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Title : SEMINAR ON 'REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN EUROPE AND ASIA – COMPARISONS AND LESSONS'

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Ambassador of Ireland

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Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset, may I congratulate the organizers for holding this Seminar on "Regional Integration in Europe and Asia : Comparisons and Lessons". I understand that this seminar is part of the activities to observe the historic enlargement process of the European Union scheduled for May 1, 2004. Indeed the biggest and yet most ambitious enlargement of the EU marks a new achievement for Europe in its efforts towards deeper integration among its member states. Malaysia welcomes this positive development and looks forward to working more closely with an enlarged EU.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

2. Historically, for years, Europe was the cockpit of frequent wars and conflicts which had devastating effects over the entire continent. Rather than allowing the violent past to prevail, Europe's visionary leaders saw beyond the death, destruction and parochialism. They had a vision for a united, peaceful, progressive Europe. They pursued this vision with a deep sense of purpose and conviction. Europe's enlargement today and its achievement as the most successful regional organization in the world is in no small measure a testimony to the founding fathers of modern Europe.

3. Europe was further blessed by the emergence of leaders who continued to build on and implement the vision of the founding fathers. Over the years, especially since the Second World War, European leaders, with the support of their people, translated the vision into a framework of nations working together towards a European Union underpinned with the signing of the Maastricht Treaty 1992. EU has also reached other forms of cooperation on matters relating to defence, justice and home affairs, agriculture, environment, energy and consumer affairs.

4. Today, the EU has a single currency, the Euro, and has a single institutional structure consisting of the European Council, the European Commission, the European Court of Justice and the European Parliament. Through phases of enlargement process, the EU has grown in membership from the initial 6 to 15. In three days time, the EU would welcome 10 new members to become 25.

5. The EU is thus a highly structured institutional system. It is a supranational organization to which member states have surrendered a certain degree of their sovereignty. The framework of cooperation among the member countries is based on Treaties which are legally binding. Decisions are reached by a system of voting which seeks to strike a balance between the imperatives of power and the essence of democratic principles.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

6. South East Asia had its own share of problems and challenges in the quest for regional cooperation. These challenges were perhaps more daunting than those faced by the EU in its formative years. Having freed themselves from colonialism, many of the South East Asia countries including Malaysia faced fundamental threats to their national survival. These threats emanated from two principal sources, namely internal and external. Fortunately for South East Asia, we too had our visionary leaders. Certainly the first Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman was one of them. Together with his colleagues from Thailand, Indonesia and Philippines, they took the bold decision to look beyond mutual distrust and suspicion which characterized inter state relations in the region. The founding fathers of South East Asian regionalism courageously asserted that countries in Southeast Asia must assume their common responsibility to shape their own destiny and to prevent external intervention and interference. This was buttressed on the realisation that countries of Southeast Asia could not survive for long as independent states and living in isolation, unless they thought and acted in unison, identifying themselves by belonging to a family of nations. They agreed that regional cooperation was critical to national resilience.

7. Like their European counterparts, the South East Asian leaders too recognized the benefits of regionalism. After some false starts, their efforts culminated in the formation of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967 at a beach resort in Bangkok. The spirit of the 1967 Bangkok Declaration represented the collective will of the nations, to bind themselves together in friendship and in cooperation.

8. The objective of the Association was essentially to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region through joint endeavours. At the same time, it was to promote peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law and adherence to the principles of the UN Charter.

9. ASEAN thus began as a confidence building process, allowing the member states to move step-by-step, block-by-block to build regional cooperation at a level of comfort, acceptable to all the members. Today, ASEAN is a reality encompassing all the 10 states of South East Asia. It has a central Secretariat in Jakarta to follow up on the decisions of the ASEAN leaders. ASEAN is recognized as one of the most successful regional organizations in the world; perhaps second only to the E.U.

10. Admittedly, there are those, including among some of you here today, who may question the directions of ASEAN. In some quarters, it appears to have become intellectually fashionable, to pronounce ASEAN as increasingly irrelevant to the needs of the region.

