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ASEAN Leadership and Partnership Forum

Unleashing ASEAN's Potential Through Innovative, Inclusive, and Sustainable Growth

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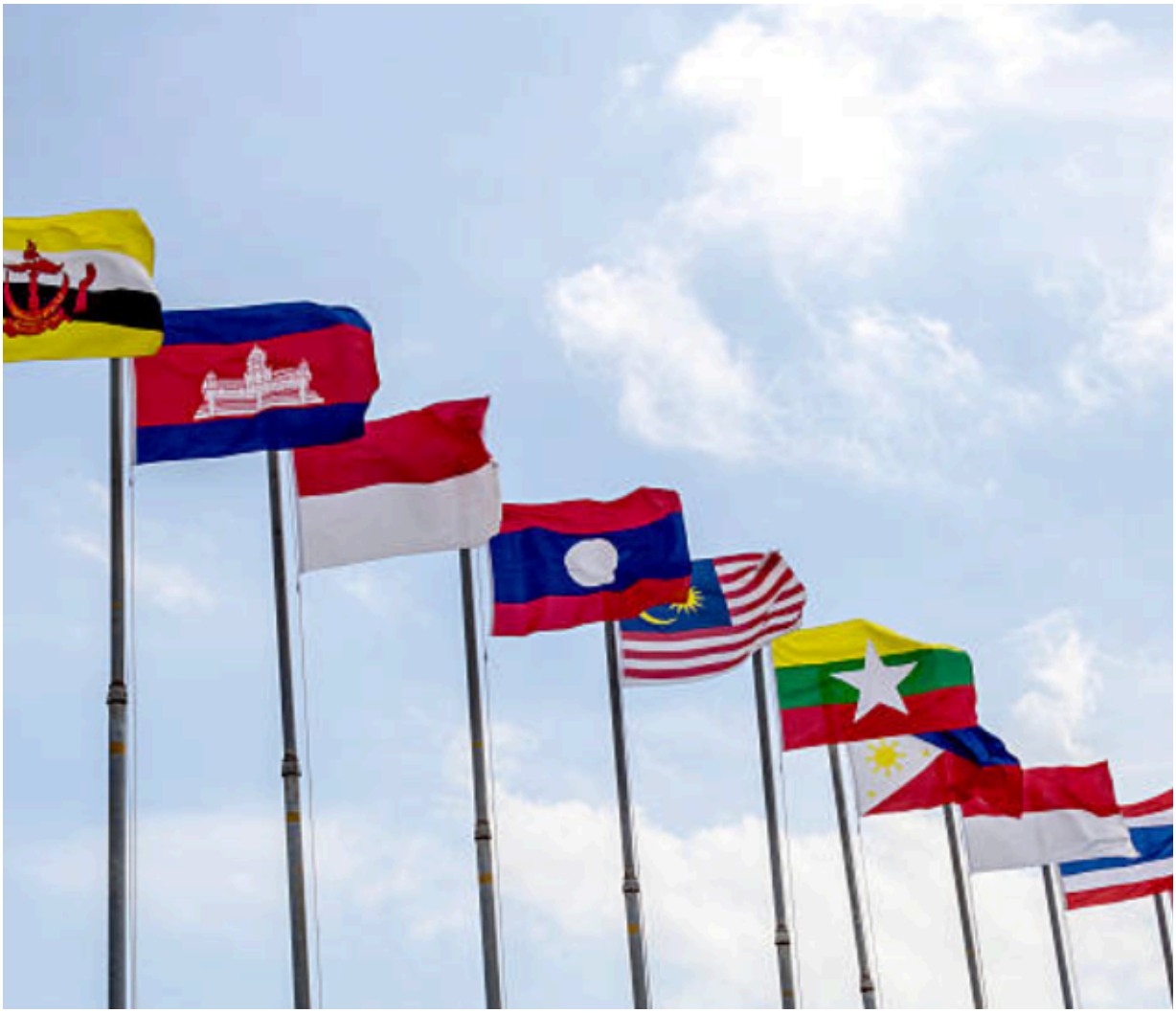

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Prepared by:
Research Department
KSI Strategic Institute for Asia Pacific

Contact Information
A-08-01, Plaza Mont Kiara, 2, Jalan Kiara, Mont Kiara, 50480 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
T +603 6419 9698
F +603 6419 9683
E info@kasi.asia
W www.kasi.asia

The 2025 ASEAN Leadership and Partnership Forum (ALPF), held in Kuala Lumpur in conjunction with the 46th ASEAN Summit, reaffirmed its role as Southeast Asia's premier platform for advancing regional economic cooperation, policy dialogue, and strategic collaboration across governments, businesses, academia, and civil society. Co-founded in 2005 by Ambassador Ong Keng Yong and Tan Sri Michael Yeoh, ALPF has consistently driven ASEAN's integration journey by promoting digital transformation, sustainability, connectivity, and inclusive growth. This year's forum was framed around ASEAN's resilience in an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world, and how it must strengthen leadership, enhance partnerships, and recalibrate strategies to manage geopolitical shifts and harness emerging opportunities.

