

focus



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Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia

The Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia was established on 8 April 1983 as an autonomous, not-for-profit research organisation.

ISIS Malaysia has a diverse research focus which includes economics, foreign policy, security studies, nation-building, social policy, technology, innovation and environmental studies. It also undertakes research collaboration with national and international organisations in important areas such as national development and international affairs.

ISIS Malaysia engages actively in Track Two diplomacy, and promotes the exchange of views and opinions at both the national and international levels. The Institute has also played a role in fostering closer regional integration and international cooperation through forums and networks such as the Asia-Pacific Roundtable (APR), the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS), the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC),

the Network of East Asian Think-Tanks (NEAT), the Network of ASEAN-China Think Tanks (NACT), the ASEAN-India Network of Think Tanks (AINTT), and the Silk Road Think Tank Network (SiLKS). ISIS Malaysia is a founding member of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) and manages the Council's Secretariat.

As the country's premier think tank, ISIS Malaysia has been at the forefront of some of the most significant nation-building initiatives in Malaysia's history. It was a contributor to the Vision 2020 concept and was consultant to the Knowledge-Based Economy Master Plan initiative. It also produced the first ever National Interest Analysis to be undertaken on Malaysia's participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

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Editorial Letter

For more than three decades, **ISIS Focus** has been a tool for reporting on the Institute's events and activities. However, it was mainly aimed at informing its staff, members and a select number of friends and associates. As in most cases, adaptation and change have to occur in response to particular situations, demand and technology.

I am pleased that starting from 2016, **ISIS Focus** will appear in a more professional and substantive magazine format featuring more articles, research findings and commentaries on the important issues of the day and of concern to researchers, policy makers and the public. It is intended to reach a wider audience.

This first issue examines a particularly fitting topic, namely the future of think tanks and nation building in Malaysia. This follows from a first-ever gathering of 26 research institutions and think tanks from around the country at a roundtable conference in **ISIS Malaysia** on 27 January 2016. This coincided with the launching of the 2015 Global Go To Think Tanks rankings compiled by the University of Pennsylvania. **ISIS Malaysia** is pleased to continue with this activity in future through the network of Malaysian think tanks which was mooted at the roundtable.

It is clear from the articles in this issue of **ISIS Focus** that, despite their diversity and internal challenges, think tanks remain a vital resource in the life of the nation. Think tanks have to be able to cope with the rapid pace of change and complexities of policymaking today. These require constant struggle and innovation on the part of think tanks in order to remain relevant and influential and to be able to gain the attention of policy and decision makers.

I commend these and the accompanying articles for your reading pleasure.

Tan Sri Rastam Mohd Isa
Chairman & Chief Executive, **ISIS Malaysia**

THINKING ALLOWED

What does the future hold for think tanks in Malaysia – and what should they be?



BY
JOMO KWAME SUNDARAM

Allow me to begin by reflecting a little on the notion of think tanks. There are many definitions, but I would like to start with the Anglo-American model, drawing particularly from the experiences of the Brookings Institution and Chatham House, and then to contrast that with other types of think tanks in the world.

First, the Anglo-American pioneers were essentially not-for-profit. Second, they were often distinct and separate from universities. Third, they were also distinct from the private sector and from the state. These three attributes enabled a degree of autonomy that was considered essential for advancing independent discussion.

The key nexus here is the relationship between research and policy. I emphasise research because we have a great deal of discussion that is not based on systematic investigation and analysis but on strongly held prior views, often associated with conventional wisdom or hegemonic discourses. This can very much influence discussion in ways which are not necessarily useful.

Because quite a number of think tanks in Malaysia are located in universities and most, if not all, in Malaysia are sponsored by or closely engage with the state, those in Malaysia may be considered “hybrids” by this Anglo-American standard.

But it is important to realise that that standard is not universal. If we look, for example, at the most influential think tanks in Japan, many are embedded in major corporations or conglomerates.

If we look at think tanks in relatively poor countries

like Vietnam, most are essentially foreign funded. This was also true of Russia under the presidency of Boris Yeltsin, if not beyond.

If we look at Latin America before the generals retreated to their barracks, there were a number of think tanks created by well-meaning individuals but which were often reliant on foreign funding.

