



**KEYNOTE REMARKS OF
H.E. DR. KAO KIM HOURN,
SECRETARY-GENERAL OF ASEAN
ON “ASEAN-NEW ZEALAND PARTNERSHIP: FIVE DECADES OF RELATIONS,
COOPERATION, AND PARTNERSHIP”**

University of Auckland, New Zealand, 12 May 2025

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Members of Faculty, Dear Students,

1. First, allow me to extend my sincere appreciation to the University of Auckland for this opportunity to engage with all of you and to share my thoughts on the “ASEAN-New Zealand Partnership: Five Decades of Relations, Cooperation and Partnership.” For me, it's always good to be back at university as it's something I am passionate about.
2. We are gathering here at a particularly consequential juncture in global affairs. The international system is undergoing profound transformation—marked by shifting power dynamics, surging economic protectionism, and fraying commitment to open trade. Recent tariff escalations by major economies have sent shockwaves across global supply chains and financial markets. At the same time, we face intensifying geo-political tensions, accelerating climate change impacts, disruptive technological shifts, and extensive realignments in global governance and politics.
3. Within this complex landscape, partnerships built on shared principles, common interests, mutual respect, and collaborative approaches—such as that between ASEAN and New Zealand—are vital to navigating uncertainties and sustaining the momentum of international cooperation.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, and Friends,

4. The evolution of ASEAN–New Zealand dialogue relations since 1975 gives us strong confidence in the enduring strength of our partnership. Its elevation to a Strategic Partnership in 2015, and our celebration of its 50th anniversary this year, are powerful testaments to a relationship built on mutual trust, mutual respect, and shared aspirations. New Zealand's proposal to forge a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with ASEAN further underscores Wellington's steadfast commitment to deepening our ties in the years ahead.

5. Throughout the past five decades, New Zealand has demonstrated its steadfast commitment to multilateralism, regional economic integration, and robust people-to-people connections with Southeast Asia. Indeed, there are around 2,000 students from the ASEAN Member States studying in New Zealand. Concurrently, ASEAN has served as a vital bridge for New Zealand to be with Asia and in Asia, firmly anchoring its presence and active participation in our dynamic and thriving region.
6. In the political-security domain, New Zealand has long been one of ASEAN's most valued partners and a steadfast champion of the principles and values that the organization holds dearly, particularly those enshrined in the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), to which New Zealand formally acceded in 2005.
7. New Zealand has also been an active participant in the ASEAN-led mechanisms including the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM)-Plus, and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF). Through your support for ASEAN centrality and contributions to regional peace, stability and security, New Zealand has become an indispensable partner of ASEAN in shaping our inclusive and open regional architecture.
8. In line with its active role in ASEAN-led mechanisms, New Zealand's strong support for the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) has been integral to deepening our partnership. Since its adoption by ASEAN Leaders in 2019, the AOIP has become a key reference framework for ASEAN to work with its external partners towards fostering an inclusive, open, and cooperative regional order, particularly given the many different Indo-Pacific strategies by other partners. The 2023 ASEAN-New Zealand Joint Statement on the AOIP, titled 'Standing Firm Amidst Swirling Currents', underscored our strong commitment to strengthening cooperation in the key areas of the AOIP, namely maritime security, connectivity, sustainability, economy and other areas of shared priority. New Zealand is a maritime nation and with the exception of Lao PDR, ASEAN is also a maritime community. Our synergy in implementing the AOIP also contributes substantively to implementing the ASEAN-New Zealand Plan of Action 2021-2025, opening new avenues for innovative initiatives that contribute to a stable, resilient and prosperous Indo-Pacific, which New Zealand is a part of.
9. New Zealand has also been a constructive partner for ASEAN in the law enforcement sector, maintaining regular consultations with the ASEAN Senior Officials' Meeting on Transnational Crime (SOMTC). In the defense sector, beyond active engagement in ministerial discussions of the ADMM-Plus, New Zealand has co-chaired several ADMM-Plus Expert Working Groups with ASEAN Member States: Peacekeeping Operations for the 2011-2013 cycle, Maritime Security (2014-2017), Cyber Security (2017-2020), and currently, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief for the 2024-2027 cycle.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

