



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

**Remarks at the Opening Session of the
ASEAN Future Forum 2026**

9 June 2026, Hotel Meliá, Ha Noi, Viet Nam

Your Excellency Lê Minh Hững Prime Minister of Viet Nam,

Samdech Thipadei Dr. Hun Manet, Prime Minister of Cambodia,

Your Excellency Sonexay Siphandone, Prime Minister of Lao PDR,

Your Excellency Anutin Charnvirakul, Prime Minister of Thailand,

Your Excellency Xanana Gusmão, Prime Minister of Timor-Leste,

Your Excellency Lê Hoài Trung, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Viet Nam,

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me begin by thanking the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam for having me back at the ASEAN Future Forum in its third edition — it is always a privilege to return to Hanoi, and to this important platform for strategic dialogue on ASEAN's future. This year's theme – Shaping a Shared Future Together: Peace, Prosperity, and People-Centred Development – could not be more timely.

We meet at a moment of profound global uncertainty. Geopolitical competition is intensifying. Armed conflicts continue to unfold. Economic fragmentation is deepening. Technological disruption is reshaping societies faster than institutions can adapt. The international laws, rules, norms, and institutions that have underpinned international peace and prosperity for decades are being severely challenged.

As His Excellency General Secretary Tô Lâm recently observed at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, the world is confronted with three interconnected crises: a crisis of international order, a crisis of development models, and a crisis of strategic trust.

Together, these triple challenges are creating a more complex and unpredictable environment for all nations on this planet. In such circumstances, the idea of a shared future reminds us that no country and region can effectively address these challenges alone. Our ability to navigate the crises, turbulences and disruptions will depend on sustained cooperation and collective action, even in the face of growing headwinds and competing pressures from both within and outside the region.

It is against this backdrop that ASEAN begins implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 under the Chairmanship of the Philippines. That is a heavy lift. The challenge is not only to set ambitious goals, but also to build the collective capacity and political will required to achieve them.

This is where the ASEAN Future Forum has an important role to play. By bringing together leaders, policymakers, business leaders, academics, civil society representatives, and young people, the Forum embodies the inclusive and forward-looking spirit that has long been ASEAN's strength. More importantly, it challenges us to confront hard questions: How can ASEAN preserve its unity, resilience and relevance in a more fragmented world? How do we maintain our agency amid growing major-power competition? And how do we translate shared aspirations into meaningful action?

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

When we last gathered at this Forum, we discussed the challenges posed by growing geopolitical rivalry, rising protectionism, and weakening confidence in multilateral cooperation. Today, these major trends have not only persisted but intensified to an alarming degree. Recent developments in the Middle East serve as a stark reminder that in an interconnected world, no crisis remains confined to its place of origin. Events thousands of kilometres away can quickly affect markets, supply chains, investment flows, and livelihoods across Southeast Asia.

These developments expose our deep vulnerabilities to global shocks, reminding us that resilience remains very much an unfinished business and a matter of priority. It must become a central pillar of both national governance and regional cooperation – as General Secretary Tô Lâm underscored at the Shangri-La Dialogue.

I would describe these vulnerabilities through the “5Fs”: fuel, food, fertiliser, finance, and foreign workers. These are the principle channels through which external shocks are transmitted into our economies, societies and communities. Disruptions to energy supplies drive up fuel costs; volatility in commodity markets threatens food security; shortages of fertiliser affect agricultural productivity; financial uncertainty constrains investment and growth; while disruptions to labour mobility impact industries and livelihoods across our region.

The lesson for ASEAN is clear: resilience can no longer be viewed solely through the lens of security or economics alone. It must encompass our energy systems, food networks, financial buffers, supply chains, the mobility and welfare of our workforce, and societal resilience in the digital age. Amid these cascading disruptions, strengthening these foundations is essential to safeguarding peace, prosperity, and well-being of our peoples.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Against this backdrop, it is encouraging that ASEAN has responded with urgency, clarity and purpose. At the 48th ASEAN Summit in Cebu, last month, our Leaders focused on three immediate priorities: safeguarding the region's energy security, food security, and the safety and well-being of ASEAN nationals affected by the ongoing and unfolding crisis.

These discussions resulted in the adoption of the ASEAN Leaders' Statement on the Response to the Middle East Crisis. More than an expression of concern, it reflects ASEAN's determination to strengthen regional resilience through closer coordination across all three Community pillars and amongst member states to enhance food and energy security, build resilient supply chains and financial systems, with a steadfast commitment to international law, ASEAN Centrality, and a rules-based regional order.

What struck me most was the candid and forward-looking nature of the Leaders' discussions. There was a clear recognition that even if the current conflict in the Middle East were to end tomorrow, its repercussions would be felt for years to come—in energy markets, trade flows, investment decisions, and broader economic stability.

