

**38th ASEAN ROUNDTABLE
ASEAN IN A FRAGMENTED GLOBAL ORDER**

**WELCOME REMARKS BY MR CHOI SHING KWOK
DIRECTOR AND CEO, ISEAS-YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE**

**SINGAPORE MARRIOTT TANG PLAZA HOTEL
3 October 2023**

*Dr Kao Kim Hourn, Secretary-General of ASEAN
Excellencies, Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen*

Good morning, and a very warm welcome.

The ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute is delighted to host the 38th ASEAN Roundtable which is organised entirely in a physical format for the first time since the pandemic.

We are honoured and grateful to **Dr Kao Kim Hourn**, Secretary-General of ASEAN for joining us here today at this Roundtable.

I am grateful to all our speakers and moderators – many of whom have travelled here from across the region and beyond – for generously taking the time to come to share your valuable insights, and to participate in what we believe will be an enriching discussion. Indeed, this is a timely opportunity to take stock of, and reflect on, the progress made at the recently concluded 43rd ASEAN Summit and related meetings last month.

I would like to especially thank the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) for supporting our Roundtable again this year. KAS has given ISEAS unstinting support over many decades, especially in the promotion of ASEAN research and outreach. Let me also thank all of our participants for taking time out of your busy schedule to come physically to join us for these discussions.

This year's Roundtable theme "**ASEAN in a Fragmented Global Order**" will look into the different dimensions of ASEAN's relevance in shaping the future of Southeast Asia and navigating the global order which is at risk of fragmentation. The geopolitical landscape is in flux, with major powers rolling out their own initiatives and approaches towards the region, be it the QUAD, AUKUS, the Global Security Initiative, or a variety of Indo-Pacific strategies, each of which has its own implications on ASEAN's central role in the regional security architecture.

Regional flashpoints such as the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, the potential outbreak of hostilities in the Taiwan Strait, the situation on the Korean Peninsula, and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis will continue to be sources of uncertainty. Within the grouping itself, the question of Myanmar remains a key challenge to ASEAN's resolve and effectiveness as an organisation in dealing with regional challenges cohesively.

On the economic front, rising geopolitical tensions have also affected the global and regional economy. While Southeast Asia is still recovering from the pandemic, it is also facing other economic headwinds such as widespread financial tightening due to rising interest rates, and inflation due to high global energy and food prices. Furthermore, the emerging trends of protectionism, industrial policy and export restrictions are putting stress on the rules-based multilateral trading system. In this context, it is critical for ASEAN to continue to play an influential role as the regional champion and bulwark of the open rules-based multilateral system. One concrete step would be in the effective implementation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP), which can play a key role in supporting regional post-pandemic economic recovery, strengthening the regional supply chain, and supporting ASEAN's agenda of economic integration.

The recent launch of the negotiations on the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA) – the world's first regional digital economy agreement – is another major milestone and one of the most remarkable achievements of ASEAN in 2023 (*as Dr Kao himself had underscored in August*)¹. It is also a testament to ASEAN's long-term commitment to embrace digital transformation to propel ASEAN businesses towards a bigger frontier and unlock an era of borderless growth.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Please allow me now to briefly introduce our Guest of Honour Dr Kao Kim Hourn who took office as the 15th Secretary-General of ASEAN in January 2023. He has served as a two-term Minister Delegate attached to the Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Cambodia since September 2013. Prior to that, he had held senior positions in the Royal Government of Cambodia, including the post of Secretary of State of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. A diplomat-scholar, Dr Kao is well known in the think-tank and academic circles, having founded the University of Cambodia and two think-tanks in his home country. Dr Kao played an instrumental role in Cambodia's ASEAN membership back in 1999. I cannot think of a more qualified person to be Cambodia's first Secretary-General of the regional grouping. With his years of experience engaging with ASEAN, we look forward to hearing Dr Kao Kim Hourn's deep insights into the key challenges facing ASEAN, and its role and relevance in a rapidly changing global order and an increasingly turbulent world.

Dr Kao, please.

¹ <https://asean.org/asean-defa-study-projects-digital-economy-leap-to-us2tn-by-2030/>