



**TRANSCRIPT OF SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER LEE HSIEN LOONG  
AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE 51<sup>ST</sup> ASEAN FOREIGN MINISTERS'  
MEETING AND RELATED MEETINGS, 2 AUGUST 2018**

Foreign Ministers, Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to Singapore.

First of all, I would like to convey my deepest sympathies to Laos on the collapse of the Xe Pien-Xe Namnoy hydroelectric dam. I would also like to express my condolences to Indonesia on the earthquake in Lombok. Singapore and ASEAN stand ready to support our Laotian and Indonesian friends during this difficult time.

The ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting holds special meaning to ASEAN because this is how ASEAN started. 51 years ago in August 1967, five Foreign Ministers signed the ASEAN Declaration in the main hall of the Department of Foreign Affairs in Bangkok. It was a leap of faith for the founding members to come together. Southeast Asia at that time was very different from Southeast Asia today. It was a troubled and unstable region, rife with hostilities and confrontation. The five countries wanted to build a regional platform that could build trust and cooperation, and put away old suspicion and rivalries. In order to create a stable external environment, and to allow each country to focus on its own nation-building. ASEAN has come a long way since that tumultuous period. We now have ten members. ASEAN's cooperation has broadened and deepened. We have become an established and respected regional grouping in international fora. ASEAN achieved its initial political objective of regional peace and stability, which in itself a significant accomplishment. Thereafter, ASEAN shifted its focus to economic cooperation. We launched the ASEAN Free Trade Area in 1992. Today, the ASEAN Economic Community is one of the most successful economic groupings in the world. With a growing middle class and a young workforce, ASEAN is forecast to become the fourth-largest economy in the world by 2050. ASEAN has also cast our collective sight outward to engage external parties. We started with the Post-Ministerial Conferences with ASEAN's Dialogue Partners in 1978. We went on to establish the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1994, ASEAN Plus Three in 1997 and the East Asia

Summit in 2005. All these fora are on the agenda this week. Together, they make up the open, inclusive and ASEAN-centric regional architecture which has supported the region's peace and stability.

All these ASEAN-led structures have served us well. We must continue to strengthen the regional architecture. We can all see the growing geopolitical uncertainties. At the same time, each ASEAN Member State is subject to different pulls and pressures from different powers. In these circumstances, all the more we must stay united and strive to maintain our cohesion and effectiveness. That is the only way for ASEAN to remain relevant and to be of value to our members as well as to our external partners.

I shall briefly mention two specific areas where we can do more together. First, the economic integration, one of the three pillars of the ASEAN Community. Trade tensions between the US and our other Dialogue Partners including China, the EU and Canada have escalated. The rules-based multilateral trading system which has underpinned ASEAN's growth and prosperity is under pressure. It is important that ASEAN continues to support the multilateral system and work with like-minded partners to deepen our web of cooperation. I am glad that ASEAN countries are redoubling our efforts to conclude the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) by the end of the year. The RCEP comprises ASEAN and our six FTA partners. It will be the world's largest trading bloc, covering a third of the world's GDP. We are also working with the EU on the ASEAN-EU Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement, the first substantive aviation arrangement between two major regional groupings. When established, these two - the RCEP and ASEAN-EU CATA will send a clear signal of ASEAN's commitment to trade liberalisation and economic integration. I do not expect the negotiations to be easy, especially with the growing mood of nationalism and protectionism in many countries. Every participant will have to make trade-offs and difficult compromises. But I am glad that ASEAN Member States have taken a long-term approach and made a collective decision to stay on course, in order to bring tangible benefits to our peoples.

Secondly, we should make use of technology to bring ASEAN closer together. The fourth industrial revolution is underway. ASEAN has to embrace innovation, build up our digital connectivity, and make ourselves ready for the future. We are forming the ASEAN Smart Cities Network. The 26 participating cities held its inaugural meeting last month. Singapore hopes that these cities will come together to establish a common framework for smart city development in ASEAN, and develop city-specific action plans and innovative projects that will improve the lives of our peoples.

At the national level, Singapore has launched its own efforts to support the regional drive towards digitalisation. We held our Smart Nation Innovations Week in June. Our Smart Nation initiative seeks to improve the lives of citizens and the

competitiveness of businesses through the use of data and digital technology, including in e-payments, public transportation and the delivery of government services. At the same time, Singapore is also stepping up our cybersecurity defences, especially in 11 critical sectors, including aviation, healthcare and water supply. We recently experienced a major intrusion into one of our healthcare data systems, which only underlines the seriousness and urgency of the task.

To boost regional economic integration and the adoption of technology, Singapore will enhance our support for the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI). We will upgrade the three IAI Centres in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos to become Singapore Cooperation Centres. The new Centres will expand our range of technical assistance and offer new modalities for capacity building that go beyond classroom training. Singapore hopes to share our experiences, and at the same time, learn from our neighbours and partners.

Chairing ASEAN at its 51<sup>st</sup> year is a significant responsibility. Singapore hopes to work with fellow ASEAN colleagues, to forge a new way forward for ASEAN and together as our theme for the chairmanship has it, to, build an “innovative and resilient ASEAN” for future generations. Thank you very much.

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