

32nd ASIA-PACIFIC ROUNDTABLE
“Disruption: People, Technology, Power and Security”

**Welcoming Remarks by Tan Sri Rastam Mohd Isa,
Chairman and Chief Executive
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**Hilton Kuala Lumpur
7 May 2018**

ASEAN- ISIS Heads,

Distinguished guests and conference participants,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Assalamualaikum Warahmatullah and a very good afternoon.

1. Welcome to the 32nd Asia-Pacific Roundtable. Welcome to beautiful Malaysia and to the ever vibrant city of Kuala Lumpur. To the loyal supporters of the APR, welcome back. You are here in very exciting and anxious times in the history of this country.
2. I wish to especially acknowledge the presence of Mr Khin Maung Lynn, Joint Secretary of the Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MyISIS). He would be delivering the opening remarks on behalf of Ambassador U Nyunt Maung Shein who is currently the Chairman of ASEAN-ISIS.
3. I have said this before, at the closing of the 30th APR two years ago: “Planning for a conference such as this is not a simple matter even if you have accumulated three decades of experience organising it”.
4. When my colleagues and I set out to plan this APR, we started by trying to fix suitable dates. Next we looked at possible themes. We finally settled for the theme, “Disruption: People, Technology, Power and Security.” I will explain later as to why and how we came to that decision.

5. From there we began to work out the sessions and the topics for different sessions. Later on we started identifying the possible role players who would fit into the different sessions.
6. As to the dates, two factors were foremost on our mind – the month of Ramadan and the 14th general elections in Malaysia. We settled for early May since Ramadan is set to begin on 17 May. We try to skirt Ramadan so as to avoid the inconveniences associated with having a conference during the fasting month. We did the same thing last year.
7. It is not that people do not work during Ramadan in Malaysia. Life goes on as usual: no shorter working hours, no discernible decrease in everyday activity. Indeed, there would be more excitement; people would be busy shopping and preparing for Hari Raya or the Eid, the Ramadan bazaars would be bustling and Ramadan buffets would be found in nearly every hotel and many restaurants.
8. But there are certain constraints when organising a big conference such as the APR during the month of Ramadan. We certainly do not want to have awkward situations such as when, among others, a section of the participants could partake of refreshment and lunch, while another section would be fasting for the day.
9. As to the other factor concerning the dates, no matter how hard we tried, we could not accurately predict the date of the 14th general elections. Earlier we thought that elections would be over by mid-April. This was because when we extended the customary invitation to the Prime Minister to deliver the keynote address and officiate the opening of the 32nd APR, he accepted and he also chose to do it on the morning of 8th May.
10. Later when it appeared that elections would not be held in April, like many others, I confidently laid my bet on the 5th of May. I thought that would be a nice prelude to the APR which would start just two days after elections. That bet was obviously a lousy one. Now, as we are all aware, elections would be held on 9th May, less than two days from now.
11. I mentioned earlier that disruption is the theme for this year's APR. Disruption can put you off-balance and if you do not adjust, adapt, innovate or change you may not recover from the situation and could suffer serious consequences.

12. Disruption has definitely descended upon us in respect of this year's APR. Fortunately, it happened not in a way that we could not adjust or change.
13. It is very obvious to everyone by now that our initial plan and earlier programme has been disrupted. By an interesting twist of irony, it is connected to the title of our first plenary session: "Politics in South East Asia: Change or Status Quo?" And it is also about people and power, two of the components identified in our theme. About 60 hours from now, we would know whether the people of Malaysia have used their power to elect for change or status quo.
14. When the Malaysian Elections Commission (SPR) announced 9th May as the date for GE14, we at ISIS had to think and act quickly. We immediately ruled out the Prime Minister's presence since he would be busy with the elections. For that matter, we had to rule out the presence of any Malaysian political figure at this time. We were also conscious of the fact that the Malaysian participants would need time to go out to vote. It is no surprise that some have chosen to skip the APR altogether, especially those who have to vote outside of Kuala Lumpur.
15. We had no choice but to adjust our plan and rearrange the programme. We conferred, made phone calls and sent out e-mails. We consulted our ASEAN-ISIS partners, the role players, the vendors and of course, the Hilton. Everyone understood the situation.
16. Let me at this juncture say thank you to everyone for your understanding and cooperation. Thank you to all participants. Thank you in particular to the role players, some of whom have had to rearrange their schedules and travel plans in order to fit with the new conference programme.
17. So, -- ladies and gentlemen--, here we are. As it stands, we begin the 32nd Asia-Pacific Roundtable this afternoon and would end it with lunch on Wednesday, 9th May. That should give a few hours to those Malaysian participants and ISIS staff who would be at the conference on Wednesday to go to the polling stations before they close at 5.00 pm.
18. The Prime Minister, the Hon. Dato Sri Mohd Najib Tun Haji Abdul Razak who was initially due to give the keynote address tomorrow morning has informed us that regrettably he is unable to attend – but for reasons that I think we can

