



KEYNOTE REMARKS

**DR. KAO KIM HOURN, SECRETARY-GENERAL OF ASEAN,
AT 37TH ANNUAL US PACOM INTERNATIONAL MILITARY LAW AND
OPERATIONS CONFERENCE (MILOPS 2026)**

**"ASEAN CENTRALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF MAINTAINING PEACE, SECURITY
AND PROSPERITY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC"**

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 3 August 2026,

***The Honorable Dato' Seri Mohamed Khaled bin Nordin, Minister of Defence of
Malaysia,***

***The Honorable Gilberto Teodoro Jr., Secretary of National Defense of the Republic
of the Philippines,***

His Excellency Kevin Kim, the US Ambassador to ASEAN,

***The Honourable Thomas G. Dinanno, Under Secretary of State of the United States
for Arms Control and International Security,***

Excellencies, Ambassadors, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good Morning.

1. It is a pleasure to join you at the 37th United States Pacific Command (US PACOM) International Military Law and Operations Conference and to share ASEAN's perspective on the theme, "ASEAN Centrality in the Context of Maintaining Peace, Security and Prosperity in the Indo-Pacific."
2. I wish to express my appreciation to US PACOM for convening this conference. Over the years, it has established itself as a respected forum where military leaders, legal practitioners, policymakers, thought leaders, and scholars from

across the Indo-Pacific exchange perspectives on the legal, operational, and strategic dimensions of regional security. This discussion is particularly timely.

3. The Indo-Pacific has become one of the world's most consequential geopolitical and geoeconomic theatres, home to some of its fastest-growing economies, vital arteries of global trade, and a dynamic innovation landscape. It is also where strategic competition is intensifying, traditional and emerging security challenges increasingly intersect, and developments carry consequences far beyond the region.
4. This raises a fundamental question: How do we preserve peace, stability, and prosperity in a region where strategic competition is likely to remain a reality? From ASEAN's perspective, the answer is not to deny or eliminate competition. Competition among states is an enduring feature of international relations. The more pressing task is to manage it responsibly, prevent it from undermining regional peace and stability, and anchor it in dialogue, diplomacy, international law, and practical cooperation.
5. It is in this context that ASEAN Centrality matters most; not as an abstract concept of diplomacy and international relations, but as an organising principle sustained through ASEAN-led mechanisms, shared norms of behaviour, a culture of dialogue and cooperation, and the accumulated experience of working together and habit of dialogue and consultations over decades.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

6. ASEAN Centrality is, first and foremost, an assertion of agency and responsibility. It reflects ASEAN's determination and commitment to shape the regional order; to keep the regional architecture open, inclusive, and forward-looking; and to create the conditions for countries with different political systems, strategic outlooks, and national interests to consistently engage constructively. But centrality cannot be sustained by assertion alone. Its credibility depends on ASEAN's continued relevance and responsiveness, and on its ability to convene, facilitate dialogue,

and deliver practical cooperation that addresses the evolving needs and interests of the region.

7. In this sense, ASEAN Centrality is neither about primacy nor dominance. Rather, it reflects ASEAN's role as an honest broker, a trusted convener, and a reliable platform that enables cooperation among all key stakeholders.
8. For nearly six decades, ASEAN has consistently demonstrated that sustained engagement is itself a strategic asset. Dialogue and diplomacy are not the alternative to strategy; they are an essential component of strategy. They create the confidence necessary for cooperation, promote strategic trusts, reduce the risks of miscalculation, and preserve channels of communication precisely when they are needed most. Equally important is ASEAN's unity and solidarity, and our ability to speak with one voice. This requires coherence and coordination within each Member State through a whole-of-government approach, as well as among ASEAN Member States through a whole-of-ASEAN Community approach. Such efforts are essential to maintain ASEAN's credibility and advance our shared interests through ASEAN-led processes. The Minister of Defence of Malaysia also mentioned the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) and I fully agree that upholding ZOPFAN is important to maintain peace, freedom and neutrality in the ASEAN region.
9. These qualities have become increasingly important in a region where geopolitical tensions, maritime disputes, cyber threats, transnational crime, terrorism, emerging technologies and climate-related risks are deeply interconnected. No country can address these challenges alone. They require sustained cooperation and institutions capable of bringing countries together even when differences remain unresolved.
10. ASEAN's response to this complexity has therefore been to strengthen an open, and inclusive regional architecture that encourages and enables engagement across political, economic, security and socio-cultural domains. Its strengths do

not derive from coercive power, but from the confidence and trust that countries place in ASEAN and ASEAN-led platforms as credible venues for dialogue, diplomacy, confidence-building, and practical cooperation.

