

**REMARKS OF  
H.E. DR. KAO KIM HOURN, SECRETARY-GENERAL OF ASEAN  
THE PHNOM PENH STRATEGIC DIALOGUE**

***ASEAN and Regional Order in an Age of Strategic  
Fragmentation***

2 June 2026, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

---

Good Morning. Thank you very much for a very kind introduction.

Excellency Huy Kanthoul Vora, Executive Director of Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP),

Your Highness, member of the Board of Directors of CICP,

Ms. Natalie Russmann, Country Representative of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) for Cambodia and Malaysia,

Excellencies Ambassadors, Distinguished Board members of CICP,

Excellencies members of the Royal Government of Cambodia, Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen.

1. I want to start by thanking both the CICP and KAS for hosting a wonderful yesterday. Some of you may not have been here, but we had a wonderful dinner last night. Thank you very much for that dinner. It is a profound honour to stand before you at the inaugural Phnom Penh Strategic Dialogue. From what I have heard, yesterday's discussions before my arrival were both engaging and illuminating - a fitting beginning for what I trust will become an enduring forum for the region's most pressing conversations.
2. Let me begin by extending my deepest appreciation to the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP) and KAS for convening this platform. I congratulate both CICP and KAS for launching Phnom Penh Strategic Dialogue here. I hope it would go a long way because when you have the first meeting, you always want to have the second meeting, and after that a series of it. This year, CICP marks its 30th Anniversary. Three decades of steady and consequential work in advancing dialogue, deepening cooperation, and nurturing policy thinking across Southeast Asia. Standing here today carries a certain personal weight for me. I was there at the very beginning of this journey, when the Institute was established - modestly, almost tentatively - with a

singular purpose: to help Cambodia find its footing and take its rightful place within the regional family that is ASEAN. That it did so, with full membership in 1999, remains one of the moments I hold with quiet pride.

3. It is also a particular joy to see so many familiar faces in this room; friends and colleagues from the ASEAN-ISIS network as well as the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP). These networks did more than welcome CICA when it was still finding its voice; they nurtured it and helped shape it into the institution of standing that it is today.
4. The convening of this Strategic Dialogue here in Phnom Penh is, in many ways, the clearest measure of how far CICA has journeyed. That it can now convene policymakers and thought leaders of this calibre is itself a statement of maturity and purpose, and the timing could not be more fitting. For we meet at a moment when our region must think deeply, speak honestly, and act wisely in the face of a world that is shifting beneath our feet in ways both familiar and unsettling.

***Your Highness, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,***

5. Today, we meet at a moment of great transition. Across the globe, several powerful structural forces are converging to reshape the strategic environment in ways that are both far-reaching and deeply unsettling. Geopolitical tensions are rising, and major power competition is intensifying. Economic interdependence, once hoped to bind nations together against war and conflict, is being recast as a source of vulnerability and strategic risk. Supply chains, investments, and technology are no longer viewed through a purely economic lens; they have become instruments of geopolitical contest and even coercion. Meanwhile, technological disruption is accelerating at an unprecedented pace, reshaping economies, transforming societies, and changing the very character of international relations and warfare.
6. Traditional security concerns remain, but they are now deeply connected and intertwined with competition and disruption across digital, technological, financial, maritime, cyber, and informational domains. Transnational challenges - climate change, pollution and haze, health security, food and energy resilience - add further layers of complexity that no single country or region can manage alone.
7. Beyond our region, the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East stand as stark reminders of how fragile peace can be – and how far the consequences travel and have direct impact. Conflicts that begin far from our shores have cascaded into our economies through disrupted supply chains, volatile energy prices, tightening financial conditions for both governments and ordinary citizens. These conflicts also reinforce an enduring lesson: that lasting peace cannot be imposed by force or power – it must be built through dialogue, diplomacy, and respect for international law. Force may alter the battlefield; it can rarely resolve the underlying political conditions that peace requires.
8. The cumulative effect of all this is a world of strategic fragmentation, confrontation, and contestation. The rules, norms, and institutions as well as

trust that once provided stability are being tested, and in some cases, strained for their limits.

