



INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC &
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
(ISIS) MALAYSIA

ACTIVITY REPORT 2022:

Reset & return of optimism





At the start of the year, optimism infused much of the world after two years of Covid lockdowns, restrictions and economic turbulence.

While the desire to embrace a "new normal" and "learning to live with Covid" was understandable, the coronavirus did not recognise timelines and efforts to move towards endemicity were hampered by outbreaks from new variants.

At ISIS Malaysia, January started with courtesy visits from the Pakistani and Indian high commissioners – Amma Baloch and BN Reddy – followed by an official visit from the Japanese ambassador Takahashi Katahiro.

On the writing front, **Darshan Joshi's** *Edge* article started the op-ed ball rolling. The piece was in response to a forum, COP 26 and beyond, centred on the global South's response to climate ambition. The event on 20 January was held in conjunction with Asia Foundation.

Climate change was a major theme

at ISIS Malaysia with senior analyst **Ahmad Afandi** coordinating a series of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) policy roundtables and the fifth holder of the Tun Hussein Onn chair **Prof Emeritus Tan Sri Zakri Abdul Hamid** presenting a public lecture in September on biodiversity, conservation and how to address the ecological crisis. At the end of January, **Alizan Mahadi**, Darshan and Afandi helmed a workshop on the national climate change policy with the Environment and Water Ministry (KASA).

ISIS Malaysia also submitted a report on the economic instruments for climate policymaking. This is Malaysia's first research project of its kind, whereby it examined the domestic landscape of using economic instruments to achieve climate and environmental goals. This research was supported by the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Afandi noted that he introduced prospective instruments for climate adaptation and disaster-risk reduction, such as insurance and a risk-based land surcharge, to strengthen Malaysia's climate

policymaking. He also took the lead to highlight the increasing importance of adaptation and correcting market failures related to unsustainable development practices.

Darshan's COP 26 piece marked the start of a new media partnership with *The Edge*, which featured our op-ed pieces. *The Edge* published pieces ranging from **Jamil A Ghani's** call to adopt a data-centric approach to "co-exist" with Covid-19, which coincided with Malaysia reopening its borders on 1 April, to **Lee Min Hui's** piece on amendments to the Employment Act, which came into force on 1 January 2023.

On the project front, there was continuity. **Farlina Said** described 2022 as vital for understanding Malaysia's technological landscape amid international shifts. This theme was explored in a project from 2021 – the national R&D survey conducted under the auspices of the Malaysian Science and Technology Information Centre (Mastic).

The project sought to map



Malaysia's research and development across four sectors: business enterprises, government research institutes and agencies, institutions of higher learning and civil society. The project, expected to complete in 2023, aimed to quantify Malaysia's research intensity and expenditure in 2020. The other researchers who worked on this project were **Harris Zainul**, **Nazran Johari**, **Sofea Azahar** and **Haris Shaiful**.

Another project from 2021 was the Johor agrofood policy 2021-2030 (DANJo), which started in July and continued until November. Led by **Dr Larry Wong**, DANJo was a far-reaching policy to transform the southern state into an agricultural powerhouse. Among the recommendations were smart agriculture, agtech and digital transformation; moving up the value chain and forming networks to serve domestic and overseas markets; building and nurturing of talent and transformative leadership; and greater agrofood and food security data empowerment. The project highlighted the fact that even though Malaysia is becoming more and more urbanised, we can't forget or neglect the importance of the agricultural sector to the country and its people.

War clouds

February was another step towards relaxation of Covid protocols with the resumption of physical events. ISIS Malaysia hosted a roundtable on "peaceful coexistence", led by **Thomas Daniel**. This was followed by a visit from the United Nations Office on Drug and Crime's counter-terrorism team, who took part in a roundtable on terrorism and violent extremism in Malaysia, convened by **Shahriman Lockman**.

The media engagements continued with **Yanitha Meena Louis'** appearance in NewsX on 1 February where she discussed



the implications of India's budget for Malaysia. **Zarina Zainuddin** published a piece on the Look East Policy (LEP), which acted as a curtain-raiser for other LEP-related events throughout 2022.

To mark the return to "normalcy", we held a Chinese New Year buffet lunch on the ISIS Malaysia grounds on Chap Goh Mei (15 February). The event was notable as it marked the first gathering of ISIS folk after months of working from home while Building B underwent extensive renovation.

A fortnight later, on 24 February, we launched the Google policy paper on digital trade and digitalisation, authored by **Calvin Cheng** and Dr Juita Mohamad.

