

OPENING REMARKS from Datuk Prof Dr Mohd Faiz Abdullah, Institute of Strategic & International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia at the Forum on Malaysia Japan Relations at ISIS Malaysia on 10 December 2024.

Present were HE Shikata Noriyuki, Ambassador of Japan to Malaysia; Professor Minohara Toshihiro, Chairman of Research Institute for Indo-Pacific Affairs (RIIPA), Japan; and Prof Datuk Dr Zakaria Ahmad, Pro-Chancellor of HELP University Kuala Lumpur

**Text:**

Welcome to ISIS Malaysia and to this Forum on “Japan’s Foreign Policy Evolution, Global South Aspirations and Malaysia’s Perspective”.

First off, it is my privilege to welcome HE Shikata, Japan’s Ambassador to Malaysia, who I’ve had the honour of having met twice. In our first meeting recently, we discussed a broad spectrum of matters including how best to move the needle towards enhancing our bilateral relations, going forward.

I would like to mention Ambassador Shikata’s predecessor, my good friend HE Takahashi, who has since returned to Japan. I am grateful for his friendship and kind cooperation during his tenure in Malaysia and wish him all the best in his new post. In that vein, Ambassador Shikata, I am confident that the long, productive, and friendly relationships between our organisations will continue to flourish under your tenure.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As we crafted the modalities of this forum, the intention was to better understand initiatives undertaken under Prime Minister (Fumio) Kishida such as the Global South engagement, to exchange viewpoints on a range of issues and to seek synergy between the agendas of our two nations.

Yet plenty has occurred during this time. In the United States, we now have the return of President Trump. His first administration was characterised by unpredictability, an America-first agenda, withdrawal from certain multilateral mechanisms and penchant for unilateral action. Could these trends continue, and again usher in a period of uncertainty in global environment? What are the implications on the global geopolitics and geoeconomics, especially for those of us in Asia?

Kishida’s abrupt resignation as prime minister followed by the succession by (Shigeru) Ishiba leaves open the implications of the leadership dynamics in Japan. What are the nuanced adjustments, if any, to Japan’s foreign policy agenda and the role it could play in the region? How will this be affected in turn, by Japan’s domestic politics, especially within the LDP?

Closer to home, in Southeast Asia, we have seen four ASEAN members, including Malaysia, join BRICS as partner countries. For Malaysia, this is about maintaining our non-alignment, non-block approach, as well as diversity of trade partners, as we head to a multipolar world. The key word here is diversity, and not replacement. It should not be interpreted as Malaysia taking a side amid major power rivalry.

Ladies and gentlemen,

One of my biggest misgivings concerns the economic uncertainties confronting our region. Tariffs, sanctions, bans, de-risking, offshoring – these signal a looming economic conflict and more protectionism. A world where trade is not used to connect nations, but instead used punitively, for narrow national objectives. The question is: Are we to stand idly by as decades of our economic advancement and prosperity fall by the wayside?

I fear that we could be on the precipice of an era of instability, fraught with tension and conflicts, with impacts to both our countries. Or truth be told, are we already in such an era?

The issues arising from the South China Sea continue to pose a strain on maritime security and the need of respective nations to protect their sovereign borders and economic zones. The Myanmar crisis continues to be unresolved and for the Middle East, developments unfolding in Syria draw new concern even as Israel persists in grabbing more land with no let-up in its killing in Gaza and Lebanon.

These emerging challenges, every nation will do their best to protect their national interests and priorities. Malaysia and Japan are no different, and some of these policies will be complimentary, while others less so.

It is imperative for Malaysia and Japan to fall back on the close cooperation, mutual respect and warm friendship that have bonded us for decades. Our bilateral relations that began with close economic cooperation have grown to encompass people to people interaction and of late, stronger ties in the defence and security sphere. While the test of a robust partnership lies not in total commonality of purpose or policies, nevertheless, there should at least be unified focus on cooperation in areas that are mutually beneficial.

In this regard, our efforts should be anchored on achieving those goals and visions that we share in common such as preserving peace, stability and prosperity, promoting inclusivity and establishing a rules-based order which is applicable to all nations, equitably.

The way forward includes strengthening existing regional infrastructure including ASEAN and its processes, promoting multilateral trade agreements such as RCEP and CPTPP as well as enhancing cooperation and synergy on Indo Pacific initiatives namely the AOIP and the FOIP.

Ladies and gentlemen,

One of the main objectives of the forum is to foster better understanding on how both nations formulate their national agenda, particularly in foreign policy. It would be enlightening to learn about the factors that drive Japan's foreign policy.

More importantly we hope to be able to unpack the recent changes and challenges that are occurring as we speak. Today, we are privileged to have two distinguished speakers, Prof Minohara, and Prof Datuk Dr Zakaria, to share their insights on the subject at hand.