

## Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen,

My warmest congratulations on the launch of “ASEAN-EU Partnership: The Untold Story”, as well as to the two editors, Ambassador Tommy Koh and Dr Yeo Lay Hwee for seeing this project to fruition.

I wish to also thank the authors who have contributed their insights to the book, which will enhance our understanding of the rich tapestry of ASEAN-EU relations.

Relations between ASEAN and the EU are longstanding and deep.

The EU became a Dialogue Partner of ASEAN in 1977, just 10 years after ASEAN was formed.

Since then, the relationship has grown to a comprehensive partnership that spans ASEAN’s Political-Security, Economic, and Socio-Cultural pillars.

ASEAN and the EU are widely regarded as two of the most successful regional organisations in the world.

As the ASEAN and EU Foreign Ministers noted at the 22nd ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting in 2019, both groupings are “partners in integration”.

We share a natural partnership forged by the mutual belief in a rules-based multilateral order, a commitment to regional integration, and a continuous drive to strengthen region-to-region ties.

### The ASEAN-EU Partnership

Our extensive economic linkages provide a firm structural underpinning for the broader ASEAN-EU relationship.

The EU has consistently featured among ASEAN’s top economic partners.

According to preliminary ASEAN statistics for 2019, the EU was the third largest foreign investor in ASEAN and was ASEAN's third largest trading partner.

Micro, small, and medium enterprises are an engine of ASEAN's growth, contributing more than 50 per cent of ASEAN's GDP and employing over 80 per cent of the workforce.

We welcome the EU's efforts to share best practices and experiences to support the growth of our enterprises.

In addition, the EU-ASEAN Business Council and ASEAN Business Advisory Council serve important functions in fostering deeper public-private engagements and business-to-business links.

Beyond trade and investment, the EU has substantially increased its presence in the region through development programmes such as the Enhanced ASEAN Regional Integration Support by the EU (ARISE-Plus) and the Enhanced

Regional EU-ASEAN Dialogue Instrument (E-READI) schemes.

I understand the EU has contributed over €2 billion in development cooperation to ASEAN Member States. The EU had also dedicated over €200 million to support ASEAN integration between 2014 and 2020.

People-to-people linkages form another pillar of the ASEAN-EU relationship.

Pre-COVID, over 11 million European tourists visited ASEAN Member States in 2019.

The EU has generously offered scholarships to ASEAN students, including through Erasmus+ and the EU Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region (SHARE) programme.

Protecting Lives, Safeguarding Livelihoods, and Securing our Future

As with any relationship, we can work together to do more.

Today, I'd like to explore how ASEAN and the EU can cooperate in 3 broad areas to protect lives, safeguard livelihoods, and secure our future.

Let me start with protecting lives.

Our immediate priority is to protect the lives of our people during the COVID-19 pandemic.

ASEAN and the EU have worked together to address our common challenges.

We moved quickly to convene the *ASEAN-EU Ministerial Video Conference on COVID-19* in March 2020.

This was the first video conference on COVID-19 between ASEAN and a Dialogue Partner.

It paved the way for ASEAN to continue its work in 2020, and engage external partners to deepen cooperation in dealing with the pandemic.

The EU's announcement in August 2020 that it has mobilised a "Team Europe" package of €800 million to combat the spread of COVID-19 and mitigate its impact in ASEAN is a welcome initiative that would bolster the region's response to public health emergencies.

We should work quickly to take up this generous offer from the EU, and operationalise the cooperation under this package.

Going forward, we need to deepen cooperation to ensure that our COVID-19 response remains inclusive and accessible.

I note that the EU and several ASEAN Member States, including Singapore, are involved in the COVAX Facility.

We should continue working together on the development and production of a viable vaccine, and in ensuring its equitable distribution and affordability.

Next, let me touch on safeguarding livelihoods.

Even as we continue to grapple with the public health aspect of COVID-19, we have to address its impact on jobs and livelihoods due to the economic fallout.

The pandemic has also exacerbated rising economic nationalism and protectionism, which has affected global supply chains.

In the face of these worrying trends, we need to push forward with existing cooperation initiatives, explore new ways to strengthen our economic linkages, and redouble our efforts to uphold multilateralism.

This includes accelerating discussions on an ASEAN-EU Free Trade Agreement, which would further enhance the EU's status as one of ASEAN's top economic partners and create more opportunities for both regions.

In addition, the ASEAN-EU Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement (CATA) which both sides are currently negotiating, will be the first substantive aviation agreement between two leading regional groupings.

Concluding it expeditiously would inject a much-needed boost to our travel and tourism industries as we gradually resume safe travel.

Beyond the ASEAN-EU CATA, I am glad that we are intensifying discussions on connectivity cooperation, in particular the strengthening of physical, institutional, and people-to-people links.

The *ASEAN-EU Joint Ministerial Statement on Connectivity*, which we are looking to adopt later this year, will send a strong signal of our commitment to enhancing cooperation in this important field.

The ASEAN Smart Cities Network represents another key area of collaboration, as ASEAN Member States grapple with the



challenges of urbanisation and look to capitalise on the digital revolution.

On a related note, I am pleased that both sides have been intensifying discussions on green growth, sustainable development, and climate change.

I welcome the EU's announcement earlier this year that it would extend €50 million in support to the ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility.

I look forward to further cooperation between the EU and the ASEAN Centre for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue, such as through the development of concrete projects relating to sustainable consumption and production, as well as promoting a circular economy.

Last but not least, we need to work together to secure our future.

Besides the pandemic, our future will be impacted by geopolitical tensions and rivalry between major powers.

Many countries in ASEAN and the EU are concerned that the Sino-US relationship is increasingly characterised by confrontation, mistrust and escalatory measures.

Against such a backdrop, it is critical for ASEAN and the EU to send a strong signal of our mutual commitment to multilateralism, win-win cooperation, and a rules-based global order.

We have the opportunity to send a positive signal to the international community by formalising the elevation of the ASEAN-EU Dialogue Partnership to a Strategic Partnership, and I hope this can be done as soon as possible.

In her chapter in the book, Dr Yeo Lay Hwee cautioned against being caught in a “singularity trap”, where one issue derails the path towards deeper strategic engagement.

I fully agree with Dr Yeo on this important point. Given the diversity inherent in ASEAN and the EU, it is inevitable that

disagreements will arise from time to time between ASEAN Member States and the EU or EU Member States.

It is neither practical nor realistic for us to ignore these differences, or sweep them under the carpet.

Rather, as close friends and partners, we should seek to press on with cooperation in areas where we can agree, while simultaneously managing these differences. We should ensure that region-to-region ties are not obstructed by bilateral issues, and continue to work to strengthen the ASEAN-EU relationship.

We should also continue to take advantage of regular dialogue mechanisms to identify how we can strengthen cooperation and better position ourselves in an increasingly complex world.

E-READI, which facilitates dialogue across various policy areas such as economic connectivity as well as the environment and climate change, is a key mechanism in this regard.

At the Ministerial level, we look forward to the 23<sup>rd</sup> ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting later this year, which Singapore will co-chair as ASEAN-EU Country Coordinator.

### Conclusion

Protecting lives, safeguarding livelihoods, and securing our future.

These are the three themes which I believe ASEAN and the EU should continue to pursue to strengthen our relationship amidst these challenging times.

I am confident that we can weather this storm together. Thank you.

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