

**ASEAN Co-operation in the 1990s  
Opening Address by  
Mr Goh Chok Tong  
Prime Minister of Singapore  
at the  
26th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting  
Singapore, 23 July 1993  
PRESS RELEASE**

Your Royal Highnesses  
Your Excellencies  
Ladies and Gentlemen

I take great pleasure in welcoming all of you to Singapore. It is an honour for the government and people of Singapore to host this 26th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting and the Post-Conference dialogues that are to follow.

The ASEAN Foreign Ministers are no strangers and are always honoured guests. Mr John Kaputin, Foreign Minister of Papua New Guinea, has also visited us before and, as always, we are happy to receive him. I believe that our two other observers, Mr Nguyen Manh Cam, Foreign Minister of Vietnam, and Mr Somsavat Lengsavad, Foreign Minister of Laos, are visiting Singapore for the first time. I extend to them a special welcome.

Our warmest welcome also to ASEAN's two guests, Mr Qian Qichen, Vice Premier and Foreign Minister of China, and Mr Andrei Kozyrev, Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation.

We are happy to receive Prince Norodom Sivirudh, Foreign Minister of Cambodia. His presence in Singapore today as a special guest of ASEAN marks the first stage in Cambodia's return to the Southeast Asian community of nations. I want to wish him a very special welcome.

We meet under fortunate circumstances. After more than a quarter century of ASEAN co-operation, we enter the 1990s in sound condition. Our countries are at peace, both internally and with each other. Our economies are healthy and the prospects for more development are good.

Vietnam and Laos have become observers in ASEAN. We hope that Myanmar and Cambodia will follow them when conditions permit. Then, all ten Southeast Asian countries will be integrated into a single community.

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In the meantime, a stable equilibrium exists in Southeast Asia, creating optimal conditions for growth. We all have healthy relationships with the major powers that advance our interests without compromising our sovereignty.

This state of affairs prompted ASEAN Foreign and Economic ministers to report to the Fourth ASEAN Summit last year that "conditions in Southeast Asia today approximate those envisaged in the Declaration on ZOPFAN".

Such an outcome was not inevitable. In fact, in the 1960s, Southeast Asia was often referred to as the "Balkans of Asia". It was not an unreasonable description of a region that was then characterized by division and conflict. In the 1960s, every member of ASEAN was at one time or another in dispute with another member. Many faced serious internal instabilities as well.

Southeast Asia is still a diverse region. But the worst case scenario has not come to pass. We have learned to manage our diversity and our differences. We have avoided the kind of vicious blood letting that we sadly witness in the former Yugoslavia, the original Balkans.

Why were we spared? We would be less than honest if we did not acknowledge a large dose of luck. But we also made our own luck by adopting sound internal and external policies.

Whatever the differences of style or policy, all ASEAN countries have always put the well-being of their peoples above all else. All of us also knew that we could achieve a high standard of living for our peoples only if regional peace and stability were maintained.

ASEAN therefore worked because we made it work. ASEAN worked because, whatever the differences, all of us always had a compelling interest in making ASEAN succeed.

We co-operate through an active network of regional and extra-regional agreements and processes. These multiple forums draw on different sources of strength.

We may disagree. We may argue. Discussions can get heated. But there are always consultations at different levels. We have avoided resort to force. This has created a pattern of peaceful and co-operative behaviour.

This larger achievement is more important than specific outcomes. It is the ASEAN process that has kept us cohesive. It is the process that has allowed us to manage differences; build networks of personal relationships at all levels; and helped define common parameters even if we cannot always reach common positions.

In the 1990s, the ASEAN process must grow to meet new challenges. Prosperity, peace and stability cannot be taken for granted. To be sure, there are no imminent threats. But across the Pacific major changes are under way. The geo-political landscape is being reshaped in response to global shifts of strategic balances after the end of the Cold War.

Leaders in governments and in the media are extrapolating China's economic success into the 21st Century. They all concede the vast economic potential. But they also ask how a powerful China will act, whether such a powerful China can be a comfortable partner for peace and progress in the Asia-Pacific.

