



CO-CHAIRS' SUMMARY REPORT
17TH ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM
EXPERTS AND EMINENT PERSONS MEETING
8 April 2025, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

1. Pursuant to the decision of the 31st ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) held in Vientiane, Lao PDR on 27 July 2024, the 17th Meeting of the ARF Experts and Eminent Persons (ARF EEPs) was convened in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia from 7 - 8 April 2025.
2. The Meeting was co-chaired by Datuk Prof. Dr. Mohd Faiz Abdullah, EEP of Malaysia, and Dr. Choi Yoon Jung, EEP of the Republic of Korea (ROK). The Meeting was attended by EEPs and representatives from all ARF Participants, with the exception of Bangladesh, DPRK, India, Mongolia and Sri Lanka. Representatives from the ASEAN Secretariat were also in attendance. The list of participants appears as **ANNEX 1**.

AGENDA ITEM 1: WELCOMING REMARKS BY CO-CHAIRS

3. In his remarks, Datuk Prof. Dr. Mohd Faiz Abdullah, EEP from Malaysia and Co-Chair emphasised that regional tensions are no longer impending but are already present; from internal challenges like the Myanmar crisis and the South China Sea disputes, to the worsening of major power rivalries thereby widening the fissures in the region and impeding the inclusive multilateral mechanisms that ASEAN has painstakingly built. In this context, he underscored the responsibility of Malaysia, including future ASEAN Chair, to foster unity among Member States and seize opportunities amidst these ASEAN Chairmanship theme, "Inclusivity and Sustainability," which reflects a bold and urgent vision for ASEAN's role in shaping a secure and equitable regional future an inclusive and sustainable future for the immediate region and the wider Asia Pacific. He further highlighted that ASEAN must become more proactive across all spheres of cooperation, and ensure that the Association remains dynamic, resilient and fit for purpose.
4. He added that the adoption of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 later this year, alongside the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the ASEAN Community, marks a critical moment of both reflection and renewal. With this in mind, Malaysia called for ASEAN and the ARF to move beyond a business-as-usual approach and instead focus on streamlining mechanisms toward tangible deliverables. Quoting Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, he stressed that ASEAN's mechanisms must reclaim their convening power.

5. In her remarks, Dr. Choi Yoon Jung, the EEP from the ROK and Co-Chair, highlighted that the urgency of collaborative actions is greater than ever as we are witnessing escalating tensions both in the physical world including Europe, the Middle East, Myanmar, the South China Sea, and the DPRK and in cyberspace. In this context, she noted that the role of the ARF becomes increasingly vital in fostering dialogue, enhancing mutual trust, and reinforcing regional stability. She further underscored the valuable contribution of the EEPs as a track 1.5 advisory mechanism of the ARF, which serves as a platform for the exchange of independent and forward-looking ideas, and said that the platform can be proposed for elevation to track 1. She noted that this will facilitate the inclusion of non-ASEAN Member States in dialogue and foster trust among nations, thereby ushering in a future of a sustainable Asia-Pacific region. Such a direction is also aligned with this year's ASEAN theme of "Inclusivity and Sustainability". In addition, regarding this year's agenda on digital security, she acknowledged that, while technological advancements present tremendous opportunities, they also give rise to emerging security challenges such as online scams. She expressed the ROK's strong commitment to contributing to digital security, development cooperation, and trust-building in the digital space through initiatives such as the Korea-ASEAN Digital Innovation Flagship (KADIF).
6. Dr. Choi also emphasised the significance of this year as a pivotal moment marked by the conclusion of the ARF Ha Noi Plan of Action II (2020-2025) and the adoption of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045. She expressed her expectations for this meeting in setting a clear direction for the future development of the ARF, responding to the region's increasingly dynamic and uncertain security environment. In this regard, she reaffirmed the ROK's dedication to shaping a forward-looking partnership with ASEAN through the upcoming ASEAN-ROK Plan of Action (2026-2030), and reiterated the ROK's steadfast support for ASEAN-led mechanisms, including the ARF, as essential platforms for regional peace and stability.
7. The Co-Chairs then adopted the Agenda of the meeting, which appears as **ANNEX 2**.