More recently, in that continent and elsewhere, you see clearly partisan think tanks supported by the rich and powerful, sometimes from abroad. Some are partisan in the sense that they are related very clearly to one political party or another, others to particular ways of thinking from which they advocate policy positions. The latter can be very important in bridging divides among political formations, especially when these are due to historical or personal differences.

Relying solely on the Anglo-American definition of think tanks also robs us of a more historical appreciation of the evolution of think tanks as, very often, they change in role and function over time and with new circumstances and opportunities.

These changes may be due to a number of factors.

One in Malaysia has been the question of financial viability: “How do think tanks sustain themselves?” Very often, they do not respond just to the larger environment, but often also have to react to funding challenges and opportunities.

Finally, it’s very important to recognise that the very label “think tank” is used by individuals or organisations to present their views as ones which ostensibly emerge from or are based on research. This, in itself, one might



“Almost by definition, think tanks are also meant to provide a space for debate, a sounding board for policy discussion and opinion making”

describe as pragmatic, but one has to remember that it is also crucial and often strategic.

This means that think tanks outside the universities seek legitimacy and credibility by association with other trusted sources of knowledge. It is often in the interest of such think tanks to enhance their own standing by comparing themselves favourably with others, especially with public universities.

Hence, you have think tanks which, on the one hand, insist on differentiating themselves from universities, particularly public universities, but also mimic them and their practices for legitimacy.

So, the very act of definition, of self-definition, is, itself, a means for think tanks to try to gain legitimacy and authority, especially authority in the sphere of knowledge, and in what the Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye would call “soft power”.

Thus, the standard definition of think tanks coming out of the Anglo-American tradition does not really enable us to understand many of those coming out of other contexts.

It has been suggested by some observers that think tanks may be better understood functionally – that is in terms of the functions they perform – and that this should be the basis by which we differentiate between them.

Just as the term is a way of providing legitimacy to policy positions being advocated, some think tanks – ISIS Malaysia, for example, partly because it was among the first in the country – enjoy a certain legitimacy which confers on them considerable convening power. This is not something to be taken lightly. The ability to gather varied and sometimes opposing organisations around a table can be used to great effect.

Almost by definition, think tanks are also meant to provide a space for debate, a sounding board for policy discussion and opinion making. If we take the Latin American experience, some think tanks provided important “safe houses” for people who were more independent-minded.

Another not insignificant element is that think tanks often provide a very legitimate financing channel. Some in Malaysia, for example, have been in touch with foreign foundations, all which have agendas of their own. The “think tank” label becomes a very important way of legitimising

their influence in a particular context or debate.

All this, of course, is because think tanks and others seek to influence the policy process, discussions and debate.

Think tanks can also play a very important role in providing a cadre of experts – and potential policy makers – many of whom are waiting in the wings to take over in the event of a change of government. This might not be relevant in Malaysia because of the stability of the ruling coalition for over 60 years, but it is important to recognise that this is a function of think tanks in many other parts of the world.

Yet another role is in training and enhancing human resource capacities and capabilities in particular areas.

And in some rare instances, think tanks play an auditing role as well, whereby think tanks monitor progress or the lack thereof, providing a reality check on what is really happening.

Very often, however, funding is difficult and sometimes problematic. So, you have a combination of business models. But it’s important to distinguish between them. For example, you can have a model involving the promotion of independent research, looking at medium term and longer term issues, which is appropriate because the concerns of a nation are often enduring ones. Funding, on the other hand, by its very nature, is short term. So, how do you develop a medium and longer term strategy to examine these issues – outside of university-based think tanks, which tend to be more long term in orientation compared to others?

There are also think tanks which basically survive on doing consultancies. This poses some important challenges, because there has been a recent tendency to rely on private sector consultants; whereas the earlier approach, from the 1980s onwards, was for the public sector to look to think tanks. This turn from think tanks to accountancy and audit firms, companies involved in credit ratings and so on, is partly because they are seen to have market power, which think tanks do not have.

Consequently, people associated with think tanks often express frustration about their declining influence compared to that of the now-favoured consultancy firms.

The last element I want to note is the role of policy advocacy and influence which think tanks in this country are involved in. Very often, many of the arguments made are



on the basis of values, interests, and ideology. This should be made more explicit but unfortunately these assertions are often presented as universal truths based on research.

