

**NAVIGATING GEOPOLITICAL CURRENTS:  
MALAYSIA AND AUSTRALIA'S PIVOTAL ROLE IN THE ASIA  
PACIFIC.**

**THE 2024 GARETH EVANS ORATION BY  
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PRIME MINISTER OF MALAYSIA,  
AT THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY**

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Thank you, Foreign Minister Penny Wong, for that kind introduction.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me to begin by acknowledging the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people, Traditional Custodians of the land on which we gather today, and pay my respects to their Elders past and present. I extend that respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples here today.

I am delighted to be back at the Australian National University, an institution of consequence to this country and the broader region. When the ANU was established in 1946, its pioneers naturally envisaged that it would serve to advance higher education.

More than that, the Australian government vested the ANU with the vital mission of broadening and deepening this country's understanding of what we now call the Asia Pacific, thereby helping to define Australia's place in global affairs. In introducing the bill establishing this university, the Australian Minister for Post-War Reconstruction at the time said that Australia's relations with its neighbours and partners "must be carefully studied in order that they may become friendly and fruitful, as they must be if our future is to be safeguarded and if we are to make our full contribution in the councils of the nations."

Almost eight decades later, the study of Australia's external strategic environment is evidently being spearheaded on this campus, as we witness the extensive Asian collections of the Menzies Library and the tremendous scholarly output across the board, leaving no one in doubt as to why this university remains a leading centre for Pacific and Asian studies.

It is indeed a great honour to deliver this oration named after a great friend, Gareth Evans. As Foreign Minister of Australia from 1988 to 1996, Gareth was on the frontlines of diplomacy at a pivotal moment for this region and the world. The end of the Cold War led to political and economic shifts that swept away old certainties. It presented new risks and opportunities for countries like Australia. And Gareth was there to make sure that Australia strategically adapted to that new world, including through the creation of APEC.

It is therefore fitting for me to take this opportunity to speak about how Malaysia and Australia can work together and navigate yet another pivotal moment in our region's history. For despite the tyranny of distance, the destinies of our two countries have long been intertwined, right from the beginnings of Malaysia itself.

Malaysia won't forget the heroism of the "Anzac breed." As Prime Minister John Curtin said in March 1942: "Our men stormed Gallipoli, they swept through the Libyan desert; they were the 'rats' of Tobruk; they were the men who fought under the 'bitter, sarcastic, pugnacious Gordon Bennett' down Malaya and were still fighting when the surrender of Singapore came." From the tragedy of the Sandakan Death Marches to the defence of Malaysia against threats of the Cold War – foreign and domestic,

all existential – Malaysia will remember that Australia was there for us.

Economic relations between Australia and Malaysia have grown from strength to strength in recent years based on mutual geo-economic interests and the pursuit of regional prosperity. Last year, our trade was valued at about 27 billion Australian dollars, cementing Malaysia's position as Australia's second-largest ASEAN trading partner. Globally, we are Australia's tenth-largest trading partner.

Commodities such as hydrocarbons, coal, palm oil and refined copper are a significant part of our bilateral trade and underscore the trade element of our geostrategic interests in the Asia Pacific. Malaysia prioritises Australian produce and foodstuffs based on their high quality, safety, and dependability.

Beyond that, Malaysia and Australia are parties to four economic frameworks, including the world's largest FTA, namely, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. These signal our joint interest in facilitating trade and investment across this dynamic region.

We are also heartened by the trade-focused components of Australia's recent Southeast Asia Economic Strategy (SEAS), which recognises the need to deepen such collaboration between Australia and ASEAN amid growing geopolitical uncertainty. Nationally, Malaysia is on track, with its New Industrial Master Plan 2030 and MADANI Economy Framework outlining similar priority areas alongside the SEAS.

In the years to come, new opportunities will emerge for Australian investors in digitalisation, renewable energy and energy transition, agro-processing and the downstream of the chemical and mineral sectors, coinciding with Malaysia's push towards becoming a complex, advanced economy.

Ladies and gentlemen,

A recent hallmark in our relationship, formerly categorised as a Strategic Partnership, is its elevation to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which reaffirms our strong bilateral ties, with cooperation cutting across multiple spheres, often stretching beyond the traditional economic, diplomatic, security and cultural ties. More importantly, it also emphasises shared regional aspirations and the intent to cooperate strategically on a multilateral level.