AGENDA ITEM 2: REVIEW OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ARF WORK PLAN ON PREVENTIVE DIPLOMACY

Updates on the ARF Preventive Diplomacy Work Plan

8. The ARF Unit of the ASEAN Secretariat updated the meeting on the progress of the implementation of the ARF Work Plan on Preventive Diplomacy. Since its adoption in 2011, implementation of the Work Plan has progressed steadily across its eleven action lines. They highlighted continued efforts by ARF Participants to initiate and conduct confidence-building measures (CBMs) in key areas such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, counter-terrorism, maritime security and non-proliferation.
9. For the inter-sessional year 2024-2025, a total of 14 ARF Track 1 activities have been included, including workshops and seminars, some of which were carried

over from the previous year. It was further noted the consistent voluntary contributions by Participants to the ARF Annual Security Outlook (ASO), with 22 submissions received in 2024.

10. On the remaining action lines, it was reported that standardised reporting formats continue to be followed and that international organisations such as the United Nations are regularly engaged in ARF activities. Since the adoption of the Work Plan, over 20 preventive diplomacy-related activities have been conducted, including the ARF Workshop on Preventive Diplomacy Targeting Climate Change. The ARF Unit also referenced efforts to strengthen the Unit and highlighted the role of EEPs, think tanks and regional networks in supporting ISMs. However, it observed that action lines 9 to 11; which include proposals for regional risk reduction centres, good offices roles and mediation mechanisms, have yet to be implemented.

Review of the recommendations of the 16th ARF EEPs Meeting

11. Both EEP from ROK and EEP from Brunei Darussalam took the floor to review the recommendations of the 16th ARF EEPs Meeting which was held in Seoul on 26 April 2024. EEP from ROK informed that the six key recommendations made during the 16th ARF EEPs Meeting were acknowledged in the Chairman's Statement of the 31st ARF held in Vientiane, Lao PDR on 27 July 2024. EEP from ROK provided an overview of these recommendations. In particular, she mentioned that the first-ever UN resolution on AI in the military domain, jointly submitted by Korea and the Netherlands, was adopted in November 2024.
12. EEP from Brunei Darussalam welcomed the recognition of the 16th ARF EEPs recommendations by the 31st ARF and expressed appreciation for the active engagement of ARF Participants. He underscored Brunei Darussalam's focus on youth and women as drivers of peace and development. He highlighted Brunei's National Youth Policy and Strategy 2020–2035, aligned with Brunei Vision 2035, which among others prioritises youth empowerment and engagement in peacebuilding. He highlighted the importance of the ARF to expand youth-targeted programmes such as in leadership training, peace education and dialogue platforms, as well as encouraged synergies with other ASEAN-led initiatives related to youth empowerment such as the ASEAN Foundation's youth engagement efforts. On the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, EEP from Brunei Darussalam stressed the need for equal participation of women in peace processes and praised recent ARF workshops, including the 2nd ARF Workshop on WPS held in Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam in March 2025. He encouraged deeper alignment between ARF and ASEAN efforts, including through mechanisms such as the ASEAN Women for Peace Registry and the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation.
13. EEP from Brunei Darussalam briefed on the outcomes of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting held on 26 February 2025 in Penang, Malaysia, which among others focused on the role of AI in defence. EEP from Brunei Darussalam shared that the Defence Ministers acknowledged both the potential and risks of AI, including the possibility of an accelerated arms race and expressed commitment

to ensuring the responsible use of AI in defence, guided by human oversight, international law, and ethical standards. EEP from Brunei Darussalam added that the Meeting also highlighted the importance of enhanced regional collaboration to address disparities in AI development among ASEAN Member States, through capacity building, knowledge sharing, and joint research efforts. In addition, EEP from Brunei Darussalam informed that the Meeting further noted that AI should be integrated into ASEAN defence platforms such as the ASEAN Cyber Defence Network and the ADMM-Plus Experts' Working Groups to maximise its benefits while mitigating risks.

