



***“ASEAN’s Prospective beyond Fifty”***

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**During**

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I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to all the organizers of this event and I am privileged to take part in the important symposium and to share my thoughts on the prospective of ASEAN in the next 50 years with all the eminent participants of this gathering.

For the benefit of this symposium, I would like to highlight key achievements and key challenges ASEAN faces as it celebrates the 50<sup>th</sup> year anniversary and discuss how best ASEAN could balance great power rivalry in order to remain as preeminent provider of security arrangement in this part of the world.

**ASEAN Achievement:**

Over the course of the past 50 years ASEAN has created numerous opportunities to fix many shortcomings and strengthen the hope for a better future for a region of Asia-Pacific that are truly peaceful, stable and prosperous. Most notably among the opportunities created has been the manifestation of the development of various instruments and mechanisms to enable regional cooperation and strengthen ASEAN’s institutional presence in engaging the world.

ASEAN’s hallmarks include the creation of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TCA) which was signed in 1976 serving as an essential code of conduct in the management the behavior of the interstate relations; the



ASEAN Charter which entered into force in 2008, setting out the governing principles on how ASEAN intends to conduct its affairs; the ASEAN Community Blueprints, describing broad goals, objectives, strategies, and targets which are intended to make ASEAN politically cohesive, economically integrated, socially responsible and a truly people-oriented, people-centered rules-based ASEAN. Realized at the end of December 2015, this groundbreaking endeavor was complemented by the adoption of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) Blueprint 2025 which will further boost the efforts in building a more cohesive ASEAN Community and a stable Southeast Asia.

### **ASEAN Challenges:**

There are persisting challenges that stand in the ASEAN Way which require the grouping to be more resolute in next fifty years.

Internally, ASEAN must pay greater stride in bolstering its institutional capacity, accelerate its integration process, and resolve domestic grievances effectively.

For ASEAN to lead effectively into the future, it must review how it operates in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> Century landscape. ASEAN must get its act together and stay united on any issue adversely affecting common regional interest. ASEAN need to work harder among member-states by improving and investing more heavily in the Association's institutional strength as well as elaborating consistently its common positions on critical questions of foreign and security policy if it wants to command greater centrality in regional affairs. Moreover, ASEAN needs to be seen as an Association that proactively pay serious attention toward the issues of good governance, human rights, democracy, rule of law, accountability, transparency and corruption in order to build a more cohesive society.

In proclaiming a community of prosperity, ASEAN needs to accelerate its integration process to mitigate economic disparity and inequality among member states, especially there still much to accomplish in narrowing the development gaps for the lesser developed ASEAN nations.



Let's consider my country. ASEAN needs to prove to Cambodia that it has been doing all it can to improve Cambodia's domestic political, socio-economic and external security situation well into the future. Although in the past 18 years ASEAN has helped Cambodia to a large extent in the spheres of economics, politics and security, however, there still remain a big challenge for ASEAN to narrow the development gap among the older and newer member states. Cambodia is still lacking behind the other richer ASEAN members. The Cambodian per capita GDP stood at USD1,144 in 2015, the lowest among the 10 member countries and well below the ASEAN's average of USD11,158. ASEAN must commit more efforts to narrow the development gap through sub-regional cooperation and technical assistance to help the new members grow faster and become further integrated into the regional economy. Cambodia has yet to receive concrete benefit from many of the projects identified in the ASEAN Master Plan on Connectivity and in the Initiative of ASEAN Integration (IAI), involving infrastructure development. Without effective resolutions to this shortcoming, the regional integration will slow down affecting the overall ASEAN Community building process.

Furthermore, ASEAN must find more concrete ways to offer good office and mediation to resolve the border dispute or tension between and among all member states and bolster its spirit of caring and willing to assist member states in distress due to their domestic grievances.

For instant, Cambodia has been frustrated with the weakness of ASEAN dispute settlement mechanism to stop Thai military aggression over the issue of the 4.6 square kilometer of land surrounding the Temple of Preah Vihear.

Another concern has to do with the apparent powerlessness of ASEAN to adequately respond to the Rohingya refugee crisis, compromising its credential as an influential organization who supposes to dare to withstand mass atrocity so as to provide timely and adequately protection to affected population against human rights violation against the Rohingya people in Myanmar.



Therefore as long as ASEAN remains unable to resolve these challenges swiftly among its member states, the group is unlikely to become a mature politico-security community.

It is perhaps time for ASEAN to explore a suitable recalibration of the principle of non-interference and exhibit a more responsive decision making process on contentious issues that have critical ramifications over its credibility even if these infractions are considered domestic issues.