Despite contributing less than one per cent to global greenhouse gas emissions, as an oil and gas-producing nation, Malaysia is dedicated to achieving net-zero emissions by as early as 2050 and fulfilling our commitment to the Paris Agreement. We have set ambitious targets to support the energy transition, including a 70% share of renewable electricity capacity by 2050, a substantial increase from the current levels of 25%.

Now, as reducing emissions is only one side of the coin, planning to adapt to the impacts of climate change is therefore imperative. Recognising our shared vulnerabilities, Australia, Malaysia, and ASEAN countries must strategically plan to adapt to rising sea levels, heat waves, and disrupted water cycles to enhance climate resilience while safeguarding investments in low-carbon transitions.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It has become an understatement to say that we now live in unsettled times. A sense of foreboding has seeped into the discourse on the future of our region. This stands in stark contrast to how we spoke about the Asia Pacific at the turn of this century. At the time, there was a clear consensus that the principal challenge emanated from non-traditional threats. This

was an era when terrorism repeatedly reared its ugly head with the tragedies of 9/11 and the 2002 Bali bombings.

On the economic front, there was broad agreement that cross-border trade and investment would help build interdependence and moderate rivalries. Our pet peeves were relatively benign quarrels over market access, tariffs and quotas.

Yet, I recount that juncture in recent history to underline how fundamental assumptions about preserving peace and prosperity in our region have altered. Globalisation is decidedly under assault. Economic interdependence is now seen as indicative of duress or, worse, of buckling under the weight of coercion. For some countries, the preservation of stability warrants nothing less than a more muscular approach towards international affairs.

Our responses to the rise of China will be a critical determinant of whether our region will be characterised by détente or discord. To tailor our strategies effectively, we need to adopt a measure of empathy; to put ourselves in their shoes; to see how others see us. For the leaders of China, it is only natural for them to be more forthright in asserting their interests. A growing economy naturally leads to greater diplomatic influence and a more formidable military.

In their eyes, the adverse reactions to China's rise – militarily, economically and technologically – represent nothing less than an attempt to deny their legitimate place in history. The obstacles being placed against China's economic and technological advancement will only further accentuate such grievances.

Nevertheless, while we are confronted with a situation of contending perceptions, I do not for one moment suggest that we may turn a blind eye to behaviour or action that is not in consonance with international law and norms.

It is also crucial that we understand the profound changes that have taken place in the United States. The past thirty years have been a period in which key parts of the American industrial base have been thoroughly hollowed out. The collapse of the working class in the United States is one of the most consequential societal shifts of our era.

Globalisation has not worked for them in the way it has for workers of Asia. The long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have exacted an immense toll on the psyche of the people. The upshot is a preference for leaders who are more transactional with the rest of the world – those who profess to put America first.



We are also going through fundamental shifts in global assumptions about what societies should aspire to be. For over 150 years, at least since the Meiji Restoration of 1868, it became the immutable truth that to be modern or even civilised was to become Western.

Today, a chasm is developing between what we now call the Global North and the Global South. We therefore need to start accepting that the Global South now see multiple pathways for advancing their societies – and not just those prescribed and endorsed by the Global North. Accordingly, we should not take for granted that Western perspectives on the future world order would be embraced universally.

There is growing impatience with how global institutions are failing to reform themselves. Designed in the aftermath of the Second World War, the United Nations Security Council and the Bretton Woods institutions reflect a world that is now long gone. The Washington Consensus is gradually eroding, if not altogether disappeared. We should therefore not be surprised when forums such as BRICS start to gain purchase. If one avenue for asserting new realities is impeded, others will take its place.

But we should be wary when these take the form of mini-lateralism, because it could have the unintended consequence of fomenting suspicions rather than bridging differences. It is therefore crucial that we look at ways to enhance multilateral institutions and other arrangements that are inclusive by design.

There can be no easy and straightforward responses to our present circumstances, for they are immensely complex. They are rooted in vexed questions about the rightful place of societies in the world and in history, their dignity, and their livelihoods. It boils down to fundamental questions of values and identity.

