

**REMARKS BY MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS DR VIVIAN BALAKRISHNAN AT
ASEM HIGH-LEVEL POLICY DIALOGUE**

**“ASEM AT 25: STRENGTHENING ASIA-EUROPE PARTNERSHIP IN A
TRANSFORMING WORLD”**

HANOI, VIETNAM

22 JUNE 2021, 1330HRS

Excellencies,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1 Our host, Minister Bui Thanh Son, made a very important point that the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is indispensable. There are four reasons why this meeting, and this engagement is indispensable. First, we are transiting from a unipolar world to a multipolar world. In that multipolar world, Europe and Asia will play very significant roles. The second reason why ASEM is indispensable, is that we are still faced with this current emergency, this crisis due to COVID-19, and it will go on for some time. The third reason is that we are in the midst of a once in a lifetime digital revolution with a profound impact on jobs, society, and politics. The fourth reason is that there remains a clear and present danger of climate change, for which a global response is essential. And so, I submit that Mr Bui Thanh Son’s description of ASEM as “indispensable” is absolutely spot-on.

2 Let me quickly sketch out three challenges that we face. The first is to deal with the immediate crisis of COVID-19. COVID-19 is endemic. The possibility of it disappearing the way its predecessor, SARS did, 18 years ago – we have lost that opportunity. COVID-19 will be permanent in humanity and it will come back in recurrent waves. We need to vaccinate, to test, to isolate, and to improve therapeutics. And while significant and indeed unprecedented progress has been made – if you had asked me a year ago if we would have vaccines within a year, as a doctor I would have told you that it was impossible. But the impossible has occurred. What we are witnessing now is great asymmetry, for instance, in the distribution of vaccination. Asymmetry ranging from some countries’ vaccination rates of more than 70 or even 80 percent, and some countries with less than one percent vaccination rates.

3 The second challenge we face is economics. COVID-19 decimated economic activity across the world. Because we all needed to impose some form of generalised lockdown, there was a very heavy price paid by all our people. There will be recovery this year, but again, just like the vaccination story, we are going to witness asymmetry in the pace of recovery. We need to make sure that we do not end up with another stratified world in the way we recover post-COVID-19.

4 The third, and perhaps the most painful challenge, is to recognise the crisis of global governance. If we cast our minds back to a year ago and recall the missed opportunities, the failure to coordinate, and the way the virus was allowed to escape into our populations and become endemic, and the failure to coordinate at a global level, I am afraid history will judge this generation harshly. If that was not enough, we also witnessed disruption of global supply chains, xenophobia, racism, and rising hyper-nationalism. What we thought was an interconnected happy village in fact turned out to be the opposite. In the face of these current and ongoing challenges, where does ASEM fit in? I think there is quite a lot that we can do.

5 On health, the cooperation between Asia and Europe is absolutely critical. ASEM issued the COVID-19 Ministerial Statement last year, which reaffirmed our commitment to strengthening dialogue and cooperation. But it was not just about words and pious aspirations. In fact, when you look at reality, Europe and China were the largest exporters of vaccines in the last few months. I give credit to Europe for being a reliable exporter of vaccines and honouring contracts, even when Europe itself was not fully vaccinated. Europe needs to be commended for its commitment to a rules-based system of honouring contracts and its understanding that the world would not be safe unless all of us were safe. I am glad that we all supported the COVAX facility. Singapore was a co-founder of the informal Friends of COVAX facility. Vaccine multilateralism is essential.

6 On the economic front, ASEM partners have continued to do our best to keep our economies open, to integrate our economies, and to continue to stand for the cause of free trade despite the political opposition accentuated by the fears brought on by COVID-19. On this point, it is worth reflecting that in just the last one or two years, the eleven of us proceeded through the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) even without the United States. Vietnam and Singapore have ratified the CPTPP. I am glad that the United Kingdom has expressed interest in joining the CPTPP. And last year, ASEAN, China, Japan, Republic of Korea, Australia and New Zealand signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) – probably the world's largest free trade agreement. The EU signed a free trade agreement with

Singapore, and a separate free trade agreement with Vietnam. And EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice President of the European Commission Josep Borrell would know that I have been encouraging the EU to explore an EU-ASEAN free trade agreement. In this day and age, standing up for free trade, negotiating, signing, ratifying, and trying to convince our domestic constituencies that free trade works and delivers for all our people is a political challenge. It is one which all politicians in this room need to fulfil.

7 Next, as vaccinations roll out and immunity levels around the world rise either by infection or vaccination – hopefully the latter because the mortality rates with infection cannot be ignored. The point is, the world will restart and our people will insist on resuming their lives. The question then is how we will reopen, allow travel, and reconnect our economies and our supply chains, and perhaps even build new capillaries. That means interoperability of our systems, mutual recognition of health and vaccine certificates, and the ability to verify across boundaries and across national systems. Speaking of connections between regions, I want to welcome the recent conclusion of the ASEAN-EU Comprehensive Air Travel Arrangement (CATA). This is the first time ever that two regions have signed a bloc-to-bloc air travel agreement. Given the battered state of aviation and airlines in the last one and a half years, I think this is a much-needed shot in the arm for aviation industries.

8 Another point – we do need to strengthen multilateralism. Not just because it is a nice-sounding word, but because we are transiting into a multipolar world. If we are to avoid repeating the mistakes of the last century, we need multilateralism and a rules-based system that works effectively. Now more than ever before, we need effective multilateral institutions including the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). These remain essential avenues to advance our shared interests. And here again, ASEM leaders, because of our instinctive support for multilateralism and a rules-based system, can play an invaluable role to support these institutions. This is the only way which we can secure peace and achieve prosperity in a world which would otherwise historically be at a very dangerous phase of transition. We do need greater international cooperation. There is no shortage of transboundary challenges. We have climate change looming over us, and cyberthreats emerging. Just as we become more dependent on our digital systems, the cyberthreats and cybercrimes become even more critical threats to our way of life and prosperity.

9 Let me conclude that if you had any doubts, let me put them to rest. The engagement between Europe and Asia is more relevant and essential than ever before. I thank you all for your support over the past 25 years. Let us look forward to another 25 years with hope, confidence and solidarity. Thank you all very much.

