

**SPECIAL LECTURE  
BY SECRETARY-GENERAL OF ASEAN DR. KAO KIM HOURN  
AT KANSAI UNIVERSITY, OSAKA, JAPAN  
3PM – 4PM, 14 APRIL 2025**

**“ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Strategic Partnership:  
Partnership for Peace, Prosperity, and People”**

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Distinguished Faculty Members, Ladies and Gentlemen, Students, and  
Friends***

Konnichiwa.

1. I am delighted to be here at the kind invitation of Kansai University and for the opportunity to speak with all of you today. As someone who has been deeply involved in the education of the younger generation, I greatly value these opportunities to engage with the academic community, think tanks and students.
2. While in Osaka for the World Expo 2025 Opening Ceremony, I'm delighted to connect with young minds on a topic that resonates perfectly with the Expo's theme of “Designing a Better Future” – the ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.
3. As we look to the future, it is crucial to recognize that the world is in a state of flux. The ground beneath us is shifting, and a new global order – or perhaps disorder – is emerging, defined by escalating great power competition and deepening economic uncertainties due to resurging protectionism and trade tensions. The recent tariffs imposed by the US under President Trump’s administration serve as a stark reminder of how fragile the international economic order is. This is threatening the very rules-based trading system that has underpinned Asia’s remarkable growth for decades.

4. Against this backdrop, closer cooperation between ASEAN and Japan is not merely mutually beneficial but absolutely essential. It stands as a stabilizing force in the face of growing global complexities, championing free and fair trade, and demonstrating that prosperity is built on collaboration, not isolation. By deepening our economic ties, we can better withstand external pressures, safeguard opportunities for employment and prosperity for our peoples, and lay the foundation of resilience and strength for our future generations.
5. As we envision the next five decades of ASEAN-Japan cooperation, both sides must embrace new opportunities while addressing common challenges including climate change, food security, and public health through coordinated action.

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6. The partnership between ASEAN and Japan has deepened and expanded over the past five decades. The journey began with informal dialogue relations in 1973, which were formalized in 1977 and have since played a crucial role in fostering peace, stability, security, and prosperity across the East Asia region.
7. A pivotal milestone was the signing of the Tokyo Declaration for the Dynamic and Enduring ASEAN-Japan Partnership in the New Millennium on 12 December 2003. The following year, Japan's accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia further cemented Tokyo's commitment to our shared vision of lasting peace and stability in our region, which is anchored in fundamental principles guiding peaceful relations among member states, including peaceful resolution of disputes and the renunciation of the use of force.
8. The 40th anniversary in 2013 saw the establishment of the ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation Vision Statement, reaffirming both sides' dedication to peace, stability and friendship. Japan became ASEAN's strategic partner in 2020, and in 2023, as we celebrated the 50th anniversary of our relationship, it was elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Japan's standing as

ASEAN's comprehensive strategic partner has been rightfully earned through its substantial contributions to regional peace, prosperity, and the well-being of ASEAN peoples through many decades.

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9. Japan has long been a constructive and trusted partner of ASEAN in safeguarding regional peace and stability. It consistently engages with all key sectors of the ASEAN Political-Security Pillar, including through informal plus one engagement with the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) and participation in the ADMM-Plus; cooperation with the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crimes; and support for the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Drug Matters. Japan has also been an active ASEAN Regional Forum participant since its inception in 1994 and has co-chaired numerous ARF meetings and activities. In fact, in one area where Japan has been a leader and that is in the area of Justice Diplomacy, where Japan initiated this particular dialogue with ASEAN in 2023.
10. Japan also collaborates closely with ASEAN in addressing non-traditional security threats. It has supported key institutional mechanisms in this regard, including the ASEAN-Japan Cybersecurity Capacity Building Centre. Furthermore, Japan has earmarked US\$50 million to operationalize and support the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases Centre (ACPHEED) to be set up very soon. Japan will also promote collaboration between this Centre and the Japan Institute for Health Security, demonstrating its strong dedication to enhancing regional pandemic preparedness.
11. Notably, Japan was among the first Dialogue Partners to support the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific after its adoption by ASEAN Leaders in 2019. The following year, ASEAN and Japanese leaders issued a Joint Statement on Cooperation on the AOIP. Another joint statement on further promoting and implementing the AOIP will be adopted at the upcoming 28th ASEAN-Japan Summit later this year. This will further underscore the synergy of our shared vision and

joint efforts for regional peace and stability in a world with many challenges.

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12. ASEAN and Japan have built a profound and extensive economic partnership, with robust trade, investment, tourism and development cooperation. This is underpinned by key agreements, including the ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which facilitates greater economic cooperation and mutual market access. We are also members of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the world's largest free trade agreement, a cornerstone of regional economic integration and a powerful testament to our shared commitment to the multilateral rules-based trading system. With regard to RCEP, in terms of population we are looking at about 30% of the world population. In terms of GDP, it would be about 30% of the global GDP. At the moment, we have already set up with RCEP Support Unit (RSU) within the ASEAN Secretariat. We are also working to open the arrangement on Accession to the RCEP agreement by other countries and economies that are interested to be part of it. This is very important arrangement that we have in terms of promoting free trade areas among countries that are interested.
13. The numbers speak volumes about the importance of Japan as one of ASEAN's top economic partners: Japan was ASEAN's fourth-largest trading partner in 2024, with bilateral trade reaching US\$236.4 billion. Japan also has been a major source of foreign direct investment, with inflows totaling US\$16 billion in 2023, making it ASEAN's fourth-largest investor.
14. The enduring ASEAN-Japan partnership therefore thrives on strong business connections and vibrant people-to-people exchanges. Today, we have roughly around 15,887 Japanese companies are operating across ASEAN and are expanding in key sectors such as transportation and storage, manufacturing, finance and insurance. Tourism further strengthens these bonds, with 3.5 million Japanese visitors to ASEAN in 2024, a significant increase from 2.7 million of visitors from Japan to ASEAN in 2023. ASEAN's

outbound tourists to Japan have reached pre-COVID level already. These connections not only enhance economic cooperation but also deepen cultural and social ties among our peoples from all walks of life.