Japan is building an internal and regional consensus on a new and bigger political role. We, and maybe many Japanese themselves, do not know what kind of Japanese consensus will be reached.

The United States is and will remain a key factor for Asia-Pacific stability. President Clinton has reiterated that the United States will remain engaged in Asia. America's budgetary and economic problems have coloured the long-term outlook of the American presence in the region. The United States has moved towards looser but more cost-effective access arrangements. To be durable, the U.S. presence must be based on strong political and economic interests. It is in the self interest of the United States to remain plugged in to this economically dynamic area.

Next, the international trading system is under severe pressure because of global structural changes. Even though prospects for a successful completion of the Uruguay Round have improved after the G-7

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Summit, some developed countries seem to feel that the open trading system will threaten their domestic industries and jobs by cheaper imports from poorer countries. A more restrictive trading regime cannot be entirely ruled out.

ASEAN cannot stand aloof from these changes. Of course, we must expect the major powers to act in their own interests. But we are not totally at their mercy.

ASEAN should not allow its future to be decided only by the actions and policies of other countries. So long as ASEAN is cohesive, we cannot be ignored by the major powers. ASEAN must be a factor in their Asia-Pacific calculations. A forward-looking, realistic and creative ASEAN can help shape the new pattern of relationships in the Asia-Pacific.

Indeed, we have already begun to do so. The Fourth ASEAN Summit made several key decisions. It set up the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA). We should press ahead and combine our markets to improve our attractiveness to investors and increase our bargaining power in dealing with protectionist groups. Investments will increase. Trade will expand. Our economies will all become more competitive.

The Summit also agreed to use existing forums like the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting and the Post Ministerial Conferences to discuss regional security.

The 25th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting held in Manila in July last year began such discussions. It produced a Declaration on the South China Sea that helped define some of the principles for a peaceful resolution to complex territorial issues like the Spratlys. The Declaration made special reference to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia as the basis for establishing an international code of conduct for the South China Sea.

We followed up by securing recognition for the Treaty in a consensus resolution in the United Nations. This gives greater weight to the Treaty as the basis of a peaceful regional order, not just for Southeast Asia, but in the broader Asia-Pacific.

As mandated by the Fourth ASEAN Summit, we have begun to re-examine old concepts like SEANWFZ to see how they can fit into the post-Cold War World in ways that will protect and promote our interests and those of our friends.

Another follow-up to the Fourth ASEAN Summit was the special Senior Officials' Meeting convened in Manila last year. For the first time ASEAN defence and military officials sat alongside their colleagues from the foreign ministries.

ASEAN is not and will not become a military pact. Each member country must always assume primary responsibility for its own defence and security. But consultations among defence and military officials will help build an environment of confidence. They add to regional stability. We should study how such intra-ASEAN defence dialogues can be added to existing ASEAN processes.

Just two months ago, senior officials from ASEAN and our seven dialogue partners met for the first time in Singapore to discuss regional and global issues. Such a meeting would have been inconceivable just a few years ago. Any multilateral political and security dialogue would then have conjured up images of blocs and ideological conflict. But all agreed that the Singapore meeting was constructive and should be continued. The officials will meet again in Thailand next year.

ASEAN has also established consultative relationships with other key players in the Asia-Pacific — China and Russia. Together with our sectoral dialogue with India, this makes the ASEAN PMC process a unique diplomatic forum which will bring together all the major players. It complements existing bilateral arrangements and multilateral forums like APEC. It can be the vehicle for engaging and accommodating all interests in the region in an acceptable common framework. This will contribute to the peace, stability and economic progress of the whole region.

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The decisions of the Fourth ASEAN Summit and the follow-up actions that I have briefly described will form the basic agenda for co-operation within ASEAN and between ASEAN and other Asia-Pacific countries in the 1990s. The task of the 26th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting is to build on these foundations.

In conclusion, let me once again welcome all our friends to Singapore. We are honoured by your presence. I hope that you will find your stay enjoyable and the discussions constructive.

Thank you.

SOURCE: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Singapore.