

Book E-Launch: “ASEAN-EU Partnership: The Untold Story”

Opening Remarks by Mr. Choi Shing Kwok, Director of ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute

15 October 2020

Guest of Honour SMS Chee Hong Tat,

Excellencies, Distinguished participants,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure and honour for the ASEAN Studies Centre in ISEAS to host the Launch of the Book “ASEAN-EU Partnership: The Untold Story”. The two editors of the book, Prof Tommy Koh and Dr Yeo Lay Hwee, are long-time friends of ISEAS and have contributed much to us over the years. Some of our ISEAS fellows have also contributed to this undertaking by writing chapters based on their insights into the different aspects of EU relations with Southeast Asia. On a personal note, almost all the other writers are also my former colleagues or collaborators in one venture or other. ISEAS is therefore closely associated with the book and most happy that this is so.

This book is being launched at an extraordinary time. With the COVID-19 pandemic still raging all over the world, many countries are retreating behind their borders, global supply chains are disrupted, and misgivings about globalisation are accentuated. The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated many pre-existing political, economic, geopolitical and governance fault lines across nations, regions and organisations. This is a severe stress test for multilateralism and many believe that multilateral institutions, including ASEAN and the EU, have been found wanting. To be fair though, this is the crisis of a century that no one can prepare adequately for and it is still early days yet, whether for celebration or despair. Both ASEAN and the EU therefore still have the opportunity to write the history of their response in the months ahead.

As the EU and ASEAN reposition themselves in this *brave new world*, their partnership has taken on a deeper strategic meaning and a greater sense of urgency. Together, they can hold the middle ground for cooperation, uphold the rules-based international system and work harder for effective and meaningful multilateralism.

With this backdrop, the book provides a very timely and comprehensive stock-take of the multi-layered relations between the two organisations and regions from national, regional and inter-regional perspectives. Many essays in this book take a long view on the future of the relationship, and include policy recommendations on how to adjust to post-COVID-19 trends, such as digital governance, sustainability, and restructuring of global value chains.

The EU and ASEAN are considered by some to be the two most successful regional groupings in the world. Coming out of different but equally traumatic histories, both organisations share the desire for peace, the spirit of cooperation, and the conscious choice of multilateralism over unilateralism. Yet, as illuminated by this book, being parallel does not mean we are the same. In fact, ASEAN and EU are very different animals and may not converge on all matters soon or at all. Much of the book thus seeks to explain the reasons for the differences between the two sides, so that we do not wrongly conclude that we have irreconcilable outlooks even in matters of greatest divergence.

In today's highly contested and disruptive world, where different value systems coexist, both sides should seek to achieve deeper mutual understanding and empathy. While both sides clearly have their own intra-regional integration problems, this should not detract us from reaching out to build on and enlarge our common interests. I am optimistic that the deeper understanding that this book seeks to nurture will create an enabling environment for both sides to make hard policy choices and trade-offs on matters that affect us both going forward.

On that note, I would like to thank SMS Chee Hong Tat for gracing this book launch and congratulate Prof. Tommy Koh, Dr. Yeo Lay Hwee and all contributors for this excellent book. It is a must-read for those who wish to understand the complexities of ASEAN-EU relations and the importance of their partnership in the times ahead. Thank you.