

Theme: Charting a New Course for Asia



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Introduction

First of all, I would like to thank Hitachi for inviting me to participate in this interesting and far-reaching initiative. Youth and leadership are two essential ingredients for the future. Through Hitachi's Young Leaders Initiative, we are able to have a dynamic interaction and brainstorm of what we want for the future. This unique exchange gives a very practical meaning to Hitachi's slogan "Inspire the Next".

Today, I would like to have a "heart-to-heart" talk with you about the ASEAN Community. This is a topic which is very close to my heart. Not only because I am currently the Secretary-General of ASEAN, but more due to the strength of my personal conviction. As you know, ASEAN is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, founded in August 1967 by the Foreign Ministers of five countries, namely, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, and now enlarged to include Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam.

ASEAN has brought about a special situation in the region. We are at peace with one another. We are more concerned with economic and social endeavours than quarrelling with each other. We have created a spirit of thinking about one another and doing things together. While the cynics continue to belittle ASEAN and downgrade ASEAN's accomplishments, the fact is ASEAN is alive and well! At policy-making levels in member countries, ASEAN is very concrete and the desire is to make it even stronger.

The ASEAN Community is a Work in Progress

In the thirty six years since the founding of ASEAN, Southeast Asia has witnessed phenomenal economic growth, social progress and cultural development. These things are undoubtedly the by-products of a peaceful and stable ASEAN Community.

ASEAN cooperation has spread beyond the intergovernmental framework. In business, our entrepreneurs have gotten together to form many mechanisms, notably the ASEAN Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the ASEAN Business Advisory Council. Oil and gas companies across the region have cooperated within the ASEAN Petroleum Council. ASEAN NGOs have also gathered to establish an ASEAN People's Assembly. Even students are not standing by. For example, the law undergraduates in the ASEAN member countries have regularly held exchange and networking activities within the ASEAN Law Students Association. Professionals have also recognised the need to network regionally by forming ASEAN-wide associations.

All these forms of ASEAN cooperation, especially the ones initiated without government prodding, stand to reaffirm my belief in our ASEAN Community. Some people have wondered what holds the 10 nations together. They point to the diverse cultural, ethnic and political backgrounds.

On the surface, this may seem true. Confucian values are dominant among Singaporeans and Vietnamese. Islamic values govern much of the social practices in Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia and Malaysia. Latin influences are prevalent in the Philippines. Buddhist and Hindu values are deeply rooted in Cambodia,

Laos, Myanmar and Thailand. Nonetheless, there are behavioural inclinations that cut across societies of Southeast Asia that have been shaped through the centuries by common geography, climate and shared historical experiences with each other and with countries outside the region. I am of the view that an ASEAN citizen is family-oriented, tradition-minded, respectful of authority, consensus seeking and tolerant. These qualities are reflected in the Bali Concord II which was adopted by the ASEAN Leaders at the Summit in Bali in October 2003. The substance of Bali Concord II in its essence is a reaffirmation of the enduring Southeast Asian values of shared responsibility, shared prosperity, shared identity, habit of consultation and outward looking. I am convinced that these values are not only embedded within the wording of Bali Concord II, but are also embedded in the collective psyche of the peoples of Southeast Asia which are the constituents of ASEAN. In other words, people to people, we basically are not that different after all.

The ASEAN Community will be the foundation for peace and stability in Southeast Asia. The more often the peoples of Southeast Asia get together - whether to exchange views, to help each other or to work together - the stronger our Community becomes. Mutual understanding flourishes. Peace and stability thrives. There is no doubt that this environment permeates, and is conducive to, the lives of each and every citizen of Southeast Asia.

However, I would like to point out to you that our peaceful and stable ASEAN Community is a work in progress. It is in a forever dynamic state and requires commitment and constant nurturing. It is not something we can take for granted. Many new challenges are thrown up from time to time. For example, we have had the near-devastating effect of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) and the destructive suicide bombings by terrorists. As the leaders of tomorrow, you have to help strengthen the ASEAN Community and to define more practically ASEAN's role and spirit.

The ASEAN Community is Yours

I appreciate all the efforts exerted to solidify the ASEAN Community. However, I believe that existing endeavours can do with more synergy. There is still so much more to be done. And who would be better to take action than you, the young people of ASEAN.

Therefore, I hope that you will not wait for your elders to take the lead in reaching out to our Southeast Asian neighbours. And I certainly hope that you believe that the initiatives that you choose to undertake are as significant, or even more so, than whatever our governments can do. I would like to stress to you that nothing is stopping you from connecting with your Southeast Asian friends.

Your generation has been blessed with the powerful internet and technological advancements unimagined when I was young. Use it. Be creative. Start online discussion rooms with friends from ASEAN countries to brainstorm on ideas that are of interest to you. These may be academic topics, ideas for business, your hobbies or even ideas related to ASEAN. Take advantage of our almost similar time zones. Set a topic, send invitations, agree on a convenient time and start chatting with each other. There are so many things to talk about and so many views and experiences to exchange.

