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Milestones and Turning Points

Celebrating in Troubled Times

Philippe Peycam

This is the 100th issue of *The Newsletter*.

This seminal moment, in which we hoped to celebrate this milestone in the life of *The Newsletter*, was instead overshadowed by a challenging and extended period of uncertainty regarding the future of IIAS. On April 16, after four months of a rather opaque process of deliberation and evaluation, Leiden University publicly announced drastic cuts to several programs, including a gradual 50 percent reduction to IIAS' operational funding over the next four years. In the light of broader budgetary constraints affecting higher education in the Netherlands, the whole process began on January 14, when we were informed that IIAS was among several bodies that would undergo a stringent financial review. This review occurred at the hands of an ad hoc task force committee, which included no members from the humanities, social sciences, or Area Studies. For IIAS, there was a very real risk of total budgetary elimination at the hands of a university executive board whose current priorities may differ, and which perhaps has not yet had the opportunity to fully appreciate the unique contributions made by IIAS through its programs, initiatives, events, and networks. Against this background of existential threat, we at IIAS circulated an information letter among our partners across different sectors and geographies. In the space of one week, we collected over 400 statements of support – some of them extremely moving and powerful, and some emanating from members of Leiden University itself – expressing their utmost dismay and shock. On what became a communication campaign to salvage IIAS, we discovered the depth of support IIAS effectively enjoys within Leiden University, in the Netherlands, and worldwide, from academic and non-academic circles alike, including diplomats, journalists, artists, and other interested citizens. After over 30 years of existence, the institute has manifestly come to occupy a very special place in many lives, enriching not only Asian Studies and Area Studies, but also the very practices through which inter-cultural humanistic knowledge is generated and shared.

This strong showing of support appears to have positively influenced the final decision of the Leiden University Executive Board. On the one hand, we are heartened that the campaign led to some formal recognition of the critical importance of IIAS, and thus

ensured its institutional survival. On the other hand, we must acknowledge that a 50 percent budget cut is hardly a victory in absolute terms. The decision significantly hamstrings IIAS' ability to operate vital 'public service' activities not covered by outside sources, from the renowned IIAS Fellowship Program to our widely read dissemination platforms like *The Newsletter*. The halving of our budget will irremediably harm the institute's capacity to plan and engage in future innovative ventures.

It is thus with deep frustration and dismay that we deliver this news. Of course we will continue to challenge the university's decision. We understand that these are difficult times requiring difficult choices, and IIAS is willing to carry its fair share of financial cuts imposed upon the university by political realities. Nevertheless, it should be allowed to pursue its core mission and sustain what it has been successfully doing for decades in the service of the wider knowledge community.

But writing such a gloomy note for the 100th issue of *The Newsletter* would not do justice to the level of forward-thinking dynamism and resilience that IIAS continues to demonstrate, not just amidst the grim context of destructive reductions of humanistic knowledge activities in the Netherlands, but, more generally, amidst the devastation currently at play in many parts of the world, notably as a result of the extreme policies pursued by countries like the United States.

For a few years already, IIAS has gained recognition for its unique 'South-South-North' vision, one seeking to effectively support a more multi-centered and circulatory process of knowledge creation and sharing, with the explicit recognition that the increasingly fragmented world we live in requires stronger capacities for mutual engagements between different world regions – crucially including what is called the 'Global South.' We believe a more balanced flow of knowledge exchange in favor of the South should also eventually benefit 'northern' institutions for their ability to engage with their 'southern' counterparts in a more reciprocal mode. IIAS foregrounded this model in the form of innovative pedagogical support under the Mellon-funded Humanities Across Borders (HAB) program. It was also brought to the multifaceted 'field' of environmental humanities with collective projects such as the Urban Knowledge Network Asia (UKNA), the Southeast Asia Neighborhoods



Fig. 2: Entrance to the new IIAS offices at Leiden University. (Photo courtesy of IIAS, 2025)

Network (SEANNET), and more recently, the multi-disciplinary River Cities Network (RCN). Meanwhile, "Africa-Asia: A New Axis of Knowledge" – a platform designed for inter-cultural, inter-regional knowledge exchanges – stands as IIAS' most overtly multi-centered mode of intervention. Over time, these initiatives have led the institute and some of its close partners to consciously endorse an institutionalizing strategy grounded in a new model of knowledge sharing and circulation articulated as 'South-South-North.' The S-S-N vision entails a local-global framework of interventions and the participation of different knowledge actors or stakeholders around concrete situated projects. Eventually, these initiatives coalesce into a deliberately inclusive knowledge community beyond borders, built on shared experiences and thereby on lasting trust.

It is this S-S-N Knowledge Community approach that has been increasingly recognized by other institutions as a possible alternative to the traditional North-South cooperation model framed in exclusive bilateral terms. In the last two years, IIAS has led the trend in streamlining the different formats of its activities to more effectively support a converging mesh of people and organizations in Asia, Europe, Africa, and Latin America, and with it, the constitution of perennial new hubs or networks effectively forging a multi-pronged community of like-minded S-S-N knowledge actors. The 2018 Africa-Asia Conference in Tanzania eventually yielded a new Africa-Asia collaborative 'Hub' at the University of Dar es Salaam. In Surabaya, Indonesia, the preparation and organization of the ICAS 13 ConFest paved the way for the establishment of the inter-faculty university-national Airlangga Institute for Indian Ocean Crossroads (AIIOC), while in Thailand, Kasetsart University established the country's first Asia-Africa Program. The upcoming Africa-Asia ConFest in Dakar may also be an occasion for the Senegalese colleagues to establish an Africa-Asia-Latin-America platform, in collaboration with partners from these regions and counterparts in Europe and North America. In the Netherlands and in Europe, this trend is giving rise to a more conscious effort to reinvent collaborative knowledge engagements in today's multipolar world through new circulatory streams of exchange. This model can also serve to reposition Europe, and particularly some Europe-based knowledge institutions like IIAS, as reliable-facilitating partners to the Global South. The continent is indeed well positioned for implementing this new economy of knowledge exchanges in the making. In the last few months, IIAS has begun promising discussions with different services of the European Union, including the EU Parliament, to help frame a new strategy of engagement with the different Souths and Norths of the World.

These latter developments, if they are left to blossom, augurs to the possibility of a new chapter in the always-dynamic existence of IIAS, this, against the regressive and parochial forces it currently confronts. So, we hope this 100th issue of *The Newsletter* will be read as a message of resilience and hope for all that IIAS and its close partners stand for.

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Fig. 1: Meeting in preparation for the upcoming ConFest "Africa-Asia: A New Axis of Knowledge" in Dakar, Senegal. (Photo courtesy of IIAS, 2025)