AGENDA ITEM 3: REGIONAL SECURITY ISSUES

Session 1: Evolving Dynamics between Major Powers in the Asia Pacific

14. The EEP from the Philippines, as presenter, mentioned that the dynamics between major powers, particularly the US-China relationship, significantly impact the security and economy of the Asia-Pacific region. In this regard, she underscored the importance of prioritizing cooperation based on the existing rules-based international order, given the current situation of uncertainty. Specifically, she noted that, according to relevant opinion poll statistics, ASEAN recognizes the considerable influence of great power dynamics on regional security and economic stability. Also, she mentioned that recent tariff wars raised concerns in terms of the weakening of shared international norms and principles. She highlighted that addressing urgent transnational issues such as climate change and disaster response requires continued cooperation grounded in multilateralism, regardless of changes in great power relations. Against this backdrop, she emphasised that immediate action is needed to address threats like climate change, pandemic prevention, and social welfare knowledge sharing through small-group cooperation. She also pointed out the necessity of resolving global commons problems such as air pollution and illegal fishing, strengthening ASEAN's role as a bridge builder for dialogue and cooperation, and promoting bilateral cooperation to foster regional stability.
15. The EEP from Cambodia, as the first discussant, underscored that the Asia-Pacific region is facing growing strategic uncertainty due to shifting major power dynamics and intensifying interactions over transnational issues. He emphasised the need for regional countries to respond to these complex security challenges by building mutual trust through multilateral mechanisms, including ASEAN-led platforms such as the ARF, ADMM, ADMM-Plus, and ASEAN+3, while maintaining ASEAN Centrality. He further noted that, to ensure regional defence partnerships do not trigger arms races or exacerbate tensions, a firm commitment to a rules-based international order—grounded in respect for international law and mutual respect—is essential.
16. The EEP from the United States, as the second discussant, mentioned that the relationships among major powers (the US, China, Russia) are currently marked by tension. Regarding US-China relations, he characterized them as a mix of 3C (Cooperation, Competition, Confrontation), which have shifted toward increased competition and confrontation, particularly due to China's growing role in Taiwan

and the South China Sea. He highlighted the need for careful management to avoid escalation into conflict. With regard to US-Russia relations, he noted that the outcome of the Ukraine peace talks could not only affect US-Russia relations but also lead to a loss of confidence in US extended deterrence, potentially prompting nuclear armament among US allies. He emphasised that any such outcome would have significant global implications. In mentioning the China-Russia relationship, he noted that tensions in the region might escalate due to deepened military cooperation and increasing ties between Russia and the DPRK. Lastly, he pointed out that, while some speculate on President Trump's approach to Moscow and Beijing, the real focus should be on the official US foreign policy direction to be outlined in the National Security Strategy.

17. The EEP from China observed that, while the dynamics of US-China relations have continuously evolved, recent developments have contributed to a more complex and unstable environment in Southeast Asia and the broader Asia-Pacific. He emphasised China's commitment to playing a constructive and stabilizing role in regional security issues, including the South China Sea, Myanmar, and transnational threats such as online scams. He further underlined that China seeks to enhance collaboration not only with ASEAN member states but also with major powers, including the US and Russia, to support peace and stability in the region.
18. The EEP from Australia highlighted the importance of addressing regional tensions, particularly in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, where the risk of conflict escalation remains high. He noted that, while major power dynamics are significant, it is essential to focus on the broader regional risks in the Indo-Pacific. He stressed the urgency of utilizing existing ASEAN mechanisms, including the ARF, to creatively seek diplomatic solutions to ease tensions. He pointed out that smaller powers in the region will bear the economic and humanitarian consequences of any conflict, and therefore, there is a pressing need for conflict prevention strategies to be developed and implemented.
19. The EEP from the ROK emphasised the DPRK's military cooperation with Russia - a veto wielding major power in the UN Security Council - poses threat to global stability, undermines regional peace and security, and hampers the international security institutions' ability to curb illicit proliferation and respond to the DPRK's violations of international norms. He highlighted that such cooperation enables the DPRK to access advanced nuclear technology, and thus threatens the nuclear non-proliferation regime. He stated that ASEAN and the ARF must take a proactive stance in deterring the DPRK's military provocation and avoid rewarding the DPRK's intervention in the Ukraine war, stressing that the war in Ukraine is already listed as one of ASEAN's top 6 geopolitical concerns in the 2025 ISEAS Annual Survey.
20. The EEP from Indonesia stressed that the ARF must evolve into a platform that facilitates practical and focused discussions on political, economic, and security challenges, enabling stakeholders to engage in strategic dialogue and develop norms that can ease tensions and prevent conflict.