11. Through its regular Summits, Ministerial Meetings, and sectoral dialogues, ASEAN maintains substantive engagements with all its external partners on a regular basis. These relationships reinforce a regional architecture that remains open to all, inclusive in participation, transparent in its processes, and grounded in mutual respect, sovereign equality, and adherence to international law. These principles, in fact, have guided ASEAN since the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia in 1976, whose fiftieth anniversary we commemorate this year.
12. These principles also find contemporary expression in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), which advances a vision of the region based not on rivalry or exclusion, but on dialogue, inclusivity, cooperation, and shared responsibility. Its central proposition is that countries should not be compelled or coerced to choose between competing strategic visions. Rather, the region should remain open to all, with cooperation providing the basis for addressing common challenges and building trust across differences. To this end, the AOIP encourages practical cooperation wherever interests converge.
13. ASEAN's own experiences give us reason for confidence that strategic competition may be unavoidable, but confrontation is not. Despite differences in history, political systems, cultures, levels of development, and strategic perspectives, Southeast Asia has remained one of the world's most peaceful, stable, and dynamic regions. This is no accident. In fact, it reflects decades of patient diplomacy, institution-building, and a collective commitment to managing differences through dialogue rather than violence. But this achievement should not be taken for granted. Peace is not self-perpetuating; it must be continually sustained through trust, engagement, and institutions that keep cooperation possible even when consensus remains elusive.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

14. The value of ASEAN Centrality lies not only in the principles it articulates, but in the positive purpose it projects and the institutions that put them into practice. Over the years, ASEAN-led mechanisms have provided sustained channels for dialogue, confidence-building, managing differences, and practical cooperation across political, diplomatic, and defence domains. Their significance lies not simply in convening meetings, but in sustaining relationships and preserving channels of communication, particularly during periods of strategic volatility.
15. At the Leaders' level, the East Asia Summit (EAS) occupies a unique position in this architecture, bringing ASEAN together with eight of its Dialogue Partners on a single clear conviction: that dialogue among the Leaders must continue even when consensus is hard to reach and differences are difficult to manage. It provides a trusted platform for countries with diverse strategic interests to engage candidly on issues shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific. Its strategic value - and the resilience of our regional architecture - lies not in the absence of disagreement, but in the capacity to keep dialogue alive and constructive through periods of tension and growing mistrust.
16. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) complements this effort at the ministerial level by giving practical expression to ASEAN's commitment to dialogue, confidence-building, and preventive diplomacy. With 28 participants now - including major powers, middle powers, and smaller states from across the Indo-Pacific and beyond - it remains one of the region's most inclusive platforms for political and security dialogue. Its value lies in recognising that preventing conflict rarely depends on dramatic major breakthroughs. More often it is the steady work of keeping channels open, building transparency and confidence, and addressing differences before they harden into actual crises. The ARF provides precisely such an important space - where sensitive issues can be raised candidly and differences aired with mutual respect, mutual understanding, and the art of diplomacy.

17. In the defence sector, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) demonstrates another important dimension of ASEAN Centrality; that trust and resilience are built through regular dialogue and practical cooperation. Many of you here have taken part in the ADMM-Plus activities, and know that interoperability cannot be developed overnight, nor trust improvised when tensions rise. Both are built through sustained engagement: professional exchanges, joint exercises, working side by side. Through the Experts' Working Groups, ASEAN and its Plus partners have deepened cooperation in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, maritime security, military medicine, peacekeeping, counter-terrorism, humanitarian mine action and cybersecurity. This work sharpens operational readiness and strengthens regional resilience – turning familiarity into confidence, and confidence into habits of cooperation we can draw on when the next crisis comes about. Of course last year, the Minister of Defence of Malaysia was the Chair of the ADMM and ADMM-Plus, and this year Secretary of National Defense of the Republic of the Philippines is the Chair of the ADMM and ADMM-Plus this year.
18. Taken together, the EAS, ARF, and ADMM-Plus, the three key ASEAN-led mechanisms, illustrate what ASEAN Centrality means in practice. It is not an abstract diplomatic aspiration, but an institutionalised capacity to keep dialogue open, build confidence, deepen practical cooperation, and sustain an open, inclusive, and rules-based regional order. Their continued relevance reflects a principle that has long guided ASEAN's approach to regional affairs: durable peace is built through sustained engagement, not episodic diplomacy; through habits of cooperation, not *ad hoc* responses; and through institutions that keep countries connected and engaged, especially when strategic circumstances become more challenging.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

19. Strong institutions alone, however, are not sufficient. Their effectiveness ultimately depends on the rules and norms that guide the conduct of states, and on the professionalism of those entrusted with safeguarding peace, stability, and security.
20. For the military leaders, legal advisers, policymakers, and scholars in this room, international law is embedded in how military operations are conducted. It provides the common framework through which professionalism is expressed, operational conduct is guided, strategic stability is reinforced, and legitimacy is strengthened. Respect for international law enhances predictability, reduces the risks of misunderstanding and unintended escalation, and promotes confidence among states. These functions become increasingly important in an environment where military activities often occur in close proximity and where strategic tensions can evolve rapidly.
21. This conference therefore addresses issues that extend well beyond legal doctrines. It contributes directly to the development of common understandings, professional standards, and practical cooperation among those responsible for maintaining regional peace, stability, and security. That task has grown harder and more challenging as technology reshapes the strategic landscape much more rapidly today.
22. Artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, cyber capabilities, and activities in outer space are transforming military operations at an unprecedented pace. These developments offer real gains in performance and capability, but they also raise legal, ethical, and policy questions that no country can answer them alone. The challenge is that technology is outpacing governance: capabilities are being developed and deployed rapidly while the rules governing their use are still under debate and lacking behind.
23. Keeping pace with these developments requires closer collaboration among governments, armed forces, legal experts, policymakers, academia, and other

relevant stakeholders. It requires continued dialogue, informed policy development, and international cooperation that ensures technological advances remain guided by international law and responsible state conduct.

