

**Speech by HE Mr. Laurent Fabius,
Minister of Foreign Affairs of France
on France's policy in Asia**

ASEAN headquarters, Jakarta, 2 August 2013

Secretary-General,
Ambassadors,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to meet you here at the ASEAN headquarters. This is the first time a member of the French Government has visited this place which is symbolic of a peaceful, prosperous Asia. I wanted to be with you today to show the major importance of ASEAN and its constituent countries for France.

* *

South-East Asia is a region with which France has long-standing historic ties. The first contacts date back to the 16th century with the first French sailors – Normans, to be precise, which is important for me as an elected representative of Normandy – who reached the shores of Sumatra. They include Pierre Caunay from Honfleur in 1527 and then the Parmentier brothers in 1529. It was under the reign of Louis XIV that official relations truly began with respective embassies – Siamese at the Court of the Sun King and French at the Court of Ayutthaya – which were established successively during the 1680s. The Siamese Embassy made such a great impression that it inspired a work by the author Charles Dufresnoy, himself a source of inspiration for Montesquieu's famous *Persian Letters*.

Since that time, human exchanges have become a permanent reality. The meeting between France and South-East Asia has not been without its conflicts. We are all aware of the suffering of the colonial period. I am not ignoring this, but I want above all to focus on the unbreakable human, cultural and affective ties that we have forged. Three ASEAN member countries – Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam – are members of the International Organization of the Francophonie, and a fourth country, Thailand, is an observer. The diasporas of your countries living in France are numerous and very well integrated, with famous personalities like the director of Vietnamese origin, Tran Anh Hung, the Franco-Khmer film-maker Ritty Panh, the singer of Indonesian origin, Anggun, the Franco-American-Vietnamese astro-physicist Trinh Xuan Than, and many entrepreneurs and doctors.

These ties can be seen in everyday life, including through gastronomy: spring rolls are now part of French heritage in the same way as bread is part of Vietnamese culture. In the art and thought world too: when the great French author Antonin Artaud launched his enterprise to rebuild the foundations of modern French theatre, he took his inspiration from the Java, Bali and Khmer theatres.

* *

Our convergent visions of the world also bring closer together France and Europe on the one hand and ASEAN on the other. Like Europe, ASEAN represents an impressive project, the – successful – enterprise of building an area of peace, cooperation and prosperity. Like Europe, ASEAN played a decisive stabilizing role after the collapse of the Soviet Union, offering the countries of Indochina and Burma, which were torn apart from decades of conflict, the prospect of a better future through regional integration.

I know that the experience of the European Union has been a source of inspiration for the countries of South-East Asia, even if you have followed your own path. Conversely, we see reason for hope in the way you faced up to the Asian Crisis of 1997. I remember that many observers judged at that time – too soon – that ASEAN was “finished”. You overcame this test and continued along the avenue of integration, adopting a Charter in 2008 and planning to create, from 2015, a political, economic and cultural “community”. Similarly, the EU is currently recovering following the eurozone crisis. The end of the recession is in sight, even if not everything has been settled. We managed to work together to overcome the crisis and we are now working on a project to create a more integrated EU. I am convinced that, like ASEAN 15 years ago, the EU will come out of this test stronger.

Our shared global view can be seen in our common commitment to a multi-polar world. The world is increasingly interconnected and interdependent and we share common concerns; yet collective action appears to be lagging behind. Yet, contrary to what is often said, our world is not multi-polar. It is more “zero-polar”. This lack of structural and controlled major relationships makes it difficult to settle crises, as we are unfortunately seeing at the moment in Syria. This tragedy is also a concern for you.

The positive alternative to this zero-polar world should not be the re-constitution of a bi-polar relation in the form of a Chinese-American G2. Neither the United States nor China desire that. For Europe and the countries of South-East Asia, this configuration would mean a loss of strategic independence, or even, in the worst-case scenario, an obligation to choose.

What we should – and want to – build is an organized multi-polar world, in which the EU and ASEAN play a stabilizing role. ASEAN counts more than 600 million inhabitants – one tenth of the global population – and relies on remarkable economic dynamism. The EU, with its 500 million inhabitants, is the world’s leading commercial power. Taken separately, these two poles count for a lot. United, they will be decisive!

* *

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A lot is said about the US “pivot” to Asia. I don’t know if it’s the right word. France, too, has undertaken a “pivot”. Not to “blindly follow the crowd” but because France wants to be present where tomorrow’s world is built. Asia-Pacific will clearly be central to the 21st century. And also because France is part of the Asia-Oceania space, through its history, the fact that at least one million French people have Asian origins, and through its Pacific territories, where more than half a million of our citizens live.