10. When ASEAN's founding fathers convened in 1967, the region was still roiled by Cold War rivalries and intra-regional tensions. Yet, against this backdrop of volatility, they articulated a bold and far-sighted vision in the Bangkok Declaration—placing economic cooperation at the heart of their aspirations for lasting peace and shared prosperity. That conviction has withstood the tests of time. Today, ASEAN stands as the world's fifth-largest economy, trailing only the United States, China, Japan, and Germany, and is poised to become the fourth largest by 2030. Despite global economic uncertainties and geopolitical tensions, the region is forecast to grow at 4.7% this year.¹
11. Why am I emphasizing this? Because New Zealand stands out as one of the countries that has long recognised—and actively harnessed—the economic potential of our region. This is evident in its steadfast support for ASEAN's efforts to foster a robust, rules-based multilateral trading system through various free trade agreements. From its membership in the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Area (AANZFTA) to its participation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the world's largest regional free trade agreement, New Zealand has consistently deepened its economic integration with ASEAN and the wider region.
12. As a strong champion of ambition, quality, and inclusivity in trade, New Zealand has been instrumental in driving the recent second upgrade of the AANZFTA, which now stands as one of the most comprehensive and high-quality FTAs in the region, establishing a benchmark for the global trade community. This upgrade is not only a testament to the strength and maturity of our partnership but also sends a clear signal to the international community: that our region remains dynamic, outward-looking, and committed to advancing high standards in global trade cooperation. At a time when economic nationalism is gaining ground, ASEAN and New Zealand stand firm in our shared pursuit of deeper economic integration, broader market access, and innovation-driven growth.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

13. People are the heart of the ASEAN-New Zealand partnership, and this is most vividly expressed in our collaboration under the socio-cultural pillar of the ASEAN Community—where our shared values and aspirations come to life through meaningful, people-centred cooperation.
14. ASEAN is dedicated to fostering holistic human development, encompassing education, health, well-being, and inclusive societies, while also working to

¹ Fulcrum, *Southeast Asia's Economic Performance in 2024 and Outlook for 2025: Navigating Rising Risks*, <https://fulcrum.sg/southeast-asias-economic-performance-in-2024-and-outlook-for-2025-navigating-rising-risks/> (accessed on 29 March 2025).

strengthen regional identity and enhance people-to-people connectivity. Our ongoing initiatives—ranging from bolstering health security and developing a skilled workforce to promoting mental health and advancing cultural understanding—align closely with New Zealand’s development priorities. By leveraging these shared objectives, ASEAN and New Zealand can forge synergistic partnerships that amplify impact across the socio-cultural landscape, driving a more resilient and interconnected region.

15. In the field of education, our partnership has nurtured a new generation of capable and committed public sector leaders across ASEAN. Through initiatives such as the ASEAN-New Zealand Short-term Training Scholarships, these leaders have gained critical expertise in key areas including public health management, good governance, food and agribusiness, and international trade. We recognize significant potential in expanding such initiatives for ASEAN senior and mid-level public sector officials to address future governance challenges.
16. Other people-to-people initiatives have enabled our populations to further solidify the strong connections between ASEAN and New Zealand. For instance, the 2023 relaunch of the Young Business Leaders Initiative (YBLI) brought together not only existing alumni but also new participants, thereby strengthening interpersonal connections and fostering a vibrant YBLI network.
17. Our partnership extends to addressing some of the region’s most pressing challenges. In disaster management, New Zealand has been a constructive partner of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) and has supported capacity-building programmes for our disaster management personnel.
18. In the environmental domain, New Zealand actively contributes to ASEAN’s climate and biodiversity agendas through support for the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity in the Philippines and the ASEAN Centre for Climate Change in Brunei Darussalam—helping to advance conservation initiatives like the ASEAN Flyway Network that aims to conserve migratory birds, and develop specific policy responses to the region’s climate challenges.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

19. With our partnership structured around four key themes—Peace, Prosperity, People, and Planet—New Zealand will continue to play an important role as ASEAN’s strategic partner. As we commemorate the 50th anniversary of our dialogue relations, allow me to share some perspectives on the future directions for ASEAN-New Zealand cooperation.
20. Regarding political-security cooperation, given our common interest in promoting a stable, peaceful and rules-based Indo-Pacific region, I encourage New Zealand to further enhance practical cooperation in the four areas outlined in the AOIP.