Related to this is the commitment to research. That can be empirical or applied, but sometimes you have ostensible research which comes from what might be considered a theoretical or academic background, which can raise its own problems.

It is also important to recognise that because of the different roles they try to perform, think tanks often have to trade different priorities and competencies off against each other. Your research competency may take second place to your advocacy interest. If that role is your priority, you may devote more resources to public relations and communications than to research. This must be accepted and identified as an issue.

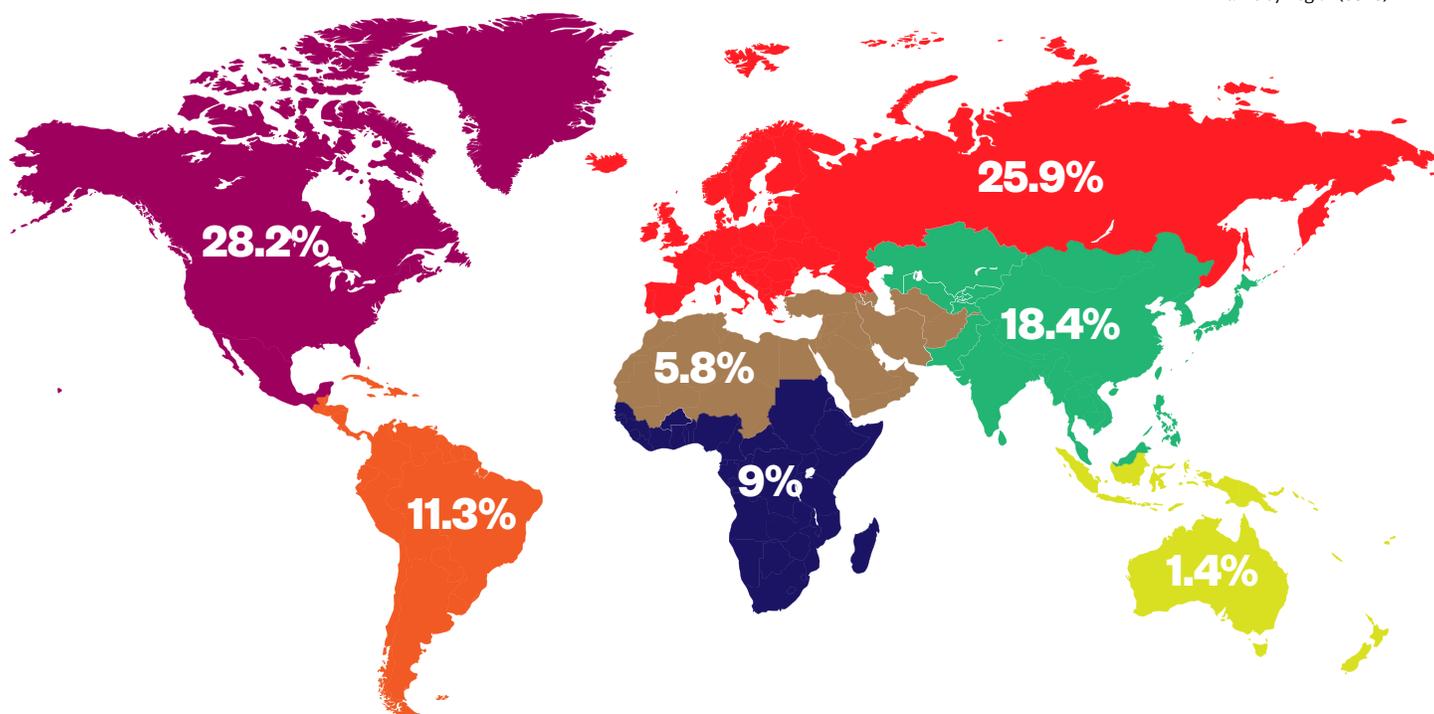
What we have, in effect, is not unlike a group of blind

men touching different parts of an elephant. We all experience the think tank world in different ways, as we come into contact with different parts of this elephant, and we generalise from our own particular experience or understanding of think tanks.

To conclude, there are three issues which many of us are grappling with in this country. First, how do we avoid Malaysia being stuck in the middle income trap? Second, there is the question of national integration, in the broader sense of the term; and third, the challenge of sustainability. These are three challenges that think tanks in this country particularly need to address.

