



H.E. Dr. Kao Kim Hourn, Secretary-General of ASEAN
Remarks
Opening Session of the 2nd ASEAN Future Forum (AFF)

25 February 2025, Hotel Meliá, Hanoi, Viet Nam

Your Excellency Pham Minh Chinh, Prime Minister of Viet Nam,

Your Excellency José Ramos-Horta, President of Timor-Leste,

Your Excellency Bui Thanh Son, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Viet Nam,

Your Excellency Saleumxay Kommasith, Deputy Prime Minister of Lao PDR,

Your Excellency Prak Sokhonn, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia,

Your Excellency Maris Sangiampongsa, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand,

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me express my profound gratitude to the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (DAV) for inviting me to participate in this year's ASEAN Future Forum (AFF). I particularly appreciate Viet Nam's efforts in sustaining the momentum through this second Forum, whose theme resonates deeply with the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 on building a resilient, innovative, dynamic, and people-centred ASEAN.

I also extend my heartfelt appreciation to Malaysia, both as ASEAN Chair for 2025 and as permanent Co-Chair of the High-Level Task Force on the ASEAN Community's Post-2025 Vision (HLTF-ACV). Malaysia's steady stewardship of the High-Level Task Force since its inception in 2022 has been truly exemplary. And this year, Malaysia's chairmanship marks a watershed moment as we inaugurate a new chapter in ASEAN community-building, guided by the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 and its four Strategic Plans for the next two decades.

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A central focus of this Forum is how ASEAN and its Member States can strategically navigate an era of profound and accelerating change and transformation. Geopolitical rivalries are deepening, protectionism is resurging, and globalization is

being rapidly reconfigured. Technological disruptions are upending industries and reshaping power dynamics, while demographic shifts, climate change impacts and political volatilities worldwide are testing the resilience of our governance and economic systems. These forces are not just unsettling the global and regional order—they are fundamentally reshaping it, demanding foresight, adaptability, and decisive action.

In contemplating our path forward, I find great wisdom in examining historical precedents and lessons. Throughout our journey, we have weathered seismic global shifts—from the iron walls and proxy wars of the Cold War to the breakthroughs and new fault lines of the post-Cold War era, from the heights of unfettered globalization to the current reckoning that challenges its very foundations, and from the shockwaves of global terrorism to the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through it all, we have remained true to our overarching mission: promoting peace, security and prosperity for our nations and peoples. From this journey, two lessons truly stand out: firstly, collective action through cooperation and collaboration consistently proves more effective than going it alone; and secondly, every challenge carries with it the seeds of opportunity waiting to be seized and leveraged.

ASEAN has indeed demonstrated remarkable resilience and agility in converting challenges into opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic has catalysed our stronger regional collaboration in pandemic response and recovery. It has also accelerated our digital transformation, particularly in the economic sector, as communities pivoted to online platforms during lockdowns. This momentum will only accelerate, fuelled by our ongoing negotiations of the Digital Economic Framework Agreement (DEFA). Upon completion, DEFA promises to unlock our region's digital economic potential, with projections to double our digital economy from US\$1 trillion to US\$2 trillion by 2030.

In today's increasingly fragmented and polarised world, where major power competition escalates and global economic decoupling accelerates, ASEAN's enduring commitment to cooperation and collaboration, dialogue and diplomacy, alongside its role as a bridge-builder, has become more essential than ever. Our region, by virtue of its geography, history and economic nature, has always found itself at the centre and at the intersection of competing interests and initiatives of the great powers. Yet, it is precisely within this dynamic of tension and convergence that ASEAN is presented with the unique opportunity to harness our diplomatic acumen and convening power to our advantage, provided our member states remain united and steadfast in our shared purpose.

Resilience must start within ASEAN itself—among its member states. This principle, which has shaped ASEAN since its early days, remains crucial as we navigate this era of fragmentation, disruptions and polarisation. This approach has already borne tangible results, as demonstrated in the ASEAN economic integration

journey, beginning with the ASEAN Free Trade Area in the early 1990s. This laid the important groundwork for ASEAN to collectively build a robust network of free trade agreements with our various trade partners, establishing ASEAN as a dynamic force in the global trade landscape. The key takeaway is that by safeguarding our strategic autonomy and reinforcing intra-ASEAN integration, we amplify our collective bargaining power, enabling ASEAN not only to withstand external pressures but also to become an attractive partner to the world, thereby advancing our national and regional interests with greater impact, cohesion, and integration.

ASEAN's economies have long been major beneficiaries of globalization. Today, as global supply chains are reconfigured, we must continue to leverage our intrinsic dynamism and advantage to capitalize on the unfolding diversification. With a combined market of over 680 million people, a prime geographic location, and diverse economic strengths, ASEAN stands as an attractive destination for investments seeking stability and growth in an increasingly uncertain world. The key to unlocking this potential lies in deepening our internal economic integration, while preserving our engagement and inclusive approach to external partnerships. I must emphasize – inclusive engagement remains our fundamental approach.

