



**Secretary-General of ASEAN, Dr. Kao Kim Hourn,
Remarks for 1st Plenary Session of 13th Beijing Xiangshan Forum
on “International Order and Strategic Stability”**

Beijing, People’s Republic of China, 16 September 2026

Your Excellency Admiral Dong Jun, Minister of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China,

Your Excellencies Deputy Prime Ministers, Ministers, UN Under-Secretary-General,

Your Excellencies Defence Officials,

Excellencies, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning

1. Let me begin by expressing my appreciation to the China Association for Military Science and the China Institute for International Strategic Studies for inviting me once again to the Beijing Xiangshan Forum. It is an honour to join this discussion under the theme, “Build Consensus on Stability, Advance Security Governance Together”.
2. Before turning to ASEAN's experience, it is worth briefly taking stock of the wider regional and global environment. We are navigating a period of profound change where the international order is being reshaped in real time. Power is becoming more diffuse, strategic competition is intensifying, and the institutions and norms that have long underpinned peace and cooperation are under mounting strain. At the same time, conflicts are growing more protracted, economic and technological ties are increasingly filtered through security considerations, and traditional and non-traditional threats are converging in ways no single country can manage them alone.

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3. Three shifts help explain why. First, the distribution of power is changing faster than the institutions of global governance can adapt. Second, multilateral

institutions face growing pressure at an unprecedented pace, and confidence in international law weakens whenever rules and commitments are applied randomly and selectively. Third, strategic mistrust is narrowing the space for cooperation and raising the risk of miscalculation. Together, these trends are widening a deficit of trust, predictability and collective action.

4. For Southeast Asia, this is not a distant concern. Our region sits at the intersection of major strategic and economic currents, connected to vital sea lanes, global supply chains and fast-evolving technological networks. We therefore have a direct stake in an international order that is peaceful, stable, open, inclusive, transparent and rules-based, anchored in the UN Charter and international law.
5. For ASEAN, strategic stability cannot rest on military balance alone. It requires strategic reassurance: confidence that competition will be managed responsibly, that channels of communication will remain open, and that international law will continue to anchor the conduct of states. It requires an environment where disagreements are settled peacefully and amicably and every state, regardless of size or power, can exercise its sovereignty and pursue development with confidence.
6. Competition among states is a feature of international affairs, not an aberration. The question that matters is whether it is managed responsibly and peacefully. Strategic competition need not harden into confrontation; avoiding that outcome would need restraint, respect for international law, sustained dialogue, confidence-building, and effective mechanisms to reduce risk and manage crises.

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7. ASEAN's approach is guided by *ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future*, and by the ASEAN Political-Security Community Strategic Plan that sits within it, both envisioning a peaceful, stable and secure region grounded in the ASEAN Charter, the UN Charter and international law. This vision reflects ASEAN's determination to sustain its unity and Centrality, shape an open and inclusive regional architecture, and contribute to a rules-based international order.
8. Allow me to draw out four priorities from ASEAN's experience.
9. First, strategic stability must be grounded in international law and sovereign equality. A just and equitable order cannot rest on power alone; it must rest on rules applied consistently, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference, the peaceful settlement of disputes, and the renunciation of the threat or use of force. These principles are enshrined in the UN Charter and in

ASEAN's own key instruments, including the ASEAN Charter and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC).

