

WELCOMING REMARKS

36th Asia-Pacific Roundtable

9 July 2023

Hilton, Kuala Lumpur

Introduction & niceties

- Bismillahirrahmanirrahim,
- Excellencies, Distinguished Officials, Ladies and Gentlemen,
- Assalamu'alaikum Warahmatullahi Wabarakatuh and a very good morning,
- I would like to begin by thanking Professor Dr. Mohd Faiz Abdullah, Chairman of ISIS Malaysia, for inviting me to participate in the 36th Asia-Pacific Roundtable today.
- My congratulations as well to you, Professor, on your appointment as ISIS Malaysia's Chairman earlier this year (*17 February 2023*).
- After a few years of virtual interface due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is my honour to be here today in person, and to address this gathering of eminent guests and participants.

Asia-Pacific Roundtable

- For close to four decades now, the Asia-Pacific Roundtable (APR) has been a leading Track II conference in the region.
- Every year, the APR brings together many distinguished thinkers of various backgrounds, who contribute to constructive discussions on issues affecting the region's security, stability and prosperity.
- Having attended many of these roundtables, I am always inspired by the APR's intentional, timely and coherent selection of themes and topics.

- The APR has focused on a range of issues such as COVID-19, climate change, major-power competition and the idea of “Indo-Pacific”, all of which continue to add to the uncertainty facing us all today.
- In this unpredictable and rapidly-evolving world situation, it is a given that we live with vulnerability and anxiety.
- For this reason, I am in full support of the theme of the roundtable this year: “Strategic Uncertainty”.
- Allow me to say that, the term “Asia Pacific” has also evolved since the Roundtable was established.
- “Indo-Pacific” has emerged in our regional security lexicon and this is the context of my remarks. It reflects the changing security dynamics, concerns and the way we manage our cooperation.

Strategic Uncertainty

- In recent years, very few could have predicted the myriad of developments and crises the world has seen, from the outbreak of COVID-19 and the ongoing war in Ukraine, to the rapid onset of Artificial Intelligence (AI).
- With every new development and crisis, we often find ourselves a step behind and forced to re-strategise to “cope” with changing times.
- Even with early planning and solid strategies, challenges can sometimes occur along the way and derail our steps.
- Yet, uncertainty does not necessarily mean we are destined to fall behind.
- In fact, uncertainty can be a source of improvement, motivation and innovation, empowering us to be prepared, flexible and adaptable, amid so many unknowns on the horizon.
- For many of us living in the Asia-Pacific / Indo-Pacific region today, strategic uncertainty has become an ever-present reality.

Opportunities in the Asia-Pacific

- Over the past few decades, our region has become an economic powerhouse and the engine of global consumption growth.
- Home to nearly two thirds of the global population, our region has some of the world's greatest biodiversity, most diverse ecosystems and largest multinational companies, as well as the world's fastest-growing internet market.
- By 2030, our region is projected to dominate various areas of development, accounting for two thirds of the world's middle class and over two thirds of global GDP.
- It is also expected to outpace the United States and become the world's largest financial technology market.
- By some estimates, our region will likely determine the shape and direction of global development as a whole.
- Therefore, the onus is upon us to leverage existing and emerging opportunities to our advantage and maintain a competitive edge.

Challenges in the Asia-Pacific

- That said, I would be remiss if I did not mention the challenges we are faced with today.
- As we all know, major-power rivalry is intensifying in the region, leaving us with unimaginable consequences. This is very concerning.
- Such rivalry, if not properly managed, can also increase the risk of the region's long-running flashpoints escalating into open conflict (*Korean Peninsula, cross-Straits relations, South China Sea, etc.*)
- With global power shifting to the region, we have also seen a proliferation of unilateral groupings that promise cooperation, but may intensify major-power competition (*Indo-Pacific strategies and security alliances like the Quad and AUKUS*).

- All these political risks are set against the backdrop of existential threats to the region, such as climate change, biodiversity loss and breakout of future pandemics.
- At a time when we are confronted with intersecting crises, our ability to address them holistically depends upon our ability to mobilise resources at the scale needed.
- Here, I ask myself: “Do we have these resources at the scale needed, and are we coordinated in our response to these crises?”

ASEAN

- Now, let me turn my focus to Southeast Asia and ASEAN as the heart of the Asia-Pacific / Indo-Pacific.
- ASEAN's global importance has risen significantly over the years, thanks to our increasing economic prosperity, our strategic location at major sea-lanes of communication, and our key role as the primary convenor of regional fora and meetings.
- Recent projections for ASEAN indicate that we will continue to make positive growth, and that we are on track to achieve important milestones over the coming decade.
- By 2030, ASEAN is poised to become the world's fourth largest economy after the United States, China and the European Union.
- 70 percent of our population will have become "middle class", with only 1 percent living in extreme poverty.
- Our GDP is predicted to rise to 10 trillion dollars (USD), leading to our designation by many experts now as “the next economic superpower”.
- Yet, our continued success and potential can be offset by security issues, particularly those emerging from geopolitics, climate change and the cyber space.

- With high stakes at play, we know that we cannot afford to be passive in the face of threats against our peace, security, stability and prosperity.
- A question that we continue to ask ourselves is: “How do we proactively leverage opportunities and address challenges, while ensuring sustainability and resilience?”

Conclusion

- With all these considerations in mind, I am encouraged by the selection of discussion topics at the roundtable today.
- Major-power dynamics, the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN strategies, the South China Sea, and others... these are the topics we ought to be talking about in the overarching context of security issues in the region.
- This roundtable today is our opportunity to engage each other in earnest on not just our common issues and challenges, but also our collective desire and will to live in a region of lasting peace, security and stability.
- I personally look forward to hearing and learning from the ideas, perspectives and experiences of every one of you here today.
- With that, I will end my speech here and wish us all a productive discussion ahead.
- Thank you.

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