This French “pivot” is not, unlike the American pivot, primarily military, although France is present in the region. We have forces stationed in our Pacific territories, whose active contribution to regional stability is unanimously recognized. We participate in the international effort in Afghanistan and we have undertaken major defence cooperation projects with the major regional countries, including our ASEAN partners.

Our “pivot” is more diplomatic. For the last year, the French Government has made developing our ties with the whole of Asia a real priority. This is demonstrated by the four visits to the region by President Hollande since his election, to Laos for the ASEM summit, a forum for dialogue initiated by France and Singapore in 1996, and then to India, China and Japan. This priority concerns the whole of Asia and does not boil down, as the temptation may have been in the past, to dialogue only with the giants of the area: China and India. Our strategic partnerships with these two countries are naturally of prime importance and we do not want to scale back our ambitions.

With a GDP equal alone to that of all the other BRICS countries put together, as well as Mexico and Indonesia, China, a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, is a key country for the resolution of international crises and the seeking of solutions to global challenges, and a vital partner. This is why President Hollande, the first Western Head of State received in China by the new authorities last April, marked his commitment to deepening the Franco-Chinese strategic partnership in every field.

With India, the world’s largest democracy, our relationship is unequalled in terms of the degree of confidence that underpins it and the level of ambition that drives it. Our two countries have established a particularly close strategic partnership in the fields of defence, counter-terrorism, civil nuclear energy and space. The strong political determination to take this relationship even further was confirmed by both parties during President Hollande's visit in February.

Our ambition is to strengthen our ties with these two countries and develop in parallel our ties with the whole area. I am thinking in particular of Japan, a historic partner that has not received all the necessary attention in recent years and with which, during President Hollande’s visit in June, we agreed to implement an exceptional partnership. We adopted a five-year roadmap with this in mind. I am also thinking of the Republic of Korea, whose economic, cultural and diplomatic dynamism is impressive, as well as Mongolia, which I will visit soon, and of course, at the top of the list, ASEAN and its Member States.

France was not sufficiently present in South-East Asia in the past. It is significant that I am the first French Minister of Foreign Affairs to visit Indonesia in 17 years. Things have changed: over the last year, high-level exchanges have taken place with all ASEAN countries. The visit of President Hollande to Vientiane was a signal of this priority. Similarly, the Prime Minister has already made three visits to five different ASEAN countries since his appointment! Just days ago he was in Malaysia. There is a genuine political will in France to step up its relations with ASEAN and its Member States.

Within the ASEAN, Indonesia, which represents 40% of the population and GDP of the ASEAN, is a major emerging country and democracy. It is naturally a leading partner. I welcome the growing and constructive engagement of Indonesia on the regional – and increasingly international – stage. It is a major contributor to peacekeeping operations – particularly within UNIFIL in Lebanon – as well as an active G20 member, a country strongly engaged in combating climate change, and an influential moderate Muslim country. Indonesia is proving that it is equal to its international responsibilities. It is a crucial partner for France. The relations between our two countries have not yet reached their full potential. We signed a strategic partnership in 2011. It now needs to be implemented in every field. That is one of my priorities.

This “pivot” is also economic. Hosting one fifth of French businesses present abroad, Asia is France's second largest partner region. This part of the world, where more than half the growth of our exports has been achieved in recent years and which will concentrate close to 50% of global growth for the 2012-2017 period, will be increasingly involved in the strategy of French businesses. The scale of the exchanges with South-East Asia, where 1500 French companies are present, is noteworthy: the amount of French exports to ASEAN is comparable with exports to China, and the current account is almost balanced. Amongst the 47 priority countries for French exports, there are six South-East Asian countries: Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. With the increased economic integration of the region, the prospect of free trade agreements between the European Union and the major Asian countries, and the ongoing internationalization of the yuan, everything strengthens this dynamic.

This “pivot” is also human. The French have never looked so much to Asia as today. The French communities in Asia are the fastest-growing worldwide. The 120,000 French people living in Asia already represent more than 7% of the French population abroad. There are now close to 50,000 French people in China alone. French students are flocking to your universities. In France – and this is not widely enough known – young people are passionate about Japanese and Korean culture. Learning of Chinese and other Asian languages is growing rapidly and Japanese is the second language the most translated into French, behind English. Thai and Philippine film is meeting growing interest. Asian students, particularly from China but also Korea and Vietnam, now number close to 50,000, making an appreciable contribution to their host universities. Asian tourism is exploding: close to 4 million visitors come from your continent each year! We hope for even more.

