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Prime Minister

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It was in Thailand that Asean was formed in 1967. The century of Asean's birth is now drawing to a close. It is very symbolic, therefore, that as we start charting Asean's course in the new century, we meet again in this delightful city of Bangkok, where it all began.

Let me say how happy I am to be here amongst friends. I especially delighted to note that all Southeast Asian countries are represented in this gathering. This was exactly the vision that the founders of Asean had when they signed the Bangkok Declaration of 1967.

I wish to extend my warm welcome to the leaders of Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar in our midst later, Malaysia would also welcome them to take steps to become full members of Asean as soon as possible.

My congratulations and thanks to you, Mr Chairman, and to the Government and people of Thailand for the timely hosting of this Fifth Meeting of the Asean Heads of Government.

In the new century, the Asean countries, hopefully numbering 10 by then, should rightfully claim and play its role in the management of Asia Pacific regional affairs. We have every reason to do so.

Even now, the combined total of the Asean population is in excess of 411 million. The Asean share of global trade is in excess of US\$498 billion comparing very favourably with the respective shares of China, Japan and Korea. The GDPs of Asean member countries exceed US\$448 billion, again reflecting a very credible figure compared to the other major Asian nations.

We do have the necessary clout as a group and if we remain strongly united, we should be a credible force which others would need to reckon with.

In the name of open regionalism, others outside the region are attempting to dictate the pace and direction of Asia Pacific affairs - be it in the Asean Regional Forum (ARF), or in the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation (Apec) process, or even in the process, or even in the meeting which Asians are planning to hold with Europeans. Asean must not permit this.

The, Asia Pacific is Asean's immediate outer environment. We must, therefore, insist on our appropriate share in the management of its affairs.

First and foremost, Asean must take a common stand to prevent outside powers from dividing the Asian countries of the Pacific.

We, on the Asian side of the Pacific, are permanent neighbours. Surely, the neighbours themselves should have more right than others to determine how they wish to relate to each other in economic, security and political matters, for now and for now and for the future.

We should, therefore, be on guard against becoming a pawn in global politics ostensibly in the interest of regional security.

We should not be listening to outside advice about our security needs. In any case, I believe it is counter-productive to discuss regional security to discuss regional security based on a conscious or subconscious attitude of wanting to contain or restrain potential enemies. It would lead us into believing in the need for counter-threats to meet the perceived threats. That would be the surest way of turning the enemies we dream up into real ones.

I am very confident that the Asian countries of the Pacific, knowing the permanency of their neighbourly existence, will find accommodation with each other if external factors do not come into play.

The ARF should genuinely be a forum which enables the Asian countries of the Pacific to establish confidence and co-operation between themselves in political and security matters.

Other interested parties can contribute constructively to the process but they must not be allowed to use it to further their own schemes at the expense of the Asian participants.

Asean created the Asean Regional Forum. Asean must stay the course to ensure that the ARF process is not steered into directions which Asean does not wish to pursue.

Similarly, in economic relations and on issues of international trade, Asean should not allow others from outside the region to set the pace for co-operation in the context of Apec. This is not just for reasons of sovereign right. We even have the economic rationale.

For example, a recent International Monetary Fund report concludes that the developing countries of Asia will remain the most important engine of growth through 1996. And, recent figures produced by the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) show Asean countries significantly increasing their share of OECD's imports of goods.

It is an established fact that some of the most dynamic economies in the world today are those in the Asean region. To sustain this dynamism, Asean countries would need to create continuing opportunities for trade and investment. Where else can we best do this than in our own Asean region? That is why we should not deviate from our commitment to put the Asean Free Trade Area (Afta) in place by the agreed target dates.

His Majesty the Sultan of Brunei Darussalam, at the Foreign Ministers Meeting in July this year, even suggested that the target date be brought forward to the year 2000.

That is also why Asean countries should not miss the opportunity to be in the lead to upgrade economic relations with the three other countries in South-east Asia. Intensification of trade and investment relations with these immediate neighbours of ours cannot but bring mutual benefit for all in our sub-region.

The political and economic potentials which Asean would have, as an enlarged grouping, to determine Asean's own destiny, and to influence the pace and direction of Asia Pacific affairs, is really quite enormous. That is why the Asean 10 should become a reality quickly, not slowly.

I do believe that, with sufficient determination and convergence of views, we can exert influence to protect and promote our own interests. The decisions taken at the recent Apec leaders' meeting in Osaka was a good example where Asian countries of the Pacific spoke unitedly, and succeeded in establishing the desired pace for trade and investment liberalisations in our own region.

That is the kind of function, in fact the only kind of function, envisaged for the East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC). I still believe that, with a little bit of persistence on the part of Asean, the EAEC can yet be formalised as a caucus within Apec and as forum for discussion of common East Asian problems.

I hope the leaders of the Asian countries of the Pacific will be able to maintain the same unity of purpose as they did in Osaka when we meet the European Union (EU) leaders here in Bangkok in March next year. If we speak with one voice, we should be able to utilise the occasion to usher in a truly new era of equitable relationships between the European and the Asian participants.

There is much to be gained from the development of constructive relationships with the European group. At the first Asia Europe Economic Meeting (Asem), we should not let that opportunity pass. At the same time, we should also not let them miss the point that constructive relationships develop through consultation and consensus, not through direction or prescription on their part.

We have heard enough from the Europeans about democracy and human rights. We have been threatened with trade sanctions unless we abide by the social clauses to be established according to their standards. They have lectured to us about how to manage our environment and conserve our forests. I think the time has come for us to put across, candidly and honestly, our own viewpoints on these matters.

We should say in no uncertain terms that international peace, security and prosperity cannot be established without justice and equity.

There cannot be genuine peace if might alone is used to establish what is considered right, with double standards dominating the order of the day. We have repeatedly witnessed examples of its application, for instance in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Another case in point is the continuation of weapons testing by certain nuclear powers. How can the world ever be rid of nuclear weapons if some cannot even agree to stop testing or perfecting these weapons? Asean should put its collective weight to campaign for the total and complete elimination of all nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction. As a start, we should quickly agree to establish the Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in Southeast Asia in accordance with the proposed treaty.

Asean on its own might not be able to do much to change the world. But with other like-minded nations and groups of nations, we can make a difference and achieve a lot.

For the Asia Pacific environment, however, I feel Asean has, not only the duty but also right and the necessary clout to shape a regional order which we can truly call our own. It may require us to draw upon all of Asean's ingenuity to do it. But do it we must.

Mr Chairman, I might have spoken with some passion about these issues. If I did so, it is because of my own and my country's commitment to the Asean cause, and if I may repeat, my belief in the potentials of Asean.

Finally, Mr Chairman, I thank you, the Government and the people of Thailand for the warm welcome and generous hospitality extended to me, my wife and to the members of my delegation. I am certain that, under your able stewardship, this Fifth Asean Summit will achieve great success and attain its own pride of place in the annals of Asean.