ASEAN and New Zealand should also maintain collaboration through ASEAN-led mechanisms, including efforts to combat non-traditional security threats and challenges.

21. Under economic cooperation, with recent US announcements of tariffs and considering ASEAN's deep integration into global supply chains, these developments could significantly impact our economies. It is essential that ASEAN and New Zealand remain closely engaged to ensure that these shifting trade dynamics do not erode the rules-based multilateral trading system that we both champion. At a special meeting recently, the ASEAN Economic Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to engage in frank and constructive dialogue with the US to address trade concerns—choosing not to pursue retaliatory measures, but instead to demonstrate restraint and uphold the principles of an open, predictable, and rules-based global trade order.
22. Even as we navigate these pressing economic and geopolitical challenges, we do not lose sight of sustainability—an imperative of our era and a crucial driver of future prosperity. The ASEAN Strategy for Carbon Neutrality outlines key priorities in climate action, decarbonization, and sustainable financing, all of which resonate strongly with New Zealand's sustainability priorities. In this regard, I encourage New Zealand to deepen its collaboration with the ASEAN Centre for Climate Change, including through organizing targeted workshops and developing flagship projects to support ASEAN's carbon neutrality goals.
23. I would also like to encourage New Zealand to consider expanding capacity-building programmes, particularly in entrepreneurship for our young people and women. Expanding scholarships and creating internship opportunities for ASEAN students would further strengthen human capital development, especially in emerging areas such as digital technology, biodiversity, research and development, and engineering, while simultaneously reinforcing our people-to-people exchanges.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Members of Faculty, Dear Students,

24. The ASEAN Leaders will adopt the ASEAN Vision 2045 at its forthcoming summit in May to guide our community-building agenda in the decades ahead. This is the first time that ASEAN will have a 20-year vision. It envisions ASEAN as a resilient, innovative, dynamic, and people-oriented region amidst existing and future megatrends. It further positions ASEAN as the epicenter of growth in the Indo-Pacific. The four Strategic Plans—for the ASEAN Political-Security Community, ASEAN Economic Community, ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, and ASEAN Connectivity—are designed with a view to realizing the objectives as set forth in Vision 2045.
25. I wish to emphasize that ASEAN's external partners certainly have a crucial role in contributing to the fulfilment of Vision 2045, especially through cooperative projects

and programmes that support ASEAN community-building efforts. In New Zealand's case, five decades of steadfast partnership with ASEAN have built a solid foundation for our more substantive, meaningful, and mutually beneficial ties going forward.

26. As I conclude, I am reminded that what makes the ASEAN-New Zealand partnership particularly compelling is the remarkable alignment of our fundamental values and interests. As middle and smaller powers in the global arena, we share a profound interest in preserving the international rules-based order that safeguards the rights and prosperity of all nations regardless of size. Our partnership exemplifies how like-minded nations can amplify their collective influence to shape global norms and standards.
27. Particularly, in this era of mounting challenges to the multilateral trading system and global governance, ASEAN and New Zealand must remain resolute in championing open trade, rules-based multilateralism, and inclusive regionalism. Now more than ever, we must redouble our efforts in sustaining international partnerships—both bilaterally and through ASEAN-led mechanisms—to advance our shared vision of an open, inclusive, and prosperous Indo-Pacific, firmly anchored in international law and the enduring principles of multilateralism.
28. In doing so, we offer a powerful counterpoint to the resurging tides of fragmentation and isolation, demonstrating that enduring prosperity is best secured through sustained engagement and a common purpose.

Thank you.