Another idea in my mind is to have campus student associations or youth groups conduct ASEAN-wide writing competitions. Whether you wish to focus on academic or creative writing would be your prerogative. Again, the force of the internet could be utilised to facilitate communications and enable the cheap and speedy submission of entries. If resources permit the finalists could come together in person. If not, the outstanding pieces could be published in the print media of each ASEAN member country.

We need to learn about the diversity in culture, language, religion and social norms in a region which has been the crossroads of many civilizations. We must propagate the common values which inspire and unite us. And I would like to elaborate on the five common values that bring us together. These are values which are already found in our respective countries.

The first value is what we call 'shared responsibility'. After we came together as an association, we all have to make it work. So our responsibility was and is to make it work and make it improve the lives of our people.

The second value is 'shared prosperity'. 'Prosper Thy Neighbour' which brings shared prosperity among ASEAN member countries is not an altruistic dictum from our political leadership. It is what keeps peace and stability in the ASEAN region. This idea of shared prosperity has been around for many years. But in most recent years it has found manifestation in what Dr Mahathir Mohamed, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia said. He always talks about this 'Prosper Thy Neighbour' principle. As Dr Mahathir explained, the idea of 'Prosper Thy Neighbour' is borne out of what he called enlightened self-interest. It is important

to make sure that our neighbour grows and prospers together with us. The idea of 'shared prosperity' is an important value for all of us in ASEAN. When everyone in ASEAN sees a stake in working for peace and prosperity in Southeast Asia, then ASEAN will endear and endure.

The third value that ASEAN stands for is what we call 'shared identity'. All of us come from Southeast Asia and in many ways Southeast Asians are quite similar. We all value our families, we all value our traditions and we are not confrontational by nature. Our Thai friends in Bangkok will 'Sawadee' you and no one will pick a quarrel with you, unless you have really provoked them. By nature we are consensual. So this is our identity, our 'shared identity' as a group of people in Southeast Asia, interested in peace and stability and growing our own economies. How can we promote this identity to others outside the region, to our Japanese friends who are here and to all the people around us? When you go to European countries, it is likely that the Europeans will treat you as one group of people, whether you are from Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand or Philippines.

The fourth value is what we call the 'habit of consultation'. If you work with a lot of Southeast Asians, you will notice that there is a great deal of devotion spent on consulting somebody. Sometime you may have very good ideas, but you still say "well, let me talk to my friend from Thailand or from Singapore or whatever". The 'habit of consultation' is there.



The fifth, value is what we call 'outward looking'. It is an important value. We are always looking to the rest of the world. If we close ourselves, we will become isolated, we will have a very different outlook of life and our relations with other countries will be not the same as you know it today.

These are the 5 common values which spread across all Southeast Asian nations, namely, 'shared responsibility', 'shared prosperity', 'shared identity', 'habit of consultation' and 'outward-looking orientation'. John F. Kennedy once said leadership and learning are indispensable to each other. We

cannot fight ignorance about SARS and other communicable diseases and the threat of terrorism unless we are more knowledgeable about what is around us and how to persuade others to work together to face these challenges.

For the youth leaders from Japan, I wish to urge you to find ways of broadening and deepening the relationships you and your predecessors have developed over the years since Hitachi first started this initiative. I have always believed that Japan is part of Southeast Asia. The Japanese investment in Southeast Asia has brought about a lot of jobs, a lot of economic growth and many career opportunities for all of us. Japan has done much to help ASEAN grow and develop. More people-to-people linkages, especially starting at a young age, will be a good process to strengthen the ties between ASEAN and Japan. As youth leaders, you have to go out there, articulate the goodness of sharing and caring. Get the cynics to at least give the ASEAN process the benefit of the doubt. Do not get distracted by their indifference. Always look on the bright side. Be optimistic.

These are just a few of my ideas. I challenge you to develop better ideas. I have no doubt of your generation's capacity to think resourcefully and creatively. More importantly, I believe that your generation has a wider awareness of the world around you than the generations before. I sincerely believe that the ASEAN Community of your generation can surpass whatever that has been achieved up to now.

Ultimately, an ASEAN Community could serve as an embryo for the wider community of East Asian nations, which the countries of ASEAN and Japan are part of. The realisation of such a big community may be a long time away but all of you will surely be part of it. So, seize the opportunities coming your way.

Conclusion

In closing, I will leave you with my sub-text of Hitachi's motto, that is, to inspire the next person, group or generation with "C.H.E.E.R.S." standing for Creativity, Hope, Enthusiasm, Education, Responsibility and Service. This Young Leaders Initiative by Hitachi hopefully will inspire all of you to do more, to be more creative, more hopeful, more enthusiastic, more educated, more responsible and for all this you should do more service for your fellow citizens.

"C.H.E.E.R.S." is easy to remember. Communicate this to your peers, seniors and all. A leader is someone who can relate to another, get him/her to do things and follow up on the ideas and improve the lives of other people or the system we live under. CHEERS!



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