

**Closing Address at the 39th Asia-Pacific Roundtable of
H.E. Dr. Kao Kim Hourn,
Secretary-General of ASEAN**

Datuk Prof. Dr. Mohd Faiz Abdullah, Executive Chairman, Institute of Strategic & International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia

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ISIS-Malaysia Board of Directors

Excellencies

ASEAN-ISIS Members

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

1. Closing the thirty-ninth iteration of the Asia-Pacific Roundtable is no small charge. What began, almost four decades ago, as a gathering of academics, policy analysts, think tanks, and thought leaders has become a respected fixture in the region's intellectual and policy life. Few forums endure for nearly four decades. Fewer still remain relevant throughout that time. The Asia-Pacific Roundtable, or APR as we all know it, has done both and done them so well. It has helped deepen understanding of the many issues shaping our region and informed the thinking of those, especially the decision-makers, tasked with addressing them.
2. This year's Roundtable takes place at an unprecedented time of considerable uncertainty. Familiar challenges remain with us, but they now present themselves in new forms and sometimes with great complexity. Major power relations and power politics have become more strained. Economic and technological competition is accelerating. Artificial intelligence is beginning to transform economies, societies and communities rapidly, though many of its long-term implications remain unclear.

3. Times such as these place a premium on careful and critical analysis as well as sound judgment. The greatest risk is not simply that we make the wrong, hard choices. It is that we misunderstand the nature of the challenges before us. That is why gatherings such as this remain critically important. They provide an opportunity to question assumptions, test ideas, and think out of the box and examine developments with the benefit of perspective rather than urgency and expediency.
4. Reflecting on the discussions here, and on ASEAN's own experience over nearly six decades, I am persuaded of one central point. ASEAN's capacity to exercise genuine agency rests, in the end, on what I would call the power of ASEAN conviction: a conviction grounded in cooperation, solidarity, and mutual respect. These principles have enabled ASEAN to navigate uncertainty complexity and volatility for nearly six decades and continue to shape the region's future through six dimensions that I will set out here as Peace, Prosperity, Planet, People, Partnerships, and Possibilities.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

5. The first P is Peace. History offers a clear and valuable lesson: peace cannot be commissioned from outside. It can neither be imported nor outsourced; the responsibility for it is ours, and so, then, is the work of guarding it.
6. ASEAN's understanding of peace has never been confined to the absence of war and conflict. It is something built, constantly and continuously, through regular and consistent engagement. Preventive diplomacy sits at the centre of that effort, carried out through the regional mechanisms ASEAN has constructed over the decades among its Members, and with its external partners through what has become known as ASEAN-led mechanisms.
7. That framework depends, in turn, on exchange at every level of society: among the young and among political leaders, across business

communities, scholars, journalists, and civil society alike. Each dialogue deepens understanding; each partnership builds trust; each exchange narrows the space in which misunderstanding, and eventually conflict, might otherwise take root.

8. ASEAN Member States have extended this commitment beyond the region through their contributions to United Nations peacekeeping operations, for example. It is a reminder that peace is not a regional responsibility alone but a global public good, whose dividends accrue to all who help sustain it. And because economic interdependence reinforces the very foundations on which peace stands, the case for deepening trade, investment, tourism, connectivity, and cooperation across every sector remains as strong as ever.
9. The second of these convictions follows naturally from the first: prosperity, like peace, has to be of our own making.
10. ASEAN's future cannot rest on serving merely as a way-station or intermediary for the ambitions of others. The wealth the region seeks must be generated from within, by unlocking the potential ASEAN already holds. That is the logic behind the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA), which we expect to conclude this year; behind the bilateral Free Trade Agreements ASEAN maintains and continues to upgrade; and behind the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).
11. Our economies, our resources, and above all, our people amount to what one might call “an acre of diamonds” — opportunity already beneath our feet, waiting only to be developed through cooperation and innovation. What remains is to keep building toward the truly integrated single market and production base envisaged and called for in the ASEAN Charter, harnessing the collective weight of ASEAN as an economic bloc. Together, the region holds the scale, the diversity, the relevance, and the resilience to compete globally while still extending growth to all its peoples.

12. What matters most is that prosperity lift people out of poverty and prepare them for what comes next. That means continuously upgrading and expanding the skills of ASEAN's citizens to meet the digital revolution, artificial intelligence, and the technologies still emerging. Technology, in this telling time, serves humanity and extends what people can do. It does not, and should not, stand in for them.
13. The third conviction concerns people, who remain ASEAN's greatest asset; more so than its geography, more so than its economy. ASEAN exists, fundamentally, for the people of ASEAN.
14. Our responsibility is to ensure they live in peace rather than conflict, in security rather than fear, in hope rather than uncertainty. And to strive for societies where people live longer, healthier, stronger, and happier lives, with the attention to mental health and overall well-being that this requires.
15. The lessons of COVID-19, though already fading from public memory, remain instructive, and we owe it to ourselves to act on them by bringing the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases (ACPHEED) to full operational readiness without further delay, so that the region is genuinely prepared for whatever pandemic comes next.
16. Our people also need better education, stronger skills, and wider and more opportunities; upskilling and reskilling are now simply the cost of staying competitive. And they need, equally, to see one another not as strangers but as members of a single ASEAN community bound by shared aspiration and mutual respect. Cultivating that ASEAN identity, and the sense of belonging it carries, means holding on to the value of regional solidarity and to what cooperation has already achieved; rather than letting short memory erode it.
17. Our fourth conviction concerns the planet that hosts all of this activity. ASEAN is endowed with extraordinary natural wealth: abundant water resources, fertile agricultural land, rich fisheries, and a biodiversity matched by few regions on the planet.