Consensus continues to be the basis of ASEAN's decision-making, while transparency, openness, inclusiveness and convergence-building remain deeply embedded in ASEAN's DNA. Upholding these principles is essential, both within ASEAN and in our relationships with our external partners, as we navigate an increasingly fragmented multipolar world.

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In this context, the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 serves as a comprehensive roadmap for sustaining our unity and resilience in the decades ahead. It seeks to deepen the ASEAN community-building across the three pillars—political-security, economic, and socio-cultural—while strengthening ASEAN connectivity through a whole-of-Community approach.

Building on the foundations of the previous Vision and Blueprints, ASEAN Community Vision 2045 places strong emphasis on innovation-driven and sustainability-oriented growth, ensuring that the ASEAN peoples be at the heart of our efforts and priorities. By aligning with global megatrends and staying attuned to emerging global challenges, it aims to make our region more adaptable and resilient to external shifts and shocks, as well as challenges and crises.

On the external front, the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 reaffirms ASEAN Centrality as our guiding principle, particularly vital in today's fractured global order. ASEAN shall continue to be the primary driving force in shaping the regional architecture amidst geopolitical tensions and rivalries, while contributing to

international peace and security through upholding the rules-based multilateral system and international law.

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It is noteworthy that in an era where multilateralism faces real challenges from exclusive minilateral arrangements and unilateral actions by major powers, ASEAN stands as both a beacon and steadfast advocate of multilateral cooperation. Our ability to maintain constructive dialogue and mutually beneficial cooperation with all partners, amid mounting global tensions, demonstrates the enduring value of the ASEAN Way, and the ASEAN spirit of unity, solidarity and Centrality.

From an institutional perspective, ASEAN will continue to strengthen all Sectoral Bodies across the three Communities and enhance ASEAN-led mechanisms towards greater effectiveness, responsiveness and future-readiness. This includes both our engagements with individual Dialogue Partners through the ASEAN Plus One modality and multilateral platforms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus Three (APT), East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), and Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF). These mechanisms remain as vital today, if not more so, than at their inception, providing structured channels for dialogue and cooperation, as well as to promote preventive diplomacy that help prevent misunderstandings and reduce tensions in our region.

Moreover, we will further strengthen the implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) which has become increasingly relevant today. The AOIP has emerged as a crucial framework for ASEAN's external engagements, particularly in developing cooperative programs and projects in maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainability, economic and other areas of cooperation. Its inclusive and balanced approach, coupled with its affirmative agenda for shared prosperity and stability, makes the AOIP a compelling platform to bridge divides and foster ASEAN's role as a stabilizing force in the region.

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At this juncture, I must emphasize that our primary challenge lies in translating vision into action as we navigate an increasingly complex and divided world. Looking ahead, we must confront crucial questions: How can ASEAN maintain its cohesion amid centrifugal forces and competing pressures and interests? How can ASEAN remain true to its inclusive approach in a world increasingly defined by competition, confrontation, contestation and fragmentation? How can ASEAN uphold its fundamentals of consensus and non-interference while responding swiftly and effectively to the new demands and disruptions wrought by a fast-changing world?

The timing of this Forum is particularly significant, as it aims to generate practical, actionable recommendations for ASEAN at a critical juncture of its community-building and of world developments. Given the multifaceted nature of the challenges facing our nations and region, it is imperative that discussions on ASEAN's future incorporate diverse stakeholder perspectives.

Therefore, I am heartened to see participants from diverse backgrounds joining this Forum, including government officials, scholars, business people, tech practitioners, and youth representatives - effectively bringing together both current policymakers and future thought-leaders on a soul-searching journey to shape ASEAN's path forward. The outcomes of our discussions and deliberations over these two days may well lay the groundwork for the implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045.

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As I conclude, I would like to acknowledge that this year marks the 30th Anniversary of Viet Nam's membership in ASEAN. It is fitting that the ASEAN Future Forum represents Viet Nam's latest contribution to strengthening ASEAN community-building, particularly at a time when regional solidarity and resilience are becoming more crucial than ever. As noted at last year's inaugural Forum, this platform's unique outstanding value lies in facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogue and engagement on innovative ideas and practical policy recommendations.

It is my hope that the Forum will continue annually and become a premier ASEAN-centred, future-oriented platform that fosters brainstorming and drives innovative and critical thinking to address the complexities of our rapidly changing world. Through our collective wisdom and shared commitment to regional stability, peace and prosperity, I am confident that ASEAN will continue to thrive, turning global challenges into regional opportunities.

I look forward to the productive discussions ahead.

I thank you.
