Its approved budget for 2020-2021, is US\$5.84 billion. By way of comparison, the health budget of New York City is \$88.5 billion. The Director-General is Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, a former Health and Foreign Minister of Ethiopia.

WHO was criticised by President Trump for its alleged bias in favour of China in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. The US

began the process of withdrawing from the organization and withheld its financial contributions. Fortunately, President Biden rescinded President Trump's decision on his first day in office.

The World Health Assembly, the decision-making body in the WHO, mandated the appointment of an independent panel for pandemic preparedness and response. The panel was co-chaired by the former Prime Minister of New Zealand, Helen Clark and the former President of Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. The panel has made several important recommendations in areas such as:

- (i) The current way in which WHO is financed, primarily through voluntary contributions and not assessed contributions, seriously affects the quality of its performance and poses a risk to its integrity and independence. In 1970, assessed contributions constituted 62 percent of WHO's budget. Today, it is less than 20 percent. Not only is the budget too small but it is not being adequately funded by its member states.

- (ii) Strengthening the authority and independence of the Director-General, including being empowered to act decisively in a public health emergency of international concern such as a pandemic. Influential member states should refrain from using their clout to compromise his integrity and independence; and

- (iii) The WHO's governance structure, specifically, strengthening the governance capacity of the Executive Board and augmenting the resourcing of WHO Country Offices.

ASEM should reaffirm its support for the WHO. At the same time, it should also carefully review the recommendations of the Independent Panel. In order to carry out its important mandate, the WHO has to be adequately funded and staffed. This is, unfortunately not the case now.

WTO

The WTO is an inter-governmental organization with 164 member states. It regulates and facilitates trade between

countries. It was founded in 1995, succeeding the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). The current Director-General is Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, a former Finance Minister of Nigeria.

International trade is the life-blood of many countries, especially in Asia. International trade has enabled several countries in Northeast and Southeast Asia, to break out of the poverty trap and join the ranks of the middle-income and high-income countries. An effective WTO is therefore important to all of the members of ASEM.

In 1994, in Marrakesh, Morocco, the WTO's members adopted a compulsory dispute-settlement system. Under the system, any member can initiate a trade dispute against any other member, for violation of the WTO's laws. The country complained against cannot opt out of the system. However, any country which is dissatisfied with the decision of the dispute panel, can appeal to the Appellate Body.

The Trump Administration was angered by a WTO dispute panel's decision that the imposition of levies, on more than \$200 billion of Chinese exports to the US, was a breach of the WTO's

laws. Both the Obama and Trump Administrations blocked the appointment of Appellate Judges. The latter also threatened to withdraw from the organization and blocked the appointment of Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, as Director-General.

Although President Biden is a multilateralist, his focus will be on reviving the domestic economy. He will also give greater attention to the concerns of the labour unions and the environmental movement. He will not be averse to adopting protectionist measures to protect US jobs.

The WTO should focus on the following. First, it should make itself more relevant to new developments, such as, the digital economy. Second, it should become a more effective body. After 20 years of negotiations, the WTO is still unable to bring the Doha Round of Multilateral Trade Negotiations, to a successful conclusion. Third, the WTO has to address the harmful consequences of free trade and free trade agreements, such as, unemployment, growing inequality and the impact of trade on the environment.

ASEM should defend the WTO and the principles it represents, such as, free trade and non-discrimination. At the same time,

ASEM should demand that the WTO reform itself, in order to become more relevant, more efficient and more responsible.

Third Suggestion

My third suggestion is for ASEM to act together, in a significant way, to fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. First, ASEM should support vaccine multilateralism and oppose vaccine nationalism. ASEM should also support, in cash and in kind, WHO's COVAX Facility. Second, several ASEM members, namely, China, Germany, India, Russia and the United Kingdom produce vaccines against COVID-19. Is it possible for the vaccine-producing countries to help the other countries, especially the developing countries? Many developing countries are unable to acquire the vaccines for their people. The situation is so bad that the Director-General of WHO has described it as "vaccine apartheid". No country, no region should be left behind because no one is safe unless every one is safe. This is an occasion when we can make it meaningful and beneficial to be a member of ASEM.

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