Joanne Archana Bala, government affairs and policy lead, Google Malaysia, pointed out the transformative nature of Covid-19, which altered the way we live, particularly our shopping habits. She discussed the need to build resilience into the digital economy, which is expected to reach US\$35 billion by 2025.

The Google papers noted that as Malaysia moves towards confronting a post-Covid landscape and tries to catapult itself to a high-income nation, it should strengthen and support the digital economy, which added three million new consumers since the start of the pandemic in 2020. Following the presentation, research director Alizan moderated a panel on the topic, joined by Fabian Bigar, MyDigital CEO, and Smita Kuriakose, World Bank senior economist.

On the same day of the Google papers launch, the world witnessed the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which led to supply chain disruptions. While the conflict dominated headlines well into March, locally, the news cycle was dominated by landslides and floods, which hit badly the greater Klang Valley and claimed several lives.

A few days before the natural calamity in the Klang Valley, we hosted a webinar on the US strategic and defence shift and what it means for Malaysia. Elbridge Colby, lead architect of the US 2018 national defence strategy, discussed the American foreign policy strategy shift. He argued that GDP can be viewed as a proxy for global power and with China's rise, the US is trying to use non-military power as an economic leverage,

at unpacking these strategies and their respective digital ambitions. The ISIS forum at the end of March took a look at Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy, which became the topic of discussion at year-end with professor **Dai Mochinaga** presenting on the Digital Silk Road, state-sponsored cyber operations and Japan's activities under the Indo-Pacific to fortify and strengthen cybersecurity.



which it can then translate into political leverage.

A fortnight later, on 14 March, we hosted analyst Dr Prashanth Parameswaran's webinar on US President Joe Biden's Indo-Pacific strategy. Against the background of US-China rivalry, the main question was why Washington finds it difficult to commit itself to Southeast Asia. No one would doubt the region's importance, Farlina added, as it reverberates with major power politics, technological rivalry and emerging security challenges.

The various Indo-Pacific strategies – American, Indian, European, Chinese and Australian – all have their respective digital ambitions. Throughout 2022, Farlina organised, participated and contributed to discussions aimed

Meanwhile, Meena took part in the Cosmos Dialogue on Bangladesh-Malaysia relations where she urged both nations to move beyond the stereotypical "labour relations" that have traditionally defined their relationship. She also called on Putrajaya to help Dhaka engage with Asean.

In April, the foreign policy and security studies team hosted a webinar on the Russo-Ukrainian war. The focus was on the economic fallout of the war, food and energy security, and failure of Asean diplomacy.

From pandemic to endemic

Min Hui examined the gendered impacts of the pandemic after two years of "living with Covid".

Women paid a heavy price with the pandemic merely exacerbating discrimination and economic inequality. She continued to publish research and analyses on the progress Malaysia has made on gender equality, with a focus on women's work and building inclusive care-centred labour policies.

Min Hui also co-authored a chapter on labour trends during Covid-19 and a care-centred approach to labour policies for a TalentCorp book project, scheduled for publication in 2023.

In the second quarter and with the relaxation of Covid restrictions, ISIS Malaysia welcomed more visitors – the Kazakh and US ambassadors in April. During Ramadan, Farlina and Harris coordinated the Malaysia Scholars on Korea (MASK) Network meeting to discuss expectations of South Korea's new administration led by President Yoon Suk-yeol and growing a network of potential mediators in the Korean Peninsula conflict.

Farlina continued the digital theme

with a May webinar followed by the Huawei papers in August on embracing technology and preserving data sovereignty. The webinar's goal was to raise awareness among the government, agencies and public about preserving data sovereignty while using digital technology, such as cloud, in the age of digital transformation.

Zarina took the lead in organising one of the more successful ISIS webinars of the year – the 40th anniversary of the Look East Policy. More than 180 participants signed up for the webinar, which examined the then fourth prime minister's signature policy.

