



KEYNOTE REMARKS

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

3rd ASEAN Think Tanks Summit

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Excellencies Members of the Committee of Permanent Representatives to ASEAN,

***Excellencies Ambassadors from our Dialogue, Sectoral Dialogue, and
Development Partners,***

Professor Simon Tay, Chairman of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs,

Professor Antoinette Raquiza, Chair of the ASEAN-ISIS Network,

H.E. Tiffany McDonald, Ambassador, Mission of Australia to ASEAN

***H.E. Ralf Beste, Ambassador, Embassy of the Federal Republic of
Germany to Indonesia, ASEAN and Timor Leste***

***Mr. Mathias Domenig, Deputy Head of Mission, Embassy of Switzerland
in Jakarta***

Distinguished representatives of ASEAN-ISIS, Ladies and Gentlemen and Friends,

A very Good Morning.

1. It is my pleasure to welcome you to the ASEAN Secretariat/ASEAN Headquarters for the Third ASEAN Think Tanks Summit.
2. This Summit brings together the ASEAN-ISIS network, which for nearly four decades has provided an important Track 2 platform for thinking about regional

peace, security, cooperation, integration and community-building. As an Entity Associated with ASEAN under Annex II of the ASEAN Charter, ASEAN-ISIS has been a longstanding integral part of ASEAN's wider intellectual and policy ecosystem.

3. Within this network, the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA) has played a leading role in developing and transforming the ASEAN Think Tanks Summit since its inaugural meeting in 2024, and in coordinating this year's meeting on behalf of ASEAN-ISIS. I sincerely thank both SIIA and the ASEAN-ISIS Network for its continued commitment to this platform. Now in its third year, the Summit has become an important forum for ASEAN's think tank community to examine the region's strategic priorities, policy challenges and long-term trajectory, especially as ASEAN has just launched the first year of the implementation of ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future and its four Strategic Plans.
4. This year's Summit takes place at a particularly consequential moment for ASEAN. Under the Philippines' Chairmanship and its theme, "Navigating Our Future, Together," ASEAN faces a regional and international environment that is more contested, complex and unpredictable. The challenge is not simply to navigate these pressures, but to do so without losing ASEAN's unity, solidarity, centrality and sense of direction as it advances towards the ASEAN Community Vision 2045: Our Shared Future.
5. This also calls for a broader understanding of resilience and relevance. Resilience is not simply the ability to withstand shocks, but to adapt to change while preserving room for choice. Also, it means that ASEAN's growth, development and transformation are relevant for its people. For ASEAN, that means remaining open while managing vulnerabilities, deepening partnerships without creating excessive dependencies, and engaging major powers and other partners while retaining the capacity to define its own priorities and shape its own future for its people.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, and Friends,

6. The ASEAN Community Vision 2045 establishes a clear ambition: a peaceful, secure, resilient, prosperous, and people-centred ASEAN Community. The Strategic Plans of the three Community pillars, together with our Connectivity agenda, provide clear roadmap for getting there.
7. Yet, frameworks alone will not build the ASEAN Community. Ultimately, the Vision will be judged by the choices ASEAN makes collectively and the results those choices deliver. Good choices require rigorous analysis of a rapidly changing

region, innovative ideas that are both ambitious and workable, and an honest assessment of what succeeds and what does not.

8. Track 2 work can help provide these foundations for better policymaking. Think tanks create intellectual space for candour, foresight and constructive challenge – questioning established assumptions, confronting difficult trade-offs, and testing new ideas before they enter the formal policy process. To be useful, however, such thinking must remain grounded in the realities of the region, sensitive to the different circumstances of ASEAN Member States, and practical enough to inform policy. Think tanks can also help ASEAN ask whether the institutions, policies, and approaches that have served it well in the past remain fit for the challenges it will face in the decades ahead.
9. I therefore welcome the focus of this year's Summit on issues that lie at the heart of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045. I would like to highlight four areas:
10. **First, peace and dialogue.** At a time of intensifying geopolitical competition, ASEAN must continue to invest in dialogue and diplomacy as instruments of first resort. It has strong foundations for doing so. The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), now in its 50th year, continues to embody fundamental principles for peaceful inter-state relations and the renunciation of the use of force in Southeast Asia.
11. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) extends this approach to ASEAN's engagement with the wider region, anchored in ASEAN Centrality. ASEAN-led mechanisms – including the ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asia Summit, ADMM and ADMM-Plus – alongside institutions and mechanisms such as the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation, provide established channels for dialogue, confidence-building and practical cooperation.
12. The challenge is to ensure that these mechanisms remain relevant as the regional landscape changes around them. Strategic rivalry is sharper, new institutions and initiatives are proliferating, and states are increasingly turning to issue-based coalitions and minilateral arrangements. For ASEAN, the question is how to ensure that this increasingly complex regional architecture does not become so fragmented that ASEAN-led processes lose their coherence, relevance, or convening power.
13. The issue, therefore, is not whether dialogue remains relevant, but how ASEAN can make more strategic and effective use of the instruments and mechanisms already at its disposal. As ASEAN approaches its 60th anniversary in 2027, the test of its centrality will lie in what its institutions can achieve. Centrality, after all, cannot