For many countries, a natural response to these changes is to build their defences and strengthen their network of strategic relationships. For Australia, this has principally manifested itself in building a more potent naval capability. We will also chart new paths for expanding bilateral ties in areas such as artificial intelligence and cybersecurity.

At the same time, I believe that Malaysia and Australia have a duty to try their utmost to encourage the United States, China and other major players in the Asia Pacific to conduct themselves in a manner that is conducive to the enhancement of regional cooperation and economic integration.

For hard-headed realists, it has become fashionable to assert that major-power rivalry has become a structural feature of regional affairs and that nothing can be done to moderate it. I do not accept this fatalistic view of the world.

Working on our respective strengths and unique relationships with the major countries of this region, we can achieve something of profound consequence for the Asia Pacific. I therefore invite Malaysia's key partners, including Australia of course, to work closely with us on revitalising regional cooperation and integration.

As Chair of ASEAN in 2025, Malaysia will attempt to breathe new life into ASEAN-led forums such as the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ADMM Plus. The path ahead will not be easy. A degree of inertia has unfortunately set in.

There's a deep-seated conservatism, an assumption that little can be done. But this is not the moment to be fainthearted. I believe that, with enough will and support from our partners, we will be able to achieve something of consequence.

There is bound to be cynicism about the value of ASEAN in a more divided region. But it is precisely when chasms are growing that we need to double down on ASEAN.

Without it, the region will be principally dictated by the calculations and designs of the major powers, unfettered by the need to account for a more diverse range of interests and viewpoints.

For Malaysia, ASEAN acts as a multiplier, an indispensable platform for the countries of Southeast Asia to exercise their agency. Irrelevance, decay or reversal are not acceptable options. ASEAN's advancement is at the core of our strategic interests.

Finally, Malaysia and Australia have high stakes in upholding the sanctity of international law. It is only by adhering to universally recognised sources of international law, whether it is the UN Charter or UNCLOS, that we will be able to keep the sharp edges of inter-state interactions within certain limits.

Nor should we be selective in our application of international law. Unfortunately, the gut-wrenching tragedy that continues to unfold in the Gaza Strip has laid bare the self-serving nature of the much-vaunted rules-based order.

The differing responses by the West to human suffering defy reasoning. Why, for example, has the West been so vociferous, vehement and unequivocal in the condemnation of the Russian

invasion of Ukraine while remaining utterly silent on the relentless bloodletting inflicted on the innocent men, women and children of Gaza? Sure, there are some exceptions, but there are few and far between.

The fact is much of the Western world has given the Israeli Occupation Forces a *carte blanche* in their murderous rampage on the Palestinians. When South Africa took Israel to the International Court of Justice under the Genocide Convention, some countries decried it as counterproductive. But what could be more consistent with any reasonable conception of a rules-based order than an appeal to those very rules before a panel of 17 judges?

Ladies and gentlemen,

As we strive to build a more peaceful and economically vibrant region, I believe it's a fool's errand to think that the "liberal international order" and the inconsistencies in the application of principles, rules and norms will go unnoticed. Nor should we descend into cynicism and declare that no country can ever be fully consistent in international affairs.

Consistency matters. International law matters. So does a commitment to fair play and mutual respect among nations. It is imperative that Malaysia and Australia pool our political and diplomatic resources to these aims. Our respective capabilities and attributes present numerous possibilities.

Malaysia and Australia may not see the region and the world in identical terms, but our ultimate aims are the same. The specifics of our strategies may diverge but we can still pursue parallel policies in promoting regional cooperation and integration.

Ultimately, our shared objective should be to foster a region that is resilient to power shifts while preserving every country's autonomy, regardless of size. We must invest in institutions that will enable us to adapt to change peacefully, without denying any nation of their rightful place in the global community.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me to end this oration with a message of hope and in this regard, I can do no better than to share the first stanza of *A Song of Hope* by the inimitable activist, poet, and educator, Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker):

“Look up, my people,  
The dawn is breaking  
The world is waking  
To a bright new day  
When none defame us  
No restriction tame us  
Nor colour shame us  
Nor sneer dismay”

Thank you.