



SG Dr. Kao Kim Hourn, Secretary-General of ASEAN

Pre-recorded Opening Remarks at the

SEAFIC Inaugural Forum

Theme: ***ASEAN's Golden Decade: Turning Geopolitical Overload into
Goeconomic Opportunity***

10 February 2026

H.E. Tengku Zafrul Aziz, Chairman of the Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA) and the Chairman of the Southeast Asian Future Initiative Centre (SEAFIC)

H.E. Dyah Roro Esti Widya Putri, Vice Minister of Trade of the Republic of Indonesia

Mr. Arsjad Rasjid, Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Indonesian Business Council (IBC)

Excellencies, Esteemed Members of the Business Community,

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good Morning,

Thank you for the opportunity to address SEAFIC's inaugural gathering and official launch. The arrival of a regional think-tank dedicated to forward-looking evidence-based policy dialogue comes at a critical moment. Southeast Asia's intellectual ecosystem is already vibrant, and SEAFIC's contribution will sharpen our collective capacity to navigate what lies ahead. In an era defined by fragmentation and flux, policy-making grounded in rigorous research isn't a luxury—it's essential to ASEAN's coherence and strategic autonomy.

Today's theme—'*ASEAN's Golden Decade: Turning Geopolitical Overload into Goeconomic Opportunity*'—captures precisely where we stand.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The global economic order is being rewired. Trade policies, export controls, supply chain management, and investment decisions now move along lines drawn as much by geopolitics as by market logic. These aren't aberrations but features of the system we now inhabit. For ASEAN, one of the world's most open and interconnected regions, this creates real exposure: to supply chain disruptions, to the spillover effects of great power rivalry, to policy choices made far from our capitals but felt deeply in our economies. It demands that ASEAN move with greater coordination and strategic intent.

Yet ASEAN sees these pressures not merely as constraints but as opportunities. The global recalibration of supply chains, the search for resilience and trusted partnerships, the premium now placed on sustainable production—all of this creates space for ASEAN to position itself as a reliable, competitive, and forward-looking economic partner. With strong fundamentals, deepening integration, and an extensive web of partnerships, ASEAN is well-positioned to turn volatility into strategic advantage—if we act collectively and with conviction.

And ASEAN has acted. Under the leadership of H.E. Tengku Zafrul Aziz as Chair of the ASEAN Economic Ministers last year, we established the ASEAN Geoeconomics Task Force to assess emerging risks and chart strategic responses that protect our integration, resilience, and centrality. We've also delivered concrete results. The upgraded ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement strengthens integration through more efficient rules of origin, streamlined customs procedures, and new commitments on circularity and remanufactured goods. In parallel, we reached substantial conclusion of the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement—the world's first region-wide legally binding digital economy agreement—projected to double our digital economy from USD 1 trillion to over USD 2 trillion by 2030.

Beyond our borders, ASEAN continues to deepen and expand its economic partnerships. Last year saw the signing of the upgraded ASEAN-China Free Trade Area, or ACFTA 3.0. As each other's largest trading partners, this upgrade unlocks opportunities in the digital economy, green transition, and supply chain connectivity. We also signed a Joint Declaration on Economic Cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council, diversifying our partnerships and supply networks. This momentum will carry forward through the conclusion of negotiations for the ASEAN-Canada Free Trade Agreement—our first with a North American partner—and the launch this year of FTA upgrade negotiations with the Republic of Korea.

ASEAN enters this period from a position of strength. We are now the world's fifth-largest economy, with a combined GDP of USD 3.9 trillion, and we're on track to become the fourth-largest by 2030, propelled by average annual growth exceeding 4 per cent. As the world's third-largest trading bloc, ASEAN recorded total trade of USD 3.8 trillion, with intra-ASEAN trade maintaining the largest share at 21.4 per cent. Investment flows are equally robust: intra-ASEAN FDI surged 42.2 per cent to USD 32.6 billion, representing 14.1 per cent of total inflows, while overall FDI into ASEAN reached USD 230.8 billion in 2024. These figures reflect sustained global confidence in ASEAN's stability, openness, and growth trajectory.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our strategic compass is anchored by the ***ASEAN Community Vision 2045: Our Shared Future***, together with its four Strategic Plans covering the Political-Security, Economic, Socio-Cultural, and Connectivity pillars. These provide an integrated framework to help ASEAN navigate geopolitical and geoeconomic complexity with coherence, resilience, and inclusivity.

The coming decade can indeed be ASEAN's Golden Decade—not because the global landscape is favourable, but because ASEAN possesses the institutions, partnerships, and collective will to convert complexity into opportunity. Think-tanks like SEAFIC will be instrumental in this journey—translating ideas into evidence, evidence into policy, and policy into outcomes that matter for our people.

Thank you, and I wish you a productive and insightful discussion.
