



INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC &
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
(ISIS) MALAYSIA

ACTIVITY REPORT 2023



The first ISIS Malaysia event took place on 18 January on [Dissecting 20th Communist Party Congress](#) held jointly with Lowy Institute. **Shahriman Lockman** moderated the session featuring **Richard McGregor**, who examined the election of President Xi Jinping to an unprecedented third term.

The Lowy Institute senior fellow discussed Xi's move to re-establish the primacy of the Communist Party in all realms of politics and civil society, crackdowns on corruption and failure to identify a succession plan.

The following day, we hosted a Chinese New Year lunch for staff members, which set the "celebratory" tone for the rest of the year.

In early February, we co-organised the high-profile [Asia-Pacific Leaders' Dialogue](#) with Global Leadership Foundation (GLF), a network of former presidents, prime ministers, senior ministers and other distinguished leaders.

The dialogue featured **Helen Clark**, former New Zealand prime minister; **Gareth Evans**, former Australian foreign minister; Prof Emeritus Tan Sri Dr **Zakri Abdul Hamid**, fifth holder of the Tun Hussein Onn Chair at ISIS Malaysia; **Marzuki Darusman**, former attorney-general of Indonesia, among others.

The high-powered panel discussed the role of good governance and international cooperation to achieve SDG targets at session 1, moderated by senior director (research) **Alizan Mahadi**. The second session looked at achieving sustainable peace, outlining strategies for containing and resolving destructive internal racial/religious/class conflicts and living with major-power strategic competition.

On 17 February, Prof Dr **Mohd Faiz Abdullah** assumed the post of ISIS Malaysia chairman.

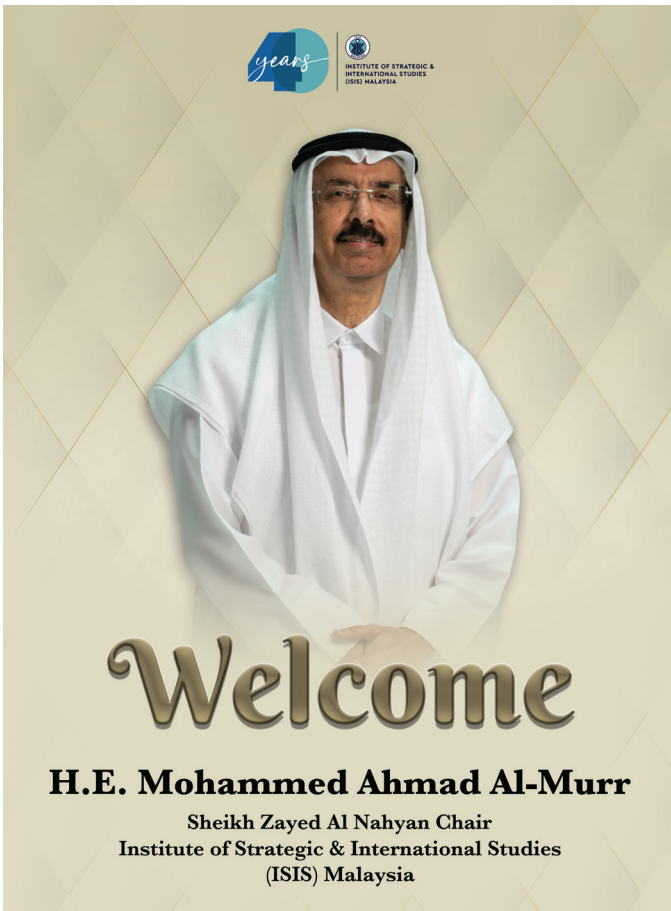
Towards the end of February, we held a symposium with one of our long-term stakeholders – the European Union Delegation to Malaysia. This symposium highlighted the articulation of Malaysian stakeholders on perspectives of the [EU Indo-Pacific strategy](#), its opportunities and challenges for Malaysia and local expectations.



Alizan, **Thomas Daniel**, **Tashny Sukumaran**, **Yanitha Meena** and **Qarrem Kassim** joined the closed-door roundtable featuring **Timo Goosmann**, **Gunnar Weigand**, Datuk **Cheong Loon Lai** and Dr **Rahul Mishra**. Among the topics were the framework for regulatory sustainably edible oils and a more enhanced partnership with and greater green investment in Malaysian companies to accelerate localised solutions in low carbon and adaptation technologies.



