

Opening Remarks

**Mr. Sihasak Phuanketkeow
Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand**

**At the East Asia Round Table on
“ASEAN, Thailand, and the Korean Peninsula:
A need for a new security arrangement in East Asia?”**

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**Your Excellency Dr. Kantathi Suphamongkhon,
former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand,**

**Prof. Gasinee Witoonchart,
Vice Rector for Policy and Planning Affairs of Thammasat University,**

**Dr. Kitti Prasirtsuk,
Director of the Institute of East Asian Studies at Thammasat University,**

**Distinguished Speakers and Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Good morning to all of you. And, of course, I would like to join with Prof. Gasinee, Vice Rector of Thammasat University, in welcoming all of you to the Round Table.

As others before me have said, this Round Table is being held at a time when the situation in Bangkok is not normal. So, I am encouraged by the turnout.

It is an honour to be here and to share with you some thoughts on the subject of today's Round Table.

But before I begin, please allow me to thank Prof. Gasinee as well as Dr. Kitti and their team at Thammasat University for their kind cooperation and assistance in the organization of today's event.

This is an inaugural Round Table – the first in a series of Round Tables that we hope to organize on major issues that have direct bearing on the course of events shaping the present and the future in East Asia.

The state of affairs in the region is increasingly complex, marked by both opportunities and challenges to regional peace and prosperity. I have often discussed this with my colleagues at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

We have, in the region, what is a dichotomy. On the one hand, there is the region's economic dynamism, which has captured the attention of the international community. The region's geopolitics, however, seem to be going in the other direction.

Some have even labelled this the "Asian Paradox" because increased socio-economic interdependence has not translated into decreased conflicts.

Instead, flashpoints persist: the Korean Peninsula as well as the territorial disputes in the South China and East China Seas, just to name a few.

There is also rising tension in major power relations in the region. Some would even say there is increased rivalry.

China's recent movements to fortify its air and maritime security; Japan's revitalisation of its own security policy and military capability; the so-called U.S. strategic rebalancing to Asia; and, our main concern here at the Round Table, nuclear developments in North Korea. These have all made headlines and have raised concern on the part of all of us.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Some of you may be wondering about the choice of topic for this Round Table. Indeed, why "ASEAN, Thailand, and the Korean Peninsula?" We don't normally see or hear mention of ASEAN and Thailand in the context of the Korean Peninsula.

And in spite of ASEAN's claims of centrality with respect to the regional architecture, ASEAN has not been a major player insofar as the situation on the Korean Peninsula is concerned.

With the changing regional landscape, ASEAN – to maintain its credibility – needs to redouble its efforts in contributing to regional peace and stability, including the situation on the Korean Peninsula.

Why is this so?

Because, **for one**, ASEAN's desire to maintain its centrality means that it must give serious consideration to how it can make a more proactive contribution to reducing tension and strengthening peace on the Korean Peninsula.

And **two**, given increasing economic interdependence and integration, ASEAN must recognise that its security – the security of Southeast Asia – is very much intertwined with the security of Northeast Asia.

ASEAN must, therefore, play a more proactive role in regional security, through utilizing its strengths: diplomacy, dialogue and multilateral cooperation under the various ASEAN-driven processes and frameworks. These are familiar to all of you – the ARF, EAS, and the ASEAN Plus Three process.

And one of the most protracted and intractable security challenges in the region is the situation on the Korean Peninsula.

Indeed, developments on the Korean Peninsula in recent years have been a major source of potential instability in the region.

To this day, no peace treaty has ever been signed to bring to closure a war that ended some 60 years ago. And neither has the North Korean regime ever renounced the option of going to war.

There are other uncertainties as well that make the situation all the more precarious. These include how secure the current leadership really is; what the actual state of the economy is; and the North Korean leadership's continued pursuit of the nuclear option.

All of this fosters a climate of mistrust and fuels present-day hostilities.

Developments on the Korean Peninsula also reflect the changing geopolitical landscape in the region.

The Korean Peninsula is an arena where the interests of the major powers – China, the U.S., and Japan – converge and increasingly conflict. How this triangular relationship plays out has a tremendous bearing on the power balance in the region and direct implications for peace and security.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the past, when there was progress in the Six-Party Talks, it was because the major powers were able to realize a sufficient degree of cooperation.

Now, however, the increased strategic competition among the major powers makes cooperation in dealing with common regional challenges more difficult. And reviving the Six-Party Talks requires the joint efforts of all of the major powers.

In the absence of the Six-Party Talks, ASEAN can, should, and must be a conduit to facilitate dialogue, keep the channels of communication open and, importantly, promote confidence- and trust-building.

After all, ASEAN has no vested interests in the issue aside from the desire to see real peace, security, and stability prevail over Northeast Asia; which will, in turn, continue to contribute to an environment conducive to economic growth, development, and integration as well as ASEAN's own Community-building efforts.