24. The maritime domain shows most clearly why this matters. The seas and oceans of the Indo-Pacific carry our trade, connect our economies, and sustain the livelihoods of our populations. Between ASEAN and the U.S. we have one billion people. They are also where strategic competition is most visible, and where the distance between a routine encounter and an incident can be measured in minutes, not many hours. Hence, the importance of effective communication, operational professionalism, and respect for international law.

25. It is against this backdrop that ASEAN has consistently maintained that disputes should be resolved peacefully, in accordance with international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). ASEAN also continues to emphasise the importance of the full and effective implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC) in the South China Sea, while working towards the early conclusion of an effective and substantive Code of Conduct (COC) that is consistent with international law, including UNCLOS.

26. For ASEAN, these are not simply normative aspirations. They serve as practical guideposts for responsible state behaviour, helping to reduce the risks of misunderstanding, prevent unintended escalation, and preserve a peaceful, stable and predictable maritime environment. Professional conduct at sea, effective communication mechanisms, confidence-building measures, and adherence to international law demonstrate that even where differences remain unresolved, responsible behaviour and practical cooperation are still both possible and necessary.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

27. This year ASEAN has commenced the implementation of the ***ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future*** and its four Strategic Plans — a commitment to a Community that

is resilient, innovative, dynamic, and people-centred, and better equipped for a more demanding strategic environment. It carries an implicit acknowledgement and recognition: that centrality cannot be inherited. It has to be earned and re-earned, by remaining responsive to evolving challenges as they emerge, and by delivering necessary outcomes appreciated by our peoples and our partners.

28. For centrality was never an end in itself, and it is not a claim about where ASEAN sits in the regional architecture. It is defined by what ASEAN enables that architecture to do: to keep channels open when tensions rise; to create room for cooperation where interests converge; and to sustain the confidence that differences can be managed peacefully and in accordance with international law.
29. That work is not ASEAN's alone and it should not be. When our partners uphold the principles of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, engage seriously through ASEAN-led mechanisms, and take forward the vision set out in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, they join hands with ASEAN in sustaining the culture of dialogue and the habits of cooperation that have held this region together for nearly six decades. As mentioned before by the Minister of Defence of Malaysia, this is the ASEAN Way.
30. The future of the Indo-Pacific will not be settled by the distribution of power alone. It will be shaped by the strengths of our institutions, the resilience of our partnerships, and our collective adherence to international law. Maintaining peace, stability, security, and prosperity in this region is therefore a shared responsibility, and each community represented here carries part of it. Governments set policy. Diplomats sustain engagement. Military leaders uphold professionalism and operational discipline. Legal advisers keep the conduct of states within the law. Scholars challenge assumptions and provide rigorous analysis to inform sound policy.
31. And responsibility is ultimately discharged by individuals, in decisions taken far from any conference hall; by a commander who knows when to act and when to

hold back, and by an officer weighing the risks of a manoeuvre, and by those entrusted with hotline communication who choose to make or take the call rather than walk away. Peace and stability are the accumulation of such judgements, made professionally and consistently over the years.

32. This is precisely why conferences such as MILOPS remain so valuable. Beyond the exchange of ideas, they strengthen professional relationships, deepen mutual understanding, and cultivate networks of trust across institutions, across borders and through the years. These relationships are often built quietly over time, yet they prove invaluable when tensions arise and timely communication becomes essential. In that sense, such engagements represent one of the most practical and enduring investments in preventive diplomacy and regional resilience.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

33. Competition will remain a key feature of this region. Our shared task, as I said at the outset, is not to remove it entirely but to ensure that it is managed responsibly. ASEAN's own experiences over nearly six decades - navigating geostrategic competition around us, and reconciling disagreements among ourselves - demonstrate that this is possible: through sustained engagement, mutual respect, patient diplomacy, and a shared commitment to international law. And this is appropriately reflected in the theme of the Philippines' ASEAN Chairship this year, "Navigating Our Future, Together."

34. If we continue to uphold them together, I am confident that the Indo-Pacific will remain not only a centre of economic dynamism and innovation, but also a region where cooperation prevails over confrontation, where trust is strengthened through sustained engagement, and where peace, stability, security, and shared prosperity endure for generations to come. I want to take this opportunity to say that between ASEAN and the U.S., we are long-standing partners for nearly five decades. In fact, next year we will commemorate the 50th anniversary of ASEAN-U.S. relations as well as the fifth year of our Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

35. Once again, I wish to thank U.S. PACOM for this important conference, and I wish the meeting a resounding success.

Thank you.

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