On 8 March, we marked [International Women's Day](#) with a series of graphics shared across our social media platforms. The graphics highlighted the [lack of equity in the workplace](#) and ways employers can move beyond tokenism and empower women more impactfully.



On the same day, we hosted a forum featuring **Susannah Patton** of the Lowy Institute and **Gregory Poling** of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies to discuss the changing distribution of power in Asia and its implications for the [South China Sea](#).

Patton is project lead for Lowy's Asia Power Index, which evaluates countries according to their capacity to shape their external environment, while Poling is the author of *On dangerous ground: America's century in the South China Sea (2022)*, which examines the United States' involvement and interest in the South China Sea.

On 21 March we welcomed **Omar Odeh**, head of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Kuala Lumpur regional delegation, in a forum to discuss the increasingly complex intersections between humanitarian action and armed conflicts. Senior fellow **Eddin Khoo** moderated the session.

Prof Faiz delivered the opening remarks, highlighting how the vicious cycles of violence that have fuelled protracted conflicts leave countries in crises for decades. This has been further exacerbated by the continuously evolving nature of today's conflicts through the convergence of complex and interlinked factors: the fragmentation and proliferation of actors, the privatisation of warfare and widespread availability of weapons.

On 5 May, our intern **Zayana Zaikariah** presented a staff seminar on "Beyond disaster response: the role of rights-

based approach in addressing climate-related floods in Malaysia". **Ahmad Afandi**, senior analyst, moderated the presentation on adopting a rights-based lens in analysing the impacts on communities affected by pre- and post-floods events.

On 18 May, we held a [Hari Raya open house](#). More than 150 guests, including board members, joined us on a sunny afternoon at the ISIS Malaysia grounds.

On 30 May, **Angeline Tan** led a staff seminar on "Review of 2023 JIIA fellowship: understanding Japan's changing security policy and territorial issues". Angeline had spent a few weeks in Japan and upon her return, shared Tokyo's strategic shift in its security policy, breaking away from its approach since World War II. She also touched on Japan's territorial issues, particularly with the Senkaku Islands, Takeshima Islands and the Northern Territories.

New chair holder

In June, we welcomed the newly appointed holder of the Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan chair HE **Mohammad Ahmad Al Murr**. It was a jam-packed programme for the chairman of the Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Library Foundation, who visited Batu Caves, the Islamic Arts Museum, Malacca, among others.

On 19 June, we hosted a South Korean delegation on a Track 1.5 meeting on the Indo-Pacific strategy. **Yoon Sang-wok**, deputy director-general of the policy strategy coordination bureau, led the Korea Association of International Studies delegation. **Azril Abd Aziz**, a deputy director-general in the Foreign Ministry and **Sumathi Balakrishnan** from the International Trade and Industry Ministry represented the Malaysian side.

The forum dived into the Malaysia-Korea Indo-Pacific strategy, focusing on the dynamics generated by the South China Sea conflict; geo-economic ramifications of the Belt and Road Initiative; and Korea-ASEAN solidarity initiative, aimed at "addressing growing uncertainties and complexities associated with major power rivalry, the reshaping of supply chains, aftermath of the pandemic and the rise of economic nationalism".



At the end of June, senior analyst **Farlina Said** helped convene a dialogue entitled “Towards a resilient cyberspace in Southeast Asia@”. The programme featured a research presentation by **Keith Detros**, programme lead at Tech for Good Institute, followed by a discussion led by **Shariffah Rashidah Syed Othman** from the National Cyber Security Agency; **Dr Rachel Gong**, deputy research director of Khazanah Research Institute; **Jay Sharma**, IO Foundation; and Farlina on improving cyber resilience in Malaysia.

In-person APR

The second half of the year was particularly hectic with two flagship events – the 36th Asia-Pacific Roundtable (36APR) in August and [PRAXIS 2023](#) in October.

The 36APR was the first in-person roundtable after the pandemic. The 34th and 35th editions were convened virtually.

The 36APR adopted the theme of An Age of Strategic Uncertainty, a reflection of the challenging environment

competition for technology, power and influence; and how Japan’s changing strategic outlook could impact on cooperation with Southeast Asia. Lunch and dinner addresses also made a return. HE **Michalis Rokas**, ambassador of the European Union (EU) to Malaysia, spoke on the implications of the EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy to the region in an age of strategic uncertainty.