* *

Ladies and Gentlemen,

That's all for the past, the present state of affairs, and for our will. We now need to move forward and strengthen the partnership between France, Europe and ASEAN. I propose at least two major focuses :

1- Focus one: translate in concrete terms our common vision for a world of peace and cooperation. Conflicts are tearing apart some parts of the Middle East, Africa and South Asia. Tensions exist in your region, even if they are not comparable. They also concern us, as ASEAN is central to vital sea routes for our economic and strategic interests. This is the reason for the participation of the French Minister of Defence, Jean-Yves Le Drian, in the last two sessions of the Shangri-La Dialogue. It is not for France to arbitrate on territorial disputes between regional countries, but we can help seek peaceful solutions in line with international law. Moreover, France is encouraging the establishment by ASEAN and China of a code of conduct for the South China Sea, as provided for by the 2002 Phnom Penh declaration.

As a permanent member of the Security Council, France has particular responsibilities in this field. It shoulders them when necessary, with determination, and in compliance with international law. It was in this spirit that we intervened at the beginning of the year in Mali, at the request of the country's Government and with UN authorization, to help it tackle the terrorist threat and re-establish its territorial integrity and sovereignty. We are also engaged in combating the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, a particularly acute situation on the Korean peninsula, and in securing vital supply routes for Asia through our active involvement in combating piracy in the Indian Ocean. We are also prepared to step up our cooperation with the Asian countries contributing to UN peacekeeping operations. In this respect I welcome the decision of Vietnam to send, starting next year, contingents of UN troops. You can count on our support.

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

I propose working together, drawing inspiration from what we did in the past to bring peace back to Indochina. It is a great source of pride for France to have co-chaired with Indonesia the Paris Conference which led to the October 1991 Cambodia Peace Agreements. In 2007, France was the first European country to accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia. I would like my country to maintain this pioneering role in the implementation of cooperation for peace and security with ASEAN in the future. It was with this in mind that France expressed its desire to participate in the ADMM+ (ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting).

2- Focus two: together address global problems and build a new global political, economic, social and environmental regulation. It is vital in particular to limit greenhouse gas emissions in order to combat climate change. Asia represents a third of global greenhouse gas emissions, perhaps 45% in 2030. It is a region that is particularly exposed to the consequences of climate change, a subject on which I would like to welcome the visionary commitment of President Yudhoyono. France has proposed to host the COP 21 in Paris in 2015. I would like to work hand-in-hand with ASEAN to make this event a success.

Despite economic difficulties, my country is maintaining a significant level of official development assistance to contribute to this sustainable development goal, particularly through the French Development Agency. The Agency's priority mandate in Asia is to promote "green growth" and effective combating of climate change.

These sustainable development challenges are also opportunities for the development of economic relations between France and your countries: "sustainable urban planning", public transport, energy, food security, new technologies, etc. In these priority fields for your region, French businesses have exceptional expertise that they are prepared to put to work to serve your projects.

Efforts are needed to develop these relations. French companies need to be more present and sometimes persevere more. In South-East Asia, progress needs to be made in terms of market access and protection of intellectual property. We are particularly vigilant on this point in the framework of the ongoing negotiations of free trade agreements with several of your countries, in accordance with the principle of reciprocity. On this basis, I hope we will be able to conclude ambitious agreements rapidly, as we have already done with Singapore.

* *

Ladies and gentlemen,

In 1684, the first Siamese Embassy in France was received in the Hall of Mirrors of the Château de Versailles by Louis XIV. The splendour deployed for this reception was equal to the message of welcome.

More than three hundred years later, I too bring this message of welcome, albeit more modestly. I present it on behalf of France. I invite you to follow in the footsteps of those Siamese ambassadors and to come in turn to France.

This is a message to investors. Investment from ASEAN in France is still too low, apart from a few exceptions which are generally successful. An investment in France is an investment in the world's fifth-largest economy and the fourth most common destination for foreign stock investments, with 20,000 companies held by foreign investors. It also provides access to the whole eurozone and, further afield, the dynamic markets of Africa and the Middle East. Asian investment is welcome in France, creating wealth and jobs. So do not hesitate to seize this opportunity.

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

It is also a message for students and researchers. Apart from the Vietnamese, there are not enough South-East Asian students in France, even if their number is growing rapidly. We are working to facilitate procedures for you to come to France, to improve reception conditions, and to develop programmes in English for non French-speaking students. Don't hesitate to come.

Lastly, this is a message to all citizens who wish to make a tourist visit. You are welcome. A particular effort is being made to simplify and speed up visa procedures and develop tourism that meets the expectations of Asian tourists and to ensure their total safety, as we know this is essential.

The motto of Indonesia, which could also be that of ASEAN, is "Unity in Diversity" ("*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*"). This beautiful motto is close to that of the European Union: "United in Diversity". This determination to combine unity and diversity is one of the bases of our friendship and a solid partnership between France, Europe and ASEAN.

Long live ASEAN! Long live the European Union! Long live Indonesia! Long live France!