Another virtual APR

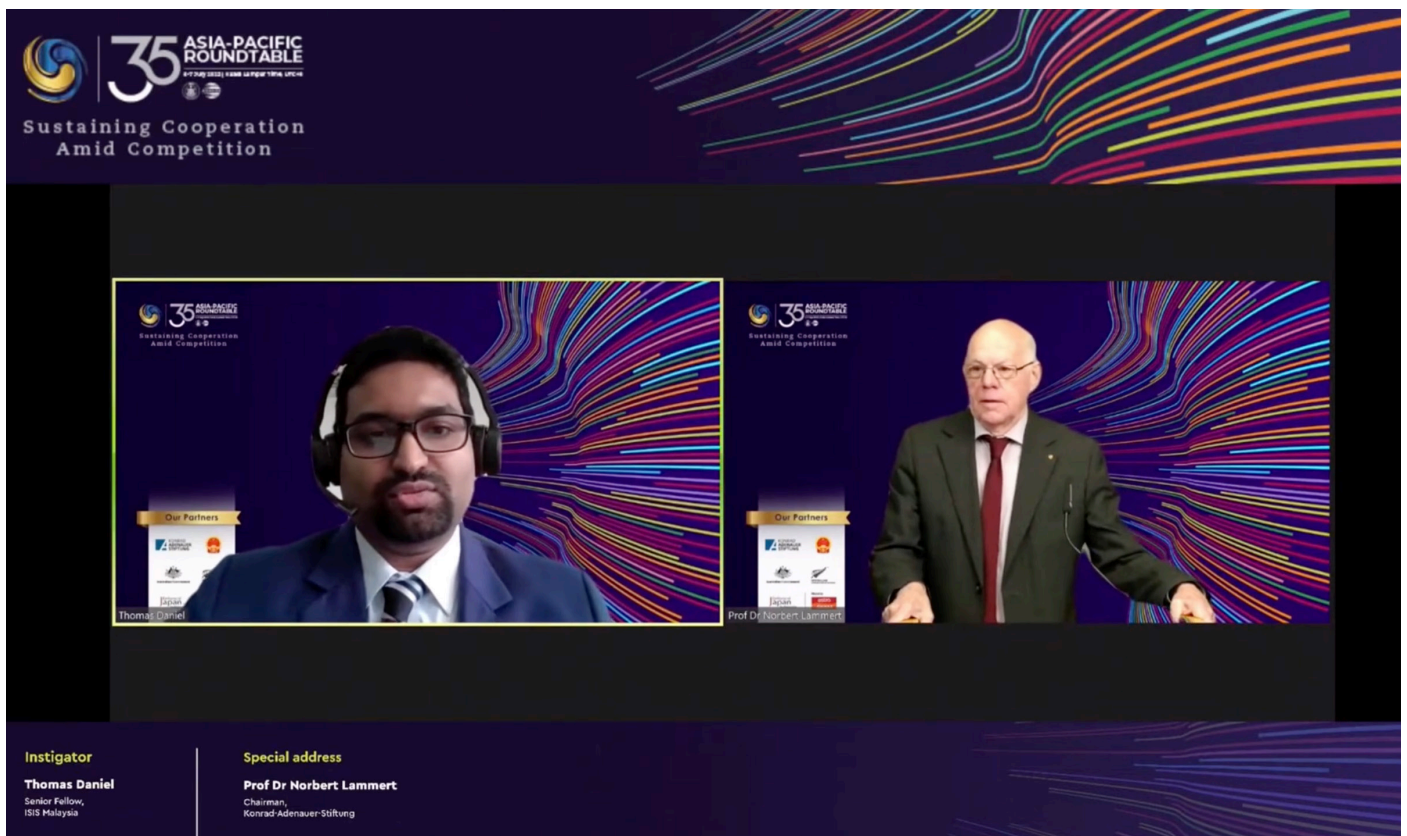
In the second half of the year, ISIS Malaysia geared up for one of its two major events – the 35th Asia-Pacific Roundtable (APR). It was successfully convened virtually again because of uncertainties over travel restrictions at the time of planning. We attracted a wider

audience because of the no-fee policy.

The theme, "Sustaining cooperation amid competition", moved the discussion of strategic issues away from "pandemic-parochialism" onto the strategic pulse of the Asia-Pacific region that remains in the throes of multi-spectrum major power competition and the importance for all stakeholders to continue to find ways of cooperation to mitigate the more damaging aspects of unbridled competition.

More than 460 delegates engaged in candid and frank discussions, a hallmark of the APR, on topics ranging from the impact of climate change on the region to nuclear rearmament in the Asia-Pacific, and prospects of a resurgent European engagement in the region.

The current chair of the Asean-ISIS Network, Assoc Prof Dr Hoang Anh Tuan, and ISIS Malaysia chief executive **Herizal Hazri** gave the opening remarks. Both reflected on the ongoing challenges that faced this region, and the role of



EU collaboration

As the nation transitioned towards endemicity and with the administration's mandate for staff to return to the office, ISIS Malaysia held more events at the restored Building B.

