



## **Solidarity in an Age of Competition and Disruption**

Opening Address by Professor Dr Mohd Faiz Abdullah

Chairman, ISIS Malaysia

MASK program

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Ambassador Yeo Seung-bae,

His Excellency from the Republic of Korea Embassy in Malaysia,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to Solidarity Amid Disruption, a MASK program held here in the very halls of ISIS Malaysia. Thanks to an MoU between ISIS Malaysia and the ROK Embassy, the MASK Network was formed – the Malaysia Scholars on Korea Network of academics, teachers and think tankers.

1. Perhaps in this day and age, nothing would shape discourse on a nation's economic, political and strategic future more than competition and disruption.
2. Speaking of disruptions, I have just returned from COP28 where discussions attempted to find coordinated actions to limit long-term global temperature rising by 1.5 degrees Celsius. Rising sea levels, heavy floods, urban heat island effect and biodiversity loss – this is the rogues' gallery of climate change – and it's getting from bad to worse!



3. And the consequences are far reaching, incurring significant economic losses. Case in point, over the last 50 years, Asia alone has accounted for half of the world's economic losses from natural disasters, amounting to more than US\$1.3 trillion. Hence, to forge greater resilience and solidarity in the face of crises, we need better coordination and more capacity building among others.
4. But nature is not to blame for everything. The Ukraine-Russia conflict for instance impacted energy costs, turned supply chain on its head, and unleashed market instability and price volatility while GDP growth forecasts were thrown out the window, dragging down the region's recovery.
5. Amidst this crisis, the competition for ideology and influence would permeate in other parts of engagements, making it even more difficult to achieve consensus and solidarity.
6. As for major power competition, states may choose to entrench power positions whether in economy, global governance or the military. You may call it friend shoring, de-risking or self-reliance policies, these are effectively protectionist measures in the quest for economic dominance.
7. Calling them "development pathways" won't change the fact that unbridled competition leads to intense rivalries which could spill into



the security or military domains. We are already seeing this unfolding in the semiconductors sector.

8. The moral is that when two powers are fixated on primacy, chances are the outcome could lean more on calamity rather than fortune. This may not be cast in stone, but we know that according to Thucydides' Trap, when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power, the consequence is a clash.
9. In this vein, the intense rivalry today among the major powers is the bitter child of time! The upshot of the 2008 financial crisis is the rise of the emerging economies, where lo and behold, 15 years later, the battle lines are drawn. One pole accuses the other of displaying ambitions for international economic governance. The other pole retorts that the table is big enough for others to take their seats.
10. Global entities such as the WTO and the UN are fundamentally shackled and rendered impotent to mount any effective check and balance. Thus, the "World Order" based on predictable systems becomes destabilized as structures formed on so-called international rules buckle under the weight of skepticism and cynicism.
11. Meanwhile, as power shifts, the hegemon would aim to reassert and maintain dominance specifically in the economic, technological and military arenas.



12. From our standpoint, both are indispensable partners for the region, and it's a fool's errand to engage, let alone rejoice in disruptive behavior which serves only to promote protectionism, sow distrust between nations and segregate communities. Worse still, expanded militarization and misunderstanding and animosity are surefire formula for the disruption of our trajectory to progress.
13. The arena of conflict is certainly not confined to two major players as countries choose specific alliances to advance domestic goals. To navigate the power rivalry, they may craft their own Indo-Pacific strategy, where some may have more containment elements than others. Solidarity could also mean alignments that build accords while sequestering other players.
14. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the South Korea Indo Pacific Strategy and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific underscore the imperative of inclusivity. In an environment slouching more towards ideological divisiveness rather than concordance, we need to see more of this – solidarity amid disruption.
15. Current circumstances make it rife for the participation of small and middle powers to shape international environments. Amid the circumstances propelling the rise of China is the emergence of developing economies in global governance.



16. Again, the numbers don't lie. Emerging economies accounted for almost two-thirds of the world's GDP growth and the swift recovery from the pandemic has demonstrated their resilience. On the strength of global forecasts, emerging markets will grow by more than twice the speed of developed markets in 2023. Asia alone will add US\$22 trillion in new wealth between 2020 and 2025.
17. The growth opens spaces for small and middle powers to shape the global order while influencing international outcomes. Thus, ROK and Malaysia can play a role to build the environment for common prosperity. To my mind, ROK, and naturally, the ambitions to be a global pivotal state, along with Malaysia's interest of ensuring regional and international stability – this could find solidarity amid disruptions.
18. Yet, perhaps the first step to realizing shared goals is to identify strategic commonalities. Here, we could look forward to the first session that will discuss potential sectors of common views, inclusive of the Korea ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI) that could ensure stability in a disruptive world.
19. But truth be told, common goals may be difficult to construct for two nations who may know each other only on the surface. People-to-people exchanges are the anchor of resilient relationships. They reap rewards for closer diplomatic relations, greater economic



engagements and shared strategic point of views needed to ground solidarity amid future disruptions.

20. Such soft power influence tied to positive outlooks has to penetrate beyond the glitz and glamour of K-pop or headlines in the news. (Now, having said that, don't get me wrong – BTS, Blackpink, Twice, and so on – these are great agents of soft power too!)
21. There are also positive directions. In 2019, the joint number of tourists between Malaysia and Korea and vice versa exceeded one million for the first time. Further, it is estimated that there are 15,000 Koreans and 5,000 Malaysians who live and work in Malaysia and Korea, respectively.
22. Unfortunately, the 2022 ASEAN-Korea Centre's survey finds people-to-people awareness, especially among Korean youth on Malaysia, remains low with knowledge of neighbors such as Thailand higher. Thus, the second panel exploring ways to enhance such ties is imperative to lay the building blocks of resilient Malaysia-ROK relations today, and the future.
23. On that note, I look forward to the outcome of the panels today. I wish everyone a good seminar and fruitful discussions.