all fully understand! We can rest assured that he has been a long-standing and strong supporter of the APR series and would continue to be in future.

Ladies and gentlemen,

19. Today we begin series 32 of the APR. The track record of the APR speaks for itself. It has successfully carved its own niche and reputation. We just have to continue to make it better as one of the world's most important Track Two conferences. This we try to achieve by assembling a formidable, high quality panel of speakers and discussants deliberating on the most pressing political, security, economic and other related issues that concern not only the region but also the world at large. I think we have been able to do that again this year.
20. As with previous iterations of the APR, this year we look at the big picture and also zero in on the micro issues. This is what distinguishes the APR from other fora in the region, that focus mainly on security and defence issues.
21. Our theme for the 32nd APR is "*Disruption: People, Technology, Power and Security*". This takes into account the global and regional political, security and economic landscape and environment. At the same time, we recognise the role of technology, in particular digital technology, in shaping our opinions and our lives as well as its disruptive effects in practically all spheres of human activity. We want to examine the impact, implications and ramifications, both positive and negative, of disruption and the digital age on politics, democracy, elections, governance, foreign policy, security, defence, connectivity, regional integration and trade and commerce and many other facets of life, even on how war is conducted now and in the future.
22. The topics before us have been carefully chosen with the above objective in mind. The sessions are thus arranged and role players chosen to follow the same line of thinking. Except we had to rearrange the sequencing of the different sessions to fit with the new programme.
23. Disruption we have had as far as the organisation of this Roundtable is concerned. But disruption is not always negative. The disruption we experienced is positive in many ways. Those of you who have come from abroad would not have had the chance to witness, first hand, democracy in

action in Malaysia if not for this interesting coincidence of timing between the 32nd APR and Malaysia's GE14.

24. Therefore, with GE 14 as the backdrop, it seems most appropriate that we begin our Roundtable with the session on politics in Southeast Asia. Besides Malaysia, other countries will also be conducting elections this year and in 2019: Cambodia, Thailand and Indonesia. That explains our interest in seeing whether there will be change or status quo and what would the impact be on ASEAN and the wider region.
25. In this regard I would like to point us to a report entitled 'Democracy in Southeast Asia: Achievements, Challenges and Prospects' which has been recently released by the Kofi Annan Foundation based in Geneva. This is a report of a conference held in Kuala Lumpur last September organised jointly by the Foundation and SUHAKAM (Malaysian Human Rights Commission).
26. The report begins with a moving tribute to the late Tan Sri Dr Surin Pitsuwan written by Kofi Annan himself. We all know Surin; scholar, professor, orator, Foreign Minister of Thailand and Secretary General of ASEAN, who passed away so suddenly in November 2017. In Annan's words, Surin was also a "skilful bridge-builder". He was a true Southeast Asian champion of democracy. His words in the foreword of the report duly attest to his belief that democracy is crucial in ASEAN. To him democracy is an integral part of development and ASEAN's success in developing further would rest on the participation of the people through greater democratisation.
27. Let me also say that Surin was a friend to many of us and also a strong supporter of the APR and other ASEAN-ISIS activities. We miss this great son of Southeast Asia.

Ladies and gentlemen,

28. We have seen plenty of disruption in the last one year; not just in technology but also in diplomacy, statecraft and leadership. Twenty years ago, President Habibie of Indonesia, being a scientist, stood out as an innovator when he communicated directly with other leaders by e-mail, bypassing the Foreign Ministry. Now we see the advent of a new era of leadership with President Trump utilising digital technology by simply tweeting his views and policy

preferences. That has had some great impact leading to ground-breaking developments.