We started a series of stakeholder engagement initiatives with the European Union Delegation, starting with Gunnar Weigand, managing director for Asia and Pacific, European External Action Service (EEAS), who expounded on the EU's strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Wiegand reiterated that the bloc seeks partnerships to tackle issues, such as climate change, loss of biodiversity, energy issues and to provide inputs that go beyond its economic interests.

Thomas noted that the key expectations and outcomes of these engagements are the articulation of Malaysian voices and perspectives on the EU strategy, its prospective gaps and strengths, and domestic expectations. These engagements commenced from December 2022 and will end on the first week of March 2023. On 15 December, Meena took part in an open symposium called EU-Asean at 45: from dialogue partnership to strategic partnership, organised by Carum.

Meena was one of the panellists for session 3 of the symposium where she delved into the EU, Asean and the emerging regional order. She spoke on the importance of consultative dialogue mechanisms in the EU-Asean relationship. She shared the panel with Dr Seun Sam, policy analyst from Cambodia and Dr Maria Thaemar C Tana from the Philippines. Former Thai foreign affairs minister Kasit Piromya delivered the keynote speech.

The and the EU theme continued on same day with a roundtable on the "EU's role in a contested Indo-Pacific" at ISIS Malaysia.



Track-Two diplomacy supporting policymakers' efforts to find durable solutions to intractable challenges.

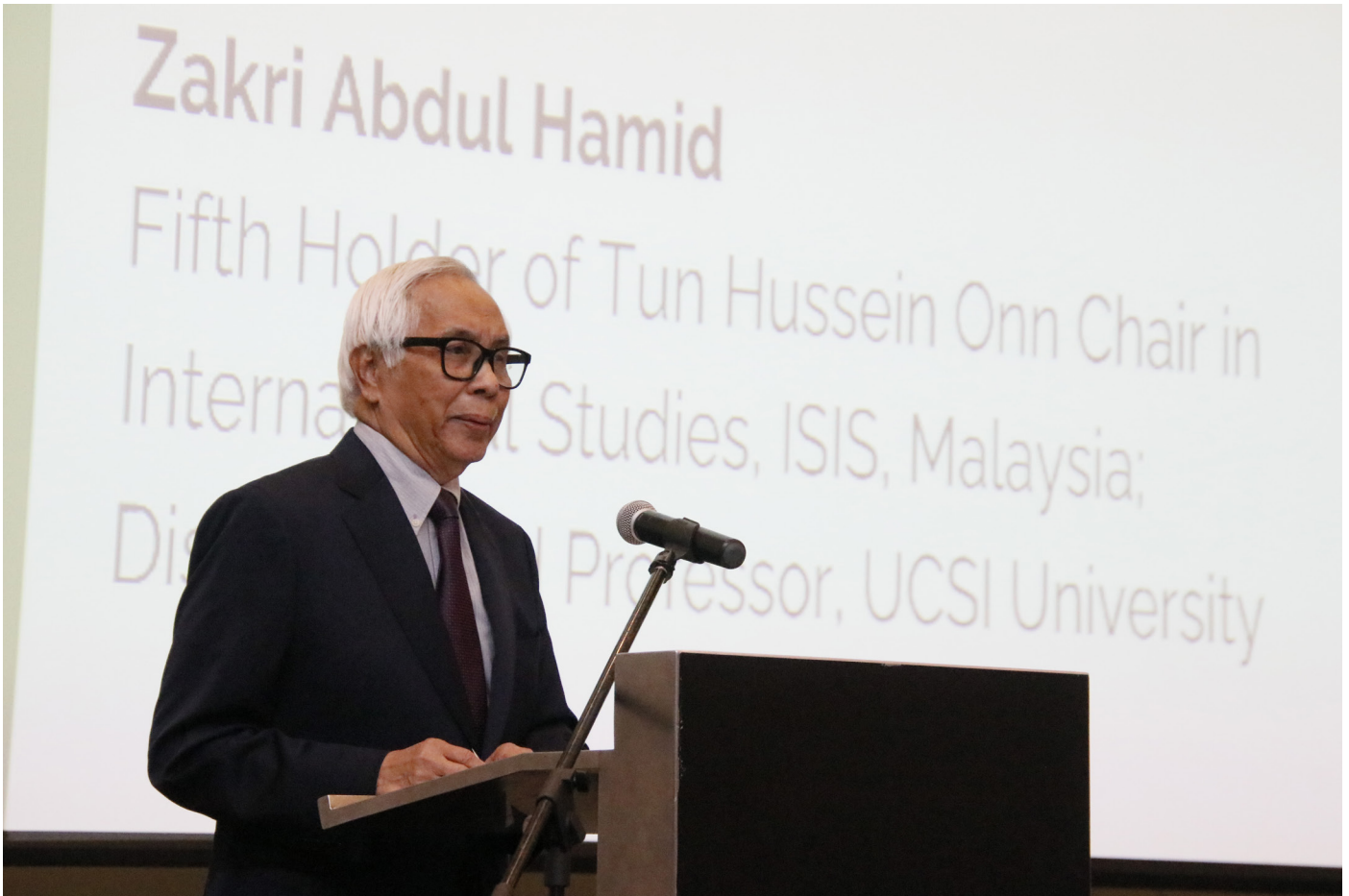
The roundtable also saw the participation of key diplomats from the region. Ouyang Yujing, the Chinese ambassador, spoke at session 1 on China's Dual-Circulation Strategy. He articulated the rationale behind China's new economic approach and its strategic impacts, not just in China, but to the wider Asia-Pacific region.

