

**MFA Press Release: Transcript of Doorstop Interview by Minister for Foreign Affairs
George Yeo after the Plenary Session of the 43rd ASEAN Ministerial Meeting,
20 Jul 2010, Hanoi, Vietnam**

Question: What are the discussions you had, have you had any talks on North Korea?

Minister: We had a good series of meetings and even though positions were a little divergent initially, in the end, because of the strong spirit of solidarity, we were able to reach good compromises. On the regional architecture, we welcomed the interest shown by the Americans and the Russians in membership in the EAS, and we will now work on the modalities. The Ministers have tasked the senior officials to come up with the modalities, which take into account future challenges, and also safeguarding the existing agenda items and priorities of the EAS including Free Trade Agreements and the very important discussion on Connectivity. Officials will work on this, and the ASEAN Coordinating Council will take a formal decision, and then recommend to the Leaders. So we take this interest by the Americans and the Russians in a very positive spirit.

We also had a very good presentation on the work done on Connectivity so far. There is one more meeting to be held in Singapore and the report should be ready for approval by the Leaders. This will be a very important milestone in ASEAN's integration both in terms of our internal Connectivity along all dimensions --- land, sea, air, electronic, energy --- and also our Connectivity to our neighbours, to China, to India and beyond. So these are two very important areas of discussion and agreement which we have achieved last night and today.

Question: Minister we initially had some reservations about the EAS modalities. How did it come about?

Minister: The important thing is to safeguard the existing areas of work, and to make sure that the [EAS] Free Trade Agreement that we are working on will be maintained. It is important that these meetings are held annually, and in ASEAN, that it will be ASEAN-led, even though ASEAN is not strong compared to the big powers.

Question: [inaudible] EAS?

Minister: I think we can make it (EAS) work so long as the details are looked after.

Question: Sorry, Can you tell us again about the conclusion of the EAS expansion again?

Minister: Oh, you were not here earlier? We've had a good discussion and we achieved agreement that we welcome the interest shown by the Americans and the Russians but that we must take into account the existing areas of priority, the existing agenda items, in the EAS today. So the officials will work on this, the ASEAN Coordinating Council will come to a formal decision, and at some point in time make a recommendation to the Leaders to enlarge the EAS to include Russia and the US. But we are likely to stop there.

Question: Minister Yeo, what is the position of ASEAN with regards to Myanmar? I mean Myanmar still has not set a date for elections.

Minister: The process is ongoing, some time this year. We had a good briefing by their Foreign Minister last night. I believe he himself will be standing for elections, and once the

generals take off the uniforms, they have got to win votes and kiss babies, and attend to local needs. Their behaviour will change, the economy will gradually open up and this will be an important change in Myanmar. We don't see a sharp break from what it is today, but we see an important turning which will lead Myanmar into a different situation --- constitutional government and one which will have a more open economy.

Question: Aung San Suu Kyi is not participating in the elections. Does ASEAN think it will be a credible election?

Minister: No, ASEAN continues to call for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi but in the end this is a decision that they will have to take for themselves.

Question: Did Myanmar show any reaction to accepting "election visitors"?

Minister: Oh yes, indeed, we suggested quite strongly to our Myanmar colleague that they consider having ASEAN observers at the elections ---bringing in members of the family as it were --- into what is really their own domestic affair. I think the Foreign Minister will put it back to his government.

Question: Inclusive elections --- what exactly does ASEAN mean by inclusive? Whose participation?

Minister: I think many parties have registered including elements of the NLD and many minority groups.

Question: The NLD is saying that the NDF has nothing to do with them.

Minister: I think that is one point of view.

Question: Sir, how about the Myanmar's nuclear programme. Is that a cause for concern because the US always brings it up?

Minister: The Myanmar government [and] the Foreign Minister have told us categorically that they do not have a nuclear programme, and they have no ambitions for one.

Question: But they have an energy programme?

Minister: Oh, that is completely within the rules. So do many other ASEAN countries.

Question: Sir, did you consult with China and other EAS partners before deciding to invite the US and Russia?

Minister: No, we have got to do this step by step. I mean, the US and Russia have expressed interest and we welcome that interest with a positive spirit. But we must now study this in detail within ASEAN. The decision has got to be taken by the ASEAN Coordinating Council, which includes [consulting] Economic Ministers and the Defence Ministers. Then we will have to consult our existing partners, settle the modalities and then formalise the whole process. So it will take some time.

Question: Minister, [inaudible] we heard that you proposed ASEAN Plus rather than expansion... [inaudible].

Minister: The important thing is the details, and we have got to look into the details to make sure that, in the enlargement, we do not weaken the existing EAS. And [that] the existing programme for regional integration will not be diluted, especially in the five priority areas, and also our hopes for Connectivity, and discussions about the free trade arrangement among the 16 countries.

Question: Minister, the hope is for US and Russia to join next year? Not this year?

Minister: Next year will be achievable, this year will not be easy. But we are having summit meetings with both Russia and the US this year.

Question: But still not as EAS expanded?

Minister: Because it is such an important issue, the Leaders would have to discuss this, and it is not a process which we would want to rush into without setting very carefully the parameters.

Question: Would they be part of any Free Trade Agreement, the Russians and the US?

Minister: We have got to discuss this with them. Russia is not a member of the WTO and the US may not have an interest in a Free Trade Agreement which involves ASEAN, China, Japan, Korea and India.

Question: And how would you plan to align the agenda for this EAS Plus Two because US and Russia may have more political security issues in mind whereas...

Minister: Well, these are details which we have to look into very carefully and officials will study this and make their recommendations to ministers. Ok, thank you very much.

Question: Thank you, Sir.