HE **Ouyang Yujing**, ambassador of China to Malaysia, articulated China’s response to growing instability and uncertainties across multiple spheres, and its strong preference for peaceful development as well as open and inclusive cooperative mechanisms. Dr **Steven Barraclough**, a visiting senior official with the Australian High Commission, spoke about the values that Australia brings to its engagement with Malaysia and Southeast Asia, which are more important given the various challenges faced by regional architectures and multilateral mechanisms.

Among the highlights of the 36APR were plenary 1 on the China-US rivalry. The session featured Prof **Chen Dongxiao**, who framed the bilateral relationship as entering



that we find ourselves in. The highlight was the presence of Prime Minister Datuk Seri **Anwar Ibrahim**, who made his maiden foreign policy speech at the keynote address, articulating the government’s view of the state of the region and the world, while highlighting Malaysia’s interests and values, which guide its principled approach and initiatives.

Prof Faiz and Datin Paduka **Shazainah Shariffuddin**, chair of Brunei Darussalam Institute of Policy & Strategic Studies, delivered the opening remarks.

The five plenary sessions focused on whether China and the United States were locked in an inevitable march towards conflict, and how the rest of Asia-Pacific could work to both leverage on and mitigate those prospects; the evolution of various Indo-Pacific strategies; how domestic development in Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand could affect regional dynamics; the future of trade and investment in the Asia-Pacific amid geopolitical rivalry; and issues shaping the status quo in the South China Sea.

The two concurrent sessions centred on how small and medium countries could retain autonomy amid the

a new era of long-term strategic competition. He identified two driving forces as sources of conflict – Washington’s continued strategic perception that Beijing is a threat and its containment strategy of China.

Dr **Ralph Cossa** speculated that conflict is not inevitable but not unthinkable. He observed that states today are focused on competing and when necessary, confronting. **Rizal Sukma** defined the current state of relations as a rivalry, though neither side is thinking about war to resolve differences. He stressed that great-power rivalry is already



undermining ASEAN centrality, as the grouping's inability to manage major-power tensions has proved to be a serious test to its unity.

Richard Maude noted that an outbreak of conflict would require an ignition point, suggesting Taiwan as a possible scenario. Dr **Christian Rieck** emphasised that Europe is not a unified policy actor. The European Union tries to generate cohesiveness between member states but an individual member state has its own priorities and agendas.

Plenary 2 on the evolution of Indo-Pacific was led by instigator **Pou Sothirak**, who presented an introduction to the Indo-Pacific in its current and dynamic form. He opined that the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) mooted in 2019 was far from reaching its full potential, hampered by structural and functional uncertainties.

Dr **Sarah Teo** shared an "ASEAN perspective" to the Indo-Pacific that while the AOIP was less contentious and captures ASEAN's balanced and pragmatic approach, it is not bold enough and does not offer anything real beyond the existing convening role.

Dr **May-Britt Stumbaum** underlined succinctly that there are 5 "Cs" that shaped Europe's strategy to the Indo-Pacific – China, conflict, connectivity, chains of supply and competition.

Speaking about the Republic of Korea's (ROK) "Strategy for a free, peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific region" released in December 2022, Prof **Choe Wongi** stressed that the ROK is not adopting Western narratives to "counter" China.

Dr **Gurpreet Khurana**, who is credited with first using the term "Indo-Pacific" in a contemporary sense, shared that the concept emerged as a solution, in a way, to China's increasing assertiveness in the region – in essence, "dissuade" Beijing through its vulnerabilities in the Indian ocean.

Concurrent session 2 proved to be a surprising "hit". The



session on Japan's shifting strategic outlook: implications for Southeast Asia reflected on the changing dynamics of Japan-ASEAN relations amid shifting geopolitical strategy as they mark the 50th anniversary of bilateral relations.

According to Prof **Ken Jimbo**, Japan adopted a significant strategic shift through three documents – the national security strategy, national defence strategy and national defence planning – coupled with the doubling of defence spending to 2% of GDP and the procurement of weapons with long-range strike capability. The shift was prompted by increased awareness of the severe security threat posed by China, North Korea and Russia.

Dr **Shafiah F Muhibat** acknowledged the changes but pointed out that the constant of Japanese policy of hedging against China while keeping US engaged in Asia. Japan combines its bilateral with multilateral approaches to balance its national interests. From a Southeast Asian perspective, a key change relevant to the region pertains to Japan's free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, which is



complementary to the AOIP.