29. Who would have thought a year ago that the salvos of ballistic missile launches and nuclear tests by North Korea would give way in such a short span to a flurry of diplomatic activities that has produced a landmark summit between President Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un? The developments in the Korean Peninsula have been quite dizzying to say the least.
30. We now look forward to the much anticipated historic and ground-breaking summit between the President of the United States and the leader of the DPRK. The prospect of the ultimate end to the Korean War seems bright. Eventual denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula and a new era of peace and reconciliation in Northeast Asia should excite us all.
31. Pessimists among us would probably think in despair that chaos would descend upon the international order owing to heightened competition among the superpowers. The optimists would still see rays of hope for some order and stability to prevail especially in respect of the relations between the United States and China. I hope at this APR we can discuss and find answers to the complex situation brought about by an America First rhetoric and policy clashing against a rising and more assertive China.
32. We will also be discussing the shifts in political and economic power and the evolving dynamics of major power relations in the Asia-Pacific. We will discuss the future of regional integration, including APEC and other regional economic partnership agreements. We will study the new initiative to promote resilience and innovation in ASEAN and we will also look at the strategic and political situations in various sub-regions of Asia. For the first time, we have invited friends from Central Asia to discuss the dynamics in that region including the Greater Eurasia and the Belt and Road initiatives.
33. There is a famous quote from a celebrated novel called *The Leopard*, by Giuseppe di Lampedusa: "Everything must change so that everything can stay the same."
34. But we know, however, that when change comes, not everything will stay the same. That is the nature of a world that witnesses constant advances in technology growing faster than ever. So has the technology that relates to

warfare. We would be interested in that as well as the impact of autonomous technology on the battlefield. We hope to discuss those at this APR so as to understand the questions and possibly offer some useful policy recommendations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

35. This evening we would go in to a special panel discussion focusing on foreign policy in the digital age. It will be interesting to hear the views of the speakers on this. For instance, how do governments and foreign ministries deal with social media and fake news? That session will no doubt provide fascinating insights on the conduct and management of foreign policy in the digital age and their implications on regional and international security.
36. In attempting to keep the APR fresh, current and exciting, this year we have assigned “instigators” instead of the more traditional “moderators” to take charge of the various sessions. Instigators are expected to not only provoke views and discussion among the panellists but also contribute their own insights while managing the time and the panel and the interaction between panel and participants. I urge the instigators to be relay provocative. Imagine yourselves as the host of BBC Hardtalk.
37. We hope that this new format would lead to an even more dynamic exchange of thoughts, not just amongst the panel but with the participants. In the near future, there could be other innovations or changes. The APR itself could, for instance, be organised at a venue outside of Kuala Lumpur, perhaps even in Sabah or Sarawak. We are open to suggestions.
38. Let me now take this opportunity to express our sincere thanks and gratitude to the distinguished instigators and speakers for their readiness to share with us their time, knowledge and expertise in various ways, and for their tremendous contribution towards enhancing the richness of the discussions during this Roundtable.
39. I also extend heartfelt thanks and appreciation to our sponsors and supporters: The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Malaysia, UEM Group, Australian Government, the Embassy of Japan in Malaysia, the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs

and Trade, Asia Center - Japan Foundation, Bank Muamalat Malaysia, PricewaterhouseCoopers Malaysia, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the Malaysia Convention & Exhibition Bureau. Their generous contributions and assistance have once again made it possible for us to successfully convene this 32nd Asia-Pacific Roundtable.

40. I also thank our colleagues in ASEAN-ISIS for their unwavering support for the APR process.

41. Last but not least, I wish to convey my sincere appreciation to all participants for their continued support and active participation. I wish to also thank in particular the long-time supporters of the APR who have travelled from far away to be at this Roundtable.

42. In any conference, the discussions are as equally important as the formal presentations. Probing, thoughtful questions and insightful interventions from the floor are important components of a conference and it is such inputs that form the distinctive hallmark of the Asia-Pacific Roundtable. I am confident that the discussions will be as lively and engaging as in the past.

43. Let us all have a fruitful and enjoyable 32nd Asia-Pacific Roundtable.

Thank you.