

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY**

**YAB DATO' SERI ANWAR IBRAHIM  
PRIME MINISTER OF MALAYSIA**

**AT THE 36TH ASIA-PACIFIC ROUNDTABLE (APR)  
10th AUGUST 2023  
HILTON KUALA LUMPUR**

Yang Berhormat Dato' Seri Diraja Dr. Zambry Abd Kadir,  
Minister of Foreign Affairs,

Yang Berbahagia Pengiran Datin Shazainah binti  
Pengiran Dato Paduka Shariffuddin, of the Brunei  
Darussalam Institute of Policy and Strategic Studies,  
and Chair of the ASEAN-ISIS Network,

Yang Berbahagia Professor Dr Faiz Abdullah,  
Chairman, Institute of Strategic & International Studies  
(ISIS) Malaysia,

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and  
gentlemen,

Assalamu'alaikum, warahmatullahi wabarakatuh, and Salam Malaysia MADANI.

1. The last time I delivered a Keynote Address at the Asia-Pacific Roundtable was at its 8th iteration, in 1994. Therefore, it is indeed a pleasure to return to this distinguished gathering—after almost three decades.
2. The issues that you deliberate on, while rooted in this region, ultimately have a bearing on every part of the globe, ever more so as Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific becomes the centre of the global economy and strategic calculus.
3. Since I last addressed the APR, this region has undergone tremendous changes, significantly altering its geopolitical landscape and triggering geo-strategic recalibration among nations.

4. The strategic assumptions that long shaped the Asia-Pacific have been transformed in an age of flux where the only certainty now is that of uncertainty. If this sounds rather ominous, indeed it is, and will not bode well for the region unless carefully managed.
5. To begin with, the intensifying major power rivalry between China and the United States is testing, and straining, the fabric of the region's longstanding architecture and norms. This rivalry has led to the emergence of new mini-lateral groupings across the board, which despite its window dressing, could be cast as exclusive and exclusionary in nature.
6. These geopolitical developments have overshadowed some regional mechanisms and multilateral frameworks, calling into question their resilience, and readiness, even relevance, to upholding peace, prosperity, and security in the Asia-Pacific.

7. We are also seeing a growing trend of division and bifurcation across a spectrum of segments – chiefly now impacting both trade and technology. The race for cutting-edge technology, like in the semiconductor industry, which could have taken a productive turn, is instead now another major source of hostility between both powers – the so-called Chip War.
8. Sanctions and export reductions countermeasures along with other tit-for-tat manoeuvres will have ramifications to both global supply chains, and the overall trends of economic cooperation. And, of course, it doesn't end there.
9. Indeed, these bilateral dynamics are influencing how major powers engage with third nations that are inevitably caught up in the cleaving systems, rules and even norms. This further adds pressure and constraints to developing countries as they seek the best options, from all stakeholders and providers.

10. Under the weight of such stresses, there is a drastic need to revitalise not just cooperation among nation states but greater inclusivity and equity. Yet, truth be told, there seems to be no urgency to address this.
11. Some have spoken of Southeast Asia being a key part of the chessboard in the new Great Game waged between Beijing and Washington, as the latter once did against Moscow.
12. While the major powers continue to assure that a binary choice is not being imposed, the reality for countries in Southeast Asia and, indeed, many others across the Asia-Pacific, is that it is the only choice offered, if not by word, then by deed.
13. It would be a great loss for the entire region if this unfettered rivalry affects all that have been painstakingly achieved by existing and consequential ASEAN-led multilateral mechanisms.

14. Their success relies on the culminative efforts put in by ASEAN and our partners to create inclusive venues where policymakers and thought leaders of the Asia-Pacific — be they from major, middle and small powers — meet as equals.
  
15. Closer to home, we see aspects of these dynamics increasingly play out in critical and longstanding issues that we face in Southeast Asia.
  