21. The EEP from Thailand noted that ASEAN Member States have been under growing pressure to align with one side amid intensifying geopolitical rivalries and fragmentation of the international order. He pointed out that economic security challenges such as tariff wars, dual-use technology competition, and regional supply chain disruptions are deepening trust deficits across the region. He stressed the need for ASEAN mechanisms to play a more active role in managing regional security to prevent military escalation and unintended conflict. He further underlined the importance of strengthening regional economic cooperation and resilience through joint initiatives. He also called for constructive dialogue on emerging non-traditional security threats, including digital sovereignty, cybersecurity, and AI safety.
22. The EEP from Pakistan highlighted that the Asia-Pacific region is at a critical moment, with rising political tensions threatening its stability and economic potential. He emphasised the need for a new security framework that prioritises cooperation, inclusivity, and sustainable development while rejecting artificial divides that do not reflect the region's realities. He proposed that such framework should foster security through inclusive platforms like ASEAN and other regional groups, promoting balanced engagement without pressuring smaller countries to take sides in geopolitical rivalries. He stressed the importance of facilitating dialogue and practical cooperation in areas such as joint counter piracy operations and humanitarian exercises to foster trust and reduce the risks of coercion. He further noted that the ARF should provide space for middle and smaller powers, like Pakistan, to voice their concerns freely without being forced into a split of major power interests, offering an inclusive space where these countries can contribute to discussions on issues beyond geopolitical divides, such as economic cooperation.
23. The EEP from Lao PDR acknowledged the ongoing challenges faced by the region, including climate change, transnational crime, human trafficking, drug trafficking, and emerging security issues like AI misuse and online scams. He underscored the importance of enhancing ASEAN Centrality and resilience in addressing both traditional and non-traditional security threats. In light of the rising geopolitical and economic competition, he emphasised the need to strengthen cooperation in new security areas while promoting ASEAN's role. To enhance the relevance of the ARF, he recommended improving its role as a platform for constructive dialogue, confidence-building, and preventive diplomacy among Member States.

Session 2: Effect of Regional Security Issues to ASEAN Centrality

24. The EEP from Australia, as presenter, emphasised that the war in Ukraine and resulting disruptions, such as supply chain breakdowns, directly affect ASEAN, highlighting the region's vulnerability to global security threats. She acknowledged that the rising uncertainty in the international order calls for a renewed consensus on fundamental issues, including multilateralism and the rules-based order. She mentioned that, while ASEAN Centrality is often understood differently by various actors, with countries like Australia viewing it as prioritizing ASEAN's importance, it is also seen by ASEAN Member States as

a means to mitigate intra-regional conflicts. She stressed that ASEAN's relevance must be maintained through its mechanisms, which contributes to conflict resolution and preventive diplomacy. She highlighted that to strengthen ASEAN Centrality and relevance, it is crucial for ASEAN to function as an inclusive platform for dialogue, involving major powers and addressing regional and global challenges effectively.

25. The EEP from Thailand, as the first discussant, noted that ASEAN Centrality and cohesion are affected by changing security dynamics, particularly the divergence of interests in traditional and non-traditional security issues. He underscored that the ASEAN's role as a mediator and convening power is crucial, as it contributes to dialogue and confidence-building, especially on issues like disaster management and climate change. He stressed that the ARF plays a vital role in preventing the spread of regional security conflicts, and ASEAN should focus more on preventive diplomacy. He suggested that, to remain relevant, ASEAN must strengthen its institutional frameworks, with the ARF as a primary platform for conflict prevention. Lastly, he mentioned that ASEAN should promote inclusivity and stability while adapting to global changes.
26. The EEP from Japan, as the second discussant, she highlighted the ARF's unique value as a track 1.5 platform that enables frank discussions on regional security issues. She stated that ASEAN mechanisms play a crucial role in maintaining regional order, particularly amid intensifying geopolitical rivalries and the rise of unilateralism. She noted that ASEAN's inclusive architecture allows for engagement not only among its members but also with external partners. She underscored the importance of managing key security challenges such as the South China Sea and the DPRK, where resolution may be difficult but de-escalation is essential. She added that ASEAN should continue to engage actively on the Myanmar crisis by facilitating humanitarian assistance, supporting multilateral coordination, and addressing cross-border crimes. She concluded by noting that such transnational issues are of common interest and should be managed through strengthened ASEAN-led mechanisms.
27. The participant from Vietnam, representing the EEP Vietnam, acknowledged that ASEAN Centrality should not be taken for granted and noted ASEAN's efforts to revitalise its mechanisms in response to evolving security challenges. He stated that ASEAN poses no threat to external actors and has promoted inclusive dialogue to address global issues. He highlighted ASEAN's role as a platform for managing regional concerns such as those over Myanmar and the South China Sea. He emphasised ASEAN's commitment to preventive diplomacy and multilateralism grounded in trust and transparency.
28. The EEP from Myanmar, stated that Myanmar has been making efforts to implement the ASEAN Five Point Consensus agreed upon at the 2021 ASEAN Summit. He emphasised Myanmar's commitment to pursuing a peaceful and inclusive political dialogue led by its own government. He noted ongoing talks with various political groups, and highlighted progress in humanitarian assistance and preparations for future elections. He welcomed constructive proposals from ASEAN and reiterated Myanmar's willingness to cooperate.