In fact, our thinking has always been that economic development and cooperation among countries in the region ~~diplomacy~~ is the best means of strengthening the foundations of peace in the region. Economic growth and prosperity reduce the likelihood of war. This has always guided our diplomacy in the region.

Another strength of ASEAN is that it maintains good relations with all of the major powers. It should, therefore, continue to keep sending out a message of just how important constructive relations and cooperation among the major powers are to regional peace and security.

And ASEAN has a history of constructive engagement with the DPRK. In the year 2000, before the advent of the Six-Party Talks, ASEAN was able to bring the DPRK into the ARF.

In fact, I was personally involved in this process. The then Foreign Minister (Surin Pitsuwan) instructed me to go to the DPRK to brief them on what the ARF was all about and to help them prepare for coming to the meeting.

When the Six-Party Talks came about, ASEAN continued to use the ARF as a venue for substantive dialogue on the Korean Peninsula issue. ARF meetings also provided a place for parties to the Six-Party Talks to come together on a regular basis.

ASEAN is, therefore, well-placed to play the role of facilitator.

The challenge for ASEAN, however, is how to change the way it operates. The need for consensus all the time; the tendency to be reactive and to take a back seat – these are not ingredients that make for an ASEAN that is able to take concerted action in a timely manner and really be in the “driver’s seat” in the building of the regional architecture.

Nevertheless, I believe that ASEAN does have the potential to contribute to peace and security on the Korean Peninsula.

And when ASEAN acts in concert – speaking with one voice, showing unity of purpose, and adopting a unified position – we can achieve good results. This is evident in the South China Sea issue.

In fact, Thailand has been working hard with our ASEAN colleagues in talking to China and working with China. This should not be construed in any, and not in any way ~~ast~~o ganging up on China.

ASEAN’s unity is important to ASEAN’s centrality in the regional architecture.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

So, in terms of the regional architecture, the question before this Round Table is whether or not there is a need for a new security arrangement in East Asia, especially to deal with situations like that on the Korean Peninsula.

Whatever the answer to that question may be, however, I think most of us can agree that the time is not yet ripe for Asia to have an arrangement similar to the EU or OSCE, that is, an overarching arrangement.

The arguments for this are well known to all of you: Asia’s diverse cultures, political systems, levels of economic development as well as historical legacies do not lend themselves to an overarching or structured security arrangement.

Instead, what we currently have in Asia is a patchwork of overlapping security arrangements and forums for dialogue and cooperation at the bilateral, sub-regional, and regional levels. Some are formal. Some are not so formal.

ASEAN is, in a way, a security arrangement of sorts. Peace is promoted through dialogue – to build trust and confidence – as well as functional cooperation.

There is the ASEAN Plus Three process, as well as the ARF.

I hope that you can dwell a bit more on the ARF today because it is a forum for regular engagement and dialogue, with North Korea as member. Perhaps more can be done, however, to make the ARF more than a confidence-building process. We should think about how the ARF can become a real preventive diplomacy forum.

There is also a system of bilateral security alliances led by the U.S.. Indeed, the U.S. has been a traditional stabilizing force in Asia. Because we all know that, should conflict break out in the region, the U.S. is probably the only power that has deterrent capacity.

The U.S.' rebalance to Asia is a positive development, so long as it does not turn the system of alliances into a system of containment.

The other major powers, of course, also have their own arrangements apart from the U.S.-led system of alliances, for example, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), led by China and Russia.

So, is there a need for a new security arrangement in East Asia? Perhaps so, but not, once again, an overarching one at this stage.

But what we need to do is to enhance both the process and the framework for multilateral dialogue and cooperation on security matters so that they can meaningfully address common security concerns.

The region certainly needs stronger, inclusive, and multilateral arrangements. Perhaps an arrangement is especially needed in the Northeast Asian theatre because this is where the strategic interests of the major powers play out. And the geopolitics of the region is currently very volatile.

We need to address what many have called the “trust deficit” in the region, which especially prevails in the context of Northeast Asia.

Last year, South Korean President Park proposed the so-called Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative. This is part of her policy of “trustpolitik,” that is, building a habit of dialogue and cooperation through a soft agenda, which is to be welcomed as a step in the right direction.

I believe that the easing of tensions between the two Koreas is an important building block for peace and stability in the region.

**Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

These are just some ideas I wish to share with you. I hope that I have given you some food for thought for the rest of the day’s deliberations.

Perhaps I have raised more questions than given answers. But that is precisely what I had intended to do.

It is certainly not my place to venture forth conclusions. That would defeat the purpose of this exercise.

I, therefore, wish all of you a thought-provoking and productive day. I look forward to your conclusions and wish the Round Table great success.

Thank you.