9. I highlighted this point at the Shangri-La Dialogue recently, and it bears repeating here. In this environment, we welcome with cautious optimism the recent US-China summit in Beijing. The framework of “constructive strategic stability” reflects an important shared recognition between the two great powers: that their strategic competition need not foreclose cooperation on issues of common interest, especially matters concerning global peace and stability as well as global prosperity, and must not be allowed to slide into conflict or rupture. For ASEAN, this matters deeply. The US and China are our two most consequential security, political and economic partners, and the quality of their relationship has enormous direct and immediate consequences for our region. We hope and expect that this stabilisation framework will translate into policy and behaviour that tangibly contributes to regional peace, stability, and development.
10. It is within this turbulent global landscape that ASEAN and its Member States must find their footing, assert their voice, convey their narratives, and chart their course. Southeast Asia is a region of distinctive strategic complexity, where domestic political dynamics, historical legacies, unresolved territorial questions, and competing external engagements intersect in ways that demand careful and continuous management. The regional order is being recalibrated not only by the shifting dynamics between the major powers, but also by the strategic agency and policy choices of regional actors themselves.
11. We must also be honest about the challenges that originate closer to home. Bilateral tensions within ASEAN – most recently the border conflict between Cambodia and Thailand – remind us that peace within our own neighbourhood cannot be taken for granted. It must be actively and continuously maintained through restraint, dialogue, and a shared commitment to the peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law, UN Charter and ASEAN Charter. ASEAN's position on this has always been consistent — and it must remain so.

***Your Highness, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,***

12. These internal and external pressures together pose a direct challenge to ASEAN's cohesion, unity, credibility, and capacity to act as a unified and purposeful community. And they raise questions that we must confront honestly: Is ASEAN equipped to navigate this environment? Is ASEAN's Centrality still meaningful? Can ASEAN remain relevant in a world that is increasingly pulling in different directions at the same time?
13. These are not comfortable questions. But they are the right ones to ask.
14. In recent years, more questions have been raised about whether ASEAN can maintain its centrality and relevance and strategic autonomy within the regional architecture. The proliferation of minilateral arrangements, particularly those

involving ASEAN's external partners, has added new layers of complexity to the strategic landscape. Some have argued that these emerging configurations are beginning to supplant, rather than complement, ASEAN-led mechanisms.

15. The pressure on ASEAN Member States to align with one major power over another, with one framework over another is becoming more pronounced. As strategic rivalry sharpens, the space for the balanced and inclusive engagement that ASEAN has long championed is steadily shrinking. Expectations of alignment are growing, while the costs of non-alignment - or of maintaining principled neutrality - are rising.
16. And yet, and this is a point I wish to make with some conviction: ASEAN continues to stand, and to strive. In a world that is darkening in many quarters, ASEAN remains a genuine bright spot. This is not a matter of wishful thinking. It is the result of sustained commitment to dialogue, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence. Commitments that have been tested repeatedly over the decades, and have held.

***Your Highness, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,***

17. At the heart of ASEAN's resilience lies what we call the ASEAN Way: a set of principles grounded in consultation, consensus, respect for sovereignty, and inclusive practical cooperation. These principles may not always produce swift outcomes, but they had given ASEAN something more enduring: legitimacy, cohesion, and the trust of both its members and partners.
18. This year is particularly meaningful in that regard. We commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia. For half a century, the TAC has served as the cornerstone of interstate relations in the region, embodying the fundamental principles of non-interference, peaceful settlement of disputes, non-use of force and mutual respect among nations. Its significance has extended well beyond Southeast Asia. With 58 High Contracting Parties as of the latest count and expected another 6 to sign on by July this year, the TAC has become a key instrument for promoting norms of peaceful coexistence and inclusive dialogue across the wider Indo-Pacific and beyond.
19. In today's fractured and contested environment, these principles are not merely part of ASEAN's diplomatic inheritance. They are increasingly our strategic necessities.

***Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,***

20. Enduring principles, however, are not sufficient on their own. Principles must be translated into action, and that requires strategic agency; the deliberate and disciplined exercise of collective will to shape, rather than merely react to, our environment.

21. ASEAN must not be a passive arena in which external competition plays out. We must be an active architect of our regional order. And to do so, we must respond to the current moment of challenges with clarity, unity, and purpose. This requires three things above all.
22. First, unity. ASEAN's influence in the world derives, in no small part, from its ability to speak and act collectively. A divided ASEAN is not merely a weaker ASEAN - it is an ASEAN that becomes susceptible to external manipulation and that loses its credibility as a convening and stabilizing force. Unity does not mean uniformity or unanimity; Member States will always have different national perspectives and interests. But it does mean a shared commitment to common principles, and a willingness to subordinate short-term individual calculations to longer-term collective interests.
23. Second, credibility. ASEAN Centrality must be earned, not simply asserted. It is rooted in ASEAN's ability to convene, to build trust, and to provide an inclusive and genuinely neutral platform for dialogue and cooperation as well as engagement. In an increasingly fragmented environment, this convening role is, if anything, more important, not less. But it must be backed by relevance, responsiveness, and concrete results. Centrality without substance is an empty claim.
24. Third, adaptability. ASEAN has survived and grown over nearly six decades precisely because it has evolved and adapted; steadily, sometimes slowly, but always purposefully and moving forward. The world we face today demands that we continue to evolve and adapt: strengthening our institutional effectiveness, modernising our approaches, and ensuring that our collective machinery is fit for the challenges of this era.
25. At the 48th ASEAN Summit in Cebu, the Philippines, ASEAN Leaders reaffirmed the importance of enhancing ASEAN's resilience, reinforcing ASEAN Centrality, and advancing a more integrated, innovative, and inclusive regional community under the *ASEAN Community Vision 2045*. In the same spirit, the ASEAN Leaders underscored the importance of strengthening regional supply chain resilience, accelerating digital transformation, advancing sustainable development, and deepening connectivity across our region. Demonstrating that multilateralism and regionalism deliver requires constant renewal, collective commitment, and sustained political will from all of us, all Member States.