18. That endowment gives ASEAN real capacity; not only to secure food for our own population but to contribute meaningfully to feeding the world. It also comes with an obligation that falls on us, and to no one else: an obligation to the generations who will inherit what we leave of this region's environment, its forests, its oceans, and its biodiversity.
19. Our commitment to the Paris Agreement is only as good as the action that follows it. The task now is to move from declaration and negotiation to implementation that visibly reverses environmental damage. Leadership on climate is no longer a matter of choice; it is a condition for preserving the common home we share. ASEAN's network of Centres of Excellence has a role to play here too, in advancing sustainability and protecting the region's biodiversity, and the environment.
20. The fifth conviction is partnership. Not the kind assembled for short-term convenience, but the kind cultivated and strengthened over time.
21. This is, in many ways, the essence of what ASEAN has built over the decades, whether through its bilateral relations under the Plus One modality or through the broader web of ASEAN-led mechanisms. To keep those Plus One relationships dynamic and mutually beneficial, ASEAN has continued to elevate them. Hence, the Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships now in place with several Dialogue Partners, even as a number of key Development Partners have signalled their own interest in moving toward Sectoral Dialogue Partnership status.
22. Genuine partnership rests on trust, understanding, mutual respect, and a willingness to look after one another through cooperation that means something. It is also why, despite calls from outside observers for ASEAN to take sides, the bloc has held to the inclusive logic of the ASEAN Way. Major powers may compete with one another; to ASEAN, they remain partners to be engaged, all of them, on an inclusive basis. Partnership, in the end, is what allows peace, prosperity, people, and planet to advance together to benefit collectively.

23. The final P is possibilities. Looking ahead, the possibilities before ASEAN are not modest. Every Member State, and every ASEAN citizen, has something to contribute to the community being built.
24. What's needed is to keep testing the limits of what we believe is possible. We must keep asking, in our thinking and in our policy, what more ASEAN can do together to preserve the best of what humanity has achieved, and how it might contribute still further to the international community. ASEAN, after all, is not merely an organisation of Southeast Asia; it is an important stakeholder in the global community, and, more importantly, a Community in its own right.
25. This is exactly the essence of the *ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future*, which is ASEAN's long-term roadmap for the next 20-years – a very important step it has undertaken to chart its direction over the long-term. The strategic plans of the three ASEAN Community Pillars and ASEAN Connectivity are meant to ensure that ASEAN achieves what is envisioned as a resilient, innovative, dynamic, and people-centred ASEAN. Meanwhile, ASEAN needs to plan ahead to further narrowing the development gaps between ASEAN Member States and within each ASEAN Member State, and advancing ASEAN community-building, as well as strengthening ASEAN institutions.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

26. Let me draw these threads together. The six convictions I have outlined are not separate and isolated ambitions of ASEAN. They form a single vision for ASEAN's future. Peace underpins prosperity. Prosperity strengthens people. People safeguard the planet. Partnerships expand possibilities. Each depends on the others as part of the ASEAN ecosystem.
27. The central question is whether ASEAN can continue to exercise agency in a more uncertain world. I strongly believe that it can. ASEAN's success has never rested on power alone. It has rested on the conviction that differences need not prevent cooperation, and that cooperation remains the surest foundation for regional peace, stability and progress.

28. To do so, ASEAN cannot take the present solidarity and unity for granted. ASEAN both collectively and individually must guard them and consistently strengthen them.

29. ASEAN's role is not to become an arena for rivalry. Its role is to remain a platform for dialogue and cooperation. Its relevance lies not in choosing sides but in bringing them together. That has been ASEAN's significant contribution for decades. It remains no less important today.

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30. ASEAN cannot rest at this important juncture. The responsibility now is to continue that work with more clarity, more courage, and greater unity and leadership. The years ahead will require clear thinking and sound judgment. ASEAN will continue to depend on rigorous analysis and on the ability to translate ideas into policy and action. The region's future will depend not only on the decisions of governments alone but also on the power and quality of ideas that inform them.

31. I therefore wish to commend the Track 2 community, and in particular the leadership of the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies—the ASEAN-ISIS network—for the remarkable achievement of establishing, sustaining, and expanding this platform over nearly four decades. Also taking this opportunity, I wish to recognise the leadership and the outstanding role of ISIS-Malaysia, especially under the leadership of Datuk Prof. Dr. Faiz Abdullah, for the exemplary contribution of the APR to our region and the world at large.

32. I trust that the Asia-Pacific Roundtable will continue to serve as one of the region's foremost laboratories of ideas: a place where intellectual rigour meets policy relevance, where difficult questions are confronted honestly, and where ASEAN's strategic imagination continues to be expanded and valued.

33. For in strengthening the quality of regional thinking, you strengthen the quality of regional cooperation itself—and in doing so, you contribute not

only to ASEAN's future, but also to a more peaceful, stable, and prosperous world at large.

Thank You.