16. In the South China Sea, we are seeing elements of major power rivalry seeping into the territorial disputes, intentionally or otherwise. For Malaysia's part, we have always advocated for the peaceful and constructive settlement of all disputes, in accordance with the universally recognised norms and principles of international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

17. The continued militarisation of the maritime region coupled with the use of grey zone tactics to reinforce claims and stymie the lawful exploitation of resources is neither peaceful nor constructive. Added to this dangerous mix are reports which continue to stream in on the deteriorating maritime ecosystem and fish stocks devastated by illegal and unregulated fishing.

18. Malaysia remains consistent in its stance, including on the protection of our sovereignty, rights, and interests in our Exclusive Economic Zones in the South China Sea. We do so unwaveringly, in the face of all challenges and claims.

Distinguished delegates,

19. In light of this, it bears stressing that Malaysia's security lies "in" and "with" the region and not "from" the region. We leverage on our geographical location as both a land and maritime country straddling the most important trade routes, and economic position as a key part of various global supply chains to promote regional security.

20. Coterminously, on the geopolitical front, Malaysia must continue to ride on our good relations with both China and the US to promote a stronger rules-and-norms-based order.
21. This order is not based on might, or the tendency to ignore the very rules and norms one preaches about when it is inconvenient. That is uncondusive and hypocritical. What's good for the goose must be good for the gander. So, it must be an order based on fairness, respect and understanding, compassion and international law.
22. This, ladies and gentlemen, is not a pie in the sky because in our estimation, both China and the US have affirmed their commitment to it. It must go beyond multilateral trade dealings to the realm of a practical geostrategic architecture.
23. Indeed, there must be a serious effort to give effect to these grandiloquent terms. Malaysia will do our part to promote this consensus.

24. It is imperative that this new consensus on global security takes into account the views of the Global South. Without detracting from the contentions of the age of uncertainty, an objective overview of the current geopolitical landscape projects the Global South as showing signs of greater strategic independence. In any event, this development shouldn't be a cause for concern.
25. For Malaysia, this is a natural evolution of a process that began with national independence and should therefore be respected and promoted.
26. Accordingly, Malaysia will engage proactively and independently with various initiatives by regional powers and stakeholders, in both the Asia and Indo Pacific. We do so with a clear view of our national interest and priorities, which is deeply tied to the upkeep of inclusive regional architectures.

27. While T. S. Eliot reminds us that “History may be servitude. History may be freedom,” yet the lessons of history are to be ignored only at our peril. In this vein, recent history has shown us that there is an unbroken linkage between national security, national resilience, good governance and democratic accountability.

28. Under the Unity Government, Malaysia is strengthening all four. We also affirm our commitment to comprehensive security for the ultimate objective of ensuring stability, order and peace.

Distinguished delegates,

29. In these times of division and uncertainty, ASEAN and its member states must meet its challenges head on. But first and foremost, it is necessary to resolve ASEAN’s increasingly fractured unity.

30. We must cast off inertia and actively seek opportunities that emphasise inclusive, multilateral approaches and reinforce ASEAN-centred mechanisms. Redouble efforts not just with existing dialogue partners but looking further afield to other multilateral and regional groupings, in Central Asia or the South Pacific, that share similar interests. Only together can we truly stem the slide into a divided world steeped in rivalry.

31. This is not a condemnation of ASEAN, but rather an exhortation that we must do better, because we can. ASEAN as a regional mechanism has always stepped up when it matters the most. Rooted in our origins, crisis has always made ASEAN stronger and more resilient.

Distinguished delegates,

32. All-out war between nation states, once thought a relic of the past, ripples through Europe and with it, the destruction of lives, property, communities, prosperity, and principles of laws that took decades to build.
  
33. Elsewhere never-ending cycles of civil wars rage without much interest or care by the international community. In the Asia-Pacific, the risks caused by climate change and ecological disasters are evermore acute, leading to a need for more coordinated regional response. All these in turn, increases the push factors for the forced migration of people desperate to escape from their devastated conditions.

34. Make no mistake, Southeast Asia is not immune to these challenges and tragedies. Far from it. The continued post-coup violence and instability in Myanmar, remains one of ASEAN's biggest strategic and humanitarian challenges. It is also a tragic reversal for a member of our ASEAN family that held such promise. Now, more than ever before, the imperative for ASEAN unity and centrality cannot be overstressed. Failure to act would be tantamount to a dereliction of collective responsibility.

