Relations EU/Asia: enhanced partnerships, strategic framework

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The European Parliament voted 440 to 11 with 30 abstentions in favour of the report by Mr Jules MAATEN (ELDR, NL) setting out a strategic framework for enhanced partnership between Europe and Asia with a strong emphasis on respect for human rights and democracy. In view of the importance of the region and links with Europe, Parliament expects Council to set out clear priorities for the EU's policy towards Asia. Parliament recognises ASEM (the Asia-Europe Meeting) as a valuable potential instrument for practical co-operation but feels that its objectives need to be clarified. It also finds it regrettable that democracies such as India and Taiwan are not part of the organisation and urges the EU to find ways of bringing Taiwan into ASEM. At the same time it calls for regular parliamentary oversight of ASEM by the Asia-Europe parliamentary meeting. In this context, MEPs welcome the recent Asia/Europe Parliamentary meeting (ASEP II) and are proposing preparatory parallel meetings for ASEM summits. In addition, the resolution urges Europe and Asia to hold a dialogue on global challenges post-September 11 and to try and reduce tension between India and Pakistan. Mutual respect between cultures and religions must be encouraged, in particular in countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia, so that they opt for a moderate form of Islam. On the economic front, MEPs give their backing to economic co-operation programmes, especially for SMEs, but are critical of the relatively low level of EU aid to Asia and believe that these resources should in any case be better distributed. They welcome the fact that new EU delegations are to be opened soon in the region. However, they repeat their demand for a trade office to be opened in Taiwan and call on the Commission to start the negotiation process needed to conclude an EU-Taiwan free trade agreement. As regards the civil society, the Parliament stresses that, by virtue of the cooperation agreements between the European Union, Vietnam and Laos, respect for democratic principles and human, civil and political rights by the authorities of these countries can no longer be seen as a question solely regarding Laos or Vietnam, but must become a matter of direct concern to the Union and its citizens; regrets that the Commission has generally side-stepped this problem, including in the recent strategy papers it has drawn up on these countries. Furthermore, it urges China to eliminate all human rights abuses and to lift restrictions on the media and freedom of expression; It also reaffirms the extreme importance of the it attaches to all measures designed to combat the greenhouse effect, and calls on the Council and Commission to propose to the countries of Asia new joint initiatives which take account of the specific needs of developing countries. In its conclusions, the Parliament reiterates its longstanding support for the ASEP process and calls for parallel, prior ASEP meetings before ASEM Summits to allow for parliamentary discussion and oversight; it therefore agrees to consider hosting ASEP III prior to ASEM V in Hanoi in 2004. Its call, now more valid than ever, for a change in attitude towards Asia, based on the realisation of the need for a mutually respectful partnership with Asian nations and stresses that a such a partnership shouldbe based on respect for human rights, which are the foundation for stable relations between nations. Lastly, it urges the Members of the ASEM process to continue and intensify the political dialogue on human rights, democracy and the rule of law so that the common basis for cooperation among the Member States and towards third countries is strengthened. It states, in conclusion, the need for the EU to be seen as a credible partner, one moderated by the necessary balance, consistency and commitment in its opening-up of further avenues towards greater East-West coherence.