We have a responsibility to be quite explicit about who we are, and what we represent. It is vital to enhance the quality of Malaysian discourse in ways which will truly raise the level of discussion. It is only then that we will be able to move forward together. ●

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Innovate – or Die



BY ALIZAN MAHADI & MICHELLE KWA

For think tanks, it's Innovate or Die. That was the conclusion by James G McGann in the Global Go To Think Tank Index Report 2015. The Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP) at the University of Pennsylvania has been generating a ranking of the world's leading think tanks since 2006. Cataloguing almost 7,000 organisations worldwide, the report also raised some of the critical threats and opportunities that face the think tank community. Despite Asia experiencing a dramatic growth in the formation of new think tanks since the mid-2000s, 2014 saw a decline in the growth of global think tanks for the first time in three decades,

corresponding to a slowing down on the surge in recent times. Some of the factors are blamed on limited funding, with resources often channelled towards short-term and project-specific funding, competition from other organisations such as consulting groups, law firms and advocacy organisations, as well as an information glut, resulting in an increasingly distracted public in the age of social media. On the flipside, the interconnected nature of the world also poses an incredible opportunity, with greater potential for outreach than ever. Malaysian think tanks risk an uncertain future if they fail to adapt to changing times. Innovation is a matter of survival.

Global Go To Think Tank Index (GGTTI)

Compiled with the help of over 1,900 peer institutions, experts and governments, the GGTTI uses four overarching indicators to measure the impact of think tanks: resource, utilisation, output and impact. The below are the Malaysian think tanks that were included with their listings.

Asian Strategy & Leadership Institute (ASLI)

- Worldwide (Non-US) – 123/137
- Top Transparency & Good Governance – 44/60

Centre for Public Policy Studies (CPPS)

- Top Education Policy TT – 50/65
- Top Social Policy TT – 66/100

Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS)

- Think Tanks to be watched – 17/100

Institute of Strategic Analysis and Policy Research (INSAP)

- Best Think Tank with Political Party Affiliation – 27/40

Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia

- Top Foreign Policy and International Affairs TT – 86/132

- Best TT Conference (APR) – 18/61

Maritime Institute of Malaysia (MIMA)

- Best Government Affiliated – 41/69

Third World Network (TWN)

- Top International Development – 75/128

Top TT in Southeast Asia and the Pacific (95)

- CPPS – 6
- ISIS Malaysia – 10
- Malaysian Institute of Economic Research (MIER) – 81
- Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) – 85
- Institut Rakyat – 88
- IDEAS – 89

Alizan Mahadi is a Fellow and Michelle Kwa is an Analyst at ISIS Malaysia



Malaysia

Six Malaysian think tanks are in the Top 100 Think Tanks in Southeast Asia and the Pacific with various achievements in areas of research and by special achievement.

Out of 33 countries in Asia, Malaysia is ranked 11th in terms of number of think tanks with 18 organisations compared to China in first place with 435. This places Malaysia above Singapore with 12 think tanks and Thailand (8) but below the Philippines (21) and Indonesia (27) within the Southeast Asian region



Reasons for growth in number of Think Tanks

- **Technological revolution** changing the information landscape
- **Democratisation of knowledge** with a decline of governmental monopolies on information
- **Complexity in policy** problems requiring complex thinking
- **Trust deficit** in governments and elected officials
- **Globalisation** and the proliferation of both state and non-state actors
- **Demand for information** in a timely and concise manner [1]



Causes for decline in number of Think Tanks

- **Conflicting goals** with the political and regulatory environment often not in line with think tanks and evidence-based policymaking
- **Decrease in funding** in policy research
- **Short termism** with a tendency for project-specific funding at the detriment of long term institutions and ideas
- **Human capacity** and the inability to adapt to change
- **Competition** in the form of advocacy organisations, for-profit consulting firms and law firms
- **Obsolete institutions** having served their purpose and discontinued their operations [1]

Opportunities

One way to mitigate financing and other constraints could be for think tanks to engage in what might be termed “research entrepreneurship”, or the commercialisation of research with the object of supplementing income. A second way, seemingly a logical extension of present practice, is to build strategic alliances with other local and foreign think tanks



so as to spread costs, accelerate learning and increase productive output. Research consortia on specific projects might be on the cards and may form the basis of so-called “flexible networks” [2]

