



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

**Remarks at the 23rd IISS Shangri-La Dialogue
at the Second Plenary Session on
“Priorities within Asia’s Shifting Strategic Landscapes”
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Your Excellency Chris Penk, Minister of Defence of New Zealand,

Your Excellency Robertas Kaunas, Minister of National Defence of Lithuania,

Sir John Chipman, Executive Chairman of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS),

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

A very good morning. It is a pleasure to join this distinguished discussion on “*Priorities within Asia’s Shifting Strategic Landscapes.*” Our region, particularly Southeast Asia, is navigating a period of profound strategic transition. The regional order is being recalibrated not only by the shifting dynamics between the major powers, but also by the growing strategic agency of regional actors.

ASEAN and its Member States are not passive bystanders in this transition. We are actively working to enhance our resilience, strengthen our strategic autonomy, deepen and diversify our partnerships, and sustain the momentum of cooperation and dialogue – even as the headwinds of protectionism, fragmentation, and conflict grow stronger and more disruptive.

Against this backdrop, we welcome the good outcomes of the recent U.S.-China summit in Beijing. The framework of ‘constructive strategic stability’ reflects an important shared recognition between the two powers: that their strategic competition needs not foreclose cooperation on issues of common interest and must not be allowed to slide into conflict or rupture. For ASEAN, this matters.

The U.S. and China are our two most consequential security and economic partners, and the quality of their relationship has direct and immediate consequences for the region. We hope - and expect - that this stabilisation framework will translate into policy and behaviour that tangibly contributes to regional peace, stability, and development.

This matters all the more because today's strategic environment has become more structurally complex and multidimensional than at any point in recent memory. Traditional security concerns remain, but they are now deeply intertwined with increasing competition and disruptions across digital, technological, financial, maritime, cyber, and informational domains.

Transnational challenges – climate change, health security, food security and energy resilience – add further layers of complexity that no single country, no single region, and no bilateral relationship, can manage alone. And while the deep economic interdependence that underpinned the post-Cold War regional order remains significant, it is being actively reshaped by policies of supply chain de-risking and diversification.

The central challenge before us is therefore threefold. First, to deepen our partnerships — with each other, with major powers, and with the wider international community — in terms of mutual benefit. Second, to diversify our external and international partnerships to build resilience against the shocks and disruptions that will inevitably come. And third, to strengthen ourselves from within — investing in the quality of governance, national cohesion, and the human and physical infrastructure that will determine whether our societies and communities can harness technological progress and withstand global disruptions.

This is precisely where ASEAN's role becomes most important – with multiple platforms for dialogue, diplomacy, confidence-building, and practical cooperation across the full range of challenges we face.

In a more contested and fragmented world, ASEAN's enduring contribution has been – and will continue to be – its ability to provide the institutional architecture and diplomatic processes that keep all major stakeholders engaged, discourage the formation of exclusive blocs, sustain a regional order that remains open, inclusive, and rules-based. In periods of strategic stress, the temptation to bypass multilateral platforms in favour of bilateral deals and transactional arrangements grows stronger. Demonstrating that inclusive multilateralism delivers — requires constant renewal, collective commitment, and sustained political will from all of us.

Our collective commitment and vision are reflected in the *ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future* – ASEAN's strategic guidepost for the next two decades. It envisages a resilient, innovative, and people-centred ASEAN Community, anchored in dialogue, diplomacy, cooperation, stability, and a rules-based regional order. More than a development blueprint, it is an expression of ASEAN's strategic agency in shaping its own environment rather than merely responding to forces that others set in motion.

As ASEAN begins translating this vision into action, it does so with renewed momentum and a broader foundation, with the accession of Timor-Leste as our 11th Member State. It is a timely reminder that even amid strategic headwinds, the project of regional community-building continues, and that ASEAN's answer to a more contested world is not retrenchment, but deeper solidarity, broader partnership, and more purposeful engagement with the challenges of our time.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to highlight five priorities for ASEAN in shifting strategic environment and landscape. First, advancing inclusive practical cooperation. ASEAN's experience has consistently demonstrated that peace, stability and prosperity are best sustained through openness, mutual respect, rules-based partnership, and shared responsibility. In this regard, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) offers an inclusive framework for practical cooperation with all major powers to build confidence and deliver tangible outcomes across the full range of issues that matter to our peoples — from sustainability and connectivity to maritime cooperation and economic development. This is moving far beyond dialogue and diplomacy by focusing on concrete areas of cooperation.

Second, safeguarding ASEAN Centrality and unity. In an increasingly polarised strategic environment, ASEAN cohesion is indispensable. Our collective credibility and effectiveness very much depend on our ability to remain aligned and stay united even as external pressures intensify. Centrality without unity is an empty claim and promise. Both must be earned and renewed through the constant and consistent work of consensus-building and collective resolve.

Third, upholding the rules-based regional order. In a world where the assertion of might over right is increasingly felt, ASEAN's foundational principles become all the more relevant. The principles of mutual respect for sovereignty, non-interference, political independence, peaceful settlement of disputes, and non-use of force are the fundamentals that protect smaller states from coercion, preserve the space for diplomacy, maintain peace, and sustain the conditions under which cooperation remains possible.

Fourth, enhancing ASEAN's role as a convening and stabilising force. In a more contested environment, we must tactfully manage the increasing competition through guardrails, sustained communication, and responsible statecraft. This is precisely what ASEAN-led mechanisms have done for decades: the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus are the connective tissues and key building blocks of regional diplomacy, promoting strategic trust, fostering cooperation across diverse political systems and strategic outlooks, and keeping dialogue alive even when bilateral relationships are tested and strained.

Fifth, strengthening our resilience across all domains, including supply chains, critical minerals, energy systems, digital infrastructure, emerging technologies, and financial networks. In today's disruptive world, resilience is simultaneously an economic imperative, strategic necessity and societal safeguard. The conflict in the Middle East has clearly demonstrated how events far beyond our shores can rapidly cascade into our countries, disrupting supply chains, driving up energy costs, and affecting the livelihoods of ordinary people. Resilience, therefore, cannot be an afterthought or a crisis response. It must be built and sustained consistently as a core dimension of national and regional strategy, in order for ASEAN to survive and thrive in today's world of complex challenges and constant changes.

We are now building on these experiences under *ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future* by deepening economic integration, accelerating digital transformation, strengthening connectivity, and advancing a just and inclusive energy transition. At the same time, ASEAN is strengthening supply chain resilience, narrowing development gaps, and enhancing institutional capacity so that the region remains agile, responsive, and future-ready. In addition, ASEAN is responding even more strategically to its engagement with its external partners by strengthening partnerships.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation this year, we are reminded of an enduring lesson: lasting stability cannot rest on power alone. It depends equally on trust, mutual confidence, shared norms, and sustained dialogue and cooperation. We also need to invest more in building a stronger culture of peace and to keep reminding ourselves to not take peace in our region for granted. What states across our region seek is an environment in which all can pursue security and prosperity without fear of coercion and without being forced to choose sides. We seek the freedom to diversify our partnerships, chart our own developmental paths, and equip our peoples to harness technological progress and withstand external shocks.

This is why we remain firmly committed to an open, inclusive, and rules-based regional order and architecture anchored in international law, the UN Charter and the ASEAN Charter. ASEAN stands ready to work with all partners – major powers and smaller states alike – to ensure that our shared future is shaped less by fragmentation and division, and more by the difficult but ultimately rewarding work of cooperation, resilience-building, and the pursuit of shared prosperity.

Thank you.
