

First Roundtable on ASEAN and EU Political Dimension
Introductory Speech of
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Excellencies Ambassadors from various EU and ASEAN countries
Excellencies, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen

1. It is indeed my great pleasure to be associated in the organization of this ASEAN-EU International Days Symposium. I am particularly appreciative of the leadership of Professor Michel Grimaldi of the University Paris II Pantheon-Assas and as President of the Association Henry Capitant for his perseverance in the last two years to make this event a reality.
2. Before I turn the floor to a panel of distinguished speakers allow me to set the stage a bit on this first Roundtable, which will focus primarily on the political dimension of both the EU and ASEAN. I recall a recent trip this year to Davos, Switzerland when I accompanied my Prime Minister Samdech Techo Hun Sen to the World Economic Forum. He spoke at a luncheon forum on a very provocative topic “The ASEAN Way or The Highway in a Fragmenting World?”. This theme was and is still is very relevant today in the current global and regional contexts, characterized by increasing likelihoods of conflicts, risks and uncertainty due to the newly emerging trends of protectionism and populism, which explained the stalling of WTO negotiations, the President Trump’s “America First” and now the “America Alone”, the Brexit then and now the Catalonia independence movement, the autonomous votes in two Italian regions.

3. In our part of the world, we witnessed the emergence of new economic powers and geopolitical rivalries: the United States' much-publicized Asia-Pacific "pivot" or "rebalancing strategy"; after two lost decades, Japan's "Abenomics" and its "proactive contribution to peace," calling for a change of its pacifist constitution and a more active role for its Self Defense Forces; the rise of China as an economic power has brought some uneasiness for other major and medium powers; then you have India's upgrade from its "Look East Policy" to its "Act East Policy", which is another emerging factor that could increase the chances of friction and alter the regional balance.

4. Let me quote an old Cambodian proverb: "when two elephants fight, it's the ants that get trampled"; Imagine here we have more than two elephants. If I may the late Lee Kuan Yew he said "when they make love, the grass suffers as well." These two adages may be applicable in the ASEAN region, where the US-China-Japan-India rivalry leaves the ASEAN countries deeply concerned and vigilant about the development of these multipolar relations: fighting or love-making. The strategic environment in ASEAN is in a state of more than usual flux as all four powers adjust their relationships with each other and with ASEAN in a context where threats are no longer easy to define. I can't help but to look back, ironically though, to the Cold War era, where despite its obvious tensions, it had at least one virtue, that of clarity. These certainties are now gone and it is unclear what will replace them.

5. Speaking of threats, both traditional and non-traditional security threats loom large in the region. We now have to deal with challenges of growing variety and complexity, like terrorism and their foreign fighters. Who would have thought that the Syria's style of physical geographical occupation would have come to our ASEAN region as in the recent Marawi's siege in the Philippines? Moreover, we have other cross-border crimes, epidemic diseases, climate change and food and energy security issues, to mention just the major ones. Last, but definitely not the least, is the recent escalation in the Korean Peninsula, especially the series of nuclear and ballistic missile tests by the DPRK and the unpredictable responses of the US.

6. ASEAN is today confronted with arguably the most complex regional security challenge it has faced since its formation. For years, ASEAN has made itself into the focal point for regional architecture. The concept of “*ASEAN in the Driver’s Seat*” or “*ASEAN Centrality*” in regional forums, like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Plus Three (APT), the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ADMM-Plus, speak to the way the region has successfully brought other countries to the table for international dialogue. While no one ASEAN country can yet compete for influence as a great power in this complex patchwork of institutional multiplex ecosystem, together all the 10 ASEAN member states have shown that they could. Until now, at least.

7. The issue of ASEAN centrality has been the major concern for ASEAN itself. The core concepts of neutrality and cohesion are under great stress. Both competition and cooperation among major countries take on new dimensions. Economic and security imperatives pull different members in different directions. China’s grand strategy of the “*Belt and Road Initiative*”, Japan’s most recent launch of its “*Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy*”, an initiative aiming at a greater engagement in the region and beyond, in tandem with India’s “*Act East Policy*” are three solid initiatives that are alive and kicking. We all know that the US’s Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), though mainly spearheaded by the United States, is supposedly “*flatlined*” although resuscitation efforts by the existing 11 members are supposedly on the way. In the meantime, the negotiations of the ASEAN led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is nearly completed.

