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Keynote Speech at the

***Warwick Economics Summit 2026* on**

ASEAN: A Community with Vision, Purpose, and Promise

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Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Esteemed Faculty and Students, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to join you at the Warwick Economic Summit 2026 and to be back in the United Kingdom. I thank the Warwick Students' Union, the Government of the U.K., and our partners across the country for their warm hospitality and continued commitment to global engagement and policy-relevant dialogue. For me, I feel honored and privileged to be back at a university environment, which I miss very much.

This Summit convenes at a moment of heightened global uncertainty—shaped by intensifying geopolitical tensions, growing economic fragmentation and coercion, increasing technological disruptions and accelerating climate risks.

Discussions at Davos 2026 underscored a clear reality: volatility is no longer a temporary phenomenon, but a structural feature of the global environment. Globalisation is being reassessed and redefined.

Supply chains are being reconfigured. Concerns over economic security and vulnerabilities arising from interdependence are intensifying. Yet the defining challenges of our time—from nuclear proliferation to increasing use of forces in the world today—cannot be addressed by any country, region or institutions acting alone.

It is within this global context, and here in the United Kingdom—a long-standing champion of open markets and international cooperation—that I would strongly urge our countries, our governments and our peoples to find renewed purpose in working together, guided by the spirit of humanity, global public goods, resilience, perseverance, and a steady belief that international and multilateral cooperation can endure even when global winds turn against it.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since the United Kingdom became ASEAN's 11th Dialogue Partner in 2021, cooperation has deepened and strengthened across all three ASEAN Community pillars. In 2024, two-way merchandise trade reached USD 38.8 billion, positioning the U.K. as ASEAN's 13th largest trading partner and underscoring the significant potential for further expansion. The U.K. is also a major source of foreign direct investment into ASEAN, with inflows amounting to USD 18.8 billion, or 8.2 per cent of ASEAN's total FDI inflows in 2024—making it ASEAN's fourth-largest source of investment. Meanwhile, ASEAN's outward FDI to the U.K. stood at GBP 22.1 billion, or USD 29.7 billion, in 2023. Together, these figures reflect a mutually beneficial and increasingly strategic economic partnership.

Education forms another strong pillar of our cooperation. Approximately 38,800 ASEAN students are currently studying in the United Kingdom, while more than 88,000 students across ASEAN are pursuing British higher-education qualifications within the region. Taken together, ASEAN's scale and dynamism, and the United Kingdom's financial expertise, innovation ecosystem, and global reach, form a highly complementary partnership—anchored in a shared commitment to open, rules-based cooperation.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In many ways, the growing partnership between ASEAN and U.K. mirrors ASEAN's own journey. We are not only the primary regional organisation for Southeast Asia but also a living experiment in cooperation, proving that diverse nations can come together and pursue shared interests and cooperation while navigating differences collectively. My central message today is clear and simple: ASEAN is a community defined by vision, purpose, and promise.

I will frame these reflections around what I call the Six Ps: Peace, Prosperity, People, Planet, Partnerships, and Potentials.

First, Peace – the foundation of ASEAN's progress and success. ASEAN was founded in 1967 amid profound instability in Southeast Asia—shaped by Cold War rivalries, newly independent states, and unresolved conflicts. In such circumstances, regional cooperation was far from inevitable. Yet ASEAN's founders made a deliberate and strategic hard choice: to prioritise dialogue over confrontation, cooperation over rivalry, and peace over war.

This choice was embedded in what came to be known as the ASEAN Way—grounded in consultation, consensus, mutual respect, restraint, and diplomacy—which created the conducive conditions for building confidence and trust to emerge and for nation-building to be possible.

For ASEAN, peace is not merely the absence of conflict; it is the presence of trust, predictability, and a sustained commitment to dialogue, cooperation and development that endures across our diversity and through time.

Peace has enabled ASEAN to pursue its second P – Prosperity, with a pragmatic and incremental approach to economic integration, reflecting the region's diversity in development levels and economic structures. Through the progressive reduction of trade and investment barriers, improved connectivity, and a more integrated business environment, ASEAN has advanced key initiatives, such as the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), later consolidated under the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC).

