

**THE 36TH ASIA-PACIFIC ROUNDTABLE (APR)
“AN AGE OF STRATEGIC UNCERTAINTY”**

**OPENING REMARKS BY PROFESSOR DR FAIZ ABDULLAH
CHAIRMAN, INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
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HILTON KUALA LUMPUR**

Yang Berhormat, Pengiran Datin Shazainah binti Pengiran Dato Paduka Shariffuddin of the Brunei Darussalam Institute of Policy and Strategic Studies, and Chair of the ASEAN-Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) Network,

Heads and members of the ASEAN-ISIS Network,

Excellencies, distinguished panellists and delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Assalamu’alaikum, warahmatullahi wabarakatuh, selamat pagi, good morning!

1. It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the Asia-Pacific Roundtable. If you are here from abroad and for the first time, then welcome to Malaysia and to Kuala Lumpur. To the loyal supporters of the APR, welcome back!
2. This Roundtable is organised by ISIS Malaysia in cooperation with the ASEAN-ISIS Network, made up of Southeast Asia's leading think tanks. The ASEAN-ISIS Network is the only think tank network of its kind to be officially recognised and registered with the ASEAN Secretariat.
3. The Network has a history of proactive, influential work in stimulating and facilitating the necessary conversations and research leading to greater economic integration and security cooperation in this region. We do this, through our much-cherished Track 1.5 and Track 2 engagements. It is my earnest hope that we, the current and even future generations of ASEAN-ISIS leaders, carry on this trend, as the region continues to evolve and grow, and with it, our priorities, and challenges.
4. As we celebrate the 36th edition of the APR this year, we are happy that we can once again convene in person. In 2020, the APR was postponed for the first time ever in its now-approaching-four-decade history, because of the global pandemic. In 2021 and 2022,

the Roundtable was held virtually.

5. The track record of this Roundtable speaks for itself. We have, through many years of hard work, developed a niche and reputation that is recognised worldwide as one of the most important annual Track 2 conferences of its kind in this region.
6. Since its inception over three and a half decades ago, the APR has grown significantly in scope, depth and size, regularly attracting the participation of policymakers, thought leaders, intellectuals, scholars, officials, journalists and interested individuals to address strategic issues concerning the Asia-Pacific and the world at large.
7. The APR provides the opportunity for bringing together some of the best minds in the region and from different parts of the world to stimulate frank discussions, serious policy debate and networking across a broad spectrum of topics. While the bulk of role-players and delegates have generally come from Southeast Asia and the wider Asia Pacific, the APR has seen a steady and growing following from ~~by~~ North America, Europe, South Asia and more recently, the Middle East.

8. The continued success of the APR is also greatly attributed to the support given by successive Malaysian Prime Ministers and the government, as well as the region's leaders.

9. I would like to express my sincere appreciation and gratitude to the Honourable Dato' Seri Anwar bin Ibrahim, Prime Minister of Malaysia, who has agreed to deliver the keynote address of this conference tomorrow morning. This will not be his first time speaking at the APR. Dato' Seri Anwar delivered the Keynote at the 8th APR in 1994, and participated as a speaker in the 11th APR in 1997 as Deputy Prime Minister.

Distinguished delegates,

10. This year's theme, is "*An Age of Strategic Uncertainty*" was selected after much deliberation. While we do not seek to be alarmist or dramatic, the theme is an honest reflection on the regional geopolitical and geoeconomic environment that we find ourselves in. The questions and challenges that come with it perhaps affect those of us from small and medium states more than others.

11. What can small and medium states do in the face of increasingly contested and challenging realities? Do we have the agency to mitigate the worst of these trends? I submit that it might be difficult, but it is nonetheless incumbent on us to give it everything we have.
12. We need to face the facts as they are and attune it to what we'd like it to be. The cost of continued bifurcation of regional mechanisms and architectures to the spheres of influence of old – once thought a far-flung fantasy in the post-Cold War world – would be exponentially devastating to all of us.
13. In the face of this age of uncertainty, groupings like ASEAN, perhaps in greater collaboration with other regional groupings from around the world and likeminded countries and international stakeholders, should double down on the inclusive, multilateral mechanisms and established norms and principles of international law.
14. In that spirit, ladies and gentlemen, we have curated up to seven sessions for the 36th APR – 5 plenaries and 2 concurrent sessions. Lest we miss the forest for the trees, these deliberations address both the broader themes impacting our current and future strategic calculus, as well as more granular issues.

15. There is no greater uncertainty than the prospects of rivalry between Beijing and Washington potentially headed towards inevitable conflict. Nevertheless, let us not be held captive in our discourse by the fear of the Thucydides Trap. As the great French writer Michel de Montaigne once said to the effect: “There’s nothing to fear but fear itself!”

16. Some penetrating questions come to the mind, in this regard. Are there still enough common interests between the two powers to stymie further bifurcation? What could the future of trade and investment in the Asia Pacific look like, especially mechanisms and initiatives like RCEP, the CPTPP and the BRI, amidst such geopolitical rivalry?

17. How will the continual evolution of the Indo-Pacific construct, slowly but surely embraced by more countries in the Asia Pacific, and their key partners from afar, affect or mitigate these strategic uncertainties? But just to be sure, if anyone were still curious, let me put it to rest – no, there are no plans to rename the Asia Pacific Roundtable to the Indo-Pacific Roundtable! This is not a race to the bottom. It’s not a game of one-upmanship!

18. Drilling it down further, we explore how such tensions have impacted the South China Sea dispute and the prospects or limitations for Southeast Asian countries amid an intensification of competition in the semiconductor and other critical tech industries.
19. And as we mark the 50th Anniversary of ASEAN-Japan relations, we ask how Japan's changing strategic outlook and corresponding policies will in turn affect longstanding cooperation with Southeast Asia.
20. Last but not least, amidst all these regional and global developments, let us not take the eye off the ball in our own region. Our third plenary, this afternoon, examines the domestic developments in selected Southeast Asian countries – Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand – and their ramifications on both national and regional policies.
21. These are some of the issues that we will discuss over the next two days, and I for one look forward to them.

Distinguished delegates,

22. Let me now take this opportunity to express our sincere thanks and gratitude to the distinguished instigators and speakers for their

readiness to share with us their time, knowledge and expertise in various ways, and for their tremendous contribution towards enhancing the richness of the discussions during this Roundtable.

23. I also extend heartfelt thanks and appreciation to our partners: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade, the Delegation of the European Union to Malaysia, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, the Embassy of the People's Republic of China, the ~~of~~New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade, the Embassy of Japan in Malaysia, and Embassy of the United States. Their generous contributions and assistance have once again made it possible for us to convene the Asia-Pacific Roundtable successfully. I also thank our colleagues in ASEAN-ISIS for their unwavering support.

24. For those who attended the welcoming dinner yesterday, you heard me underscore the APR's three core pillars of support, namely, from successive Malaysian Prime Ministers, our partners and funders, and the hardworking staff of ISIS Malaysia.

25. Allow me to add a fourth pillar – you, our dear and respected delegates. Your continued support and active participation have played a huge part in making the APR what it is today.

26. Probing, thoughtful questions and insightful interventions from the floor are vital components of a conference. It is such essential inputs that form the distinctive hallmark of the APR. I am confident that the discussions will be as lively and engaging as in the past.

27. I wish all of us a fruitful 36th Asia Pacific Roundtable.

Thank you.