Two quite exceptional entities

India and the European Union are two quite exceptional entities in the world. India is one of the few developing countries which has managed to stay both secular and fully democratic since its independence. The EU is the only example in history where century-old conflicts between nation-states were resolved through a progressive pooling of sovereignties well beyond simple economic co-operation… As the two largest democratic entities in the world, we should be proud of these achievements and promote our successful values jointly.

The Rt. Hon. Chris Patten, CH
inaugurating the EU-India Round Table
The Role and Activities of the EESC in the Context of its Relations with Asia
Context 3

India 3
The Round Table’s Origins and its Mandate 4
Composition of the EU-India Round Table 4
The Round Table’s Subjects for Discussion and Working Methods 5
Joint Recommendations to Political Authorities 6
Conclusions and Outlook 6

China 7
The Round Table’s Origins and Mandate 7
Composition of the EU-China Round Table 9
The Round Table’s Subjects for Discussion and Working Methods 9
Joint Recommendations to Political Authorities 10
Conclusions and Outlook 10

Japan 11
The European Commission defined the broad scope of the European Community’s relations with the countries of Asia for the first time in 1994 in its communication Towards a New Asia Strategy. In 2001, it decided to further develop this policy and to establish a strategic framework for enhanced partnership between Europe and Asia.

This new framework had many ambitious aims, ranging from contributing to peace and security in Asia to strengthening trade, via fostering development and combating poverty. The determination to take joint action to address the challenges posed by globalisation, global warming and security issues and to promote a better understanding of Europe in Asia and vice-versa was also a feature of the programme.

The first bilateral strategic partnerships were concluded with India in 2004 and with China in 2006.

India and China are also the two Asian countries with which the EESC currently enjoys a special relationship and with which it has set up bilateral Round Tables. The Committee adopted an opinion on ASEAN in 1997, plans to adopt another in 2010 and intends to develop relations with this regional organisation. In 2007, it also adopted an opinion on relations with civil society in Japan, establishing a permanent Contact Group with this country in 2009.

India

The European Union and the Republic of India benefit from a long-standing relationship going back to the early 1960s. The Joint Political Statement of 1993 and the 1994 Cooperation Agreement, which is the current legislative framework for cooperation, opened the door to a broad political dialogue, which develops through annual Summits and regular ministerial and expert-level meetings.

In 2004, India became one of the EU’s “strategic partners” and since 2005 the Joint Action Plan, which was revised in 2008, is helping to realise the full potential of this partnership in areas of interest for India and the EU, ranging from culture and education to trade and investment, scientific cooperation, clean development and climate change, migration, business cooperation, etc.
The Round Table’s Origins and its Mandate

India was the country with which the EESC established its first Civil Society Round Table in 2001.

The decision to set up a EU-India Round Table was taken at the first EU-India Summit (Lisbon, June 2000). At the Summit’s conclusion, a joint 22-point action programme was adopted. It included arrangements for the establishment of a Round Table between civil society organisations in Europe and India.

Responsible for this decision were Chris Patten, then European Commissioner for External Relations, and Jaswant Singh, Indian Foreign Minister at the time.

The aim? To create a forum for the particularly dynamic and diverse civil societies of Europe and India in order to explore together possible avenues of cooperation, debate matters of common interest and make recommendations to the European and Indian authorities.

The Round Table was designed to provide a forum for civil society to engage in discussion and dialogue on any question relevant to EU-India relations, with a broader remit and a more informal approach than official gatherings. Its non-governmental character gives it greater latitude in deciding which subjects it wishes to discuss and in going beyond the issues discussed between inter-governmental bodies. Close cooperation with the European Commission and the European Parliament means that ongoing debates may be followed and taken into account when deciding what issues to discuss and how to approach them.

In May 2005, the EESC drew up an opinion on the role of civil society in EU-India relations (Rapporteur: Sukhdev Sharma) taking stock of dialogue thus far and analysing approaches for the future.

Composition of the EU-India Round Table

The Round Table has 30 members, 15 on each side. The 15 European members represent the entire EESC. As India has no ESC, the 15 Indian members are “eminent personalities” drawn from business, industry, the trade unions, universities and research centres, NGOs, the media, representatives of the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and former Ambassadors.
The Round Table is chaired jointly by the President of the EESC for the European side and a co-chairman nominated by the Indian Prime Minister. Mr N.N. Vohra held this post from the time the Round Table was established until his nomination as Governor of Jammu and Kashmir Province in May 2008. Since then Mr Chandrashekhar Dasgupta, former Indian Ambassador to the EU, negotiator of the UN Climate Change Convention and member of India’s Energy and Resources Institute (TERI), has replaced him.