Australian high commissioner Dr Justin Lee delivered an address that examined not just the longstanding value of the bilateral relationship but highlighted Australia's enduring commitment and engagement to Asean, and its efforts to enhance ongoing initiatives. New Zealand's ambassador to Asean Stuart Calman spoke from Jakarta on the strength of Wellington's relationship

with Asean, the importance of partnerships in the wider Indo-Pacific and its contributions towards advancing our principles-based approach in the wider region.

The 35th APR featured a special address by Prof Dr Norbert Lammert, chairman of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. His remarks focused on Europe's key strategic challenges vis-à-vis the Russia-Ukraine conflict, including seeking more independent alternatives to its security and energy dependency on the United States and Russia.

On 21 July, we collaborated with Asia Society Policy Institute (ASPI) to launch a report on data and AI in Southeast Asia at Hilton Kuala Lumpur. ASPI political-security affairs director Elina Noor launched the report, which mapped the aspirations of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.



Big-picture concerns

The new Tun Hussein Onn chair in international studies holder, Prof Zakri, presented his inaugural lecture on the politics of biodiversity loss at a physical event, which acted as a precursor to another ISIS Malaysia flagship conference – PRAXIS 2022.

More than 150 attendees listened to Zakri expounding on the looming ecological disaster humanity is facing, science diplomacy at work, the global North's call on the South to preserve biodiversity, disconnect between poverty and preservation of nature, and the need to return to the principles of the Convention on Biological Diversity – an ambitious agreement with 150 signatories reached at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit.

In 2021, **Prof Datuk Dr Denison Jayasoria** joined ISIS Malaysia. The appointment led to ISIS Malaysia serving as the

secretariat to the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPGM) on B40 and urban poor. Parliament had in October 2019 set up the APPGM to facilitate the engagement of MPs with civil society, academics, civil servants and the private sector in a multi-stakeholder format to "discuss, research and submit reports of recommendations to the Parliament or its committees".

Return of physical PRAXIS

We convened PRAXIS 2022 on 3–4 October at Hilton Kuala Lumpur, with 147 participants over the two-day event. It was our first large-scale event since the pandemic.

PRAXIS has always taken a domestic slant and the 2022 edition was no different. The six sessions over 1½ days focused on "Building a better Malaysia" and recovery after 2½ years of the pandemic. The conference addressed the

crosswinds of geopolitical conflict, climate and energy crises, the pandemic's legacy of inequality, inflation and supply chain issues. The first panel, moderated by Alizan, consisting of Prof Evelyn Devadason, Nadia Jalil and Prof Aries Arugay tackled the question of regional stability and risks for Malaysia and Asean as we entered 2023.

Two of the panellists focused on fiscal pressure and prudence, urging for an expansionary Budget 2023, saying that the nation can't afford to go back to business as normal, i.e. pre-pandemic times. In the second session, Afandi moderated on the topic of human cost of climate crises. Ili Nadiah, Assoc Prof Dr Yanti Rosli and Lakshmi Lavanya Rama Iyer discussed the need for Malaysia to stop being reactive and focus on adaptation to natural disasters. Their take was that climate policies must be viewed holistically, integrating national priorities and strategies. Adaptive capacity



policy measures that must be implemented to ensure resiliency in the economy.

