



SPECIAL REMARKS BY
PROF DR MOHD FAIZ ABDULLAH, CHAIRMAN OF INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC &
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (ISIS) MALAYSIA
AT
INAUGURAL SESSION
CONFERENCE ON INDIA-ASEAN DYNAMICS IN THE EMERGING INDO-PACIFIC ORDER:
PATHWAYS TO COOPERATION BEYOND THE THIRD DECADE
2 JUNE 2023, FRIDAY, 9.10 AM – 9.20 AM
PULLMAN KUALA LUMPUR BANGSAR HOTEL
ON
“MALAYSIA’S ROLE IN THE EMERGING INDO-PACIFIC ORDER”

H.E. Shri V. Muraleedharan, Honorable Minister of State for External Affairs, Government of India,

H.E. Mr Jayant N. Khobragade, Ambassador of India to ASEAN,

His Excellency Shri B.N. Reddy, High Commissioner of India to Malaysia,

Dr. Rahul Mishra, Director, Centre for ASEAN Regionalism Universiti Malaya (CARUM),

Distinguished Professor Dato’ Rajah Rasiah, Executive Director, Asia-Europe Institute,

Distinguished panellists, friends from academia and the diplomatic corps, guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Assalamualaikum Warahmatullahi Wabarakatuh, good morning, selamat pagi and namaskar.

1. First and foremost, my profound gratitude to the High Commission of India to Malaysia and CARUM for the opportunity to address this distinguished gathering today.
2. This conference comes at a most opportune time as we enter a new decade in ASEAN-India relations, against a geopolitical and geo-economic backdrop that is as dynamic as it is also challenging, if not altogether daunting.
3. To begin with, while Malaysia has not explicitly articulated its individual stance on the Indo-Pacific, Putrajaya’s alignment with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific points to its awareness of the significance of the emerging regional order. Indeed, as for this “wait-and-see approach” it is better to err on the side of caution than to falter on the precipice of imprudence.
4. That said, recent developments, including the flurry of strategies and the rise of minilateral mechanisms developed by Malaysia’s traditional strategic partners demonstrate compelling reasons why Putrajaya needs to change course so as to take on a more significant role.
5. Indeed, Malaysia possesses the requisite tools to do so. However, we need a more nuanced approach, and a greater willingness to use the requisite vocabularies and



semantics in official statements. This is crucial or else we risk being left behind at the starting line in the Indo-Pacific discourse. But this doesn't have to be so.

6. As a trading and maritime nation, Malaysia is a crucial partner for any Indo-Pacific nation that aims for greater trade and maritime connectivity. Strategies demonstrated thus far underline the utmost significance of economic cooperation, supply chain resilience and maritime security and connectivity.
7. Hence, to provide greater legitimacy, relevance and a voice to Malaysia's foreign policy objectives, Putrajaya needs to articulate its own terms of what a balanced, holistic mechanism would look like.
8. In the arena of economic diplomacy, Malaysia had already "taken the plunge", as it were, when it joined IPEF last year. While we know that IPEF is not a free trade agreement, it could be harnessed as a tool for economic diplomacy, promoting growth, resilience, and inclusiveness. Nevertheless, Malaysia must put more thought into long-term effects and demands of such partnerships considering that there are other opportunities and mechanisms now available.
9. In this regard, long-term, strong bilateral relations with prominent Indo-Pacific nations is one of Malaysia's biggest strengths and greatest tools. There is, therefore, space for Putrajaya to both advance relations through new strategies and at the same time, gain inspiration on what its own priorities are in the region.
10. As a firm believer in the active regionalisation process, Putrajaya continues to regard ASEAN as a cornerstone of its foreign policy. ASEAN centrality is crucial to the Indo-Pacific order, and this is something that Malaysia strongly recognises. The Indo-Pacific puts Southeast Asia at the heart of geostrategic engagement.
11. Despite ASEAN taking a hit in recent years due to several challenges including the situation in Myanmar, the major power rivalry and the threat of increased polarisation of perceptions, Malaysia remains steadfastly committed to its role in strengthening ASEAN mechanisms and agencies.
12. We continue to mobilise ASEAN mechanisms to address shared global challenges in the face of seemingly insurmountable stumbling blocks. This is the prism from which we should view Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's call for "carving Myanmar out for now", rather than let the country's protracted crisis hinder the entire bloc.
13. For Malaysia, ASEAN will remain a permanent priority and so its role is clear. ASEAN will help bolster Malaysia's foreign policy 'participation' and vice-versa. It provides legitimate room to navigate the highways and byways of the geopolitical landscape. Putrajaya's firm belief in the ASEAN process will underscore its importance in the Indo-Pacific, not only on paper but as an integral part of the dynamic regional architecture.
14. Now, let me pause and redirect our focus on India in the context of its trajectory in the Indo-Pacific. To my mind, any discussion of the Indo-Pacific without including India is akin

to discussing Elizabethan drama without mentioning Shakespeare! Or to vary the metaphor, it's akin to talking about that momentous eve of India's Independence without mentioning Nehru's iconic 'Tryst with Destiny' speech! For one, it is no exaggeration to say that the emergence of the Indo-Pacific has given new strategic meaning to India. Nobody has described it in more animated language than Prime Minister Modi himself when he referred to the Indo-Pacific as a "free, open and inclusive region that embraces all in a common pursuit of progress and prosperity."

15. Historically, the region has seen the evolution of various partnerships and multilateral configurations, with India taking centre stage. Now, detractors may say otherwise but to my mind, New Delhi's "multi-alignment" approach and adept compartmentalisation of its role in the Indo-Pacific, has breathed new life into India's foreign policy and significantly enhanced its diplomatic clout.
16. Despite Malaysia's lack of an Indo-Pacific strategy, particularly vis-à-vis India, let us not forget that Putrajaya has taken substantial and symbolic steps in projecting its priorities in the region. Just last year, Malaysia and India conducted all three security joint-exercises – Udara Shakti, Samudara Laksamana, and Harimau Shakti – indicating a common interest in security cooperation on a people-to-people and capacity building level.
17. As for the synergies and opportunities for Malaysia-India cooperation through IPOI and SAGAR based on shared challenges, these are also priorities for Malaysia articulated via the philosophy of nationhood as expounded by Prime Minister Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim known as Malaysia MADANI.
18. Three decades of ASEAN-India relations and, might I add, six and a half decades of Malaysia-India relations, is indeed a significant milestone. A testament no less to resilience, camaraderie and steadfast commitment for continued cooperation. Navigating the new status quo brings as many challenges as it does opportunities. As seasoned partners, and with firm commitment, I am confident that ASEAN-India relations will only emerge stronger and more resilient.
19. Undoubtedly, Malaysia can play a significant and unique role in the Indo-Pacific. What we lack in articulation on paper, in reality however, we exceed expectations in terms of consistent multilateral engagement for decades.
20. As for India-ASEAN dynamics in this emerging order, I believe that we are afloat on a full sea and must therefore "take the current when it serves, or lose our ventures."