**The Round Table’s Subjects for Discussion and Working Methods**

The working approach is always the same, to put forward civil society’s point of view on matters of importance to the European and Indian authorities, or to draw their attention to issues that are coming to the fore but are as yet unrecognised; gathering representatives of civil society organisations, experts, politicians, economists and academics around the same table to give their point of view. This was how Rajendra Pachauri, who had not yet won the Nobel Peace Prize, came to talk about climate change - long before it went to the top of the European and international agenda.

The subjects to be discussed are jointly agreed upon and examined at two consecutive Round Table sessions, the first a broad-brush examination of the problem as a whole, the second a more detailed examination of the key aspects of the problem. An Indian and a European rapporteur draw up a written report with the help of an expert of their choice. This then provides the basis for debate. Where additional academic, scientific or technical input is deemed to be of use, the EESC may call on the services of an external research institute.

A wide range of subjects has been discussed so far: education, culture, rights of minorities, topical economic and trade questions such as the free trade agreement which is currently being negotiated, migration, several reports and debates on climate change, energy security etc. A seminar on child labour has also been held. Members of the Indian diaspora in Paris have contributed to discussions on migration and meetings have been held in Srinagar and Hyderabad as well as in other parts of India and in many EU Member States. The Round Tables have often been accompanied by workshops and study visits which aim to diversify contacts with Indian civil society organisations.

In 2009/2010 three topics are on the agenda: solar energy, migration and education.
Joint Recommendations to Political Authorities

Since 2001, the EU-India Round Table has met once or twice a year, alternating between Europe and India. Some of the meetings have been more successful than others; there have been some passionate debates and other less challenging ones. The Round Table’s work has been recognised by the European and Indian authorities, who have incorporated it into the Action Plan for an EU-India Strategic Partnership, the cornerstone of the political dialogue between India and the European Union (6th Summit, September 2005). More recently, the September 2008 EU-India Summit decided to strengthen the Round Table’s mandate. The European Parliament supported this in a resolution adopted just before the Summit. The members of the Round Table therefore decided to become more involved in working parties, workshops and EU-India bilateral activities, with particular emphasis on areas relevant to climate change and energy, including renewables, areas in which the Round Table has acquired a certain expertise over the years.

Every Round Table meeting starts with an opening session in which the European Parliament, the EU Presidency, the European Commission and representatives of the Indian authorities are asked to give an account of their own bilateral discussions and to indicate the avenues of discussion that they would like civil society to explore further.

The conclusions of the Round Table are drawn up in the form of joint recommendations to be forwarded to the European and Indian political authorities at the EU-India summits. Being invited to present its recommendations to the political authorities during the Summits remains one of the Round Table’s objectives.

Conclusions and Outlook

The Round Table is now trying to move beyond annual and bi-annual meetings in order to work on a more continuous basis, which would allow civil society’s views to be taken into account in a more structured manner in the context of the definition and daily implementation of the Union’s policies vis-à-vis India. The EESC has set up a six-member Follow-up Committee for this purpose which meets regularly, organising workshops and field trips around the subjects under discussion. 2009 activities include a workshop on trade and development in connection with the free trade agreement negotiations and an exploratory mission to Delhi in September.
to establish new contacts for members with potential Indian counterparts. The Round Table has also used its Civil Society Internet Forum to establish a genuine network of civil society stakeholders in Europe and India, be they employers, trade unionists, farmers, consumers, researchers, students, human rights activists, etc., so that exchanges and partnerships can be increased.

China

The suppression of the student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in 1989 had a substantial impact on EU-China relations. The European Union and the United States imposed economic sanctions, placed an embargo on arms sales, cancelled official visits at ministerial level and froze loans to China. Apart from the arms embargo, most of these sanctions were lifted in 1990. Soon afterwards, trade and cooperation links were re-established and the normalisation of relations with China was included in the development framework of the new European Strategy for Asia and the policy of constructive engagement that it calls for.

The Round Table’s Origins and Mandate

For its part, the EESC has close relations with the Economic and Social Council of China (CESC) with which it signed a joint declaration when the latter was set up in 2001.

The CESC is an organisation with independent legal status comprising representatives from economic and social research institutes, trade unions, public and especially private-sector enterprises. Most of its funding comes from private companies. Its role is to support the reform process in China and to enhance the policy of openness towards the outside world.
In a joint declaration signed in Beijing in July 2002, both institutions recognised the importance of maintaining and developing friendly relations between China and the EU and declared themselves ready to enter into consultations, to open dialogue and to embark on research into economic and social questions of common interest as well as questions of human rights and the rule of law so as to promote economic development and social progress in China and in the European Union.

The EESC adopted three opinions on EU-China relations, in 1997, 2003 and 2006, which included a number of conclusions and recommendations.