Externally, ASEAN must get comfortable in discussing hard security issues that infringe upon the 'ASEAN Centrality', holding back the image and credibility of the Association which often the skeptics make ASEAN known as a forum for 'only talk and not enough action'. ASEAN needs to go beyond the consensual way and non-substantive reaction in dealing today's pressing challenges, ranging from the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, the South China Sea issue, terrorist threat, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the humanitarian crisis in the Rakhine state, the effects of climate change and cyber-attacks, and other non-traditional threats.

Overly dependent on any external power will restrict ASEAN capacity to stand up on important issues that matter most in the region. ASEAN should do its utmost to encourage all its dialogue partners to engage honestly with one another so as to reduce mutual suspicion to contain their rival ambitions in our region and act in unison to discourage them from dividing the Association.

ASEAN needs to define its own leadership. To do otherwise is to cede the initiative to an outside power. The largest states in ASEAN, in terms of size and influence, for instance Indonesia, should consider offering that leadership and assume the position as shield and spear. At the present time, it appears that Indonesia is too preoccupied with domestic issues and other ASEAN capitals show no interest in taking a leadership role on any of the serious issues affecting the region.



Going forward, ASEAN's principle of neutrality must not constrain ASEAN space for action to workout suitable security arrangement that can lead to the reduction of tensions caused by power transition.

### **How best ASEAN balances great power competition?**

This will bring me to the discussion on how ASEAN could reassert itself as an effective driving force in the evolving regional architecture in East Asia and the Asia Pacific by using of the "ASEAN Way" to balance great power competition.

At the dawn of the 20th Century we witness power transition plays out in an unprecedented way as the gravity of the world security is shifting from the west to the east. The epicenter of this new center is now in Asia and its ramification appears to be dominated by the relentless quest for dominance by the big powers competition and how best regional states balance this competition.

The ongoing power competition in the Asia – Pacific region often spawn greater rivalry among them which in turn provoke strategic uncertainty that tend to question the relevance of existing security arrangements such as the old system of US bilateral alliance and the ASEAN-based 'soft' security architecture.

The issue of ASEAN centrality is at the center of the ongoing debate. The more ASEAN can command greater centrality the better ASEAN can remain in the driver seat of the existing security mechanism, be it the ARF, the ASEAN Plus Three, the ADMM Plus, or the EAS.

For me, ASEAN Centrality is basically the ability of ASEAN to stir and act as an effective driver for existing regional architecture to keep the Asia-Pacific as a stable, peaceful, and prosperous region. In this context, how ASEAN make a unify decision on political and security matter the most toward ASEAN centrality.

Now at fifty years old, ASEAN often perceived by many observers as merrily a clearinghouse for regional mechanism and debate on persisting hard security



issues, such as the overlapping sovereignty claims in the South China Sea, remain pessimistically fluid.

ASEAN at the present time seem rather confuse and not knowing exactly what to do with pressure being imposed from Western countries, such as United States, Japan, and Australia, calling on all countries to act in the South China Sea in ways that are consistent with international law, including the citation that the decision of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration is legally binding.

The confusion also appears in the ASEAN's inability or intention to persuade China to adhere to the so called 'rule base' regional order, knowing full well of Beijing's desire and insistence to resolve the disputes only by direct bilateral negotiations with party most directly concerned without external interference. As such, after the PCA ruling in July last year, ASEAN has decided to go with its own separated way.

ASEAN in the next fifty years should not adopt the usual tendency to complacency and the belief that increasing economic interdependence alone can acts as a sole guarantor of security. Security cooperation must embrace the broader efforts to uphold and reinforce the rules-based order that has enabled us to get to where we are today – an order by which all countries in the Asia-Pacific region have benefited.

ASEAN Centrality must overcome the fragmented and non-committal attitude and put up a join front in formalizing the support of international law and ensure that regional rule-based regional order is the cornerstone of equity, stability and transparent decision-making, protecting every country, big and small, from actions that could destabilize security and prosperity.

### **Conclusion:**

If ASEAN wishes to maintain its preeminent status as an effective driver for security framework in keeping the region of Southeast Asia peaceful and prosperous, the Association must command greater leadership role,



nonpartisan strategy and solidarity and see to it that its re-invented vision 2025 adopted at the 27th Summit in Kuala Lumpur on 22 November 2015 can indeed be further consolidate and strengthen. And for the process of Community building to bear any meaning outcomes, the regional grouping must overcome the strains in internal cohesion and capacity. If leaders of Southeast Asian nations can hold on to the ASEAN's unity and centrality, the grouping will surely survive and able to play an effective role in managing great-power competition, at least in Southeast Asia.