Session 1: ASEAN Leadership in an Age of Uncertainty

The first session focused on ASEAN's enduring role as a neutral and stabilising force in the midst of intensifying great power rivalries, especially between the U.S. and China. The bloc's strategic neutrality and diplomatic centrality were highlighted as cornerstones of regional peace and security, echoing ASEAN's historical balancing act during the Cold War and post-Cold War era.

The discussion emphasized that ASEAN's ability to remain unified and non-aligned enhances its credibility as a regional convener and consensus builder. Economically, the session urged deeper commitment to trade integration via RCEP and CPTPP, both pivotal in diversifying markets and anchoring ASEAN in the global export economy (OECD, WTO). Notably, the dialogue explored ASEAN-India synergies, with India now among the world's largest economies. Their shared maritime interests in the Indo-Pacific, cultural affinity, and alignment on rules-based multilateralism, through initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, open opportunities in areas ranging from digital trade to tourism and defense cooperation.

Session 2: Future Proof ASEAN Through Digital Transformation

This session emphasized that ASEAN's digital transformation must be inclusive, leadership-driven, and grounded in real-world impact. Rather than viewing AI and automation as threats to jobs, the discussion focused on empowering the existing workforce through re-skilling and up-skilling, particularly via accessible technologies like low-code/no-code platforms.

These tools enable employees across sectors, including manufacturing and logistics, to adapt and innovate without needing advanced technical skills. However, panelists stressed that digital transformation must be led from the top: C-suite executives, policymakers, and domain experts must champion digital strategies, ensuring that emerging technologies like generative AI are used purposefully and ethically. Education systems must urgently bridge the gap with industry by revamping curricula in high-demand areas such as cybersecurity, data analytics, and digital content creation to meet ASEAN's growing digital economy, which is projected to exceed USD 1 trillion by 2030. Responsible and secure AI implementation was another central theme. As data privacy and ethical concerns rise alongside AI adoption, the session highlighted tools like federated learning that allow cross-border data collaboration without compromising user privacy, supporting innovation while respecting data sovereignty (AI Singapore, ADB Digital Agenda 2030). Participants advocated for the development of regional standards on data governance, digital trust, and cybersecurity to foster interoperability and avoid regulatory fragmentation across ASEAN. Ultimately, the session positioned digital transformation as a catalyst for sustainable development, inclusive growth, and regional competitiveness—provided it is underpinned by strong leadership, future-ready skills, and robust governance.

Session 3: ASEAN Sustainability Development and Green Growth

This session began by framing ASEAN as a global actor in sustainability, noting that the region, collectively the fourth-largest economy in the world, now has the leverage to influence global climate and equity conversations (IMF, ADB). However, ASEAN's development path remains deeply carbon-intensive, with coal, oil, and gas still dominating its energy mix. The discussion highlighted a promising solution: transitioning toward biomass energy, particularly by repurposing agricultural waste such as empty fruit bunches (EFBs) from palm oil production. These are abundant in countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines, and

can be harnessed to generate clean energy, reduce emissions, and foster circular economies. This approach delivers on the "triple bottom line"—supporting economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion (FAO, ASEAN Centre for Energy).

The session emphasized that sustainable development must not be reduced to economic indicators alone. ASEAN's rich diversity: across religion, ethnicity, language, and governance systems should be leveraged as an asset, not treated as a challenge. The region must reject outdated "developmentalist" paradigms that prioritize GDP over equity and dignity. Instead, there was a call to embrace a model of "Sustainable Development with Meaning," one rooted in ethical leadership, social justice, and inclusive prosperity. Such a shift is crucial in ensuring that growth reaches marginalized communities and does not exacerbate inequalities.

To actualize this vision, ASEAN must adopt a multi-tiered governance approach. Government-to-Government (G2G) coordination is vital for harmonizing sustainability standards and climate policies across the bloc. Equally important is People-to-People (P2P) engagement, mobilising grassroots actors, NGOs, youth, and local communities to localize green goals and demand accountability. Public-Government (P2G) collaboration, where civil society and citizens shape and co-create policy, is essential to fostering inclusive governance and trust. The session concluded with a reminder: ASEAN's green transition will only succeed if it is participatory, ethical, and driven by a shared sense of purpose and justice.

Session 4: ASEAN Connectivity and Supply Chains: Moving Forward

The fourth session tackled the structural vulnerabilities exposed in ASEAN's supply chains due to global disruptions, from the COVID-19 pandemic to the U.S.-China trade war. These events underscored ASEAN's overreliance on single-source suppliers and dominant trading blocs. Leaders emphasized that the region must now shift from reactive responses to proactive strategies—diversifying trade relationships, investing in resilient infrastructure, and rethinking its competitiveness in high-value sectors like semiconductors, pharmaceuticals, and critical minerals

sector collaboration, ASEAN can simultaneously green its economies, bridge the digital divide, and strengthen geopolitical relevance. As it looks to upcoming chairmanships, including Malaysia's, the region must push forward a unifying development agenda that blends ethics, innovation, and inclusivity. From addressing the digital skills gap to scaling renewable energy solutions and enhancing intra-regional trade frameworks, ASEAN has the momentum to transform challenges into opportunities for shared prosperity.