11. It is readily acknowledged that ASEAN remains confronted by various challenges. Recognising the challenges posed to ASEAN, the ASEAN leaders at the 8th ASEAN Summit in Bali adopted the Declaration of Bali Concord which envisions the realization of an ASEAN Community by 2020. It builds on ASEAN Vision 2020 Statement adopted in Malaysia in 1997 where all the leaders agreed to the creation of an ASEAN Community by 2020. The Bali Concord spells out that the ASEAN Community shall be built on three pillars namely the ASEAN Security Community, ASEAN Economic Community and ASEAN Social and Cultural Community. Currently, ASEAN countries are engaged in fleshing out the details to these plans.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

12. While European and South East Asian leaders were in fact ahead of their time in recognizing the benefits of regionalism, today it is almost axiomatic that no country is immune to regionalism given its influence in shaping the world's political and economic relationship. As the external environment becomes more competitive and challenging, greater integration becomes an imperative. In our region, the challenges facing ASEAN are numerous. We still lag behind in terms of economic competitiveness. There remains the issue of overlapping claims and unresolved border disputes, residue of our colonial past. We face growing and more complex transnational threats that threaten our survival starting with the 1997 financial crisis, the haze problem, HIV/AIDS, SARS and the avian flu.

13. ASEAN believes that the way forward in addressing these challenges is to forge closer and deeper integration while enhancing its ties with the rest of the world. The Bali Concord II is in effect a roadmap for closer integration resulting in an ASEAN Community. The question that could be posed is "what lessons could ASEAN learn from the EU?"

14. In attempting to answer this question, it must be recognized that ASEAN remains a grouping of sovereign states with diverse systems of governments. In fact, we have practically all the major political and economic systems represented here.

15. ASEAN is a policy regime and not a legal regime like the EU. ASEAN does not have a Charter or a founding Treaty such as the Treaty of Rome. It operates on the basis of basic documents. There is a greater reliance on the more time consuming consensus seeking rather than a legal approach. It seeks understanding by each member of another's situation and difficulties. While this is crucial in preserving peace and stability, it is precisely what keeps ASEAN diverse as there is an absence of impulse for convergence of outlook to create a "we" feeling.

16. ASEAN should actively act and put in place measures to foster the "we" feeling amongst ourselves so that we and our children could genuinely look at ourselves as ASEAN citizens. Some of the easier measures could include harmonising all ASEAN documents. Like the EU, our passports and visas could be made to look uniform. We could do the same with driving licenses, birth certificates and other identification documents.

17. At the political level, ASEAN should work on developing and nurturing a set of common values. Towards this end, ASEAN should work towards greater willingness to conduct open dialogue. There must be greater willingness to share information. ASEAN could also work towards evolving its own human rights standard while welcoming more engagements with the civil society.

18. Organizationally, ASEAN countries must be prepared for a paradigm shift. There is an urgent need to review the institutional framework and processes of ASEAN. As we work towards emplacing dispute settlement and compliance mechanisms for economic issues, we need to establish and entrench other relevant structures dealing with security and social issues as well.

19. ASEAN needs to build expertise at the ASEAN Secretariat and must be increasingly prepared to generate indigenous resources for development cooperation, especially in reducing the development gap within ASEAN member states.

Distinguished Guest

Ladies and Gentlemen,

20. ASEAN has from its inception believed in active and constructive engagement with the outside world. Given the significant role of trade and investment in many ASEAN economies, ASEAN has continued to cultivate its external ties, especially with its Dialogue Partners. Within the Dialogue Partners, ASEAN attaches special relations with its northeast Asian neighbours. Following the Asian financial crisis in 1997 and the outbreak of SARS in the region, the dynamic growth of the ASEAN+3 process is now not only inevitable but irreversible. The momentum of the ASEAN+3 has grown so fast that there exists now an "Asean+3 mirror-image" in all areas of its cooperation. In this connection, the convening of the ASEAN+3 Summit meetings is in fact a reflection of the commitment of the East Asian leaders to promote dialogue and resolve regional issues together as well as contribute towards international peace, security and development.

21. Despite the differences in the historical background that led to the evolution of the EU and ASEAN and its different institutional structures, both are strong advocates of multilateralism and steadfastly uphold the sanctity of international law. Regionalism should therefore actively contribute towards multilateralism.

22. ASEAN, Japan, Korea, China and EU have a population of over 2.1 billion people, or 38% of the world total and account for half of the world's GDP. There thus exists enormous potential in the economically dynamic and diverse Asian and European regions which should be fully exploited through enhanced inter-regional linkages that would further spur economic growth of both regions.

23. To date, ASEAN and EU have made considerable progress in their cooperative endeavours under various frameworks of cooperation such as in ASEM, ASEAN – EU and the ARF.

24. In an increasingly globalizing world, the two most successful regional organisations must continue to collaborate and cooperate in fostering global peace stability and prosperity.

Ladies and gentlemen,

With these words I hereby officially declare open this seminar on "Regional Integration in Europe and Asia : Comparisons and Lessons" .

Thank you.

29 April 2004