

Keynote Address
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At the Conference “ASEAN at Fifty: Introspection and Future Outlook”
27 September 2017, Raffles Le Royal Hotel, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

*Excellencies, Distinguished Guests,
Dear Colleagues and Friends Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. It is indeed my great honour and pleasure to be here and speak on behalf of my Foreign Minister, H.E. PRAK Sokhonn, at the opening of the conference. My appreciation goes to the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace for organizing this important conference under the theme “ASEAN at 50: Introspection and Future Outlook” at a time when all the 10 ASEAN countries are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the establishment of ASEAN. Looking at the list of the eminent speakers from the region gathering here, I am more than reassured that their exchanges would be very rich in substance, be they on the assessment of past achievements, on the identification of the existing challenges or on the future prospects of ASEAN.

2. We have turned 50. That’s a lot of years that have gone by and a lot of water under the bridge. If we look back to the days when our Founding Fathers signed the Bangkok Declaration 50 years ago, it is hard for them to imagine what the wheel of times could have brought 50 years later. Well, we now have an ASEAN Charter, which has served as a firm foundation for us in achieving the ASEAN Community. ASEAN has a legal status and an institutional framework. We have codified ASEAN norms, rules and values. We have set clear targets for the next decade to come. The Kuala Lumpur Declaration on ASEAN 2025 is a forward-looking roadmap to attain a politically cohesive, economically integrated, and socially responsible, and a truly rules-based, people-oriented, people centred ASEAN.

3. We now have a vibrant and increasingly integrated community, where flow of

goods, capital and peoples are being constantly facilitated and improved. ASEAN's combined GDP of more than US\$2.55 trillion as of last year count would make us the world's 6th largest economy. Our combined population of 635 million or some 8.7% of the world's total population makes us the 3rd largest after China and India. ASEAN is a vibrant market with a young and rising middle class.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

4. As a ten-member political community, ASEAN represents a significant presence within Asia and is viewed by many as a successful experiment in regional integration and cooperation. Under its newly realized ASEAN Community, ASEAN countries are more integrated in terms of politics, security, economy and socio-culture, which give ASEAN a whole new dimension in regional cooperation. While no one ASEAN country can aspire for influence as a great power, together the 10 member states have shown their ability to impress on the international system. And this is an important factor at a time when global and regional conditions keep evolving and the process of world multi-polarization continues to transform.

5. The problem of Asia's Paradox is visible where political and security cooperation has not grown in tandem with economic interdependence in Asia. ASEAN is today confronted with arguably the most complex regional security challenges it has faced since its formation. Its core concepts of neutrality and cohesion are under great stress. Challenges also emerged from non-traditional forms of security threats in this region, such as new groups of terrorism, ISIS, drug and human trafficking and migrant worker issues.

6. In light of this dilemma, I would like to challenges our gathering today to ponder on a few important questions. With the increasing presence of big power influence within the region, is the "ASEAN way" of "soft regionalism" sufficiently suitable as a modus operandi for ASEAN to negotiate the contours and interactions of big power plays. How can ASEAN balance economic and political interests in its relationship with the major powers? How can

ASEAN secure their political interests vis-à-vis major powers' increasing political influence in the region? To what extent does a closer relationship between super powers and individual ASEAN countries impact ASEAN's effectiveness as a whole? Does it affect ASEAN centrality?

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

7. Allow me to share a few personal thoughts on the above. Let me start with ASEAN Centrality. What is it? Really, what is it? Despite many existing literatures trying to define "ASEAN Centrality", there has been so far no clear-cut, specific or commonly agreed or used definition of the notion of ASEAN Centrality. For ASEAN itself, there is also no official definition on the word "ASEAN Centrality". As such "Centrality" is at least **an aspirational term**. Before 'centrality' became the term of preference, ASEAN used to refer to itself as being 'in the driver's seat', a choice of metaphor that overlooked the possibility that the driver's seat may well be occupied by a chauffeur and not necessarily by the person who sets the direction. To me, the notion of "*ASEAN centrality*", "*ASEAN driver's seat*", and "*ASEAN driving force*" in East Asian regionalism is generally used interchangeably.

8. First, the most common conception of centrality is in terms of ASEAN, not the great powers, as the driver of regionalism. In contrast to most regions where global and/or regional great powers are the key drivers and shapers of regional order and architecture – Germany and France in Europe with the European Community (EC) and the European Union (EU), the US in North America with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), or Brazil and Argentina in South America with Mercosur. The notion of ASEAN's leading role in the regional architecture rests on the principle that frames the way ASEAN approach its external relations, in particular with the major powers, to ensure that its interests are protected and the regional stability preserved.

