

Luncheon Keynote Address
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ASEAN Roundtable 2017: ASEAN at 50: Chartering the Future Together
Singapore, 2 October 2017

*Excellencies, Distinguished Speakers and Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. I would like to thank the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute for inviting me to take part in this ASEAN 50 Roundtable, another opportunity for us to reflect on ASEAN's journey over the past five decades and its way forward.
2. When ASEAN was established through the signing of the Bangkok Declaration 50 years ago, the Cold War tensions were raging in our divided region. The birth of ASEAN manifested the aspiration of the peoples of Southeast Asia for regional peace and prosperity, which has been the determining factor of success of its process of constant evolution and development over half a century.
3. Following the establishment, through the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), of the fundamental principles to govern the relations among Member States, which include peaceful co-existence and pacific settlement of disputes, respect for national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference, and non-threat or use of force, the adoption of the Declaration of ASEAN Concord (Bali Concord I) at the first ever ASEAN Summit the same year providing for comprehensive ASEAN cooperation in the economic, social, cultural, and political fields and recognizing the need to build ASEAN institutions, including the meetings of the ASEAN Leaders and the establishment of the ASEAN Secretariat reflected growing confidence of Member States in the ASEAN project.
4. The end of the Cold War also enabled ASEAN enlargement to encompass all Southeast Asian countries of different political systems, economic structures and religious beliefs. Bringing together under one roof by 1999 all the countries in one of the most diverse regions in the world constituted a historic achievement for the

organization laying a sound basis for the expansion and deepening of intra-regional cooperation in all areas leading to the traction of the idea of an ASEAN Community, culminating in the Declaration of ASEAN Concord II adopted at the 9th ASEAN Summit in October 2003, which charted the path towards realizing an ASEAN Community based on three pillars – the ASEAN Political-Security Community, the ASEAN Economic Community and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community and the subsequent adoption of the ASEAN Charter in 2007 which provides the legal and institutional framework for ASEAN by giving it a legal personality, codifying its objectives and principles, and consolidating its organizational structure.

5. The launch of the ASEAN Community on 31 December 2015 was really a historic milestone which testifies to the region's resilience and dynamism as well as the political will and solid commitment of all members to become a more cohesive and credible entity in addressing common challenges, to boost up their economic competitiveness, and to carve for themselves a strategic and economic space in dealing with other regional powers.

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6. From a fledging association in a region embroiled in intra-mural tensions and great-power contestations, ASEAN has persevered and prospered over the past five decades to become an indispensable player and major contributor to peace and prosperity in Southeast Asia and beyond. ASEAN today is widely recognised as a successful model of regionalism in all three key dimensions: regional peace and security, economic integration and institution building.
7. The most important success of ASEAN thus far has been the maintenance of peace and stability in Southeast Asia by promoting peaceful relations among its Member States.

8. Being the first ever ASEAN treaty, the TAC has been effectively serving as a code of conduct for inter-state relations in Southeast Asia. It has been gradually universalized with 27 non-ASEAN High Contracting Parties now in its fold, including all major powers.
9. With diligent efforts of norm-building, through instruments such as the 1976 TAC, the 1997 Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone Treaty and the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and regular exchanges among regional leaders and officials, ASEAN serves as the platform for dialogue and consultation among Member States to build trust, confidence and adhere to ASEAN code of conduct.
10. As trans-boundary challenges are growing in scope, impact and intensity due to enhanced connectivity in the region, upholding the principle of comprehensive security, ASEAN has stepped up regional cooperation in addressing non-traditional security challenges such as transnational crime, terrorism, disaster management, drugs and pandemic diseases, among others. Non-traditional security is a key target of policy discussions and practical cooperation under various ASEAN and ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Drug Matters, the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime, the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting, the ASEAN Defense Ministers Plus Meeting and the ASEAN Regional Forum.
11. Going more rules-based, ASEAN has put in place the necessary legal instruments to deal with these challenges, including the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution, the ASEAN Convention on Counter-Terrorism, the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response, and most recently the ASEAN Convention on Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children.

