



Opening Remarks

By

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**At the Opening Ceremony of the 55th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting and
Related Meetings**

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- *Excellencies Foreign Ministers,*
- *Excellency ASEAN Secretary-General,*
- *Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen;*

I am pleased to officially welcome you to the Kingdom of Cambodia to attend the 55th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting and Related Meetings.

As we celebrate the 55th anniversary of the establishment of ASEAN this year, I cannot stress enough how far we have come. At one point in the past, ASEAN was a region struggling with its security, stability and development. Now it is a thriving region where, together, we have turned suspicion into trust, hostilities and confrontation into cooperation and development. With decades of relative peace and stability, ASEAN has prospered way beyond our expectations, with high growth development and a steady improvement of the people's well-being.

Throughout the course of its growth and development, various challenges were lurking behind all along, from geo-political, to economic to social. For every annual ASEAN chairmanship, there are always some challenges to address but never before have we been confronted at the same time with so many perils that seriously threaten the region and the whole planet.

Here, I am talking about the devastating effects of COVID-19, the gigantic efforts it requires to recover from this multidimensional crisis, while the increasingly dangerous rivalry between the major powers is putting ever greater pressure on our countries with the unraveling of its economic and technological decoupling effects, the rise of mini alliances, the growing arms race, and the selective imposition of economic sanctions. The political and security, and now economic and humanitarian crisis in Myanmar, one of our own family, has challenged the ASEAN unity, solidarity and shaken the region stability. Far from our home, the war in Ukraine has complicated not just relations in Europe but also our region. The war has caused serious economic disruptions, exacerbated our food

and energy security, and worse yet threatened to divide the world once again. The issues of climate change related disasters and other traditional and non-traditional security challenges are still present as ever.

- *Excellencies, Honorable Guests,*

This year, Cambodia's Chairmanship theme "**ASEAN A.C.T: Addressing Challenges Together**" is in fact a response to all these challenges, necessitating that we pool our efforts and combine our sense of "Togetherness" to tackle them in the most effective way possible.

Cambodia emphasizes our stance in "unity for cooperation" and not in "unity for confrontation". We strive to focus on issues that bind us rather than those that divide us. We must prioritize peace above all else.

- *Excellencies, Honorable Guests,*

In celebrating our 55th year of existence, I am pleased that we have built a truly inclusive ASEAN Community, in line with ASEAN's core spirit of: "One Vision, One Identity, One Community". Of course, our Community, if I may say our family, is not perfect, and we all have our differences. Which family does not have differences? I may ask.

For the last five and a half decades of co-existence, ASEAN has delivered tangible achievements, based on the principles of consensus and non-interference which form the core of our ASEAN Way. In a region so rich in cultural, economic and political diversity, we have managed, against all odds, to realize the ultimate goal of "unity in diversities".

For this year, we have achieved quite a bit. Starting with the health crisis issue, we have indeed emerged relatively better from the COVID-19 pandemic. Trade and investment wise, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) has entered into force. Another milestone is the 20th year anniversary of the DOC, which is an important document in managing relations between all parties concerned in the South China Sea. We are also working hard to conclude a substantive and effective COC that is in line with international law, including UNCLOS. Timor Leste's accession process is advancing well and I am optimistic that by next year we could welcome this country to the ASEAN family. On Myanmar, we have spent so much time and energy, braved so many difficulties and criticism to help this country and its people find some political solutions. We will continue to do so without placing at risk, in any way, our ASEAN unity. Here I wish to add that even the implementation of the Five-point Consensus has not advanced as everyone wishes, but our efforts have yielded some progresses, especially on providing humanitarian aid to those who need the most. However, the current situation has changed dramatically, which can be said that is even worse than the time prior to the Five-point Consensus after the execution of four opposition activists. Cambodia, as well

as all ASEAN Member States, are deeply disappointed and disturbed by the execution of those opposition activists, despite the appeals from me and others for the death sentences to be reconsidered for the sake of political dialogue, peace and reconciliation. If more prisoners are to be executed, we will be forced to rethink about our role vis à vis ASEAN's Five-point Consensus.

On external relations, we have had more requests from countries to establish formal partnerships with us. This afternoon, six more countries will sign the Instrument of Accession to our Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC). Last year, ASEAN accepted the UK as its 11th Dialogue Partner and we have upgraded our relations with China and Australia to Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships with a few more Dialogue Partners targeted for the same status this year. We have had a very successful Special ASEAN-U.S. Summit in the Washington DC. last May and we look forward to the ASEAN-EU Commemorative Summit in Brussels toward the end of the year.

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I understand you have set a very ambitious agenda for this week gathering. Addressing all these above Challenges Together will, without doubt, fill your long and numerous meetings. Let me, however, make some suggestions related to two initiatives which I would like the ASEAN Foreign Ministers to give a thought and support:

The first one is an attempt to tackle the existential threat that climate change and environmental degradation can pose to the region and the world. ASEAN has been putting out so far various policy solutions, but our responses remain sector specific and uncoordinated. ASEAN needs to go further by leveraging different national conditions to provide a platform for cooperation among member states as well as with our external partners. It would be good if ASEAN can consider establishing an overarching framework, an initiative that I would label an ASEAN Green Deal, that enables our region to make a gradual transition toward a green future that is sustainable, resource-efficient, resilient and competitive economy. It would cover a wide range of areas such as infrastructure, energy, manufacturing, consumption, agriculture, transport, environment, and finance, with technology, innovation and circularity being the enabling factors. I would welcome opinions from any ASEAN Member State on how we could make this a reality.

The second suggestion relates to measures to effectively recover from the impacts of COVID-19. ASEAN has agreed to implement various initiatives and programs under the 4 Broad Strategies of the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework. In line with the Broad Strategy 3 that is to maximize the potential of Intra-ASEAN Market and Broader Economic Integration, I believe we do need to have a standalone Secretariat as soon as possible, to coordinate effective implementation of the RCEP that came into force last January. Cambodia is ready to host this RCEP Secretariat. We have even thought of where

in Phnom Penh, the Secretariat should be located, while we are working to formulate our detailed proposal. I hope Cambodia can win the support of fellow ASEAN Member States, as well as all RCEP participating countries when we submit our proposal officially.

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In closing, ASEAN must ensure that we become whole again. ASEAN is a grouping of 10 countries and not less. And for that, we need a collective will. ASEAN needs to exert its utmost care to ensure that its unity remains strong and its centrality is respected, that its Community become more integrated, and its external relations continue to be reinforced. I trust in the wisdom and the best leadership skills of our ASEAN Foreign Ministers here present today to reach all these shared goals.

Let me now conclude my remarks by wishing you all, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, a successful Foreign Ministers' week and, of course, a pleasant stay to Cambodia.

Thank You!