Prof **Thitinan Pongsudhirak** said Japan has lost traction in its position as an economic powerhouse in recent years as China takes over its spot. The increasing rivalry between the US and China led Japan to launch the three strategic documents on defence to maintain its autonomy.

Brad Glosserman postulated that Japan through its national and foreign policies engagement was demonstrating its seriousness about hard security. Conscientious effort on the part of the Japanese to improve its bilateral relations with South Korea provides a compelling indicator on Japan's seriousness about making changes to its defence policy.

Video recordings of the 36APR proceedings are available [online](#).

Focus on staff, strategies

August, the month of India's Independence Day, also saw the publication of a special [FOCUS to mark the 65th anniversary of Putrajaya-New Delhi ties](#). Meena oversaw the joint ISIS Malaysia-Indian High Commission in Kuala Lumpur project, which featured articles from diplomats, academics, policymakers and industry leaders who are experts in aspects that shaped the Malaysia-India bilateral relationship.

The "focus" of the commemorative edition was an assessment of the 65-year-old relationship with analyses on the various aspects, faces and phases of Putrajaya-New Delhi ties. The sub-themes highlighted both opportunities and pressing challenges in cooperation mechanisms as well as ways to overcome such challenges.

The authors covered Malaysia-India defence and maritime cooperation; collaboration in fintech and frontier technologies; cooperation in manpower and skill development as well as in higher education, science and technology, and economic cooperation; and assessed ties on a deeper technical level while also providing substantive recommendations on how to enhance multi-level cooperation.

As part of our continuous improvements, deputy director (research) **Harris Zainul** led a staff seminar in late August. He outlined what ISIS Malaysia should achieve under a renewal plan focused on three "I"s – interpret, inform and influence. The focus is to produce more in-depth research, create strategic synergies with stakeholders and enhance outcomes.

On 4-5 October, we hosted the 15th ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Dialogue (AANZD). The five sessions over two days looked at Southeast Asia's outlook on strategic competition, climate action, strategic implications of technology and cybersecurity, regional trade in Asia-Pacific, among others.

Some of the AANZD participants include Prof **Anthony Milner**, co-chair, Australian Committee for CSCAP;



Suzannah Jessep, Asia New Zealand Foundation; Prof **Herman Kraft**, University of the Philippines at Diliman; **Rohini Nambiar**, Singapore Institute of International Affairs; HE **Stuart Calman**, ambassador of New Zealand to ASEAN; and HE **Will Nankervis**, ambassador of Australia to ASEAN.

Putting theory to practice

A couple of weeks later, we convened [PRAXIS 2023](#). One of the most notable features about PRAXIS 2023 were the series of roundtables held with lead experts on the four sessions – food security, care economy, semiconductors and nature-positive economy.

Dr **Larry Wong**, lead expert on food security, urged Malaysia to consider changing its existing narrative of being "import dependent" to "we feed the world". Qarrem moderated the session which featured Datin **Zaeidah Mohamed Esa**, who argued that food security conversations in Malaysia do not only involve concerns about food availability but also consider the Global Food Security Index. Prof Datin Paduka Dr **Fatimah Mohamed Arshad** warned that the world is getting increasingly complex and that to keep up, we must relook at food systems with multidimensional solutions to food security. The final panellist Datuk **Mohd Nazrul Izam Mansor** from an agribusiness perspective, highlighted that palm oil is the most efficient oil – placing Malaysia in a strategic position.

Lee Min Hui was played a major role coordinating session 2 on building a cradle-to-grave care economy. Prof Datuk



Dr **Norma Mansor** opened the session by emphasising the need to adopt a lifecycle approach in care as it addresses the underlying vulnerabilities. Given the demographic shifts whereby the old dependency ratio is increasing alongside the declining fertility rate, the need for care becomes more pressing.

Min also addressed the [care needs of a rapidly aging society](#) ahead of the tabling of the Senior Citizens' Bill in a [New Mandala](#) article.



Chua Choon Hwa underlined that family have been the foundation of care in Malaysia because of the low awareness of the level of professional care provision but the demographic shifts raise a question of sustainability. **Balqais Yusoff** agreed that a rapidly aging population and gender inequality in terms of care provision are among the major challenges in the 21st century. **Ahmad Ikram 'Ji' Abdullah** closed the session by highlighting the key outcomes of the Asia Foundation's recent research on the care economy.