Session 3: Digital Security – in the context of transnational crime

29. The EEP from the ROK, as presenter, noted that discussions on security in the digital domain have often been fragmented across areas such as cybercrime, ICT, and cybersecurity. She suggested that a more comprehensive concept of “digital security” is needed to encompass not only the enhancement of security in cyberspace but also technological development and digital economic growth. She introduced four categories of digital security—*Security in Digital*, which involves protecting digital infrastructure and systems including cyber incident response and software security; *Digital for Security*, which refers to leveraging digital technologies like surveillance AI and disaster warning systems to enhance security; *Security for Digital* as the protection of strategic digital ecosystems, including through the development of international norms; and *Digital as Security*, which regards digital technologies such as AI, semiconductors, and data as strategic assets. She emphasised the need to promote a shared understanding of these concepts among ARF Member States. She underscored the importance of advancing strategic cooperation on digital security through the ARF framework.
30. The participant from Vietnam representing the EEP Vietnam, as the first discussant, stressed that the digital security threats stem from normative gaps created by the rapid development of digital technologies, physical risks to critical infrastructure such as energy grids, airports, and water systems, the strategic weaponization of digital tools, diminished state influence over powerful non-state actors, and increasingly state-sponsored cyberattacks. He pointed out the need to recognize the cross-sectoral nature of digital security, incorporating it into discussions on defence and development and to explicitly prohibit autonomous AI decision-making in weapons use. He called for attention to the importance of enhancing regional cooperation, including the establishment of risk information-sharing and cyber-emergency response mechanisms under the ARF. He reiterated the importance of strengthening technical capabilities through regional capacity building programs. Lastly, he advocated for the promotion of preventive diplomacy, confidence-building, and the development of norms and multilateral agreements to manage digital risks at both strategic and technical levels.
31. The EEP from New Zealand, as the second discussant, emphasised the dual nature of digital technology, highlighting the need to consider both its opportunities and the physical threats it can pose through digital vulnerabilities. She noted that digital security must be addressed as a cross-cutting issue, integrated into policies on defence, disaster response, and climate change, including AI’s energy demands and misuse for example. She underscored the importance of preventive measures such as enhancing digital literacy, sharing risk case studies, and employing diversion tactics to deal with cyber threats. She advocated for a regional strategy based on the ROK’s four-pillar framework, adaptable to national priorities and supported by cooperation with the private sector. Finally, she called for forward-looking efforts, stressing the urgency of staying ahead of emerging AI-enabled cyber threats.

AGENDA ITEM 4: BEYOND 30 – REVITALISING THE ARF

32. The EEP from Malaysia, as moderator for this session, highlighted that while the work of the ARF has significantly contributed to regional peace and stability by promoting engagement among countries of diverse backgrounds, today's geopolitical climate is markedly less collaborative, inclusive and rules-based than the post-Cold War environment in which ARF thrived. EEP Malaysia expressed concern over how the recommendations are communicated and acted upon by senior officials, questioning whether there is a disconnect between the EEP and ARF officials. Despite these challenges, EEP Malaysia emphasised the importance of revitalising the ARF as well as CSCAP, which is the Track 2 of the ARF, an underutilised mechanism that has been key in fostering confidence-building and preventive diplomacy.
33. The EEP from Canada, as presenter, reflected on the shifting global landscape and how the ARF and its EEPs must adapt to stay relevant. He contrasted the optimistic, multilateral Asia-Pacific era with today's Indo-Pacific and post-Indo-Pacific context marked by geopolitical tensions, uncertainty, especially surrounding U.S. policy and diminishing multilateral momentum. He noted that initiatives like the EEP and CSCAP were products of an earlier time that emphasised cooperative security approaches. The EEP now faces an existential challenge related to its purpose and mission. He called for a serious reassessment of the EEP's purpose and effectiveness, stressing that while many of its ideas may not have been implemented, its value lay in building a community of interest committed to diplomacy and internationalism. Drawing from past successes, EEP Canada argued that the strength of the EEP lay in its composition of committed individuals, continuity, working group formats and spontaneous, informal dialogue. He proposed revitalising the group by focusing on intersessional work and specific issue-based working groups, such as on digital security, maritime management and nuclear proliferation. He acknowledged past contributions on early warning mechanisms, WPS and incidents at sea as examples of the EEP's potential, while also urging renewed inclusivity, particularly concerning engagement with North Korea.
34. The EEP from Indonesia, as the first discussant, underscored the importance of ASEAN Centrality in driving the ARF's consultative platform for political and security dialogue. He emphasised the need to strengthen ASEAN coordination to ensure an effective and coherent approach to regional challenges, while also calling for a reformulation of dialogue formats to promote more candid and inclusive exchanges. EEP Indonesia expressed concern over procedural inefficiencies and the risk of stagnation in the ARF's work. He highlighted that revitalisation is not only about new issues but also about improving procedural aspects to ensure ARF remains responsive and effective. Indonesia also referenced the ARF's 30th anniversary statement during Indonesia's ASEAN Chairmanship, which reaffirmed the Forum's relevance but acknowledged the need for structural improvements. He further proposed aligning ARF discussions more strategically with other ASEAN-led mechanisms and strengthening trust through more substantive and candid exchanges. EEP Indonesia also suggested the need for internal reflection on ARF's membership and modalities to ensure

