

**Keynote Address on  
“50 Years of ASEAN-Australia Relations: Now and Into the Future”  
at ANU Southeast Asia Institute Student Research Symposium  
of H.E. Dr. Kao Kim Hourn  
Secretary-General of ASEAN  
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***Professor Evelyn Goh, Shedden Professor of Strategic Policy Studies,***

***Professor Scott Pearsal, ANU Pro Vice-Chancellor,***

***Excellencies Ambassadors, High Commissioners of ASEAN Member States to Australia,***

***Excellencies, Faculty Members, Ladies and Gentlemen, Students,***

1. I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to the Australian National University’s Southeast Asia Research Institute, with the valuable support of the ASEAN-Australia Centre, for organizing this significant symposium. This gathering offers a timely opportunity for us to reflect on the remarkable progress and achievements of the past 50 years of ASEAN-Australia relations, and engage in thoughtful discussions about the pathways ahead for our partnership.
2. Australia proudly became ASEAN's first Dialogue Partner in 1974, just seven years after ASEAN's founding in 1967. The relationship has progressed on a consistent upward trajectory ever since, with Australia once again leading the way as the first Dialogue Partner to establish a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with ASEAN in 2021, marking another significant milestone in our shared journey.
3. Our geography binds us, our peoples and economies are interconnected, and our security is intrinsically linked through pursuing common interests and confronting shared challenges. Whether through ASEAN-led mechanisms promoting peace, stability, and a rules-based regional order or joint initiatives advancing regional economic integration, and fostering education, sustainability and people-to-people ties, ASEAN and Australia have built a comprehensive and dynamic partnership rooted in our shared aspirations for peace, resilience and prosperity.

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4. Since its establishment in 1967, ASEAN has served as the cornerstone of peace and stability in Southeast Asia, transforming the region from what was once labelled the “Balkans of the East” into a dynamic hub of regional diplomacy and a pivotal driver of the regional architecture. ASEAN has provided crucial platforms for addressing both traditional security concerns and emerging non-conventional challenges.
5. This remarkable journey has not been ASEAN’s alone—Australia has stood as a steadfast partner in advancing our collective vision for a resilient and prosperous region.

6. Situated at the crossroads of critical maritime routes, ASEAN serves as Australia's vital gateway to international trade and global connectivity. Furthermore, the ASEAN-led regional architecture has provided inclusive platforms for Australia to project its middle-power diplomacy and work with ASEAN and other partners to advance regional peace and stability. ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) have enabled both ASEAN Member States and Australia to exercise our agency and leadership, collectively shaping the regional security architecture, fostering dialogue, and promoting cooperation among key regional and global stakeholders across the broader Indo-Pacific.
7. Australia has always been an active participant in various ASEAN-led mechanisms, consistently demonstrating its strong support for ASEAN's leadership and centrality in these forums. A notable example is Australia's steadfast backing of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), which provides an inclusive framework and affirmative agenda for ASEAN and its Dialogue Partners to join our efforts in addressing our shared challenges in the Indo-Pacific.
8. Focusing on four priority areas—maritime cooperation, connectivity, Sustainable Development Goals, and economic cooperation—the AOIP has become a guiding document for ASEAN's engagements with its external partners since its adoption by ASEAN Leaders in 2019. This alignment highlights Australia's commitment to working closely with ASEAN in shaping a cooperative, inclusive, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region.

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9. When we think of the Indo-Pacific, it conjures varied and complex images. For many, it is the arena for the 21st-century geopolitical rivalry, defined by the intensifying strategic competition between the US and China and a region that carry the risk of cascading into regional and even global conflict. Yet, this region is also the epicenter of the global economy, brimming with dynamism, innovative solutions, and transformative ideas.
10. ASEAN, through the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, has chosen to harness the region's promise rather than succumb to the divisive pressures of great-power rivalries. By prioritizing cooperation over conflict, collaboration over division, ASEAN reaffirms its conviction that shared challenges demand shared solutions, and that, together, we can unlock the region's vast potential for the greater good.
11. Among these challenges are those that disrupt the daily lives and well-being of our societies, businesses, and citizens: cybersecurity breaches, terrorism, arms smuggling, human trafficking, sea piracy, money laundering, and the illicit trade in wildlife and timber. Addressing such issues requires more than abstract commitments; it calls for tangible action and pragmatic cooperation. ASEAN has risen to this challenge by fostering cross-sectoral partnerships, with law

enforcement and defence collaboration serving as important pillars of its comprehensive security framework.

12. In many of these areas, Australia has proven to be an indispensable partner. It is one of the few Dialogue Partners with formal engagement across multiple ASEAN security bodies, including those that deal with drug matters, immigration and consular affairs. Through consistent engagement with these bodies, Australia has helped strengthen joint efforts to address transnational threats and enhance regional security.
13. Australia's commitment and contributions have extended further, with an uninterrupted record of co-chairing the ADMM-Plus Expert Working Groups (EWGs) on Maritime Security, Counter-terrorism, Peacekeeping Operations, Military Medicine, and Cybersecurity since their establishment in 2011. Its multilateral defence engagement with the region made further headway with the convening of the ASEAN-Australia Defence Informal Meetings in both 2021 and 2022. Just last week, a commemorative ceremony was held on the sidelines of the ADMM-Plus in Vientiane to mark the 50th anniversary of ASEAN-Australia Dialogue Relations.

