



KEYNOTE REMARKS BY

H.E. DR. KAO KIM HOURN, SECRETARY-GENERAL OF ASEAN

Australia-ASEAN Business Forum 2026

Theme: “Deepening Australia-ASEAN Economic Integration in a Changing Global Landscape”

Adelaide Convention Centre, 29 September 2026

-
- ***Mr. Francis Wong OAM, Chairman, Australia-ASEAN Business Forum***
 - ***The Right Honourable Dr. Jane Lomax-Smith AM, Lord Mayor, City of Adelaide,***
 - ***The Honourable Chris Picton MP, Minister for State Development, South Australia***
 - ***The Honourable Anoulack Chanthivong MP, New South Wales Minister for Industry and Trade; Minister for Innovation, Science and Technology,***
 - ***Your Excellency Nooraslena Sallehuddin, Chair, ASEAN Committee in Canberra and High Commissioner of Brunei Darussalam,***
 - ***Excellencies Members of Parliament, Mayors,***
 - ***Excellencies ASEAN Ambassadors, Distinguished Guests, Business Leaders, Ladies and Gentlemen, and Friends,***

Good Morning!

1. It is a pleasure to return to Adelaide and join you at the Australia–ASEAN Business Forum 2026. My appreciation goes to Mr Francis Wong OAM and the organising team for the kind invitation, and to the Government and people of South Australia for the warm hospitality extended to me and my delegation.

2. This year's theme, *"Deepening Australia–ASEAN Economic Integration in a Changing Global Landscape,"* takes place in a very important year of the 5th Anniversary of ASEAN-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) and certainly reflects the issues our region is grappling at the moment. The world in which our economic relationships were built is changing faster than many of us anticipated. Technology is redrawing the competitive landscape. Geopolitical and geo-economic tensions are testing the resilience of established systems. Climate change is forcing us to rethink how we produce, trade and invest. And global supply chains are being reconfigured, not just for efficiency, but increasingly for resilience, security and strategic confidence. These are structural shifts that will shape the economic opportunities available to our businesses and our people for decades to come.
3. For ASEAN and Australia, the question is therefore not whether we should deepen our economic integration, but how quickly and how ambitiously we are prepared to do so. We have an opportunity, and, increasingly, an imperative, to build a partnership that is more connected, more resilient and more capable of creating shared prosperity. The discussion we undertake and the decisions we make will determine whether both ASEAN and Australia merely navigate this new landscape, or help shape it.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

4. Under the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, ASEAN is embarking on a new phase of economic transformation. We are deepening integration and connectivity while building a region that is more resilient, inclusive, innovative, sustainable and people-centred. Australia is an important partner in this journey. Our next ambition should be to connect our markets, supply chains, capital, technology and people, and through that, create new engines of growth and shared prosperity. Let me highlight five areas where our partnership can make a meaningful difference.
5. First, reinforcing an open and rules-based trade and investment framework remains the backbone of ASEAN–Australia economic relations, built on two decades of steady work. The ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Area, signed in 2009, created one of the most comprehensive economic agreements,

and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership has since connected us to the world's largest free trade agreement.

6. Since the establishment of the ASEAN-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, our cooperation has grown broader, deeper and more forward-looking. That groundwork is critical in a time of uncertainty and geo-economic rivalry, when open markets, transparent and predictable rules, and trusted partnerships carry real weight. The upgraded AANZFTA, together with RCEP, gives our businesses a strong platform to diversify markets, deepen regional production networks and build more resilient supply chains. Our priority now is to turn these agreements into real opportunities on the ground. I would encourage their effective implementation, and I welcome feedback from the private sector to ensure that businesses, especially MSMEs, can fully benefit.
7. Second, economic connectivity is just as vital to economic security. Connectivity today extends beyond roads, ports, bridges and airports. It includes digital links, energy networks, logistics systems, standards, data flows, financial connectivity and people-to-people ties. Our complementary strengths give us a powerful foundation here. ASEAN brings scale, growing markets, dynamic manufacturing and digital ecosystems, and expanding regional supply chains. Australia brings world-class capabilities in resources and critical minerals, clean energy, capital, technology, education and professional services.
8. By connecting these strengths, we can move beyond trading with one another towards investing, producing, innovating and growing together, building more resilient supply chains, accelerating the digital and green transitions, and strengthening our collective economic security. I encourage the private sector to lead in turning this complementarity into investment, trade and integrated regional value chains.
9. Third, advancing the energy transition is central to a sustainable future. Recent energy disruptions have shown that energy security and the green transition must advance together. ASEAN needs an energy future that is secure, affordable, accessible and sustainable, one that continues to support economic growth.

Achieving this will require investment at scale, technological innovation, stronger regional connectivity and effective public-private engagements and partnerships.

10. Australia is a valuable partner in this transition. Through initiatives such as the ASEAN–Australia Energy Cooperation Program, Australia is supporting the ASEAN Carbon Neutrality Strategy, including the ASEAN Power Grid¹. By combining ASEAN's growing energy market and renewable energy potential with Australia's advanced technologies in clean energy, resources, finance and project development, we can strengthen energy security and create new opportunities for investment and sustainable growth. I also encourage businesses and investors to seize this opportunity, and to help turn the energy transition into a new engine of competitiveness and shared prosperity for both ASEAN and Australia.
11. Fourth, shaping a trusted, inclusive and innovative digital economy is another priority we share. For ASEAN, the digital economy is one of the most important engines of future growth. The upcoming signing of the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA) in November of this year reflects our ambition to build a more integrated, trusted and competitive digital economy across the region. Australia's support for ASEAN's digital transformation, including digital trade standards, e-invoicing, future skills and MSMEs' digital readiness, is both indeed timely and valuable.
12. There is real scope for ASEAN and Australia to work together on responsible AI, digital infrastructure, cybersecurity, data governance, talent development and innovation ecosystems. Above all, we must ensure that technology serves people, that innovation strengthens trust, and that digital transformation creates opportunities for MSMEs, women entrepreneurs, youth and communities across our region, not only for large firms.
13. Fifth, investing in human capital is essential to an inclusive and future-ready economy. People are the foundation of development, and its ultimate purpose. Investing in their skills and capabilities is an investment in our shared future. Australia has long been an important education and training partner for ASEAN.

¹ Progress Report on the Implementation of the Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership 2025-2029

Educational services, skilling and upskilling programmes, professional networks, cultural exchange and youth leadership are increasingly important in ASEAN–Australia relations, and these partnerships have already built generations of skilled professionals across the entire region.

14. As technology and emerging industries reshape the future of work, our human capital partnership should deepen cooperation in digital and green skills, technical and vocational education, workforce mobility, and industry–academia collaboration. By investing in our people today, we build the talent, innovation and inclusive growth that will power our economies tomorrow.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

15. Governments can create the enabling frameworks, but it is businesses that mobilise investment, build supply chains, drive innovation, create jobs and connect markets. In that spirit, I welcome the Australia–ASEAN Business Forum as a platform to move from dialogue to delivery, turning discussion into tangible projects and commercial opportunities.

16. That is the opportunity before us today and tomorrow: to move from partnership as a principle to integration as a strategic advantage, and to turn this period of profound change into a platform for our next phase of growth. With that, I wish the Australia-ASEAN Business Forum 2026 a resounding success.

Thank you very much.