the Forum evolves in step with the regional context. Importantly, he advocated for a stronger interface between Track 1 and Track 1.5/2, including closer engagement with the ARF EEPs and proposed the idea of back-to-back meetings between the EEP and the Inter-Sessional Support Group (ISG) as a way to enhance the quality and impact of the ARF's deliberations.

35. The EEP from China, as the second discussant, emphasised the value of the ARF and the EEP platform as stabilising mechanisms amid the region's complex security environment. He highlighted that the ARF and EEP function as essential forums to bridge security concerns and foster dialogue, especially at a time when tensions may prevent direct state-to-state engagement. EEP China stressed the importance of maintaining face-to-face dialogue to build mutual understanding and respect, particularly when dealing with sensitive issues. He underscored the shared responsibility of ARF participants to preserve regional peace through mutual trust, early warning mechanisms and a commitment to ASEAN Centrality. He further underscored for the EEP platform to serve as a conduit for common recommendations and collaborative communication. EEP China acknowledged the unique ability of the ARF to convene actors with divergent views in the same room. EEP China proposed digital security as a priority area for future EEP focus, suggesting the group recommend legal cooperation to address cybersecurity threats such as scams and transnational crime.
36. The EEP from Singapore, as the third discussant, stated that the ARF has a special significance for Singapore, having been born out of the Singapore Declaration at the 4th ASEAN Summit in 1992. He noted that although the ARF was conceived in a different geopolitical era, its core objective of sustaining peace and prosperity remains just as vital in today's complex and uncertain environment. The ARF's strength lies in its inclusivity and its ability to convene a wide range of actors to discuss both traditional and non-traditional security issues. To revitalise the ARF, EEP Singapore proposed two key suggestions: first, to seek better alignment of the ARF to support ASEAN's priorities, especially the implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), adopted during Laos' Chairmanship; and second, to support ASEAN's economic integration and its growing focus on emerging issues such as digital and sustainable development. He pointed to Malaysia's ASEAN Chairmanship and the progress on the ASEAN Power Grid and Digital Economy Framework Agreement as examples where the ARF could play a proactive role in identifying and mitigating future security risks.
37. The EEP from United States offered several suggestions to revitalise the ARF. He cautioned against reinventing the wheel and instead encouraged drawing from existing studies, including the ARF25 review that proposed the Forum either adopt a new mission or recommit to preventive diplomacy, though, in practice, he observed that the ARF had chosen a third, less effective path of maintaining the status quo. He recalled earlier CSCAP recommendations, particularly the long-standing proposal for the ARF to adopt an early warning mandate, which remains relevant. Noting the scarcity of accessible ARF documentation, he highlighted a 2006-2007 study outlining best practices and a strategic timeline for preventive diplomacy. He also proposed replacing the current "pace

comfortable to all” with “a pace comfortable to none,” allowing for incremental progress even if not all members fully align, thus enabling the ARF to move more effectively.