The objective was clear: to establish a single market and production base characterised by the freer flow of goods, services, investment, capital, and skilled labour, as codified in the ASEAN charter. This integration has fundamentally reshaped the region's economic landscape. Today, ASEAN is deeply embedded in regional and global integration and value chains, with production networks spanning multiple countries and linking the region to global markets.

ASEAN has played a critical role in electronics and semiconductors, automotive components, and an expanding range of digital and knowledge-based services, among others. Increasingly, multinational firms view ASEAN not as a collection of separate national markets, but as a single, interconnected regional production network—offering scale, diversity, and resilience at a time when supply chain diversification has become a strategic priority.

The results are compelling. ASEAN is now the world's fifth-largest economy, with a combined GDP of USD 3.9 trillion, and is projected to become the fourth-largest by 2030, supported by average annual growth exceeding 4 per cent in the coming years. The region also remains among the world's leading destinations for foreign direct investment, with total inflows reaching USD 230.8 billion in 2024 alone. These outcomes reflect sustained confidence in ASEAN's stability, predictability, openness, and long-term growth potential, as well as its ability to translate regional cooperation into tangible economic gains for its people.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The third P is People. ASEAN's integration has never been solely about macroeconomic outcomes. Home to nearly 700 million people, and one of the world's youngest regions, ASEAN's demographic dynamism is a powerful source of innovation—provided that integration delivers real and inclusive opportunities. Inclusivity therefore lies at the heart of ASEAN's agenda. Micro, Small, and Medium-sized Enterprises, or MSMEs, account for over 90 per cent of businesses and employ the majority of the workforce.

ASEAN is strengthening trade facilitation, digital connectivity, and regulatory cooperation to help MSMEs integrate and access finance, technology, and regional markets. A people-centred approach also requires ensuring that no community is left behind. ASEAN is investing in skills development, labour mobility, and efforts to narrow development gaps, so that growth remains broad-based, inclusive, and sustainable. Ultimately, ASEAN's success will be measured not only by GDP figures alone, but by whether regional integration tangibly improves the lives of its people. In other words, integration with a human purpose, and with people at the heart of ASEAN.

The fourth P is Planet. For ASEAN, sustainability is not a constraint on growth; it is a prerequisite for long-term competitiveness at a time when climate risks are increasingly recognised as major risks for development. Climate change poses real direct vulnerabilities tor food security, coastal cities, infrastructure, and tourism, even as global markets shift rapidly toward low-carbon and Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG)-aligned production.

ASEAN is therefore embedding sustainability into its economic integration agenda and cutting across other pillars of ASEAN Community —through a regional circular economy framework, energy-transition initiatives, and growing efforts toward carbon neutrality. Renewable-energy development, power-grid interconnection, and sustainable finance are central to this transition.

Sustainability is also being integrated into ASEAN's trade architecture. The upgraded ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA) includes provisions on remanufactured goods, supporting circular production and resource efficiency. At the same time, ASEAN's external trade agreements increasingly incorporate sustainability-related cooperation, helping firms remain competitive amid tightening global standards. By aligning climate action with trade and investment, ASEAN is re-positioning itself to seize the opportunities presented by the global green transition.

Beyond economic integration, the region focuses on environmental stewardship, sustainable trade, and human resilience as core pillars of its sustainability agenda. Targeted actions to mitigate marine pollution and advance plastic circularity, as guided by the ASEAN Regional Action Plan for Combating Marine Debris and the ASEAN Declaration on Plastic Circularity, work in tandem with initiatives for the sustainable management of coastal and marine ecosystems to ensure the region's blue economy and biodiversity remain resilient.

To protect these gains from climate-induced hazards, ASEAN is strengthening its disaster risk reduction architecture through the work of the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Disaster Management (AMMDM) and the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER), shifting toward comprehensive risk management by enhancing early warning systems and fostering anticipatory action.

Recognising that environmental stability is inseparable from human wellbeing, ASEAN is concurrently focused on strengthening health systems and transforming demographic shifts into a powerful engine for equity through the ASEAN Declaration on Promoting Green Jobs for a Sustainable Future and the Declaration on the Digital Transformation of Education Systems in ASEAN.

