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50 years of ASEAN and its future

At the outset, I wish to sincerely thank Asia House for inviting me to share my views and perspectives on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of ASEAN.

Since the inception of ASEAN 50 years ago and especially following Lao PDR's accession to ASEAN on 23 July 1997, I have observed how ASEAN has evolved. What follows are some of my thoughts and perspectives on ASEAN.

Achievement of ASEAN

Southeast Asia is a unique region characterised by its diversity. The countries in this region have not only diverse cultures, religions and languages, but also different political systems and levels of economic development, among other attributes. Looking back into history, we can see that countries in various parts of the world have attempted to form a number of regional cooperative frameworks or regional organisations. Some of them have succeeded, while others have failed. ASEAN has been uniquely successful.

Over the past five decades, ASEAN has gone through many kinds of tests and challenges and has adjusted itself to the changing regional and international landscape, taking into account its diversity and thus gradually evolving into the ASEAN Economic Community, which offers a firm and strong foundation from which to move forward.

ASEAN has not only expanded its membership to cover all 10 nations in Southeast Asia, but also deepened and broadened its intra-ASEAN cooperation to gradually include all fields of cooperation, ranging

from the political-security and socio-cultural fronts to the economic arena. ASEAN has also strengthened its external relations by expanding dialogue partnerships to include all major countries, creating various forms of engagement with external parties as appropriate. ASEAN has initiated ASEAN Plus One, ASEAN Plus Three, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit, which serve as key platforms not only for ASEAN to engage with its dialogue partners and external parties, but also for the dialogue partners and external parties, including the major powers, to engage one another and discuss regional and international issues of common concern that require collective responsibility. This contributes to the enhancement of mutual understanding and strategic trust, as well as the creation of an environment conducive to the maintenance and promotion of peace, stability and development cooperation in the region and the world. Most importantly, ASEAN's centrality has been recognised in the evolving regional architecture, which is being built upon ASEAN-initiated mechanisms.

I feel confident in saying that one of the most remarkable achievements of ASEAN is the peace, security and stability enjoyed by the countries in the region. The peaceful, secure and stable environment in Southeast Asia has provided favourable conditions under which ASEAN member states can develop their respective social and economic environments and deepen intra-ASEAN cooperation. As well as strengthening ASEAN's external relations, this led to the establishment of the ASEAN Community on 31 December 2015.

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Many people ask how ASEAN could be formed as an inter-governmental regional organisation with diverse member states and become the successful regional organisation it is today. Different people may have different views, but, in my view, ASEAN's achievements over the past five decades have been possible thanks to many factors. One of these is 'the ASEAN Way', which resulted from due consideration of the particularities and realities in the region, which is characterised by diversity

among and between ASEAN member states, mutual understanding, and adherence to the fundamental ASEAN principles, as enshrined in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, the ASEAN Charter and other ASEAN instruments.

Lao PDR is proud to be part of the ASEAN family. ASEAN's cause has been key to Lao PDR's foreign policy since it joined ASEAN in 1997. Lao PDR has been proactive in pursuing the work of ASEAN by participating in and contributing to all areas of cooperation under the three community pillars, including helping to facilitate ASEAN's external relations and fulfil its obligations. So far, Lao PDR has had the honour of chairing ASEAN twice: in 2004–05 and in 2016. Our third ASEAN Chairmanship is expected to take place in about 10 years' time.

In 2016, Lao PDR's ASEAN Chairmanship was concluded successfully under the theme 'Turning Vision into Reality for a Dynamic ASEAN Community'. There were many important outcome documents from this, including the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) Work Plan III and the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025, which constitutes an integral part of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025. These documents serve as frameworks for cooperation within ASEAN, further strengthening the ASEAN Community as well as cooperation between ASEAN and its dialogue partners and external parties for years to come. The success of Lao PDR's 2016 ASEAN Chairmanship was made possible thanks to the valuable assistance, kind support and close cooperation of ASEAN member states, ASEAN dialogue partners, and other external parties, as well as friendly countries and regional and international organisations.

Future direction of ASEAN

ASEAN has come a long way over the past half century. Despite various challenges and a changing regional and international environment, ASEAN has gradually evolved in an ASEAN Way. This year, we are celebrating the 50th anniversary—or the golden jubilee—of ASEAN and the second year of the ASEAN Community. ASEAN should build upon the achievements it has gained so far and continue to strengthen its Community so that it can prosper.

The regional and international landscapes continue to evolve. Recent developments in various regions of the world can be explained by rapid and unexpected changes, and uncertainty due to the complexity and risks involved. Against this backdrop and in moving forward, ASEAN, as an inter-governmental regional organisation, should continue to uphold its principles and the ASEAN Way. It should further deepen regional economic integration within ASEAN and with the wider region, pursue an outward-looking policy by further strengthening its external relations, and gain momentum in its relations with all ASEAN dialogue partners, as well as engaging other external parties in appropriate and practical initiatives. ASEAN also needs to strengthen ASEAN-led mechanisms and uphold its centrality and unity, including in the conduct of its external relations and in the evolving regional architecture. And, most importantly, ASEAN, as a master of its own destiny, should continue to uphold its own principles—as enshrined in the ASEAN Charter—and move forward at a pace that is comfortable for all.

I am confident that under the Philippines' ASEAN Chairmanship in 2017, which will have the theme 'Partnering for Change, Engaging the World', we will meaningfully commemorate the golden jubilee of ASEAN and further strengthen the ASEAN Community through the effective implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025, as well as the three community Blueprints, MPAC 2025 and the IAI Work Plan III. This will be among the priorities for the Philippines' ASEAN Chairmanship, thereby contributing to the common cause of maintaining and promoting peace, stability and prosperity in the region and the world.

I would like to take this opportunity to wish a happy 50th anniversary to all members of ASEAN on the occasion of its golden jubilee. We, the ASEAN family, will continue to move forward together as one sharing and caring community.



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Before serving as Prime Minister, he acted as Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. He has also held the positions of President of the Lao National Committee for Energy, President of the Investment management Committee, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee and the President of the Committee for Planning and Investment.