38. The EEP from China emphasised that in order to revitalise the ARF, we must return to and reinforce ASEAN Centrality. He stressed that the ARF, as an ASEAN-initiated platform, derives its strength and legitimacy from ASEAN’s longstanding experience in managing diversity within Southeast Asia. ASEAN has successfully built unity among its members despite differences, serving as a stabilising force and a hub for various multilateral engagements such as ASEAN+1, ASEAN+3, and others. He argued that ASEAN Centrality is not merely aspirational; it has already proven effective in balancing major power rivalries and anchoring regional cooperation. Therefore, in today’s shifting geopolitical environment, ASEAN must speak with a stronger, more united voice. If ASEAN becomes fragmented, the ARF risks becoming ineffective.
39. The EEP from ROK highlighted that, the core principles that have defined ASEAN’s identity, namely ASEAN Centrality, the ASEAN Way of consultation and consensus, and unity in diversity, remain as relevant today as ever. Citing ASEAN’s past successes, including during the Cambodian conflict and the post-Cold War era, he emphasised how ASEAN capitalised on a period of geopolitical calm to achieve key milestones such as the realisation of ASEAN-10, the ASEAN Plus Three framework and the Chiang Mai Initiative. These developments strengthened ASEAN’s central role in shaping regional order. However, EEP ROK observed that ASEAN now faces a divided Asia, with both internal divisions and external pressures threatening its cohesion. Externally, shifting global power dynamics triggered a series of global shift. Internally, ASEAN unity is being compromised. He underscored the urgent need for ASEAN to reaffirm its founding principles and maintain its strategic role amidst these growing uncertainties.
40. The EEPs from Australia emphasised that the core purpose of the EEP group is to serve as a shared resource, contributing meaningfully to the broader ARF process. He proposed that each meeting of the group could include agenda items based on intersessional work or projects commissioned and carried out by subsets of members. This would allow members to report back with concrete outcomes, enhancing continuity and relevance. He also suggested that space be given for spontaneous discussions on emerging issues, allowing the group to react in real-time and provide timely inputs to Track 1 processes, thereby strengthening the overall impact of the EEP’s work within the ARF framework.
41. The EEPs from Australia echoed the call for revitalising the forum, noting that its role is more critical than ever given today’s complex regional dynamics. Emphasising the value of utilising EEP participants as an ongoing resource beyond the formal annual meetings, she encouraged greater use of ad hoc intersessional working groups and asked for clarity on how these are formed, whether proposals can be pitched to the Forum, and what support is available for such initiatives. She underlined the importance of leveraging the expertise of

academics and analysts to advance creative diplomacy and ensure the ARF remains responsive and impactful.

42. The EEPs from Australia highlighted the value of contributing to early warning systems for conflict prevention within the ARF. She stressed on the need for faster decision-making, especially in times of crisis and volatility. In today's fast-changing environment, she stressed that ASEAN must become more adaptive and responsive rather than reactive. Importantly, she cautioned that ASEAN centrality should not be mistaken for passivity; rather, it must be a driving force for vitality and revitalisation of the regional security architecture.
43. The EEP from New Zealand expressed strong interest in understanding the scope and processes available to the EEP group to better support the ARF's overarching goal of promoting peace and prosperity. She suggested exploring mechanisms such as an early warning or emerging threats framework, particularly through intersessional activities. Highlighting the digital domain as an example, she emphasised the need for proactive engagement to help the ARF anticipate and address urgent issues.
44. The EEP from Viet Nam emphasised that after more than 30 years, the ARF remains a vital platform for political-security dialogue, particularly as one of the few regional venues facilitating both civil and military coordination. However, with the evolving regional and global landscape, and the emergence of other mechanisms, the question of ARF's continued relevance must be addressed. He suggested revisiting ARF's original mandate of confidence-building and preventive diplomacy to assess if these concepts are still effective or need to be redefined in today's context. He proposed exploring an early warning mechanism and strengthening coordination between ARF and other ASEAN-led forums. He also advocated for greater engagement with youth and the promotion of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.
45. In closing the session, the EEP from Canada highlighted the ongoing challenge of ensuring that EEP-generated ideas are effectively channelled into the ARF process. He emphasised the importance of formulating relevant and well-framed proposals that can resonate within the ARF's complex institutional structure. EEP China added two key points: first, the need to bolster economic resilience in East Asia amidst rising trade tensions by enhancing supply, value and production chains; and second, the importance of tackling transnational threats such as scams and cybercrime by strengthening legal frameworks and regional cooperation. EEP Singapore concluded by stressing the need to strike a careful balance when addressing non-traditional security challenges, such as digital economy, climate and energy security, through early warning mechanisms. While some issues may require securitisation, this must be done without constraining policymakers' ability to pursue functional and collaborative solutions.
46. In closing the session, the EEP from Malaysia noted that the discussions reaffirmed the ARF's vital role in further promoting dialogue and cooperation on regional security issues. However, he stressed that the ARF must evolve beyond

its traditional focus on dialogue and confidence-building to address a wider spectrum of emerging non-traditional security challenges in today's increasingly complex geopolitical environment.