This commitment to inclusivity is upheld through the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025: Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ensuring no one is left behind in the transition to a greener economy. These integrated efforts across the socio-cultural and economic sectors ensure that regional resilience and human capital serve as the enduring foundation for *ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future*.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The fifth P is Partnerships. At the heart of ASEAN’s external engagement lies a firm commitment to open regionalism. ASEAN has never attempted to become a closed or inward-looking regional bloc.

Instead, regional integration has been pursued to complement and strengthen global engagement, anchored in a WTO-centred, rules-based multilateral trading system at a time when confidence in global institutions is being severely tested. For ASEAN, openness, trust, and inclusiveness are a strategic necessity—to build trust and to enhance resilience, competitiveness, and shared prosperity.

This approach underpins ASEAN Centrality—the principle that ASEAN serves as the convening hub of the evolving regional architecture. Centrality is not about control. It is about fostering an open, inclusive, and transparent working environment—avoiding zero-sum competition while creating space for cooperation among major and middle powers and other partners.

Through our convening power, ASEAN contributes to enhancing strategic trust and building strategic balance in an increasingly contested region. ASEAN’s vision is unambiguously articulated in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). The AOIP prioritises dialogue over rivalry, development over division, and economic cooperation over bloc politics. It aligns closely with ASEAN’s economic priorities, including resilient supply chains, extensive connectivity, energy transition, sustainable development and deeper integration into global value chains.

Within this multilateral framework, ASEAN’s partnerships—including with the United Kingdom—are strategic rather than transactional, grounded in shared commitments to openness, inclusivity, international law, and multilateral cooperation. In a world of growing fragmentation, ASEAN’s partnership approach sends a clear message: open regionalism, ASEAN Centrality, multilateralism, and building partnerships remain essential to addressing shared challenges and sustaining long-term peace, stability and prosperity.

All of this brings us to the sixth P: Potentials. ASEAN has entered a new phase of community building. The adoption of *ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future*, together with the ASEAN Economic Community Strategic Plan 2026–2030, and along with other Strategic Plans marks a significant vision, with greater consolidation in realising the single market and production base and greater diversification through a more proactive engagement with external partners.

The Vision recognises that ASEAN's future competitiveness will be driven not by cost advantages, but by its capacity to harness innovation, sustainability, and connectivity. Reflecting this shift, the AEC Strategic Plan is anchored in six Strategic Goals, captured in the acronym "ASEAN, I": an Action-oriented Community that deepens the single market; a Sustainable Community that advances green growth; and an Enterprising Community that promotes innovation, digitalisation, and sectoral cooperation. At the same time, ASEAN must remain Adaptable in global value chains, Nimble in responding to shocks, and Inclusive – ensuring that integration delivers tangible benefits to all Member States and their citizens.

In practical terms, this means upgrading ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement as well as strengthening ASEAN's role in global value chains, accelerating digitalisation, and enabling MSMEs to participate more meaningfully in regional and global markets including through ASEAN's external FTAs with its partners – Australia, China, Japan, India, Republic of Korea, New Zealand and Hong Kong, China, as well as through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Agreement.

It also means embedding sustainability more deeply into ASEAN's economic model—through renewable energy, sustainable finance, circular-economy initiatives, and greener supply chains—recognising that long-term prosperity ultimately depends on a healthy planet.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

For the students and young leaders gathered here today and through online, ASEAN's experience offers an important and valuable lesson: regional cooperation is neither automatic nor easy. It requires patience, diplomacy, compromise, and sustained commitment. Yet ASEAN's journey also demonstrates that diversity is not a weakness, and with shared purpose, it can transform complexity into strength.

In this uncertain and unpredictable world, ASEAN does not claim to have all the answers, but it offers a living example of how vision, purpose, and promise can be translated into sustained cooperation and tangible economic outcomes and benefits. One popular quote that is often attributed to Charles Darwin is that, *"It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change"*. This reminder is particularly relevant for those of us seeking solutions in complex, rapidly changing environments.

And it is through this lens that ASEAN's story is still being written. These principles have enabled cooperation among countries with diverse political systems, different levels of development, and historical experiences, gradually transforming Southeast Asia into a region of what it is today, that peace, stability, and prosperity are important and can never be taken for granted. Its future will depend not only on policies and institutions, but on people—especially young people like you—who still believe that cooperation remains possible, and that integration can still be a force for good, at present and in the future.

Let me conclude on that hopeful note.

Thank you.

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