At the same time, there was a strong sense of confidence and optimism that ASEAN is not starting from scratch. As emphasised by His Excellency President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr., in his capacity as ASEAN Chair, the region already possesses many mechanisms and tools required to manage and mitigate disruptions, including those arising from oil supply constraints and price volatility. I fully share that assessment. ASEAN's challenge is not the absence of frameworks; rather, it is ensuring that the frameworks we have are fully operational, effective, and responsive to the evolving realities.

Take energy security as an example. ASEAN already has in place the ASEAN Framework Agreement on Petroleum Security and the ASEAN Power Grid, both designed precisely to strengthen energy resilience against global shocks. What is required now is greater urgency in their ratification and operationalisation so as to facilitate cross-border power trade, strengthen regional energy interconnection, and ensure access to reliable and affordable energy.

The same principle applies to ASEAN's economic resilience. ASEAN has built a formidable economic architecture among ourselves including the upgrading of the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA), as well as with our key partners — multiple ASEAN Plus One Free Trade Agreements, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and the forthcoming ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA), expected to be concluded later this year. The task now is to leverage these fully — to reinforce ASEAN's competitiveness and resilience in an increasingly fragmented global economy.

Equally important is ASEAN's steadfast commitment to dialogue and multilateral cooperation at a time when many parts of the world are witnessing a retreat from multilateralism.

Platforms such as the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Plus Three, ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus, and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum remain valuable because they help build confidence, reduce tensions, enhance strategic trust and encourage practical cooperation among regional stakeholders.

This is also the enduring relevance of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. By upholding inclusivity, the AOIP has become ASEAN's key framework for engaging external partners on maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development, and economic cooperation. More fundamentally, it offers a pathway to address one of the defining challenges of our time — the growing deficit of strategic trust and the fragmentation of regional and global governance.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we reflect on ASEAN's journey, two lessons stand out. First, collective action is always more effective than confronting challenges alone. Cooperation and collaboration are the foundation upon which ASEAN was built. They have enabled us to navigate geopolitical shifts, economic crises, and major disruptions for nearly six decades. Time and again, we have demonstrated that ASEAN is greater than the sum of its parts.

Yet, as we look towards the future, our understanding of cooperation and building partnerships must continue to evolve. Stronger synergy is needed not only among governments, but also among the peoples of Southeast Asia, and between governments and the people they serve.

ASEAN's future success will depend on its ability to grow beyond its intergovernmental foundations and further strengthen its identity as a truly people-centred Community, where the interests and aspirations of [our citizens remain at the heart of all that we do.

Second, every challenge contains opportunities for transformation. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated this clearly. Faced with unprecedented disruption, ASEAN strengthened regional cooperation and accelerated digital transformation across many sectors thus contributing to the ASEAN Community building.

Today's challenges present a similar imperative for transformation. I believe ASEAN can emerge stronger from the disruptions and impacts arising from the conflict in the Middle East, but only if we act with resolve, with unity and with a sense of urgency. We must strengthen energy security through greater regional inter-connection, build more resilient supply chains through diversification and strategic reserves, and deepen economic integration while expanding cooperation in emerging sectors. In doing so, we can turn today's vulnerabilities into the foundations of tomorrow's resilience.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is precisely why the ASEAN Future Forum is so valuable. Since its inaugural edition in 2024, the Forum has emerged as an important platform connecting Track 1 policymakers with Track 2 experts and a broader community of stakeholders.

It provides a unique space for exchanging ideas, challenging path dependencies, and generating fresh recommendations for ASEAN's future. The discussions over the next two days span the Political-Security, Economic, and Socio-Cultural pillars of the ASEAN Community while highlighting the growing importance of connectivity in all of its dimensions. In many respects, the agenda before us reflects the ambitions embodied in ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future.

I therefore encourage participants of the ASEAN Future Forum this year to consider a simple question throughout these discussions: How can the insights generated here contribute meaningfully to implementing the four Strategic Plans under ASEAN 2045? The true value of this Forum lies not only in the exchange of perspectives, but also in its ability to translate them into practical action. I am confident that the diverse participants gathered here today will find common ground in advancing innovative and actionable proposals that help ensure ASEAN remains resilient, dynamic, relevant, and future-ready.

As I conclude, it is my hope that the ASEAN Future Forum will continue to grow as a premier multistakeholder platform for strategic thinking and forward-looking dialogue on issues critical to the region's future. Its true measure of success will be how far our dialogue would strengthen ASEAN's capacity to anticipate change, adapt to new realities, and shape its own future for the benefits of ASEAN, the wider region and the world at large.

Throughout its history, ASEAN has rarely had the luxury of certainty. What it has had is the perseverance of working together despite differences, and the wisdom to turn adversity into advantage.

If we can bring that same spirit to the next two days — and to the years that follow — I have no doubt that the future we are here to shape is within reach. I wish the ASEAN Future Forum 2026 a resounding success.

I thank you.