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14. The connection between stability and prosperity is fundamental to both ASEAN and Australia. The region's economic transformation has elevated Asia to become the global centre of gravity. ASEAN and Australia have not merely benefited from this progress; we have been pivotal in shaping and driving it by championing regional economic cooperation and open regionalism that enables us to trade and invest more extensively with each other and with the wider world.
15. ASEAN is now the world's fifth-largest economy and is projected to become the fourth largest by 2030. This year, the region's growth is forecasted to reach 4.5%, outpacing the global average of 3.2% despite ongoing global economic uncertainties, geopolitical tensions, and great power rivalries. This resilient growth underscores ASEAN's dynamism and its growing influence as a global economic force.
16. A cornerstone of ASEAN's economic success is its thriving global trade. As the world's third-largest trading bloc, ASEAN's total trade value reached US\$3.5 trillion in 2023, of which intra-ASEAN trade makes up the largest share at 21.5%. Foreign direct investment (FDI) has also surged in recent years, with inflows totalling US\$229.8 billion in 2023, positioning ASEAN as the top investment destination among developing economies and second globally, after only the US. This growth underscores ASEAN's increasing attractiveness as a hub for global investment, driven by its stability, economic potential, and integrated market.
17. In this context, ASEAN has become a crucial trading partner for Australia over time. In 2023, Australia's total trade with ASEAN Member States reached US\$94.4 billion, surpassing Australia's trade with key partners such as Japan, the US, and the EU. Total FDI inflows from Australia to ASEAN reached US\$1.6 billion in the same year.

18. Particularly noteworthy is the rising demand for Australian agricultural exports in the ASEAN region. In 2022-23, a record 23% of Australia's agriculture, fisheries, and forestry (AFF) exports—valued at A\$19 billion—were exported to ASEAN countries. This growth is driven by the expanding middle class across the region, driving higher demand for premium products such as meat, seafood, and wine. With Australia's complementary agricultural seasons, production capabilities, expertise, and geographic proximity, our demand for Australian farm products is expected to continue growing through to 2040.

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19. Australia also stands as one of ASEAN's most steadfast and dynamic partners in promoting open regionalism and free trade, exemplified by the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (AANZFTA). This agreement, which came into force in 2010 and was upgraded last year, is considered ASEAN's most comprehensive and high-quality trade pact, offering unmatched market access for goods trade.

20. Another significant milestone is the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which includes Australia and ASEAN among its members. As the world's largest trade agreement, encompassing 30% of global GDP and 30% of global population, the RCEP is a bold declaration of our collective resolve to resist the rising tides of deglobalisation and protectionism.

21. As ASEAN and Australia stay committed to preserving and strengthening the multilateral trading system, we focus not only on traditional economic sectors but also advance into the digital frontier and other emerging domains. ASEAN is actively negotiating the Digital Economic Framework Agreement (DEFA), designed to facilitate seamless cross-border digital trade and drive deeper regional integration and competition. Once finalized, the progressive rules within DEFA could propel the region's digital economy, potentially reaching US\$2 trillion by 2030. This ambitious initiative positions ASEAN at the forefront of the global digital economy, shaping the future of commerce and connectivity.

22. As ASEAN embarks on these future-ready, forward-looking economic initiatives, Australia has been a proactive supporter, offering robust capacity building and technical assistance. These include the ASEAN-Australia Digital Trade Standards (DTS) Initiative and Australia's support to undertake studies on the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement, the ASEAN Strategy on Carbon Neutrality, and the Assessment of New and Emerging Issues in ASEAN Plus One Free Trade Agreements.

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23. The ASEAN-Australia partnership is also rooted in our shared belief in the transformative power of human empowerment across economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Australia has been a steadfast partner in empowering ASEAN's people through its contributions to health, education, and social well-being. These include, for example, Australia's support for ASEAN Centre for Public

Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases (ACPHEED), with hubs in Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam.

