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PH'S 2026 ASEAN CHAIRSHIP AND SOUTHEAST ASIA'S GROWING TIES WITH TEXAS HIGHLIGHTED IN ASEAN PANEL DISCUSSION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

HOUSTON, Texas, 16 April 2026 — The Philippine Consulate General in Houston, together with the Consulates General of Indonesia and Vietnam, co-organized a panel discussion titled "**Discovering ASEAN: Southeast Asia's Story and Why It Matters to Texas**" at the University of St. Thomas (UST) on Thursday, 16 April 2026.

Held in collaboration with the UST Department of International Studies and Modern Languages, the event brought together three Houston-resident ASEAN Consuls General and a senior official from the U.S. Department of State for an engaging, introductory conversation on ASEAN — its identity, economic dynamism, and growing relevance to Texas and the United States.

The discussion featured remarks from the Consul General of Indonesia, who provided a foundational overview of ASEAN; the Consul General of Vietnam, who spoke on the region's economic story and trade ties with the U.S.; and **Consul General Gunther Emil Sales** of the Philippines, who presented on the Philippines' 2026 ASEAN Chairship and its theme, "*Navigating Our Future, Together.*" **Ms. Katherine Ho**, Regional Director of the U.S. Department of State's Office of Foreign Missions, opened the panel by underscoring ASEAN's strategic and economic importance to Texas and the broader United States. The session was moderated by **Prof. Yao-Yuan Yeh** of the UST Department of International Studies and Modern Languages.

In his remarks, Consul General Sales outlined the Philippines' three chairship priorities — **Peace and Security, Prosperity, and People** — and drew direct connections between ASEAN's regional agenda and Houston's role as a global hub for energy, trade, innovation, technology, and culture.

He highlighted flagship deliverables of the PH's chairship, including progress toward a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea and the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA), which, if concluded this year, would be the world's first region-wide digital economy agreement. He also called attention to ASEAN's growing energy needs and positioned Texas as a natural partner in the region's energy goals.

The event drew participants comprising UST students and faculty, academic organizations, and representatives from the business and professional community in Houston. An open forum followed the panel presentations, with the audience posing questions that reflected strong and genuine interest in Southeast Asia.

The event was organized in line with the Philippines' ASEAN Chairship this year, with the Post taking the lead in bringing together the three ASEAN consular missions and UST to introduce the region to globally minded students and academics in Houston.

"Houston is not just a gateway to the world — it is already deeply connected to Southeast Asia through its people, its port, and its industries," said Consul General Sales. *"Events like this remind us that the story of ASEAN is also, in many ways, the story of this city."*

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(L-R) Consul General Ourina Ritonga of Indonesia, Consul General Gunther Sales of the Philippines, Ms. Katherine Ho, Regional Director of the U.S. Department of State's Office of Foreign Missions, Consul General Hoang Thuy Duong of Vietnam, and Prof. Yao-Yuan Yeh, Chair of the University of St. Thomas Department of International Studies and Modern Languages, pose for the traditional ASEAN handshake.



Consul General Gunther Sales presents on the Philippines' 2026 Chairship priorities.



Prof. Yao-Yuan Yeh (rightmost), Chair of the University of St. Thomas Department of International Studies and Modern Languages, moderates the open forum of the panel discussion.