Farlina took the lead organising session 3 on cultivating Malaysia's semiconductor ecosystem. Moderator Dr **Sharbanom Abu Bakar** opened the panel with an illustration of the semiconductor's significance to the country and daily

life. Semiconductor is the heart of technology products, with an expected 20 to 30 billion devices connected via the Internet of Things by 2035.

The pandemic and current geopolitical skirmishes highlight the vulnerability of the semiconductor value chain. YB **Liew Chin Tong** illustrated this, where Malaysia's movement-control order closed factories in Penang, which impacted on productivity in Detroit. Value chains shifted when China joined WTO, which means little investment in manufacturing in the region for the past two decades.

Wages, talent development and growing the workforce were emphasised further by speakers Datuk **Lim Yong Jin**, **Siobhan Das** and **Eng Seng Meng**. Lim from the Malaysia Semiconductor Industry Association agreed that bifurcation has a positive impact on Malaysia. However, the size of Malaysia's workforce would not be able to absorb displaced supply chains from China due to capacity.

Siobhan weighed the options of talent development and foreign labour policies against Malaysia's ambitions while Eng shared Infineon's internal effort to boost investment into Malaysia and experience on talent drainage.

Session 4 on shaping a nature-positive economy for prosperity commenced with a focus on the pressing need to transition to a nature-positive economy. This transition was framed as a solution to several existing challenges, including the intricacies of federal-level policymaking, resource pricing, dealing with externalities, valuing natural capital and promoting effective collaboration through the concept of co-creation.

Zakri moderated the panel featuring Datuk **Darrel Webber**, Prof Datin Seri **Sunita Rajakumar**, **Nosrat Ravichandran** and **Ushar Daniele**.

The speakers highlighted the multifaceted challenges and focused on the necessity to re-evaluate and redefine

Highlights of chairman's activities

Prof Faiz joined ISIS Malaysia on 17 February and in the 10 months of 2023, set a cracking pace.

From [Australian High Commissioner HE Justin Lee](#) to [Uruguay Ambassador HE Valerie Csukasi](#), Prof Faiz's diary was filled with lectures, courtesy calls and meetings with ambassadors, high commissioners, royalty, ministers and world leaders.

Most of the discussions focused on bilateral relations, geostrategic issues, climate change and Track 2 diplomacy.

One of Prof Faiz's first major events in March was to host [ICRC head Omar](#). In his opening remarks, prof spoke of the vicious cycles of violence that have fuelled protracted conflicts, leaving countries in crises for decades. This has been further exacerbated by the continuously evolving nature of today's conflicts through the convergence of complex and interlinked factors: the fragmentation and proliferation of actors, the privatisation of warfare and the widespread availability of weapons.



Prof Faiz also acted as gracious host at numerous celebrations, notably [Hari Raya Aidilfitri](#) hosted on the ISIS Malaysia grounds.

In June, Prof Faiz addressed a conference on [India-ASEAN dynamics](#), focusing on the Indo-Pacific. Indian Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) had described the Indo-Pacific as a "free, open and inclusive region that embraces all in a common pursuit of progress and prosperity" and the region has seen the evolution of various partnerships and multilateral configurations.

The same month, Prof Faiz delivered a lecture on ASEAN at the [National Resilience College](#). NRC is where the top echelon of the defence forces learns the art of statesmanship, strategic and critical thinking, and discourses on geopolitical and geostrategic issues.

At the 36APR in August, Prof Faiz delivered the opening and [welcoming remarks](#) for PM Anwar's [keynote address](#). He noted the prime minister's call for a new consensus on global security, considering the current geopolitical landscape of the Global South.

The event provided the perfect backdrop in which to share Malaysia's strategic stance. Malaysia's security lies "in" and "with" the region and not "from" the Asia-Pacific region. We leverage the geographical location as both a land and maritime country straddling the most important trade routes and economic position to promote regional security.

Malaysia will engage proactively and independently with various initiatives by regional powers and stakeholders, in both Asia and Indo-Pacific. We do so with a clear view of our national interests and priorities.

Prof Faiz accompanied the prime minister to the [United Nations General Assembly](#) in September where the latter made his maiden speech at UNGA. The PM condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine, urging the UN to lead a concerted multilateral effort to resolve the conflict. The extent of the Ukraine conflict has radiated throughout the world, as food prices have skyrocketed, leading to shortages, hunger, malnutrition and despair.

The PM also condemned the politics of dispossession in the Middle East, with more illegal settlements being built, stripping Palestinians of land that rightfully belongs to them. This gross violation of international law is an obstacle to a two-state solution.