24. Underscoring the importance of nurturing the next generation in this age of great flux and disruption, Australia also champions youth mental health through the ASEAN-Australia Youth Mental Health Fellowships Programme.
25. This commitment to empowerment extends into critical sectors like the care economy, where Australia has played a key role in establishing the ASCC Research and Development Platform on the Care Economy. Australia has also actively worked with ASEAN to address the problems of fake news and disinformation.
26. Additionally, Australia's contributions to ASEAN's efforts on poverty eradication and gender equality have been significant, including its support for the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025, which champions the rights of persons with disabilities, and the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework.
27. Beyond these efforts, ASEAN and Australia are strengthening their collaboration on disaster management and humanitarian assistance through ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the AHA Centre. Australia has also supported sub-regional cooperation within ASEAN, such as through the Greater Mekong Water Resources Programme, in alignment with the principle that sub-regional cooperation serves as the building block of broader regional collaboration.
28. Both sides are currently exploring new opportunities to address pressing environmental challenges, including climate change, waste management, and sustainability. By working together on these global issues, Australia and ASEAN are reaffirming their commitment to a more resilient, sustainable, and inclusive future.
29. Cultural exchanges between ASEAN and Australia also play a key role in strengthening our partnership, anchored in our shared human bonds. Through migration, education, and tourism, Australia has become home to millions of people of ASEAN origin, reflecting the deep-rooted connections between our regions. The 2021 Australian Census revealed that over one million Australian residents were born in ASEAN countries, with more than 1.1 million having ASEAN ancestry. These connections are not only an important part of Australia's demographic fabric but also a testament to the enduring strength of our shared humanity.
30. Education, in particular, serves as a cornerstone of human empowerment. Over 180,000 ASEAN students are currently enrolled in Australian institutions, including the prestigious ANU, making ASEAN one of the largest sources of international students in Australia. The educational opportunities provided by Australia enable ASEAN students to return home with new skills and perspectives, contributing to the development of their communities and strengthening our collective future.
31. And of course, the people of ASEAN-origin influence various aspects of Australian life beyond the classroom. From food to music, art, and festivals, the rich tapestry of Southeast Asian traditions has enriched Australia's identity and way of life.

Southeast Asian cuisine, with beloved dishes like *nasi goreng* and *chicken rice*, *pad thai* and *pho*, has become part of Australia's culinary landscape.

32. In this spirit, I eagerly look forward to the official launch of the ASEAN-Australia Centre tomorrow. I believe the Centre will play an instrumental role in harnessing the power of education, research and cross-cultural exchanges to foster our mutual understanding and cooperation. As we celebrate 50 years of ASEAN-Australia dialogue relations, nothing could be more meaningful and impactful than this symbol and vehicle of our partnership.

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33. As ASEAN approaches its next milestone in 2025, with the anticipated adoption of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 and the new strategic plans that will guide the region's next phase, Australia will remain a key partner in fostering a dynamic, inclusive, and forward-looking ASEAN. Australia's robust support for a future-ready ASEAN is exemplified through the *Australia4ASEAN Futures Initiative*, launched in 2022 and expanded in 2023. With a commitment of AUD204 million over the next decade, this initiative will bolster the ASEAN Political-Security, Economic, and Socio-Cultural Communities.

34. Looking ahead, both ASEAN and Australia must remain agile and resilient in responding to the shifting global landscape, marked by a range of complex and urgent challenges—such as climate change, global economic fragmentation, cybersecurity, and public health. These challenges, however, also present valuable opportunities for deepened cooperation.

35. Climate change stands out as a critical area for collaboration, where both regions can work together on advancing clean energy transitions, building climate resilience, and promoting sustainable agricultural practices. Australia's expertise in renewable energy technologies, combined with ASEAN's strong commitment to green development, offers a solid foundation for joint initiatives aimed at mitigating environmental risks and creating a sustainable future.

36. In addition, the care economy represents another key area for cooperation. With an aging population in both Australia and several ASEAN countries, initiatives focused on healthcare, aged care services, and workforce development would be mutually beneficial. Both sides can collaborate on research and training programmes to enhance the quality of care services and workforce capacity in the region.

37. Another area ripe for collaboration is disaster resilience and humanitarian assistance, where ASEAN's experience in disaster management and Australia's expertise in emergency response can be further integrated to enhance the region's preparedness and response mechanisms.

38. Finally, both regions must continue to invest in our human capital for our future growth and resilience. We deeply appreciate Australia's steadfast commitment to ASEAN youth empowerment through various initiatives such as the Aus4ASEAN

Scholarships and ASEAN Scholars Leadership Program, New Colombo Plan and Aus4ASEAN Digital Transition and Future Skills Initiative.

39. I look forward to more scholarships, research collaboration, and professional development opportunities to help build the next generation of leaders in our countries. Together, ASEAN and Australia can create a future of greater prosperity, stability, and inclusivity for the region.

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40. In closing, I wish to underscore that as ASEAN continues its journey of community-building, the role of its external partners, especially Australia, remains indispensable. ASEAN's success has never been solely the result of its own efforts; it has always been a shared endeavour with partners who understand the collective strength of unity and collaboration.

41. A strong, united, and resilient ASEAN benefits not only its member states but also the broader Indo-Pacific. Likewise, an economically prosperous, socially vibrant, and outward-looking Australia brings significant value to ASEAN, as it has done for decades. Our successes are deeply intertwined—we share a stake in each other's progress, and together, we are the enablers of that success.

42. Together, we believe in fostering inclusivity, harnessing the power of our diversity, and investing in the empowerment of our people and nations. These are the pillars that will guide us through the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Thank You.