

THE 24th ASEAN LECTURE
2024 ASEAN CHAIRMANSHIP
UNDER THE LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC
OPENING REMARKS BY MR CHOI SHING KWOK
DIRECTOR AND CEO, ISEAS - YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE
7 December 2023

Excellencies
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning to all.

On behalf of the ASEAN Studies Centre of the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, I warmly welcome you to the 24th ASEAN Lecture. We are honoured to have H.E. Mr Saleumxay Kommasith, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, to deliver this morning's Lecture on the Lao PDR's ASEAN Chairmanship 2024 under the theme "*ASEAN: Enhancing Connectivity and Resilience*".

The ASEAN Lecture Series of the ASEAN Studies Centre at ISEAS has been a key platform for incoming Country Chairs of ASEAN to share their plans and priorities for ASEAN every year. I am glad that we can gather physically once again after having this flagship event in a virtual form during the pandemic. In addition, I also welcome those of you joining us online from across the region and beyond. I believe the Lecture today will serve as a good launchpad for Lao PDR to begin laying the groundwork for its initiatives and deliverables for ASEAN in 2024.

Laos is taking over the ASEAN gavel in challenging times with uncharted terrain as the region continues to grapple with complex developments that threaten to undermine ASEAN's centrality and stability. Apart from tackling global issues such as climate change and supply chain disruptions, new geopolitical developments, especially the ongoing US-China rivalry, have exacerbated existing tensions in the region, including the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, tensions across the Taiwan Straits and provocative actions in the Korean Peninsula. Security-linked groupings centred around the concept of the Indo-Pacific and a diverse variety of Indo-Pacific strategies have also impacted ASEAN centrality, and called into question its role in the regional security architecture. The ongoing Myanmar crisis and lack of progress in the implementation of ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus strikes even more deeply into the core of ASEAN's relevance in regional affairs and has put its unity under considerable stress.

Amidst these shifting geopolitical and strategic realities, steadfast commitment to regional cooperation is now more important than ever if we are to anchor the region in peace and stability. As the recently concluded 43rd ASEAN Summit and Related Summits have shown, ASEAN is trying hard to maintain momentum in strengthening connectivity, reinforcing ASEAN centrality, and advancing economic integration even in the face of headwinds. To further enhance its resilience, ASEAN needs to develop its capacity to anticipate, navigate and overcome obstacles, bounce back from setbacks, and become stronger in the face of future challenges.

ASEAN has made significant progress this year by launching negotiations on the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA) - the first regional digital economy agreement in the world – and a major milestone in ASEAN’s journey towards digital integration. The first round of DEFA negotiations that took place on the 1st December is expected to lay the foundation for subsequent negotiating rounds and eventual completion by 2025. Other key initiatives achieved in 2023 include the adoption of the ASEAN Concord IV which serves as a foundation for working towards the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 and the ASEAN Leaders’ Declaration on ASEAN as an Epicentrum of Growth.

The region is also looking to further promote the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) through collaboration with external partners, both from the public and private sectors, as well as engaging dialogue partners in the adoption of separate Joint Statements with ASEAN on Cooperation on the AOIP. Through this, ASEAN aims to contribute to regional peace and stability, uphold a rules-based multilateral order, and enhance its own institutional capacity to remain relevant in a changing world.

At the handover ceremony of the ASEAN Chairmanship, Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone emphasised the importance of strengthening the ASEAN Community by enhancing connectivity and resilience to seize opportunities and address challenges in a changing geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape. He highlighted Lao PDR’s resolve to enhance ASEAN cooperation, strengthen ASEAN unity and centrality, advance digital transformation, and promote people-to-people exchange as well as cooperation for climate resilience. With this firm commitment against a sobering backdrop, we look forward to hearing the Deputy Prime Minister’s deeper insights into the Lao PDR’s theme for 2024 in today’s lecture.

Before I give the floor to our distinguished speaker, please allow me to briefly introduce him. H.E. Mr Saleumxay Kommasith is a distinguished career diplomat of the Lao PDR. Currently, he holds dual appointments as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs. He has been the Minister of Foreign Affairs since 2016. Prior to that, he held senior appointments in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, covering international organisations issues and relations with Europe and America, amongst others. Mr Kommasith has also served as Permanent Representative of the Lao PDR to the UN in New York from 2012 to 2014.

Deputy Prime Minister, it is my distinct pleasure to now hand the floor over to you.
