

**Acceptance Speech
by
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Distinguished ASEAN Lifetime Achievement Award 2019

Forum Gala Dinner
ASEAN Community Leadership and Partnership Forum
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Bangkok

Your Excellency, Dr. Thongloun Sisoulith, Prime Minister of the Lao People's Democratic Republic,

Tan Sri Michael Yeoh,

Dr. Kriangsak Charoenwongsak,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased, honoured and humbled to accept this Lifetime Achievement Award and to join past distinguished recipients whom I have long admired and respected.

I thank the organizers who nominated and selected me for this prestigious Award.

I also express my appreciation to all those who supported me during the course of my career in Government, the private sector and civil society.

Let me also acknowledge the support received from my family, namely my dear wife, who unfortunately cannot be here today due to her health condition and my two daughters, who are present tonight.

When you receive a lifetime achievement Award like this, it makes you reflect on your career – in my case as a diplomat, businessman and former Head of Government.

I started my career in the Thai Foreign Service in 1955.

When ASEAN was established in 1967, I was serving as Ambassador and Acting Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York.

I recall vividly the pride and excitement that all of us had when ASEAN emerged as an indigenous grouping to promote regional unity and prosperity in Southeast Asia.

It was “no mean achievement” – considering the multitude of critical security concerns preceding the founding of ASEAN. “Konfrontasi”, the Sabah issue, the rampant communist threat, and internal instability were at the forefront of our minds. Newly-independent states jealously guarded their sovereign rights. Suspicion and mistrust prevailed.

Even more serious was the lack of knowledge and understanding of one another in the region. Western colonialism had had such a deleterious

effect on the mindset of the colonials; they knew and understood their colonial rulers much more than their own neighbours.

Dr. Thanat Khoman, the then Foreign Minister of Thailand, the only country in the region not to have been colonized, was well aware of this anomaly. He was determined to address it, inspiring the concept of regional organization. Together with his counterparts - Narciso R. Ramos of the Philippines, Adam Malik of Indonesia, Tun Abdul Razak of Malaysia and S. Rajaratnam of Singapore, they worked assiduously to develop a common regional agenda to address our shared interests.

The five foreign ministers specifically refrained from any reference to security and military aspects in the ASEAN Declaration. The focus was on economic, social and cultural cooperation.

Yet deep down in their hearts, they were aware that political stability and security deriving from non-military cooperation would serve as a safety valve against any possible hostility among member states.

The leaders had a vision of turning Southeast Asia into a community of peace, progress and prosperity. Moved by the pioneering spirit of the ASEAN Declaration, foreign ministries of the five members began to coalesce.

In New York, where I was posted until 1975, the Permanent Representatives to the United Nations initiated the ASEAN group which met regularly to discuss issues and coordinate positions. ASEAN was

operating as a regional grouping with a strong unified voice, becoming a force to be reckoned with in the international community.

I returned to Bangkok in 1976 and assumed the duties of Permanent Secretary at the Thai Foreign Ministry. While the tenure was short-lived, there was ample opportunity for me to deepen my understanding of the ASEAN spirit and collective will.

Some of you may be aware that as a result of my role in negotiating the removal of American military bases in Thailand, I was accused by military elements in the country of having Communist leanings. I was fully exonerated of those trumped-up charges and left Thailand for Bonn in 1977 to serve as Ambassador to the Federal Republic of Germany.

In Bonn, it was the turn of the Federal Republic of Germany to assume Chairmanship of the European Union (EU). There began a process to negotiate and complete a draft agreement of cooperation between the EU and ASEAN. We, the ASEAN Ambassadors in Bonn, under my Chairmanship, met as a group to negotiate and finalize the draft of the political section of the agreement with our German counterparts.

The Agreement on cooperation between the EU and ASEAN was subsequently adopted at the EU/ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting in Brussels.

That was my last piece of work before I resigned from the Foreign Ministry in 1978.

I was then completely disillusioned with politics in Thailand. I made sure that in my second career in the business world, I would have the least to do with the establishment and the “powers that be”.

But fate had a different idea. It was Thailand’s turn to become Chairman of the ASEAN Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and I was designated to represent Thailand in that capacity.

I was appointed subsequently in 1984 to chair a Task Force comprising representatives of government, the private sector and academia with a mandate to chart a new direction to intensify regional economic cooperation. By then, Brunei Darussalam had joined ASEAN as its sixth member.

We worked hard to fulfil our mandate and produced a report containing a set of recommendations focusing on the establishment of an ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) whereby the flow of goods among ASEAN countries, within a set time period, would not be subject to tariff or non-tariff barriers.

The report of the Task Force was presented to and adopted by ASEAN in 1986. However, due to internal politics in some countries and lack of political will, the recommendations were not implemented.

In the late 1980s, as a result of geopolitical circumstances, the winds of change were generating greater political cooperation among ASEAN members. There was a stronger sense of cohesion and common purpose to address regional challenges.

So when I was appointed Prime Minister of Thailand in 1991, I saw that the opportunity was ripe to revive the AFTA concept of a free trade zone. My intention was to bring it to fruition.

I formed an inter-ministerial team comprising Ministers of Finance, Foreign Affairs and Commerce and a representative of the private sector to work on a plan of action. We mapped out a strategy to persuade member governments to agree on a common path.

We held a series of working sessions throughout the ASEAN region. And I personally held consultations with the other Heads of Governments in order to reach a consensus. Once President Suharto, whose initial reaction was lukewarm, progressively moved over to our way of thinking, the Thai Government was ready to present its proposal to the ASEAN Summit in Singapore.

AFTA was formally approved on 28 January 1992 at the fourth ASEAN Summit in Singapore. ASEAN was upgrading itself to a higher level of political and economic cooperation.

The role that Thailand played, with strong support from other Member States, in reaching this historic milestone for ASEAN, is etched on my heart. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to serve the people of our region in that capacity.

Let me, at this juncture, pay tribute to the five Founding Fathers of ASEAN who were instrumental in establishing, in my mind, the most successful intergovernmental organization in the developing world.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Much has changed in the world since that time. ASEAN is a much more inclusive and powerful grouping, with the addition of Vietnam (1995), Lao PDR (1997), Myanmar (1997) and Cambodia (1999) as members.

ASEAN is a much more outward-looking organization, interfacing with major powers, dialoguing with other regional groups and establishing networks across Asia and the world over.

With its 10 Member States, ASEAN represents the world's third largest market and one of the world's largest economies. The establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015 was a major achievement, envisioning ASEAN as a single market and production base.

Yet regional economic integration has its many challenges. We see that progress has been somewhat slow in certain areas due to the lack of a common regulatory framework and the great diversity of the ten Member States.

With what appears to be the retreat of the United States from the region, and the emergence of China as a dominant presence, ASEAN also faces the challenge of balancing the two major powers to safeguard its own interests.

And there is, of course, the issue of human rights. While some member countries are making efforts to address the wide range of human rights issues, others are still finding it a challenge to move forward.

Therefore, the need for bold leadership of ASEAN has never been greater, given the pace of change in the global, political, economic and social environments.

We need a new generation of leaders who can match the wisdom, foresight, vision and political will of the five Founding Fathers of ASEAN.

Let us hope that such leaders will emerge and wish them every success in rising to the challenge.

I thank you.
