THE TRILATERAL COMMISSION PLENARY MEETING
WARSAW, MAY 7-10, 2004

THE NEW EUROPEAN UNION

A Trailblazing Europe Sets the Example for the Whole World

Lee Hong-Koo

I join my fellow Asians in offering congratulations to the Europeans for successfully completing the expansion of the European Union and thereby closing a historic chapter for the reunification and reconciliation of Europe. I would also like to express our admiration for the manner and style with which the Europeans have handled themselves in this process. I might add and confess that we have a tremendous sense of envy as we watch the progress of the European integration.

As a Korean, I would like to offer particular congratulations to the people of Poland because we share a large number of common characteristics; most importantly, in terms of geopolitics, both Poland and Korea have overwhelmingly bigger neighbours. Poland has to deal with both Russia and Germany. Korea, as you know, only has three neighbors: China, Russia and Japan. So, we have to be extremely sensitive to geopolitics, and we have had a common experience of suffering from the unfortunate consequences of traditional, big power politics.

We became extremely envious of Germans when they achieved unification 15 years ago. While Germany and Korea were divided as consequences of the Second World War, only Germany was able to achieve reunification peacefully and Korea remained divided even to this date. Now as we witness Poland joining the European Union, once again we cannot help but feel very envious.

I noted the title “The End of Yalta” for the book we all received upon our arrival. As you know the division of Europe as well as the division of Korea were decided at Yalta. In the case of Korea, “the end of Yalta” is not in sight. Hence our extremely mixed feelings.

In Asia, we have the tradition of considering Europe as the central stage for setting the modern world history. From the Industrial Revolution to the Bolshevik Revolution, all the revolutionary changes have taken place in Europe. For the age of ideology and the age of imperialism, Europe again was the center stage. Two world wars and the Cold War started in Europe. In short, Europe has set the pace in world history in the last two or three hundred years. Even in the post-Cold War period, Europe has become a model in moving towards a new global order. For other regions like Asia, where the legacy of the Cold War still persists, we are trying to learn a lesson from the European experience and emulate its success in launching a new era of peace and cooperation.

The last 15 years since the Berlin Wall came down have been a period of transition for all of us, with a shift of the global power balance. For the first time in the world history, we have a sole superpower in the global setting, forcing all of us to ask how are we going to adjust to this new situation. What should be the proper relations with the United States—to find a good answer to that question has become a crucial and challenging task for all the nations. Once again the world is watching Europe as the benchmark in promoting a very creative relation between itself and the United States. We hope and trust that Europe will be successful in promoting a creative trans-Atlantic relation which will provide new impetus for searching a framework for global governance.
Asia in general and East Asia in particular is changing rapidly, and we have fortunately developed a new habit of exercising tolerance. We now accept political differences without undue excitement. China and Vietnam are still governed by the Communist parties while Japan, South Korea and many others are functioning democracies. But we all accept the differences in political system as facts of life yet try to work together to promote common prosperity. This has become possible only because everyone, particularly China, has accepted market economy as the basis of individual as well as common prosperity. It is, however, much easier to accept the common practice of market economy than to develop common political institutions. That seems to be the case in Asia today. We feel that to secure a sustained common development in Asia, following the examples set by Europe in the last few decades, there must be a sufficiently stable global political environment. The more success we achieve in economic field, the further we become aware of the need to develop stable global institutions and common goals. We hope that Europe will take the leadership role in promoting the new architecture for global governance in political, economic and security dimensions.

It is very important to note that building regional and global neighborhood does not imply promotion of uniformity. We in Asia are now practicing tolerance, while preserving the differences amongst us. We value our diversities and varieties yet try to promote the common interest and a peaceful neighborhood. This is possible only when we have a global setting that enables the regional dynamics of tolerance to operate successfully. Only when we have the principles of variety and unity preserved and applied successfully in both global and regional context, we can march forward in the neighborhood building venture. We hope and trust that Europe will take up the role of the flag carrier in this common venture.

Finally let me convey small worry I share with many Asian colleagues. The successful expansion of the European Union on May the 1st may bring not a more outward-looking Europe but a more inward-looking one—such is our worry. As I said repeatedly, Europe is such an important and pivotal region in the world that if the enlarged European Union became an inward-looking one, it spells trouble for all of us in the world. Challenges facing us today like revitalizing the United Nations and the WTO depend on an outward-looking Europe that can develop a productive relationship with the United States and Asia. That is something we would very much like to count on Europe. The spirit of Trilateralism, which is the basis of this organization, should also be understood in such context.

While again congratulating the tremendous achievement of Europeans, we ask you to be once again a pacesetter for a new global community. We Asians would like to be willing partners in that venture.

Lee Hong-Koo is Chairman of the Seoul Forum for International Affairs; former Prime Minister of Korea; and former Ambassador of Korea to the United Kingdom and the United States.