***Your Highness, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,***

26. Clarity of purpose must be matched by the effective and purposeful use of the instruments through which ASEAN exercises its strategic agency.
27. The TAC itself is one such instrument, not merely a treaty, but a living framework of norms that continues to shape behaviour across the region and beyond. Also, the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus are the platforms through which

ASEAN brings major and middle powers together in a spirit of dialogue, consultation and cooperation, and through which ASEAN ensures that no single power dominates the regional agenda.

28. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific is another important expression of ASEAN's strategic agency. At a time of deepening mistrust and intensifying competition, the AOIP preserves space for inclusive cooperation grounded in dialogue, openness, and respect for international law, while rejecting the logic of division and zero-sum rivalry. As it increasingly serves as the reference framework for ASEAN's engagement with external partners, the AOIP reflects ASEAN's determination not merely to adapt to the regional order, but to shape it in accordance with its own values and interests.
29. Beyond security and diplomacy, ASEAN must also strengthen its economic and structural resilience. In today's world, economic security and strategic resilience are increasingly inseparable. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) reinforces ASEAN's central role in regional trade, while the Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA) aims to deepen integration and unlock new opportunities in the digital domain. At the moment, we are finalizing DEFA negotiations, and we expect to have it ready and sign by November 2026 during the 49<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit. It will be the first region-wide legally binding digital agreement. At the same time, efforts to operationalise the ASEAN Power Grid reflect ASEAN's determination to build greater energy resilience and reduce vulnerabilities to external disruptions.
30. I would also note, with genuine significance, that as ASEAN advances this agenda, it does so with renewed momentum and a broader foundation with the accession of Timor-Leste as our 11th Member State. It is a timely reminder that even amid strategic headwinds and competition, the project of regional community-building continues. ASEAN's answer to a more contested world is not retrenchment, but deeper solidarity, broader partnership, and more purposeful engagement.
31. Together, these initiatives - diplomatic, institutional, economic, security, among others, — reflect a thoughtful multi-dimensional strategy for navigating a more uncertain and volatile world. They are the means by which ASEAN asserts that it is not merely a subject of great power competition, but an active and consequential shaper of its own destiny.
32. Our long-term direction is articulated in *ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future* — a vision of an ASEAN that is resilient, innovative, dynamic, and people-centred. It is also a vision that reinforces a fundamental point: ASEAN's future must be built collectively, through cooperation, inclusivity, and shared responsibility.

***Your Highness, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,***

33. As we mark the 50th Anniversary of the TAC, the 21st Anniversary of the East Asia Summit, the 33rd year of the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the 16th year of the ADMM-Plus in 2026, we are reminded that ASEAN's greatest strength

lies in our unity as well as in our enduring commitment to dialogue, diplomacy, and cooperation — and in the steady work of building and adapting the regional architecture needed to translate that commitment into action and outcomes. Above all, it lies in the generations of people who continue, patiently and persistently, to sustain this effort despite scepticism, frustration, and criticism.

34. That is why platforms such as the Phnom Penh Strategic Dialogue matter. They create space for candid and forward-looking exchanges among those genuinely invested in the region's future. Such conversations complement official processes, deepen shared understanding, and over time help shape the intellectual foundations upon which regional cooperation and policy ultimately rest. That is precisely what CICP has done over the past thirty years — creating space for thoughtful reflection, critical analysis, honest dialogue, and sustained regional engagement.

35. I began this morning by confessing the nostalgia I feel in this room — the memories of a time when CICP was just beginning, when Cambodia's place in the ASEAN family was still a hope rather than a reality. Thirty years on, seeing what has been built — this Institute, this Dialogue, this community of practitioners and thinkers and thought leaders — I also feel a quiet and abiding hope.

36. ASEAN has endured because people believed it was worth building. It will continue to endure and thrive because people like all of us in this room believe it is worth defending, worth adapting, and worth passing on. Let us move forward together, with confidence and purpose, to shape a region that is peaceful, stable, and prosperous for this current generation and generations to come in the future, and for those who will one day look back on what we chose to do in this very moment like this one.

37. I wish the Phnom Penh Strategic Dialogue every success from here onwards.

Thank you.

