



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

Keynote Address at the

ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)

Seminar Series on Maritime Cooperation: Marine Protection and Preservation

8 December 2025, Sheraton Grand Jakarta Gandaria City Hotel, Jakarta, Indonesia

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

His Excellency Srinivas Gotru, Ambassador of India to ASEAN,

His Excellency Yonetani Koji, Ambassador of Japan to ASEAN,

Ms. Lara Franzen, Chargé d'Affaires of the Australian Mission to ASEAN,

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

Excellencies, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

A very good morning. Let me begin by recognising the contributions of Singapore, Australia, India, and Japan in convening this Seminar on marine protection and preservation. As the third and final session in a series launched in late 2023, this Seminar further advances the implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP).

Since its endorsement by ASEAN Leaders six years ago, the AOIP has remained a key reference framework for ASEAN's cooperation with external partners. In recent years, more partners have voiced their support and have signalled their readiness to work with ASEAN on concrete initiatives under the AOIP.

At its core, the AOIP embodies ASEAN's commitment to inclusive cooperation—encouraging open, non-exclusive engagement, much like what we are doing here.

Excellencies, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

This Seminar provides a fitting conclusion to the AOIP Seminar Series, linking two AOIP cooperation areas together – maritime cooperation and sustainable development goals. The ocean is indeed, indispensable to ASEAN. Millions of people depend on it for food, nutrition and livelihoods. According to the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Centre, Southeast Asia contributes approximately 20 per cent of global fishery production. Our region is also home to more than 28 per cent of the world's most extensive and diverse coral reefs—ecosystems that underpin food security, economic stability, and environmental resilience.

Protecting coral reefs, mangroves, and seagrass beds strengthens our natural defences against storms and rising sea levels, reducing disaster risks for vulnerable coastal communities. Regional cooperation on marine conservation not only safeguards shared resources—from shipping lanes to fisheries—for future generations but also reinforces regional solidarity.

Yet these resources face intensifying pressures from climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss, and unsustainable practices, including overexploitation and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. By placing marine protection at the forefront of ASEAN's agenda, we reaffirm our determination to safeguard both our environmental foundations and our socio-economic resilience.

This determination is reflected in ASEAN's initiatives, including the work of the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) and the implementation of the ASEAN Regional Action Plan for Combating Marine Debris in ASEAN Member States. Marine protection is also embedded in *ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future*, which guides ASEAN's Community-building efforts over the next two decades. Cooperation on marine protection and preservation is essential to conserving biodiversity, supporting sustainable fisheries, strengthening climate resilience, ensuring livelihoods for coastal communities, and enhancing regional marine governance. These efforts not only accelerate AOIP implementation but also support ASEAN's broader vision of a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable region.

Excellencies, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Marine fisheries supply critical food, nutrition, cultural value, and income for billions globally. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization's Review of the state of world marine fishery resources, in the year 2025, seafood provides at least one-fifth of per capita protein intake for 3.2 billion people. About 600 million people depend on aquatic food systems for their livelihoods.

But marine life is under severe strain. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) estimates that 19–23 million tonnes of plastic waste enter aquatic ecosystems annually polluting our lakes, rivers, seas and oceans—a figure that could nearly triple without decisive action. With an estimated 75–199 million tonnes of plastic already in the oceans, accumulating debris is poisoning ecosystems, killing marine life and threatening fisheries and coastal communities.

Beyond plastics, oil spills continue to cause significant harm. In 2024, the International Tanker Owners Pollution Federation recorded ten confirmed tanker spills, releasing roughly 10,000 tonnes of oil into marine environments. Such incidents have lasting and profound impacts on biodiversity, fisheries, and the communities that rely on the seas and the oceans. Rapid coastal development—including ports, resorts, and land reclamation—adds further stress and pressures.

While these developments support growth and connectivity, they can accelerate habitat degradation and jeopardise coral reefs, mangroves, and seagrass beds when not managed responsibly. At the same time, rising sea levels threaten to inundate low-lying coastal areas across ASEAN, displacing communities, eroding coastlines, and undermining economic stability.

Take of all of these together – marine pollution, unsustainable coastal development, and climate-driven sea-level rise, jeopardise not only ocean health but also community safety, food security, and regional prosperity. These challenges also constrain scientific understanding and limit our ability to make informed decisions.

These interconnected threats underscore the urgency for collective, coordinated and forward-looking regional action. As we expand our work on marine protection, we must balance development with sustainability—strengthening environmental standards, promoting nature-based solutions, and aligning infrastructure planning with long-term ecological resilience.

Encouragingly, several initiatives have emerged to support this balance. One of them is the growing emphasis on the blue economy, which highlights sustainability, resilience, and inclusiveness. Since ASEAN Leaders adopted the Declaration on the Blue Economy in 2021, this approach has become an important strand of maritime cooperation under the AOIP. We have since made steady progress, including the adoption of the ASEAN Blue Economy Framework and the establishment of the ASEAN Coordinating Task Force on Blue Economy. These steps are translating blue-economy principles into action—from sustainable fisheries to marine renewable energy—promoting environmental stewardship and inclusive growth across ASEAN and with our partners as well.

Another significant development is the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction, or what we know as the BBNJ Agreement. Adopted in 2023, it marks a major step forward in global ocean governance by setting clearer rules for conservation, sustainable use, benefit-sharing, and environmental oversight in areas beyond national jurisdiction.

I am encouraged that most ASEAN Member States and our partners have signed or ratified the Agreement, underscoring our shared commitment to safeguarding marine biodiversity. On 19 September, the Agreement attained the required sixty ratifications to enter into force and will become fully operational on 17 January 2026. With this milestone, the international community will, for the first time, have a legally binding framework to conserve and sustainably manage marine biodiversity in the high seas—areas that cover nearly half the planet yet have long remained largely unregulated.

ASEAN has also expanded its regional efforts—strengthening waste management, pollution control, coastal resilience, and climate adaptation, including through cooperation with external partners. The ASEAN Working Group on Coastal and Marine Environment (AWGCME), with the strategic and policy guidance from the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Environment and the ASEAN Senior Officials on Environment, leads this work alongside the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity and the ASEAN Working Group on Nature Conservation and Biodiversity. Joint projects such as the Southeast Asia Regional Program on Combating Marine Plastics (SEA-MaP) further reinforce these environmental protection efforts.

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As ASEAN advances sustainable and inclusive cooperation in the Indo-Pacific through the AOIP, marine protection and preservation remains a critical pillar. The challenges before us—overfishing, IUU fishing, climate change, and biodiversity loss—are complex and cross-border. Progress will depend on cooperation and collaboration among governments, regional institutions, scientists, and civil society, using science-based and innovative approaches to strengthen marine governance and protect our fragile and precious marine ecosystems.

It is encouraging to see increasing initiatives at national, regional, and international levels. To maximise their impact, however, these initiatives must work in concert—ensuring coherence, avoiding duplication, and amplifying the effectiveness of our collective efforts.

By sharing insights, perspectives and experiences at this Seminar, we are helping to build a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to marine protection across Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific. These discussions can help deepen mutual understanding and ensure that our various initiatives are aligned, complementary, and responsive to new challenges of our time.

I encourage all participants to continue driving our shared commitments forward—through stronger cooperation, coherent policies, and concrete actions that protect and restore our oceans. Together, we can position ASEAN as a leader in marine stewardship, strengthening regional cooperation and advancing long-term environmental sustainability. I look forward to the discussions ahead and to the outcomes that will support the health, security and prosperity of our oceans.

I wish this seminar a resounding success.

I thank you.
