

2018.3.23

Mr Choi Shing Kwok, Director of ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute,

Distinguished participants and guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A very good morning!

First of all, please allow me to thank Director Choi and ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute for their great efforts and dedication in organizing this conference.

It is a great pleasure for me to be here this morning to join the conference and to celebrate 45 years of a very special relationship between ASEAN and Japan, a milestone of our remarkable journey as dialogue partners.

Last year, ASEAN celebrated its 50th Anniversary.

It reminded me that the collaborative partnership between ASEAN and Japan dates back to 1973, when we first held the ASEAN-Japan Ministerial Conference on Synthetic Rubber, which was merely six years after the establishment of ASEAN.

Four years later, in 1977, Japan's then Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda attended the ASEAN-Japan Summit Meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

That was in fact the very first summit meeting between ASEAN leaders and a leader of a non-member state.

In the same year, during his visit to the Philippines, Prime Minister Fukuda unveiled the "Fukuda Doctrine," outlining key principles of Japan's diplomacy toward ASEAN, including and in particular, "building heart-to-heart relationship."

In 1978, the following year, Japan became ASEAN's first Dialogue Partner, when the inaugural ASEAN-Japan Foreign Ministers' Meeting was held.

In short, the history of ASEAN-Japan cooperation overlaps greatly with ASEAN's history itself.

In retrospect, ASEAN has achieved tremendous progress since its establishment 51 years ago, and ASEAN-Japan relations have strengthened and deepened significantly in tandem with ASEAN's remarkable developments.

On the economic front, ASEAN is expected to continue its high growth as a centre for global trade and economic growth powered by its massive market comprising more than 600 million people and an impressive GDP of 2.5 trillion US dollars.

As Director Choi has kindly mentioned, our economic and social ties are strong and flourishing.

On the strategic front, as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had mentioned at the ISEAS 50th Anniversary Lecture last week, ASEAN has also strengthened and enhanced its collective voice on the international stage, enabling it to play a leading role in promoting peace and stability in the region as the centre of regional architecture, successfully engaging major countries through many ASEAN-centric platforms, such as the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus, just to name a few.

Japan too, is committed to supporting ASEAN initiatives and its centrality in these areas.

Since ASEAN is at the heart of Asia, the realization of an integrated, peaceful and prosperous ASEAN is one of the top priorities in Japan's diplomacy.

We therefore attach great importance to working with ASEAN towards creating a peaceful and stable region underpinned by international law and a free-and-open economy.

In our thinking, our "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" upholds "ASEAN centrality" as its essential part.

We are making common efforts to seek peace and economic prosperity based on rule of law, freedom of navigation, free and open trade and other shared values throughout the vast Indo-Pacific Region, stretching from Africa all the way to Latin America.

In such geo-economic terms, it is crystal clear to me that the ASEAN is literally the nodal point for Indian Ocean region and Pacific Ocean region.

Just recently, we have also accomplished TPP11 and are fervently working on RCEP together.

These two mega regional EPAs have a nice and wide coverage of the vast Indo-Pacific Region.

Apart from this, we are also looking forward to working closely with our ASEAN friends to enhance connectivity through high-quality infrastructure initiative.

As you can see, ASEAN has been a great and reliable partner of Japan in these very contexts.

Being great partners, Japan and ASEAN must stand in solidarity especially in this current time of uncertainty where even the strongest of partnerships could be

susceptible to unexpected stress amid global and regional shifts in strategic balance. Inevitably, there is an increasing sense that the international community, including ASEAN, is expecting Japan to play a more proactive role more than ever.

To that, I believe there are definitely much more we can do to take the ASEAN-Japan relations even further.

So, as we revisit our past achievements at this important juncture, we should also recognize our strong desire to look towards the future to chart our relations forward.

Through this conference, one of the great examples of ASEAN and Japan's collaborative effort, I am hopeful that our panelists will perhaps shed new light on ways to take our already friendly relations forward.

That said, I am confident that our friends from ASEAN and Japan in this room will have a frank exchange of views and opinions which reflect our mutual trust and respect.

With that sense of optimism, I look forward to a day of robust and engaging discussions at this conference.

Thank you very much.