



**H.E. Dr. Kao Kim Hourn, Secretary-General of ASEAN**

**Keynote Address**

***Opening Session of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)***

***Seminar Series: Submarine Cables***

***13 February 2025, Jakarta, Indonesia***

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***Your Excellency M.I. Derry Aman, Permanent Representative of Indonesia to ASEAN,***

***Your Excellency Gerard Ho, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Singapore to ASEAN,***

***Your Excellency Tiffany McDonald, Ambassador of Australia to ASEAN,***

***Your Excellency Kiya Masahiko, Ambassador of Japan to ASEAN,***

***Your Excellency Lee Jang-keun, Ambassador of the Republic of Korea to ASEAN,***

***Your Excellency Sarah Devadason, Permanent Representative of Malaysia to ASEAN and Chair of the CPR,***

***Permanent Representatives of ASEAN Member States, Ambassadors and Representatives of ASEAN Dialogue Partners,***

***Excellencies, Distinguished Speakers and Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen, and to those here and online,***

A very good morning to all of you. I extend my heartfelt congratulations and sincere appreciation to Singapore and Indonesia, along with ASEAN's key Dialogue Partners, Australia, Japan, and the Republic of Korea, for organizing this important Seminar on Submarine Cables. Building upon the inaugural ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) Seminar on Maritime Cooperation which of course started in late 2023, this gathering will further mainstream the AOIP into concrete, functional areas of cooperation, reinforcing its role in ASEAN's broader agenda.

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

Since the AOIP's adoption by the ASEAN Leaders in 2019, we have witnessed remarkable progress in establishing it as a key reference framework for ASEAN's cooperation with external partners. This progress is evident in the growing interest of ASEAN's partners and friends to collaborate on specific projects under the AOIP umbrella, including this seminar series. The AOIP's implementation has significantly enhanced our ASEAN community-building efforts. At its core, the AOIP embodies the principle of inclusive cooperation, a hallmark of ASEAN. It promotes collaboration between ASEAN and its partners in an open, non-exclusive manner, as perfectly demonstrated by this seminar.

Today's seminar topic reflects ASEAN's priority and commitment to advancing digital technology and the critical infrastructure that supports it. The COVID-19 pandemic has permanently transformed our relationship with digital technology as people increasingly turn to e-commerce to sell and buy goods and services and embraced remote digital solutions. Digitalization has now become an essential part of our lives and its impact only grows more pronounced each day.

ASEAN, as a community, has steadfastly embraced this digital transformation. We are proactively exploring the digital frontier, accelerating technology adoption across the region, and negotiating the ASEAN Digital Economic Framework Agreement (DEFA). This framework will enable seamless cross-border digital trade and foster regional digital integration and competition. Upon completion, DEFA is projected to double our region's digital economy from US\$1 trillion to US\$2 trillion by 2030.

To ensure a smooth transition to this digital future, we must safeguard our region from potential disruptions to our critical infrastructure. This brings us to today's seminar focus: building a secure, diversified, and resilient submarine cable network for regional and global connectivity. This is very important not just for ASEAN but for the global community as well. Cooperation on subsea cable initiatives is crucial for enhancing regional digital connectivity, and a secure submarine cable network is vital to our region's success.

*Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,*

The International Institute of Strategic Studies, in an October 2024 report, "Submarine Cables: The Achilles' Heel of Cyberspace in the Asia-Pacific", states that as a result of the world's increased demand for connectivity, the global cable system has grown more than 300% since 2010. Without cables, cyberspace would not function: militaries would be stripped of many communication lines, the US\$10 trillion in daily transactions that cables carry would fail, and the global economy would grind to a halt. With 139 publicly disclosed submarine cables, and at least 15 currently in development, many of the world's cables transverse the entire Asia-Pacific region.

Recent events have highlighted the vulnerability of this critical infrastructure. The series of cable disruptions in the Red Sea in early 2024 affected internet connectivity across multiple continents, while incidents in the Baltic Sea and elsewhere have raised concerns about the security of these vital communications links. In response, the international community has strengthened cooperation on cable protection, with nations implementing enhanced surveillance measures, updating maritime security protocols, and developing rapid response mechanisms for cable repairs. These collaborative efforts underscore the global recognition that submarine cable security is fundamental to maintaining our interconnected world.

ASEAN's strategic importance in global undersea cable connectivity is often overlooked. Our region is connected by more than 30 submarine cable systems, serving as a crucial hub for international data traffic. Southeast Asian waters form a vital node in the underwater cable network linking Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, and the Americas. This is really the geography of where we are, connecting the world.

Recognizing submarine cable networks as critical infrastructure, ASEAN released the ASEAN Guidelines for Strengthening Resilience and Repair of Submarine Cables in 2019. These guidelines aim to simplify and streamline the permit process for cable repairs. In 2024, we established the Working Group on Submarine-Cables to facilitate regular exchanges and promote cooperation among ASEAN Member States. The Working Group is currently enhancing the 2019 Guidelines, and I am pleased to note their participation in today's seminar.

As critical infrastructure supporting our region's economic advancement and security, submarine cables face various challenges. Natural hazards, accidental damage, sabotage, and climate change all pose significant risks that could lead to internet outages, financial losses, and disruption of essential services. Disruptions to submarine cables are likely to increase as demand for the internet continues to soar and geo-political competition, including in the Asia-Pacific, simmers on.

Faced with these challenges, individual countries will likely seek to enhance their own submarine-cable redundancy through more cables and satellites. The most resilient countries have high redundancy – meaning multiple cables laid along different routes – so that, should one cable fail, data can be redirected to others, minimising outages. Meanwhile, countries with less redundancy can suffer immediate effects. According to the IISS, improving repair capacity is an important pillar of strategic resilience as it may help deter or mitigate malicious activity. However, it is an expensive endeavour and countries with financial constraints will require external assistance.

Addressing these issues presents opportunities for regional, international, and cross-sector cooperation to protect these vital communication arteries and backbone of our digital connectivity and ensure swift repairs when needed. A prime example is the Quad Partnership for Cable Connectivity and Resilience, which aims to improve technical knowledge-sharing on cable maintenance between states.

ASEAN has also taken proactive steps, including the establishment of the Working Group on Submarine-Cables. The Working Group can forge partnerships with organizations like the International Cable Protection Committee to stay current with industry developments and serve as a catalyst for cross-sector dialogues among government agencies, the scientific community, the private sector, and multidisciplinary experts.

*Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,*

As we stand at the cusp of a new digital era, ASEAN's commitment to submarine cable cooperation embodies our vision for a connected, resilient, and prosperous Indo-Pacific. The challenges we face are complex, but it is clear that national governments and industry must need to collaborate on increasing and diversifying their cable capabilities and improving repair times to protect this fragile, highly vulnerable and critical layer of cyberspace. By bringing together government officials, industry leaders, and technical experts at this seminar, we are laying the groundwork for a comprehensive approach to submarine cable protection and development.

I call upon all participants to move beyond dialogue to forge concrete partnerships, establish practical mechanisms for cable protection, and develop innovative solutions for our shared digital future. Together, we can ensure that ASEAN remains at the forefront of digital connectivity, setting new standards for international cooperation in this critical domain. I look forward to the transformative discussions ahead and the actionable outcomes that will emerge from this seminar.

Thank you and a good morning to all of you.

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