rest on institutional inheritance alone; it must be earned continually through ASEAN's ability to bring countries together, manage differences, and enable collective action where it matters.

14. **Second, resilience as economic security.** Energy security, food security and sustainability can no longer be treated as separate agendas. Disruption in one cascades into others, with consequences for economic competitiveness, social stability and ASEAN's capacity to withstand external shocks.
15. ASEAN already has much of the architecture it needs. Across the Economic and Socio-Cultural Communities, initiatives such as the ASEAN Power Grid, the Trans-ASEAN Gas Pipeline, the ASEAN Petroleum Security Agreement, the AHA Centre and the ASEAN Plus Three Emergency Rice Reserve address different dimensions of resilience. The Connectivity agenda can help bind these efforts together, particularly as energy, transport and digital infrastructure become increasingly interdependent and interconnected.
16. The urgency now lies in moving from frameworks to outcomes: more reliable energy, more resilient supply chains, greater preparedness to external shocks, and stronger economic opportunities for ASEAN's peoples and businesses. This requires looking across sectoral boundaries and asking where regional cooperation can reduce vulnerabilities and challenges that no Member State can effectively address them alone.
17. But resilience also requires hard choices. ASEAN's prosperity has been built on openness, integration, deep interdependence and engagement; retreating from these would carry enormous costs. The task is therefore not to reduce interdependence, but to make it safer – through diversification, redundancy, stronger regional capacity, and a greater ability to absorb and recover from shocks.
18. These measures themselves carry costs. Diversifying suppliers or building backup capacity may reduce efficiency. The challenge is to decide which vulnerabilities ASEAN cannot afford to leave exposed, and where regional action can address them more effectively than countries acting alone. This is an area where Track 2 work can make a particularly useful contribution: identifying critical vulnerabilities and interdependencies, testing the trade-offs between efficiency and resilience, and helping ASEAN determine where collective investment and action will yield the greatest strategic return.
19. **Third, inclusion in the digital age.** Artificial intelligence and emerging technologies will shape ASEAN's next phase of economic transformation. But their value will ultimately depend on how widely the benefits are shared – particularly

among micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) – which remain the backbone of our economies and an important source of jobs, livelihoods, and opportunities.

20. ASEAN has been building the foundations for this transformation through the ASEAN Digital Masterplan, the soon to-be signed ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA), and the ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics. Digital infrastructure, connectivity, and arrangements governing cross-border data flows are enabling a more integrated regional digital economy. The harder task is to ensure that integration does not outpace inclusion – that firms, workers and economies across ASEAN have the capacity to participate and compete fairly.
21. In this regard, the distribution of the gains and adjustment costs of technological change deserves greater attention. The benefits of AI and digitalisation will not accrue evenly across countries, sectors, firms or workers. Differences in digital infrastructure, skills, access to capital, data and technological capabilities could reinforce existing disparities unless deliberately addressed. How can MSMEs, workers and smaller economies adopt and benefit from AI? How can ASEAN ensure that productivity gains are widely shared? And how can the region manage the risks of rapid technological change without constraining innovation?
22. These are not just questions of digital policy. They go to the heart of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045: an ASEAN that is innovative and competitive, while remaining inclusive and people-centred. The aim should be not simply a more digital ASEAN, but one in which technological progress also advances economic convergence and social cohesion.
23. **Fourth, transnational security.** ASEAN's security environment is becoming more complex. Traditional security concerns – from strategic rivalry and maritime tensions to the risk of interstate conflict – are intensifying, even as cyber threats, transnational crime, climate-related risks and online scams grow in scale and reach, complexity and impact. These challenges do not always remain in separate lanes; increasingly, they intersect and reinforce one another.
24. This matters because many risks no longer fit neatly within established policy boundaries. Maritime tensions can affect trade and energy security; cyber incidents can disrupt economies and critical infrastructure; climate-related disasters can create humanitarian and security pressures; and weaknesses in digital governance can facilitate transnational crime. ASEAN therefore needs both credible mechanisms for managing traditional security tensions and greater capacity to respond across sectors when risks converge.