The ninth EU-China Summit, held in Helsinki in September 2006, acknowledged that the exchanges and cooperation between the EESC and the CESC were an important part of EU-China relations. It urged the establishment of an EU-China Civil Society Round Table to meet regularly in order to contribute to and enrich the development of the EU-China strategic partnership.

The inaugural meeting took place in Beijing on 22 June 2007 and examined sustainable development and climate change issues.

The Round Table was envisaged as a forum for discussion and civil society dialogue for any issues touching on EU-China relations. It avoids some of the possible pitfalls encountered at official level, and benefits from a less formal approach. Its non-governmental character means that it has more freedom to decide what to discuss and to go beyond the limits of discussions held between government bodies. Close cooperation with the European Commission means that bilateral-level debates may be followed and taken into account when subjects for discussion are being chosen.
**Composition of the EU-China Round Table**

The Round Table has 30 members, 15 European and 15 Chinese. It is co-chaired by the Presidents of the two institutions. Moreover, the European Economic and Social Committee has established a Follow-up Committee of six members which meets regularly to prepare the Round Tables and to organise workshops and field trips related to the subjects under discussion.

**The Round Table’s Subjects for Discussion and Working Methods**

The Round Table meets twice a year, alternating between China and the country holding the EU presidency. Since 2007, it has looked at issues such as sustainable development, climate change, energy and forests, and it has debated corporate social responsibility, trade and investment against the background of ongoing discussions on the renewal of the cooperation and partnership agreement between China and the EU, the question of recycling waste and the issue of social and economic rights in China and Europe.

The subjects discussed are chosen alternately by the Chinese and European sides and approved jointly. In the same way as the EU-India Round Table, they are examined at two consecutive Round Table sessions, the first a broad-brush examination of the problem as a whole aimed at mutual understanding, the second a more detailed examination of the key aspects of the problem for civil society.

A Chinese and a European rapporteur draw up a written report with the help of an expert of their choice which is then used as the basis for debate.

Meetings and field trips relevant to the subject under discussion are organised in conjunction with the sessions. Thus Chinese members of the Round Table had the opportunity to visit waste recycling plants in Denmark and Germany when this subject was on the agenda and visits to representatives of the Chinese Ministry of Trade, the Union of European Enterprises in China and the Chinese Association of Women Entrepreneurs accompanied the session on trade and investment.

When an area of discussion proves particularly fruitful and innovative for civil society, tri-partite meetings with the partner hosting the Round Table may be organised, as happened in Paris where a debate on corporate social responsibility was organised with the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council, and in Tianjin (China) where the effects of the financial crisis were debated with the local Economic and Social Council. The Round Table rapporteurs may also present their reports in other fora, as will be the case for the 2010 China-Europe Forum on corporate social responsibility.
Joint Recommendations to Political Authorities

Every Round Table meeting starts with an opening session in which the EU presidency, the European Commission and representatives from the Chinese authorities are asked to give an account of their own bi-lateral discussions and to indicate the avenues of discussion that they would like civil society to explore further.

A joint declaration is adopted at the close of each Round Table. This enables members to summarise the issues on which they have reached consensus in discussions and to continue talks at the following Round Table on those issues on which points of view differ. This joint declaration is forwarded to the political authorities in the European Union and to the Chinese Government. At the close of the third Round Table, held under the French Presidency, Bernard Kouchner, French Minister for Foreign and European Affairs, wrote: “Rest assured that the next EU-China summit will certainly take account of the joint work carried out by the European Economic and Social Committee and its Chinese counterpart. I would like to underline the importance and usefulness of this original body for discussion between economic and social partners in the EU and China”.

Conclusions and Outlook

The Round Table has overcome many difficulties since its establishment. Every meeting, whether in China or in Europe, is now an opportunity to get to know new spokesmen and women of civil society and to enjoy improved mutual understanding. The European Economic and Social Committee has established a six-member Follow-up Committee for this purpose which meets regularly, organising workshops and field trips around the subjects under discussion such as a meeting with members of Hong Kong’s civil society organisations in May 2009 to prepare the ground for the debate on economic and social rights in China and Europe.
Japan

Japan and the European Union decided to launch a decade of joint cooperation from 2001 based on an action plan, one of the aims of which was to bring the peoples and cultures together, with the specific object of “developing civil society links and encouraging inter-regional exchanges”. In 2007 the EESC issued an opinion on *EU-Japan Relations: the Role of Civil Society*, following which contacts were launched with civil society organisations in Japan and a permanent EU-Japan contact group set up in 2009. Two joint activities will be scheduled every year alternating between Japan and Europe and operating in cooperation with EU-Japan research institutes and other partners. A workshop on employment issues was held in June 2009.

Opinions on Asia
*EU-China relations: The role of Civil Society*, 15 March 2006 – CESE 413/2006

For further information, please contact:
asia-eu@eesc.europa.eu
Fax +32 25468241