

f o r e w o r d b y t h e s e c r e t a r y - g e n e r a l



ASEAN has experienced a hectic but productive twelve months with a landmark decision to establish the ASEAN Charter, advancement in our economic integration agenda, a diplomatic achievement with the first East Asia Summit and increased support for our community-building efforts. Taking stock of these achievements and looking ahead, we have, of late, been grappling with a series of questions on the centrality of ASEAN.

First, how can ASEAN be a more central factor in the national priorities of the Member Countries?

ASEAN cooperation is no longer solely the domain of the ministries of foreign affairs and trade. The programme areas of the Vientiane Action Programme (VAP), ASEAN's blueprint for community building, cover a wide range of political, security, economic and socio-cultural issues. Numerous government agencies must now be involved in this undertaking. The effectiveness of ASEAN's regional cooperation is dependant on the extent to which national policies across various sectors are put in sync with the priorities of the VAP and ASEAN directives are followed through and complied with. These are practical matters of coordination but will also be concrete expressions of each Member Country's commitment to realise the ASEAN Leaders' vision of the ASEAN Community.

Second, how can ASEAN be a more central part of everyday life for all Southeast Asians?

A strong and viable ASEAN Community will be built by the millions of ASEAN citizens and sustained by their conviction that a strong ASEAN will make their lives better. But by and large, ASEAN had, in the past, only

been skirting on the periphery of public consciousness. ASEAN has now increased its engagement with civil society organisations. At the 11th ASEAN Summit in December 2005, representatives of civil society were invited to present their recommendations to the ASEAN Leaders. ASEAN has also increased the tangible benefits of regional cooperation to the people, engaging them through initiatives like youth exchanges, the ASEAN Heritage Parks and ASEAN Day celebrations on 8 August. ASEAN cooperation on issues like road safety, disaster management, pesticide control and combating avian influenza also contributes to a better quality of life in the region. Our challenge is to devise more people-centred policies, programmes and activities within ASEAN's limited resources.

Third, how can ASEAN preserve its central role in the evolving strategic architecture of East Asia?

Over the years, ASEAN has been in the "driver's seat" of the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Plus Three process. More recently, ASEAN was entrusted to launch the first East Asia Summit. ASEAN's ability to continue playing a central role in the evolving strategic architecture of East Asia will depend on our ability to maintain a reputation of being a credible honest broker that can balance the regional interests of the major powers. ASEAN would also need to ensure that these fora and mechanisms ultimately produce concrete cooperative actions and results.

While there are no simple answers to these three questions, there is a simple guiding principle all of us in ASEAN have worked with. The centrality of ASEAN will depend on its credibility to both its people and the world. And ASEAN will possess this credibility if it is a strong and cohesive community, with each Member Country clearly committed to its success.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Ong Keng Yong". The signature is stylized and fluid, with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

Ong Keng Yong