15. These achievements have laid a solid foundation for our determination to co-create a prosperous future together. This is reflected in the Joint Vision Statement on ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation, its Implementation Plan, and the Future Design and Action Plan for Innovative and Sustainable ASEAN-Japan Co-Creation 2023-2033.
16. Complementing these efforts, the ASEAN-Japan Economic Co-Creation Vision—developed by the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI), the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI), and the Japan External Trade Organization—aims to deepen economic engagement through a business-driven, private sector-led approach, focused on innovation, digital transformation, and supply chain resilience. Together, these frameworks establish a clear and actionable roadmap for us to forge a more dynamic, future-ready economic partnership.
17. Having addressed the “Partnership for Peace and Prosperity”, I would now like to highlight the “People” dimension. As ASEAN and Japanese people increasingly engage through education, travel, tourism, social media, and employment opportunities, they deepen their understanding and appreciation of each other’s cultures, traditions, and heritage.
18. Empowering and connecting our people, especially youth, is essential for strengthening ASEAN-Japan people-to-people ties. These connections are building a strong foundation of trust and unlocking the human capital necessary for co-creating our future. Through dynamic initiatives and collaborations under our Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, ASEAN and Japan are empowering youth with the knowledge, skills, and resources to drive progress, innovation, and certainly positive change.
19. I wish to highlight that our young people represent ASEAN's most innovative demographic force. In 2020, Southeast Asia was home

to 224 million young people—Generation Z (ages 15-25) accounting for 53% and Millennials (ages 26-35) comprising 47%. The proportion of youth in ASEAN's population is projected to peak in 2038. I understand that Japan is a society with ageing population. But, for ASEAN we will have to wait until 2038 to reach a plateau. After 2038, ASEAN will face ageing society as well. In this respect, we can learn from Japan. The young population drive technological advancement and demonstrate stronger commitment to environmental sustainability and inclusion than previous generations, creating expanding markets for green and inclusive innovations. This is where the young people of ASEAN and Japan can collaborate more effectively—together.

20. The ASEAN Leaders' Statement on the Year of ASEAN Youth in 2022 emphasized that youth as vital partners in creating solutions for health, well-being, and urban challenges. For years, Japan has invested in youth and human capital development across ASEAN by sharing expertise in disaster risk reduction and universal healthcare while, at the same time, pioneering smart city initiatives, helping to shape a healthier, more connected, and more resilient future.
21. Building on this foundation, numerous opportunities exist for higher education institutions in both ASEAN and Japan to strengthen student connections, expand educational exchanges, fund youth-led innovations, and facilitate cultural engagement. The Japan-Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths (JENESYS) exemplifies successful cultural exchange and mutual understanding among young people. Additionally, ASEAN and Japan continue investing in programmes like the ASEAN Young Climate Leaders Programme and the ASEAN-Japan Youth Forum, empowering youth to address pressing global issues through cooperation in green energy, zero emissions, and collaboration with the ASEAN Centre for Climate Change at University Brunei Darussalam.
22. The ASEAN Secretariat will also maintain its engagement with the ASEAN-Japan Centre based in Tokyo, which plays a key role in promoting our cultural exchanges and people-to-people connectivity. We must also acknowledge Japan's continued support

of the ASEAN Junior Fellowship Programme, a programme designed for young people that can be attached to work at the ASEAN Secretariat to get maximum exposure, experience and exploration of your future careers.

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23. As the Secretary-General of ASEAN, I consistently emphasize this message: An organization's greatest asset is its people—their creativity, resilience, and commitment to building a brighter future together. No individual possesses a monopoly on knowledge, wisdom and by investing in people-to-people exchanges, we create prosperity rooted in mutual understanding and respect.
24. To the young people present today: As Kansai University students, you represent future leaders and changemakers in your country and certainly in the region and in the world. Your engagement in dialogue and friendship-building is essential for breaking down barriers and fostering cross-border cooperation. As ASEAN and Japan move forward together, remember that you are not merely participants in this journey but designers of tomorrow. The friendships and networks you establish today with your ASEAN counterparts will create foundations for a more inclusive, and sustainable future.
25. As cultural and educational ambassadors, I would encourage you to actively participate in exchanges, internships, and collaborative projects, particularly in ASEAN and the World Expo here in Osaka, Kansai, Japan. The World Expo here is the best opportunity that you have. You are able to see and visit pavilions of different ASEAN Member States and international organizations. You can interact, and you can learn. I would encourage you to take part of this opportunity. These experiences will deepen your understanding of diverse cultures, facilitate mutual learning, and inspire innovative solutions to shared challenges. The resulting friendships and partnerships will transcend borders, leading to collaborative initiatives in education, business, and community development that benefit both ASEAN and Japan.

26. Over fifty years, ASEAN and Japan have built something extraordinary: a partnership defined not merely by shared history but by mutual trust, meaningful collaborations and shared aspirations for the future. Now, it falls to you—the next generation—to work together to elevate this partnership to greater heights.

Thank you.

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