8. Amidst this complex regional setting, there is no question ASEAN is still a key actor in the region’s institutional architecture as illustrated in this year ASEAN Chairmanship. The Philippines, which now holds the rotating ASEAN chair during this 50th anniversary year, has as its theme “*Partnering for Change, Engaging the World.*” As outlined by President Duterte, the regional bloc has six priorities for the year: (i) A people-oriented and people-centered ASEAN; (ii) Peace and stability in the region; (iii) Maritime security and cooperation; (iv)

Inclusive innovation and growth; (v) ASEAN's resiliency; and (vi) ASEAN as a model of regionalism and a global player.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

9. Let me now turn to our relations with the EU. Since 1977 when ASEAN-EU relations were formalised, the two regional blocs have evolved, in terms of membership, institutions and areas of competence and cooperation. Throughout the four decades, ASEAN-EU cooperation has broadened and deepened, moving from an Enhanced Partnership and now working towards a Strategic Partnership. Areas of cooperation now cover a wide range of areas -- political and security, trade and investment, and socio-cultural issues.

10. The ASEAN-EU partnership has contributed to regional and global peace, security, and prosperity. ASEAN attaches great importance on regular dialogue and exchange on global and regional security issues of common interest. In recent years, these have expanded to include, inter alia, cyber security, border management, transnational crimes and maritime security.

11. I note that the EU remains the largest source of FDI inflows and the third largest trading partner of ASEAN. Still, ASEAN-EU cooperation on trade and investment can be further strengthened as there are many opportunities and potentials arising from the creation of ASEAN single market and production base since the ASEAN Economic Community was realized last year.

12. On socio-cultural issues, ASEAN-EU cooperation has contributed to make the 1,300 million people in the two regions more connected and closer through enhancing mobility of youth, media, academia, civil societies and parliamentary bodies. I believe that we can do more in our cooperation in the areas of disaster management, climate change and sustainable development, which would help enhance the human security of the peoples of the two regions.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

13. Viewed in the light of the current political evolution, a strong demographic transformation and a thriving economic community, there are high expectations both from within and outside ASEAN about what it can achieve as a region – economically, politically, and socially. The questions I now raise to my

panel are multifold and I hope they could share from their respective perspectives but they are all indicative though:

First, what is the choice for ASEAN going forward? The ASEAN Way? Or a highway which is being traveled by others?

Second, how can ASEAN hasten economic integration to deliver a strong and equitable regional economy? How can it narrow the development divide? How can ASEAN strengthen its regional pre-eminence through strengthened internal and external engagement?

Third, how can the ASEAN Secretariat be strengthened to be capable of pursuing processes that deliver the outcomes identified by Leaders?

Fourth, viewed in the light of the current severe challenges to EU integration, i.e. the debt problem, the Brexit, the Catalonia independence movement, and the influx of refugees and migrants, what lessons could ASEAN as a shallow integration scheme draw from the deepest form of regional integration like the EU? Should ASEAN be convinced not to take the EU as a model for its integration?

Fifth, ASEAN will always see the EU as a valuable partner and as a strong voice in support of regionalism and multilateralism, what should we do in the years ahead to ensure another solid forty years of close cooperation and partnership in addressing common challenges?

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

14. For all these provocative questions, I am blessed to have 4 seasoned diplomats and professionals in my panel. All four of them are my good friends and that is why I expect them to be frank in sharing their views on the subject matters.

15. For my first panelist, Excellency George EDGAR, Ambassador of the European Union to Cambodia, who will share with us his perspectives on the EU angle with regards to the commonalities and differences between the EU and ASEAN, and how he sees relations between these two important regional structures. Before joining the European External Action Service, Ambassador

Edgar served as British Ambassador to the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Cambodia.

16. For my second panelist, I have Excellency Ambassador POU Sothirak who will share his views on ASEAN's Prospective beyond Fifty. Knowing him so well, I can assure that his views will be very candid and provocative. Ambassador Pou Sothirak is now the Executive Director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace as well as an Advisor to the Royal Government of Cambodia. Formerly he has served Cambodia under different capacities, as Minister of Industry Mines and Energy, twice as Member of Parliaments, as Cambodian Ambassador to Japan. He was also a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore.

17. For my third panelist, I have Dean KEO Chhea, of the Techo Sen School of Government and International Relations, University of Cambodia. He will share his views on the ASEAN - European Union Dialogue Cooperation. Dean Chhea is no stranger to the ASEAN mechanisms as he has just retired from the ASEAN Secretariat as Director of External Relations.

18. My last panelist is Dr. Ruth Banomyong, who will give us his perspective how the political dimension of ASEAN is shaping the development of the other economic pillar. His main focus will be in the field of multimodal transport, international logistics, trade facilitation & logistics development policy and supply chain performance measurements. Dr. Banomyong is an associate professor at the Department of International Business, Logistics and Transport Management at the Thammasat Business School, Thammasat University in Thailand.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

19. Let me now turn start the conversation with our esteemed roundtable panelists. Thank you.