AGENDA ITEM 5: RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE 17th ARF EEPs MEETING

47. The Co-Chairs shared that they will circulate to the ARF EEPs the draft key recommendations to be submitted to the ARF ISG on CBMs and PD.
48. The Co-Chair from Malaysia briefed on the draft of the key recommendation from the 17th ARF EEPs Meeting based on the discussions during the Meeting. The initial draft recommendations were as follows:
 - (i) To sustain and deepen discussions and dialogues on regional security issues that may have a destabilising impact on Southeast Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific. These include tensions in the South China Sea, the political and humanitarian crisis in Myanmar, intensifying major power rivalries, and the continued development of nuclear weapons along with related military provocations of the DPRK.
 - (ii) To maintain the momentum of discussions on cyber and digital security in future EEP meetings, including of its impact with AI, diplomacy as well as links to scam and crypto transnational crime syndicates operating in the region. The possibility of a CSCAP working/study group should be explored, which can, jointly with the EEPs make policy recommendations to the ARF Track 1 stakeholders.
 - (iii) To revitalise the approach and activities of the ARF and EEP group to ensure that its constructive, research-driven approach remains relevant to senior officials and leaders. This includes enhancing longstanding work on CBM and PD, to reinforce ASEAN centrality at a time of increasing strategic uncertainty.
 - (iv) To explore means of collaboration with subject matter experts, both in existing and emerging focus areas for the EEP group. This can be done either by directly engaging the group or through CSCAP.
49. A copy of the final consolidated recommendations is provided as **ANNEX 3**.

AGENDA ITEM 6: CONCLUDING SESSION

Dates and Venue of the 18th ARF EEPs Meeting

50. The Meeting was informed that Malaysia will resume its role as Co-Chair next year and invited any non-ASEAN ARF Participants who may wish to volunteer as the next Co-Chair for the 18th ARF EEPs Meeting.

Co-Chairs' Summary and Closing Remarks

51. In her closing remarks, the EEP from ROK summarised that the session under Agenda Item 3 acknowledged that the world is now living under the era of complex and uncertain geopolitical environment mainly stemming from evolving dynamics between major powers, namely US, China and Russia, as well as regional security challenges in Myanmar, Taiwan Strait, South China Sea and the Korean Peninsula. She highlighted that the EEPs also stressed the impact of non-traditional security issues such as climate change and natural disaster to regional security. She noted that, based on the assessment of the current security environment, participants shared their views on the importance of multilateralism and track-2 cooperation, particularly on the roles of ASEAN and ARF as an inclusive dialogue platform. While ASEAN Centrality may not be uniformly defined, there is no objection to the importance of ASEAN Centrality especially in tackling regional security challenges. She further touched upon the discussion on AI, where they discussed about digital security in the context of transnational crime. The presenter and discussants shared a common view that digital security issue is a cross-cutting concept that needs to be addressed in a comprehensive and strategic manner. The discussants suggested strengthening regional cooperation on information sharing, capacity building and engagement with private sector.

52. In his closing remarks, the EEP from Malaysia reflected on the wide-ranging discussions held during the meeting, which covered major power rivalries, external conflicts impacting the Asia-Pacific, transnational crime, political-security issues, humanitarian challenges within ASEAN and the continued importance of strengthening ASEAN Centrality and revitalising the ARF. He emphasised that processes, rather than events, drive engagements in the region. While ASEAN has been strong in this regard, it is crucial to continually revise and update these processes to ensure they remain relevant and yield tangible outcomes. EEP Malaysia also suggested exploring additional avenues for influencing policymakers, such as approaching senior officials and ministers directly at the national level. Multiple approaches should be reinforced to maximise impact. As Co-Chair for both 2025 and 2026, EEP Malaysia stated that it is committed to continuing these efforts with urgency, stressing the need for support from all EEPs, particularly the Co-Chair for 2026. The challenging environment should prompt bolder actions, not more caution. In concluding his remarks, EEP Malaysia expressed gratitude to all participants for their active contributions and support.

* * * * *