Throughout the event, ALPF also facilitated high-level networking opportunities, connecting leaders from government, business, academia, and civil society. These engagements catalyzed cross-border investment, knowledge exchange, and collaborative ventures. Delegates participated in strategic roundtables and workshops exploring digital innovation, green finance, regional funding tools, and future-oriented leadership models. Special attention was paid to young leaders and SMEs, signaling ASEAN's recognition that the next generation must be empowered to co-create sustainable futures. ALPF continues to serve not only as a think tank forum but also as a pragmatic bridge for partnerships and actionable outcomes.

Ultimately, the 2025 ASEAN Leadership and Partnership Forum was more than a conference, it was a call to action. At a time when ASEAN must navigate increasingly complex global realities, the Forum provided a rare space for candid dialogue, collective problem-solving, and shared visioning. As Southeast Asia strives to strengthen its regional integration, global competitiveness, and resilience, ALPF remains indispensable in shaping ASEAN's journey forward, where purpose-driven leadership, innovation, and partnerships converge to build a more just, green, and connected future.

(Brookings, UNCTAD). The importance of engaging the U.S. through quiet, win-win diplomacy was discussed, particularly in sensitive sectors like rare earths, digital supply chains, and medical technology. ASEAN must avoid binary alignment with either superpower and instead promote multi-alignment and rule-based engagement that benefits regional autonomy.

Hong Kong's role was re-examined within the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), now entering what speakers described as its "golden decade." The shift from megaprojects to smaller, high-impact public-private partnerships was seen as a strategic evolution. Hong Kong—ASEAN's second-largest trade partner—can help facilitate investments in innovation hubs, smart infrastructure, and human capital development. Scholarships for ASEAN students, talent exchange programs, and collaborative R&D are some examples of deeper integration that would benefit both parties. These partnerships can enhance ASEAN's positioning as both a logistics node and digital innovation corridor for the wider Indo-Pacific (HK Trade Development Council, Belt and Road Office).

The session closed with a strong focus on SMEs, which account for over 60% of ASEAN's employment yet remain excluded from many cross-border trade and finance frameworks. Persistent challenges include poor access to intra-ASEAN financing tools, lack of harmonized digital trade standards, and limited cross-border market access. There was a call to design SME-centric policies; regional funding platforms, shared digital payment systems, and simplified customs procedures—to level the playing field. The Singapore-Johor Special Economic Zone (SEZ) was cited as a replicable model of regional integration that offers localized, cost-effective solutions to retain businesses within ASEAN borders. With strategic support, SEZs and SMEs together can unlock inclusive, sustainable economic growth across the region's less developed geographies such as Kalimantan, northern Laos, and eastern Indonesia.

The Forum reinforced that digital transformation, sustainable development, and regional connectivity are not mutually exclusive but interlinked pillars of ASEAN's future.

With visionary leadership and cross-sector collaboration, ASEAN can simultaneously green its economies, bridge the digital divide, and strengthen geopolitical relevance. As it looks to upcoming chairmanships, including Malaysia's, the region must push forward a unifying development agenda that blends ethics, innovation, and inclusivity. From addressing the digital skills gap to scaling renewable energy solutions and enhancing intra-regional trade frameworks, ASEAN has the momentum to transform challenges into opportunities for shared prosperity.

The 2025 ASEAN Leadership and Partnership Forum was further elevated by the participation of key regional leaders. The Special Address was delivered by H.E. Dr. Kao Kim Hourn, Secretary-General of ASEAN, who underscored ASEAN's collective responsibility to uphold unity and shared progress in a changing global landscape. The Opening Keynote Address was presented by H.E. Paetongtarn Shinawatra, Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand, highlighting Thailand's vision for inclusive digital growth and climate resilience. A Special Keynote Address was also delivered by H.E. Pham Minh Chinh, Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, and H.E. Samdech Moha Borvor Thipadei Hun Manet, Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Cambodia, represented by H.E. Dr. Sok Siphana, emphasizing the urgency of regional solidarity and innovative cooperation to meet 21st-century challenges. These high-level contributions reinforced the Forum's standing as a vital space for political vision-setting and regional leadership alignment.

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The 2025 ASEAN Leadership and Partnership Forum was brought to you by KSI Strategic Institute for Asia Pacific, our Strategic Partner Kuok Brothers Sdn. Berhad, our Corporate Partner Asia Platinum Capital, and our Media Partner Khmer Times.

Special Thanks to:
His Excellency Dr. Kao Kim Hourn, Her Excellency Paetongtarn Shinawatra, His Excellency Pham Minh Chinh, and Samdech Moha Borvor Thipadei Hun Manet represented by His Excellency Dr. Sok Siphana