Chapter 12
Challenges for Parliamentary Diplomacy in South and South-East Asia and Europe: A Practitioner’s Perspective

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Introduction

In the last 25 years, Asia emerged as the world’s fastest growing region. The continent accounts for more than a half of the world’s population and one quarter of the economic wealth generated every year. Actors such as China and India are transforming the world’s geopolitical landscape at a rapid pace. This ‘economic miracle’ took place despite huge challenges, ranging from abject poverty to ongoing conflicts, human rights violations, natural disasters and rising inequalities. At the centre of the East Asian regional integration architecture, the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) launched in December 2015 the much-anticipated ASEAN Economic Community with the ambition of becoming a pivotal player in the region. Its integration process faces serious hurdles, however, because its member states – with wide demographic disparities, different levels of economic development and divergent political systems – are rather heterogeneous.

The interdependence between Europe and Asia has reached very significant levels and is becoming critical for the future growth, prosperity and security prospects of both sides. Asia has become the main trading partner of the European Union (EU), accounting for one third of the EU’s total trade. More than 26 per cent of EU outward investment goes to Asia. By the end of 2012, euro-denominated assets accounted for around 25 per cent of the holdings of Asia’s major economies.1 Yet the partnership must develop beyond trade. Today’s threats have no borders and, in the twenty-first century, no solution

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can be found to any global challenge without the support of the Asian nations. The EU and the Asian countries can be allies and must work together to achieve common goals.

Governments and regional institutions are actively trying to strengthen relations further, but foreign policy is no longer within the exclusive remit of diplomats. There are many more active forces at work in modern diplomacy, and parliaments are among those forces. Individual parliamentarians and local, national or inter-regional parliaments can all contribute, and they must all be engaged in ensuring public acceptance of the policies and international agreements that directly impact upon citizens’ lives. As the people’s representatives, parliamentarians – with fewer constraints and a larger degree of autonomy than executives – have a major role to play in defining policies and garnering public support for those policies.²

However, and despite the EU’s commitment to consolidating and supporting democracy worldwide, the parliamentary dimension of the Asia–Europe relationship remains largely absent. Naturally, for many in Europe, the priorities are elsewhere and are focused in particular on: the Eurozone debt crisis; economic recession and high unemployment levels; relations with Ukraine, Russia, the Balkans and the Middle East; and the problem of radical Islamism. These challenges are all pulling the EU’s attention away from Asia and this leaves little space, time and energy for developing strong parliamentary links with a far-away region. Asian issues risk being put once again far back on the European agenda.

Generally speaking, the role of national parliaments in Asia has yet to be fully developed and it remains weak, if not marginal. With the notable exceptions of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (AIPA) and the Asian–Pacific Parliamentarians’ Union (APPU), regional parliamentary assemblies simply do not figure on the map. Among the 40 institutions listed and analysed in a 2010 study by the Asian Development Bank on sub-regional cooperation, none of them covers parliaments.³ The existence of a parliament in a country is, of course, not sufficient to guarantee its democratic credentials. It is true that almost all countries in Asia have a parliament. Yet it is important to recognize that not all countries that have parliaments in this region can be regarded as