Ladies and gentlemen,

35. From the exponential rise in the cost of food, commodities and energy, to unreliable and more expensive supply chains, many have had to face uncertainty at the day-to-day level, with governments scrambling to plug the gaps. This is a double blow, coming on the back of a world that is still recovering from the many challenges brought about by the global pandemic.

36. Here in Malaysia, in the face of the aforementioned challenges, plus fluctuating inflation, we have undertaken significant efforts to control the cost of living and provide alternatives which brings added fiscal stability to the lives of Malaysians, especially those most vulnerable among us.

37. Towards this end, we have launched the Madani Economy, to boost the Malaysian economy and empower the people by addressing the various challenges and issues related to our competitiveness in the global arena. The primary strategic thrust here is to restructure the economy towards making Malaysia a leading Asian economy, and providing the people with the benefits to enjoy a better quality of life, elevating the status and dignity of our nation.

38. Malaysia is determined to strive ahead to be a more equitable, accountable, and sustainable nation. Given the national, regional and global circumstances, we cannot continue old practices and risk losing our regional attractiveness and competitive advantages.

Distinguished delegates,

39. It is no exaggeration to say that what we are now seeing is a recognition that the long-held approaches to international relations, to regional architecture and their global governance mechanism have long been dominated by Western-centric or Euro-centric characteristics.

40. How sustainable or equitable is this in a diverse world, where regions like Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, various parts of Asia and even the South Pacific are increasingly demanding their rightful seat at the decision-making table?

41. The rumblings we have seen, both in the Asia-Pacific and beyond, have clearly shown that it cannot be business as usual any further. What shape or form the emerging world might take is still up for debate. A primary characteristic, however, has to be an international system that is “politically and culturally diverse but economically and functionally interconnected”. Achieving this requires tolerance, understanding and cooperation.

42. We now see higher quality free trade agreements, standards of governance and better access to technologies at lower barriers for entry, thanks in part to healthy rivalry. Southeast Asia ought to leverage our competitive advantages and the opportunities provided by our major external partners.

43. Nevertheless, unfettered competition is different. Unfortunately, what we are seeing is rivalry between nation states, between the major powers, becoming increasingly marked by zero-sum calculations and assumptions. This only leads to a dark, self-destructive action-reaction spiral. Under these circumstances, any semblance of victory is pyrrhic.
44. Yet, it is not all doom and gloom. Amid these challenges, there are encouraging signs of progress in the Asia Pacific region, many of them centred here in Southeast Asia.
45. Despite being severely battered by the global pandemic, the region has rallied and have put in place more proactive mechanisms to face prospective black swan events. We have done this not just with its member states, but in cooperation with its Dialogue Partners and global institutions.

46. Furthermore, the ASEAN Community has come into its own, and we are now just two years away from the culmination of ASEAN's Vision 2025. In the context of the Asia-Pacific, the sure but steady progress of ASEAN into a more integrated, cohesive, competitive, innovative, and dynamic Community at a time of fluid global geopolitics and geo-economics is surely among the region's unsung successes.

47. ASEAN is determined to ensure the long-term effectiveness and resilience of the regional organisation against uncertain geopolitical trends, and in ensuring that it is more relevant to its domestic audiences and stakeholders.

48. I am pleased to note that as one of the Co-Chairs of the Post-2025 High Level Task Force, Malaysia has been committed to this process and will continue to shepherd the shaping of the core elements that would make up the post-2025 vision, and their tangible measurements.

Distinguished delegates,

49. Despite the challenges of uncertainty ahead of us, I remain optimistic that they can be overcome. That uncertainty can be turned into opportunity. Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific is a region of significant promise. The onus is on all of us to be responsible to not lock ourselves into a downward spiral, feeding on our worst suspicions towards each other.

50. Together, we can find solutions that will lead to a prosperous, sustainable, and just future. Discussions such as the Asia-Pacific Roundtable play a key role in this process. Your deliberations will continue to tackle some of the most pressing challenges we face.

51. I look forward to the outcomes of these discussions.

Thank you.

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