Opening Remarks
H.E. Dr. Kao Kim Hourn, Secretary-General of ASEAN
At the USABC Exclusive Ministerial Dinner with ASEAN Economic Ministers
7:10 pm – 07:15 pm (5 minutes delivery time)
Sunday, 20 September 2026,
PICC, Manila, the Philippines

The Honorable Ceferino S. Rodolfo*, Undersecretary for the Industry Development and Investment Promotions Group, Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) of the Philippines,*

Your Excellencies Senior Officials from the ASEAN Member States,

Mr. Marc Mealy*, Executive Vice President on Research and Chief Policy Officer of the US-ASEAN Business Council (USABC),*
Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. Let me begin this evening by thanking the US-ASEAN Business Council for bringing us together this evening, and for its longstanding, very active, and structured engagement with various key ASEAN sectoral bodies. I am also very pleased to join our ASEAN Economic Ministers and U.S. business leaders who continue to invest, innovate and build partnerships across our region.

2. Over the years, USABC has served as an important bridge and connectivity between ASEAN, the U.S. Government and the U.S. business community. I am also encouraged by its increasingly close engagement with the ASEAN Business Advisory Council (ASEAN-BAC), including their collaboration in supporting the Philippines' 2026 Chairship. This reflects a more strategic approach to private-sector engagement: aligning business expertise and initiatives with ASEAN's priorities, particularly including our 20-year vision, ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future, as well as the ASEAN Economic Community Strategic Plan 2026-

2030, and moving from dialogue towards practical cooperation and implementation.

3. This approach is particularly timely as ASEAN advances the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 and the AEC Strategic Plan 2026–2030. Our objective is not for its own sake of integration , but to make ASEAN more competitive, resilient and attractive for long-term investment.

4. Against this backdrop, allow me to highlight three areas where ASEAN and the U.S. business community can deepen practical cooperation.

5. First, we should make ASEAN an even more seamless and competitive base for trade and investment and other economic activities. The upgraded ATIGA provides stronger foundations for trade facilitation, digitalisation and more connected regional supply chains. The real test, however, is whether goods move faster, costs are coming down and businesses can operate more easily across ASEAN. We therefore welcome U.S. companies investing in resilient supply chains, helping identify remaining business frictions and connecting more MSMEs to regional and global markets. Our ambition is clear and that is for businesses to increasingly see ASEAN not simply as separate national markets, but as an increasingly connected economic ecosystem.

6. Second, we should turn ASEAN's digital integration into practical opportunities for businesses to innovate and scale. With negotiations on the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement, or DEFA, concluded, our focus now turns into speedy ratification within six months, that will enable early implementation of the agreement and delivering tangible benefits. DEFA's strategic value lies in reducing fragmentation, enabling greater interoperability and progressively creating an ASEAN-wide digital market where businesses can trade, invest, innovate and scale more easily across borders. Ultimately, success will be measured by whether digital systems work together more seamlessly and reduce the cost and complexity of doing business across ASEAN. The U.S. private sector can support this effort through technology, secure digital infrastructure, practical solutions and capacity-building that strengthen

MSME digital adoption and regional interoperability that cover 97 percent of ASEAN economy.

7. Third, we should mobilise greater investment and business solutions for sustainable growth. Sustainability is increasingly a source of competitiveness and resilience for us here in ASEAN. ASEAN is advancing this agenda through the ASEAN Strategy for Carbon Neutrality, the Framework for Circular Economy for the AEC, and by exploring the potential of an ASEAN Green Economy Framework Agreement, or GEFA, to further strengthen regional green economy cooperation. This is a top priority for Singapore next year.

8. Realising these opportunities will require investment, financing, technology and commercially viable solutions. We therefore welcome U.S. businesses and financial institutions as partners in turning sustainability ambitions into scalable economic opportunities.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

9. Across these areas, the common thread is clear: our frameworks will only deliver value through effective implementation and business utilisation. I therefore welcome USABC's increasingly practical and recommendation -oriented support across ASEAN's economic agenda, particularly through all ASEAN sectoral bodies, including through studies, workshops, dialogues as well as its close cooperation with ASEAN-BAC. I hope tonight's exchange can help us explore how these collaborations can be further advanced and scaled in support of ASEAN's implementation priorities. I look forward to our discussion tonight and beyond, and to exploring how we can take our partnerships forward together not only between ASEAN Secretariat and the USBAC, but the partnership that cut across with our Member States, with the sectoral bodies, and with ASEAN-BAC.

Thank you very much and have a good evening.

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