Prof Emeritus Datuk Dr Norma Mansor opened the last session by addressing how the pandemic revealed the gaps within Malaysia's social protection framework. She highlighted how the lack of information resulted in a less efficient approach towards implementing social protection mechanisms during the early stages of the pandemic. Dr Amanina Abdur Rahman said the pandemic helped raise awareness of the importance of social-protection mechanisms. Edmund Cheong recalled how Perkeso, at the end of 2019, began preparations to deal with

must be a bottom-up initiative that meets the top-up approach halfway. Climate policies must also consider children and their representation is crucial as their voice is missing from the discourse.

Min Hui convened session 3 on career, care and woes, which reflected on the "crisis of care" exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the challenges faced by women, who are most often the default care workers of inherent family systems.

Assoc Prof Dr Lydia Foong highlighted the disjointed nature of Malaysia's provision of care for children. Shazana Agha provided a policy perspective related to care work. She spoke about the importance of paternity leave to encourage an equal distribution of care work in households. Mahuran Saro Sariki highlighted that the main reasons women take a break from their careers are to either raise a family, care for a family member or because childcare is too expensive. Sariki shared that a part of TalentCorp's mandate is to enhance women participation in the workforce.

Eddin Khoo moderated session 4 on the creative economy. The state of creative economy in Malaysia



can be summed up as having "abundance of talent with lack of economy". The creative economy share of Malaysia's total economy has been small – less than 2% and had been static for years.

Session 5 was centred on ensuring a safer digital future. With Farlina as moderator, Dr Rachel Gong, Fabian Bigar and Mazmalek Mohammed discussed the challenges to realise Malaysia's future in the digital space. The final session focused on resilience and building back a better Malaysia, looking at the

the potential risk of a pandemic impacting on the economy. Dr Lee Hwok-Aun suggested leveraging on data to generate agile and resilient social-protection mechanisms.

Podcast success

On 18 October, ISIS Malaysia and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung held a closed-door discussion on China's soft power strategies in Asean. Following the briefing,



we welcomed Dr Aude Bernard who spoke about the geography of migration in Asia, identifying the trends, patterns and policy implications.

A visit from the UK's COP 20 ambassador Ken O'Flaherty acted as a precursor to the submission of a major research paper on economic instruments for climate policymaking to the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.

At the start of the month, we held the first series of hugely anticipated SDG policy roundtables since its inception in 2020. Afandi acted as the main coordinator and liaison, presenter and writer on flood and climate adaptation. The roundtables brought together various stakeholders, including government officials, academics, civil society and international organisations, and were the culmination of two years of research on localising SDGs by the APPGM-SDG team.

In China, Xi Jinping secured an unprecedented third term as president at the 20th Communist Party congress. The historic event led to an exclusive event at ISIS Malaysia – Insights into the 20th party congress and China's future. Thomas moderated the

event featuring Tang Rui from the People's Republic of China's Embassy, **Angeline Tan** and Dr Peter Chang (Universiti Malaya).

In the weeks leading up to GE15, the #talkingpolicy podcasts resumed with Min Hui talking about the true cost of excluding women from power and the risks of running a democratic deficit. Jamil, Min Hui, Harris, Thomas, **Qarrem Kassim** and Afandi weighed in on what the next government should focus on, ranging from the deficit to climate change, refugee and asylum seeker policy, helping SMEs and combating disinformation.

GE15 took place on the third Saturday of the month and resulted in Pakatan Harapan garnering the most seats. On 24 November, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim cobbled together a coalition comprising of Barisan Nasional (BN), Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS), Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS) and Parti Warisan to form a "unity government". Perikatan Nasional became the official opposition.

Ending on high note

On 7 December, we marked the 40th anniversary of the LEP with the launch of Akiko Kato's *40 Years of Look East Policy 1980–2022*

at the Malaysia-Japan forum. ISIS Malaysia has had a long relationship with Japan, as noted by Katsuhiko. In 2022, we produced articles and participated in webinars and forums. The activities revolved around the theme of "past, present and future" of Malaysia-Japan relations. Zarina spearheaded most of the Japan-focused activities.

Less than a week later, ISIS Malaysia and the MASK Network held a joint forum on "Building closer Malaysia-South Korea ties through 21st century challenges", which examined Seoul's Indo-Pacific strategy. Lim Sang-woo, coordinator for the Indo-Pacific Strategy Task Force, gave a special presentation on South Korea's strategy.

On 15 December, we hosted a workshop on the EU's role in a contested Indo-Pacific. The event kick-started a series of engagements commissioned by the Delegation of the European Union in Malaysia. These engagements aimed to identify Malaysian perspectives on the prospects of EU-Malaysia cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.





Discover more