9. The second conception of centrality is to understand ASEAN in terms of its contribution to East Asia's stability and security as the region's convenor or facilitator through providing an assortment of multilateral mechanisms and meeting places, which

bring together great powers, regional powers, middle and small states in East Asia for regular consultation and confidence-building. Centrality can also be defined in terms of ASEAN viewed as a hub or prime node, as former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has it, ASEAN as a fulcrum (or central role) of East Asia's regional architecture rather than as its leader.

10. Having said that, allow me to throw a few reality checks, by that I mean what are the various other different perceptions. To some, the idea of a collective, united ASEAN that is able to speak with "one voice" is at best a useful political slogan. The "ASEAN way" of emphasizing ASEAN's centrality is severely limited when it comes to critical flashpoints where member states are required to stand up for their own perceived interests vis-à-vis the major powers. There is a gap between ASEAN's rhetorical aspiration and regional reality, which constrains ASEAN's commitment to tackling emerging regional issues.

11. To others, they doubt whether the 10 middle and smaller states will be able to truly drive the process forward, especially when major powers are hesitant and, recently, increasingly suspicious of each other. ASEAN should not insist that it has to be in the driver's seat in leading regional initiatives. Instead, it should adopt a more modest approach, cooperating in areas where it has the capability to do so.

12. As to the role of external powers in shaping the regional architecture there is a need to acknowledge that ASEAN's success could not have come about without the legitimacy conferred upon it by other major powers. ASEAN has been very good at providing the "centrality of goodwill". Now it is time for ASEAN to provide the "centrality of substance". Perhaps it may be time for ASEAN to de-emphasize its centrality for the reason that such a centrality may be a tool for diplomatic speech that may not reflect political realities.

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13. Let me now shift to the ASEAN integration. "Unity in diversity" is one of the sacred

clichés in the ASEAN lexicon, reflecting the heterogeneity among its members in terms of ethnicity, religion, languages, level of economic development, political systems, and strategic orientations. To secure ASEAN Centrality, balanced development should be achieved within ASEAN. By achieving full integration, the ASEAN Economic Community will be seen as a single market and production base. The accumulation of economic attractiveness will enhance ASEAN centrality in the wider regional framework.

14. In my view, the Post-2015 ASEAN Community should aim for a more advanced phase of regionalism and intra-ASEAN integration to support ASEAN centrality. The completion of the RCEP negotiation will be another important milestone in that direction. The economic enhancement can effectively narrow the wide development gap between new and old ASEAN Member States and therefore increases ASEAN's credibility in terms of the rapid economic resilience and fast economic growth. ASEAN should tackle its perceived "*collective burden*" by improving its human resources because, for the time being, the CLMV countries still lack human capitals. ASEAN can also attract more FDIs from other countries and thus prevent the major powers from utilizing its economic influence to divide ASEAN and weaken ASEAN's unity and solidarity.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

15. Before I wrap up my speech, let me touch briefly on ASEAN's external relations. There is no question ASEAN has played a key role in creating a complex web or an ecosystem of institutional arrangements with external partners. ASEAN has gone on a spawning spree, birthing one institution after another in an ad hoc way: the ARF in 1994, the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) in 1999, the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005 and the ADMM-Plus in 2010.

16. ASEAN is at the centre of major power interests, primarily the US, China, Japan, Australia, the ROK, Russia and increasingly India. Its prosperity also depends on the good relations between them. At the same time ASEAN is facing potential risk in its great power

equation through which the region's economic and political stability depends on better relations in the China-Japan-United States triangle. However, ASEAN's ability to manage this complex web of relations seems to be limited.

18. On the one hand, tensions run considerably higher between them and mutual political mistrust and suspicion threaten to tip over the region's equilibrium of peace. The strategic environment in East Asia is in a state of more than usual flux as the US, China, Japan, India and other countries adjust their relationships with each other. The Korean Peninsula nuclear dilemma is accentuating this existing volatile situation. On the other hand, economic and security imperatives pull ASEAN members in different directions. Blossoming trade and investment ties with China, under its Belt and Road Initiative and the Mekong Lancang Cooperation, are binding Southeast Asia and China into one economic space while enmeshing economic benefits with deep geopolitical implications. So what are the ways forward for ASEAN in this Asia's Paradox?

19. Anyhow I hope I have thrown enough challenging questions for all of us for just one day work, and so I would like to conclude my address here by wishing the Conference a frank exchanges and fruitful outcomes. Thank you.
