

**The Japan ASEAN Roundtable**  
***“Geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts impacts and implications on  
multilateral and bilateral relations.”***

**Opening Remarks by**  
**Prof Dr Faiz Abdullah, Chairman, ISIS Malaysia**

**30 January 2024**  
**Auditorium, ISIS Malaysia**

His Excellency Ambassador Kiya Masahiko, Ambassador of Japan to ASEAN,

His Excellency Takahashi Katsuhiko, Ambassador of Japan to Malaysia,

Esteemed panellists and distinguished guests,

Selamat Petang, Konnichi-wa, Good Afternoon!

1. Welcome to the Japan ASEAN Roundtable titled ‘Geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts impacts and implications on multilateral and bilateral relations.’
2. At the outset, let me thank the Embassy of Japan in Malaysia for their support in organising this Roundtable – particularly in securing the participation of Ambassador Kiya.

Ladies and gentlemen,

3. The Roundtable aims to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Japan-ASEAN relations, and to look forward to the next phase of the relationship. We deliberately planned for this to happen now, just slightly over a year, to allow us a more clear-sighted, not so much introspection than a review.
4. Reflecting on this, it was 50 years ago when Japan was the first of what became ASEAN’s Dialogue Partners to engage with the regional

organisation, informally, via the Synthetic Rubber Forum in Tokyo, in 1973.

5. This was a culmination of Malaysia's effort to engage with Japan on increasing competition from Japan's production of synthetic rubber. Remember, we were then still the world's largest producer of natural rubber. There's a saying, from strife, we find peace, from problems emerge solutions. The fortuitous turn of events saw Malaysia's engagement with Japan on a contentious issue becoming the first step towards the enduring cooperation between Japan and ASEAN.
6. The beginnings of this cooperation between ASEAN and Japan could not have come at a more crucial time. The 1970s were a tumultuous decade for us in Southeast Asia – the end of Vietnam war, the invasion of Cambodia, the oil shortage crisis – among others.
7. Yet it was during this period which ASEAN stepped up and proved its value and vision, through the declaration of ZOPFAN, the First and Second ASEAN Summits and the establishment of the ASEAN Secretariat. These set the foundations of future mechanisms we know today – the ARF and EAS included.
8. Japan too sought proactive engagement during this time, grounded in the Fukuda Doctrine, which saw it utilise its strengths as a rising economic power to build trust via mutually beneficial cooperation with Southeast Asian countries. The consistent, concentrated financial and technical capacity building contributed greatly to the development of ASEAN member states – setting the ground for our own robust economic growth in the 1980s.
9. Make no mistake, Japan was very much at the forefront of Southeast Asia's regional and national development during our crucial years – and there is no reason it cannot remain a major player in the years to come.
10. Therefore, Ambassador Kiya's presence and remarks shortly after this are much anticipated for those of us who not only have to interpret our relationship, but actively contribute towards charting a sustainable yet enduring and robust way forward.

Ladies and gentlemen,

11. Like other relationships with key Dialogue Partners, the Japan-ASEAN relationship is not immune to the ebb and flow of global geopolitics and geoeconomics. This is something I hope our panellists will address later.
12. The tit-for-tat responses between China and the United States which encompass militarisation, coercive trade, investments and supply chain policies, weaponisation of currencies and technologies are deeply concerning. Despite multiple reassurances of no binary choice being forced on the region, actions speak otherwise.
13. For Southeast Asia, the unfettered rivalry between China and the United States bodes nothing but ill for this region. While there are benefits to a degree of rivalry, we can only reap these benefits if we are both cohesive and united.
14. Abandoning non-alignment, overtly aligning with one major power over another, at the expense of regional interests, is unlikely to lead to a positive outcome for Southeast Asia.

Distinguished guests,

15. In conclusion, It bears reminding that the future and growth of ASEAN's relationship with Japan must focus on exactly that – the future, and growth. Repeat existing arrangements for too long, even if they are workable, runs the risk of stagnancy.
16. It is clear that Japan realises that ASEAN's growth, needs, and capacities are now increasingly diverse, in as much as reflected in the desire for partnerships – focused as much on the management of urbanisation and digital economies, as it is on traditional infrastructure growth.
17. For ASEAN member states, it entails an effort to understand how Japan and its national priorities itself have evolved, from its national defence to the advent of Society 5.0. Understanding what and how to leverage is something we must proactively push for, and not passively wait for offers to come in.

18. I hope that the remarks and discussions of the Roundtable will contribute to the necessary conversations for all parties, especially for us in Malaysia, who will assume the Chairmanship of ASEAN in 2025.

I wish everyone a good and fruitful discussion.