25. ASEAN has already built cooperation across many of these areas, at bilateral, subregional and regional levels. The Political-Security Community addresses terrorism, transnational crime and cyber threats, while the Socio-Cultural Community works on environmental and disaster-related risks. Economic cooperation and connectivity are increasingly part of the same equation: secure sea lanes, resilient supply chains and trusted digital systems are simultaneously economic and security assets. The challenge now is to connect these efforts more effectively. ASEAN's resilience will increasingly depend on whether different policy communities can work across institutional boundaries, share information and respond to risks that do not fit neatly within a single pillar.
26. This also has an external dimension. Many of these challenges require cooperation with ASEAN's Indo-Pacific partners. The challenge is to make these partnerships work for ASEAN's priorities, while ensuring that ASEAN and its Member States retain agency in shaping regional responses and that ASEAN-led mechanisms remain relevant and effective.
27. At the same time, ASEAN should approach this broader security agenda with a clear sense of purpose. Greater security is not simply about addressing more threats; it is about protecting peace, stability and resilience on which development, integration and the well-being of our people depend. As the security agenda expands, these wider objectives should remain firmly in view.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, and Friends,

28. Next year will mark an important milestone: ASEAN's 60th Anniversary, under Singapore's chairmanship. It is an occasion to take stock of six decades of region-building, and to ask what that experience means for the next phase of ASEAN's development. As implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 gathers pace, ASEAN should also examine whether the assumptions, institutions and modes of cooperation that have served it well remain fit for a very different strategic environment.
29. The continuity of this ASEAN Think-Tank Summit can contribute to that effort. Since its inception, it has enabled the SIIA and the wider ASEAN-ISIS network to bring independent, serious and policy-relevant Track 2 perspectives into the regional conversation. The think-tank community's contribution should go beyond asking what ASEAN should do next. It should also ask whether we are framing the problems correctly, whether established assumptions still hold, and whether

existing approaches remain adequate. In that spirit, I would like to suggest three qualities for our discussions over the next two days.

30. First, candour with purpose. Track 2 diplomacy should create space for frank exchange – to challenge established assumptions, confront uncomfortable trade-offs and raise questions that official processes may have less room to explore. But candour is most useful when it points towards constructive ways forward.
31. Second, rigour with practical value. Recommendations should not be produced for their own sake. The best policy advice clarifies the choices ASEAN faces, identifies the trade-offs, and distinguishes what is desirable from what is achievable. Where possible, it should also be clear about priorities, sequencing, responsibilities, costs and risks associated with different choices.
32. Third, a strong sense of ASEAN ownership. ASEAN benefits greatly from the expertise, experience, engagement, and support of its Dialogue, Sectoral Dialogue, and Development Partners. But engagement with partners should strengthen, rather than substitute for, ASEAN's own capacity to define its interests and make its choices. Ownership does not mean insularity; it means drawing on the best ideas from within and beyond the region while keeping ASEAN's principles, priorities and interests as the strategic compass.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, and Friends,

33. ASEAN has never advanced by standing still. It has advanced by adapting – by thinking together, making choices together, and finding ways to move forward together. The ASEAN Think Tanks Summit should be part of that process of reflection and renewal, providing a rigorous intellectual space to question assumptions, bring different national and disciplinary perspectives into dialogue, test ideas, and develop recommendations that can meaningfully inform ASEAN's policy processes.
34. The issues before us – peace and dialogue, economic resilience, digital transformation, ASEAN Centrality and transnational security – are increasingly complex and interconnected. Together, they pose a larger question: how ASEAN can remain open while managing vulnerability, build resilience without turning inward, sustain its centrality in a changing regional architecture, and ensure that the gains from integration and technological change are widely shared.
35. As ASEAN approaches its 60th Anniversary and begins the long journey towards Community Vision 2045, these choices will only become more critical. Track 2 can

help ASEAN make them with greater foresight – through rigorous analysis, constructive challenge and practical ideas grounded in the realities of our region.

36. I therefore encourage you to use these two days well: to speak candidly, test assumptions, and above all, turn good analysis into ideas that ASEAN can act upon. I wish you productive and substantive discussions, and I look forward to the recommendations that emerge from your deliberations.

37. Finally, I wish the 3rd ASEAN Think Tanks Summit a resounding success.

Thank you.