As an in-demand speaker, Prof Faiz delivered a [special lecture](#) at the Asia-Pacific Programme for Senior Military Officers (APPSMO) organised by S Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore in October.

The [lecture](#) addressed the problem of how Southeast Asia must deal with internal and external challenges affecting the military security landscape and the need for broader territorial defence against security threats.

He emphasised the need to promote holistic defence cooperation that avoids pre-emption to conflict, utilise ASEAN's broader framework through regular dialogue and cross-sectoral cooperation to address issues, as well as leverage on existing frameworks like ARF, ADMM, ADMM Plus, ASEAN Plus Three and EAS. Plus, ASEAN Plus Three and EAS.



the current status quo in environmental policymaking. Specifically, it requires innovative policymaking at the federal level, considering the pricing of natural resources and addressing externalities, such as pollution and resource depletion. The conversation also delved into the complexities of conservation projects and ensuring the benefits of communities were put forward, involving and consulting various stakeholders in the decision-making processes must be prioritised. This approach was seen as crucial to achieving transparency, respecting.

Throughout the session, the overarching theme was the recognition of the multifaceted challenges that come with environmental and conservation efforts.

Budget 2024 was tabled on 13 October and a couple of weeks later, Afandi, **Calvin Cheng**, **Dhana Raj**, Min, Qarrem and **Sofea Azahar** contributed to the [policy paper](#), “Unpacking Budget 2024: navigating fiscal realities and policy priorities”.

The brief highlighted Budget 2024’s negative fiscal impulse, with a lower allocation compared with the projected expenditure for 2023. It pointed out that while MSMEs stand to benefit from RM44 billion allocated for loans, credit guarantees and digitalisation grants, the newly proposed capital gains tax on unlisted shares might impact on MSME and start-up funding in the short term.

Education receives a substantial amount of funding to promote inclusivity and tackle learning gaps, especially among disadvantaged pupils. The budget also offered numerous initiatives aimed at addressing environmental risks, biodiversity, the electric vehicle (EV) ecosystem and decarbonisation for sustainable growth. Need for transparency in funds disbursement and a greater focus on nature-based solutions, alternative financing and adequate EV infrastructure.

The World Science Day for Peace and Development is celebrated on 10 November. Zakri’s distinguished career in science led to the collaboration with UCSI University and the International Institute of Science Diplomacy & Sustainability for the “High-level dialogue on advancing the Sustainable Development Goals” through science diplomacy’ on 15 November.



The [dialogue focused on the role of science and diplomacy](#) to achieve the SDGs, exploring how science can shape foreign policy, promote international scientific cooperation and enhance international relations. Among the speakers were HE **Irina Bokova**, former director-general of Unesco and Prof **Paul Arthur Berkman**, president of Science Diplomacy Centre.

As year-end approached, we launched [Where do we go workwise? Malaysia’s labour landscape](#), edited by Alizan and Min, and published in conjunction with TalentCorp. The book examined the impact of Covid-19 on certain forms of employment, skills and sectors and factors that shaped the extent to which workers were affected. Like the rest of the world, Malaysia’s most vulnerable workers were left exposed to the worst of the pandemic, suffering the brunt of both job losses and health hazards, which deepened socioeconomic inequality.

The inequality of the Covid-19 crisis highlighted the need for a re-evaluation of how our labour markets work and raised the question of how we can develop a fairer world of work.

Towards the end of November, the Sheikh Zayed Al-Nahyan Chair welcomed a new researcher **Maryam Ismail**, an expert on the Middle East.

In mid-December, we hosted a Malaysia Scholars on Korea (MASK) programme at the auditorium. Themed “[Solidarity amid disruptions](#)”, the forum focused on South Korea’s “strategy for a free, peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific” and its outcomes for ASEAN.

The strategy calls for the development of norms, security cooperation and tailored development partnerships. Among the partnerships is the Korea-Asean Solidarity Initiative (KASI) that encompasses cooperation in traditional and non-traditional security areas while emphasising ASEAN centrality.

Thomas moderated the panel while Korean Ambassador HE **Yeo Seung-bae** made the opening remarks. The speakers included Dr **Kuik Cheng-chwee**, Centre for Asian Studies; **Farisha Salman**, Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Dr **Roy Anthony Rogers**, Asia-Europe Institute; and analyst **Izzah Ibrahim**.



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