12. Emerging transboundary problems such as radicalism and extremism, cyber security and irregular migration also feature more importantly on ASEAN agenda.
13. Economically, in its integration process, with the implementation of nearly six hundred measures under the 2015 AEC Blueprint and the on-going implementation of the new AEC 2025 Blueprint, concrete initiatives have been undertaken both at the national and regional levels, from the virtual elimination of intra-ASEAN import tariffs, the gradual opening of the services sector, to the simplification of cross-border trading processes including customs procedures and rules of origin, the harmonization of technical regulations and mutual recognition arrangements.
14. The business and investment environments in the ASEAN region continued to be fostered through the adoption of common frameworks, innovation-promoting initiatives, and mutual cooperation in areas such as competition policy, intellectual property rights and consumer protection. The development of global value chains has been further supported through the work to enhance connectivity, narrowing development gaps, including improvements in transportation and other infrastructure networks.
15. Already as the regional organization having most free trade agreements including those with all of its major economic and trading partners, ASEAN is complementing its internal regional integration efforts with strategic global engagement by forging new free trade agreements and comprehensive economic partnerships, especially the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).
16. Although the AEC remains largely a work in progress, its potential benefits in delivering an ASEAN single production and market base are huge. With a current total GDP of approximately USD2.6 trillion, the region collectively is the sixth largest economy in the world or the third largest in Asia. ASEAN is also home to nearly 650 million people, making it the third largest market in the world. If ASEAN could maintain its growth momentum, it is set to become the world's 4th largest economy by 2050.

17. These achievements and progress have resulted in flourishing business confidence in the region. Surveys have shown growing business expectations of increased trade and investment in ASEAN, and the importance of ASEAN in their global business considerations.
18. Lying at the crossroads of strategic interests of major powers both geo-politically and geo-economically, ASEAN has been positioning itself as an “extra-regional” organisation by promoting an open and inclusive regional architecture. It has been recognized as a successful architect of various regional frameworks in Southeast Asia and beyond. Over time, these frameworks have grown substantially to embrace various cooperation areas as well as new members, yet still bear ASEAN’s imprint.
19. In Asia-Pacific where an overarching regional framework is absent due to history and complex dynamics of major power relations, the ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum , the East Asia Summit and the ADMM Plus, each having its own strategic significance and historical context, provide much needed platforms for major powers and other regional countries to engage in political and security dialogue and cooperation on issues ranging from non-proliferation, maritime security, disaster relief and humanitarian assistance, among others.
20. Through these ASEAN-led mechanisms, ASEAN has been exercising its centrality to maintain strategic equilibrium in the region and contribute to building a regional rules-based order where not might but right should be the rule of law.

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21. While much has been achieved over 50 years of its evolution, development and regional integration, challenges remain for ASEAN along the way. Comprised of 10 sovereign nations with different political systems, economic structures, foreign policies and security outlooks, ASEAN working on the basis of consultation and

consensus has its inherent challenge in managing and reconciling the vast diversity among its membership. Development gaps within and among Member States are holding back deeper and higher-quality integration. In various areas of cooperation, national laws and regulations still differ.

22. In addition, the lack of effective enforcement mechanisms, hence the absence of a strong compliance and implementation culture is another major impediment.
23. ASEAN also needs to overcome institutional constraints. Coordination across a wide swathe of agencies and departments within each ASEAN country, among ASEAN Member States as well as among different ASEAN mechanisms would need to be improved. Besides, limited resources to implement ASEAN initiatives and plans of action constitute a major obstacle to the quality of ASEAN cooperation.
24. Furthermore, greater awareness and understanding of ASEAN are crucial to gain public support for and participation in the ASEAN Community. ASEAN must address the seeming disconnect between its policy-level discussions and the impacts on the ground. Being an inter-governmental organization, like many others, ASEAN has long been acquainted with a top-down approach but its agenda across the three pillars has increasingly focused on delivering tangible benefits to its peoples. Learning from the BREXIT experience, ASEAN must do more in delivering a people-oriented, people-centred community.
25. For ASEAN to continue being a success, it must be close to the hearts of the ASEAN people. The long-standing political commitment by the member governments to the ASEAN project should never be taken for granted, and must be constantly nurtured. Concerted efforts at all levels and from all stakeholders, as well as an enduring national interest of all ASEAN member states in the cause of regional integration must be promoted.

26. Last but not least, a big challenge to ASEAN's resilience is geo-political. The Asia-Pacific landscape is presently in flux with the shifting balance of power and growing strategic contestations among major powers. The most daunting challenge for ASEAN in the years to come is how to navigate its relations with the major powers and other key external partners in an inclusive and constructive manner. Looking at what is happening in the wider Asia Pacific region, the Middle East and even Europe, for long considered as the cradle of peace, more than ever the importance of peace and stability as preconditions for development and prosperity in our region which had been for too long divided by big power interventions, is vividly recognized. In this connection, will ASEAN policy and decision makers continue standing up to defend ASEAN's shared interests; let long-term fundamental interests of the Community prevail over short-term interests? The South China Sea issue is really a litmus test for ASEAN centrality which must be diligently earned through unity and credibility.

27. ASEAN can only act central when it is politically united and economically integrated. The on-going disruptive trends to the regional architecture are to be expected and well beyond ASEAN's control. What ASEAN can and must do in this time of uncertainty is to stay united and to build a strong and integrated ASEAN Community. An ASEAN that is cohesive and capable of maintaining its centrality would contribute meaningfully to peace and stability of Southeast Asia and beyond.

Thank you!