10. This year in fact marks the 50th Anniversary of the TAC, which for five decades has served as a foundational code of conduct for inter-state relations in our region and beyond. Its 62 High Contracting Parties today span every region of the world, a reflection of the shared conviction that security is strengthened when states exercise restraint, treat one another as equals, settle differences peacefully, and cooperate in good faith.
11. Second, dialogue and diplomacy must be treated as strategic imperatives, not diplomatic courtesies. Communication are critical most precisely when relations are difficult: open channels of communication reduce misunderstanding, clarify intent, and stop incidents from escalating through miscalculation.
12. ASEAN's journey bears this out. Our progress has never depended on erasing our differences; it has depended on managing them through consultation, consensus, confidence-building and cooperation. That habit of dialogue is what turned a once-divided region into a community of eleven nations sharing a common future. This is also why ASEAN places value on maintaining engagement even when strategic differences are substantial. ASEAN-led mechanisms do not eliminate rivalry, nor are they designed to do so. Their value lies in structuring interaction, especially through sustaining dialogue, encouraging restraint, embedding habits of cooperation, and preserving channels of communication when relations elsewhere become strained.
13. Third, regional and global institutions must remain inclusive and fit for purpose. For strategic stability to hold, regional arrangements need to stay open to all, inclusive in participation, and complementary in what they do. ASEAN Centrality is not a claim to primacy; it is ASEAN's commitment to keeping the regional architecture open, transparent and anchored in shared principles, and to its own role as an honest broker and a trusted convener, and a reliable platform where all partners can engage constructively.
14. ASEAN-led mechanisms give this practical form. The East Asia Summit is the premier Leaders-led forum for dialogue on strategic, political and economic issues of common interest and concern. The ASEAN Regional Forum advances confidence-building and preventive diplomacy. The ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus translates dialogue into practical defence cooperation. The Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum provides a dedicated platform for cooperation across the maritime domain. Together, these mechanisms keep channels of communication open, build confidence, reduce the risk of miscalculation, and sustain cooperation even where political differences remain unresolved.

15. Fourth, strategic stability must be comprehensive and forward-looking. Today's risks cross borders and domains: climate change, cyber threats, transnational crime, pandemics, food and energy insecurity, and the military applications of emerging technologies all have the potential to magnify geopolitical tension and open new pathways to escalation. Meeting them requires cooperation across the political, security, economic, technological and socio-cultural dimensions alike; cross-pillar and cross-sectoral cooperation is what makes that possible.
16. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific gives this an inclusive framework, promoting practical collaboration on maritime cooperation, connectivity, the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and economic and other possible areas of cooperation more broadly. Our message is clear: the Indo-Pacific should be a region defined by dialogue and cooperation rather than rivalry, where shared interests provide the basis for building trust and for promoting long-term peace and stability.

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17. ASEAN's contribution to international order and strategic stability rests on its convening role, its commitment to inclusiveness, its culture of consultation and consensus, and the reservoir of trust accumulated through sustained engagement. Our experience suggests that stability is built through practical habits: keeping channels of communication open, exercising restraint, honouring commitments, managing differences peacefully, and cooperating wherever interests converge. Our approach is not one of passive neutrality. It is one of active engagement and strategic autonomy: maintaining constructive relations with all partners, while preserving the strategic space for ASEAN Member States and partners to make their own choices and pursue their own interests. This is essential for a region as diverse, open and interconnected as Southeast Asia.
18. Major powers carry a particular responsibility in this regard, because their choices shape the strategic environment for everyone else. Strategic reassurance can be strengthened through reliable crisis-communication channels, greater transparency around strategic intentions and military activities, advance notification of major exercises where appropriate, professional conduct during encounters, and sustained military-to-military dialogue. These are practical measures, and they work: they reduce misperception and keep incidents from escalating into crises. At the same time, every country, not only the major powers, has both the agency and the responsibility to uphold multilateralism, respect international law, and contribute to a more inclusive international order.

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19. The international order will keep evolving; that much is certain. What is not yet settled is its direction, and that is where our task lies: to shape that evolution towards an order that is more representative, more responsive and more equitable, while safeguarding the principles that underpin peace, stability, sovereign equality and sustainable development.
20. Through restraint, dialogue, respect for international law and inclusive cooperation, we can ensure that a more multipolar world produces stability rather than unpredictability. ASEAN stands ready to work with China and all our partners to build an international order in which every state has a voice, every nation's sovereignty is respected, and cooperation prevails even amid competition, so that we may advance security governance together, for the peace, stability, security and prosperity of our region and the wider world.

I thank you.