Challenges

Finding funding is a challenge Malaysian think tanks face at the best of times. A strong tradition of individual and corporate philanthropy in support of non-partisan social science research is missing in Malaysia, so funding has had to come from the government and foreign non-governmental organisations [2]



FIVE PRIORITY AREAS OF INTEREST MOVING FROM CONFLICT AND COMPETITION TOWARDS COOPERATION OF THINK TANKS



Governance
Manage stakeholders strategically in fostering effective partnerships and enhancing implementation



Trade and Finance
Design framework to strengthen existing public and private financial institutions to foster greater financial and development cooperation



Environment and Resource Management
Seek institutional and legal reform to address climate change and sustainable development goals



Poverty and Inequality
Address inclusiveness through active engagement at all levels including the state and local government



Peace and Security
Engage in meaningful dialogue on international diplomacy and national integration issues

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[2] Paulino Almeida and Steven CM Wong (1991). Globalisation, Governance and Think Tanks: Malaysia's Experience Thus Far. In: Langford, JW and KL Brownsey (eds.), Think Tanks and Governance in the Asia Pacific Region. L'Institut de recherches politiques; Halifax, Canada, pp. 13-25.



Brooking Dissent

What's it like to work in a think tank? One of ISIS Malaysia's directors, who has worked in three – including a storied American institution – recalls starting out in Washington DC, and how she (almost) got to meet George Clooney



BY
ELINA NOOR

Washington DC generally elicits one of two extreme reactions: love or hate. The city is, after all, a heady mix of power and politics, money and influence, and suits and vagrants. It is also a strange amalgam of transience and permanence. Interns from all over the United States and beyond look to make their mark alongside old political hands on Capitol Hill, while policy advisers patiently bide their time behind the revolving doors of think tanks until the next administration is voted in - and they then leave to join the government.

I lived in DC twice, worked at two different think tanks, and loved it both times. As with any city and workplace, a lot depends on what you make of your environment and the people around you. DC can be driven, pompous, and self-important. But it is also intellectually buzzing, constructively humbling, and even – depending on who

“We were Muslim, Jewish and Christian and we got on fabulously”

you eventually befriend – genuinely congenial. For a fresh graduate lawyer who was really a wonk but did not quite know it yet, DC was perfect.

As a research assistant at the DC office of the Centre for Nonproliferation Studies (CNS), part of the Monterey Institute of International Studies, I compiled open source reports on weapons of mass destruction terrorism. That meant scouring through US and foreign material for news on chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear terrorist threats for electronic distribution thrice a week to more than 1,000 recipients. In between, I monitored and updated terrorism case studies, shuttled between talks at other think tanks, and coordinated workshops and meetings. Fifteen years on in the industry, this now seems unremarkable. But at the time it was exciting – because I had drunk the Kool-Aid in arguably the most powerful capital in the world.

I left DC after nearly a year, a few months before the attacks of 11 September 2001. When I returned to work at the Brookings Institution three years later, I joined the nascent Project on US Policy Towards the Islamic World, as it was then called. Housed within the Saban Center for Middle East Policy, the project sought to provide better understanding between a reeling, post-11 September United States and Muslim-majority countries. Because Washington often – and still – unfortunately views the “Islamic world” myopically through the lens of the Middle East (and occasionally through Afghanistan and Pakistan, based on how mired US troops are in that region), my sell as the Project’s Research Assistant was to widen that aperture to include Muslim Southeast Asia.

This seemed like a no-brainer to someone from the region, but less so in DC at a time when no think tank yet had a dedicated Southeast Asia programme, and Washington’s consideration of the region was problematically cast in either Global War on Terror, or traditional alliance, terms.

The Project was essentially a three person team going up to ten when interns and friends were co-opted from within the Saban Center. We were Muslim, Jewish and Christian and we got on fabulously. We had unceasing discussions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the future of Lebanon, and sometimes, Southeast Asia. We organised events occasionally featuring personalities we did not necessarily agree with but whom we nevertheless thought should be heard and, where appropriate, civilly debated (Ayaan Hirsi Ali). We even arranged the DC premiere of the movie

Syriana, and held out hope of getting George Clooney to speak at it. We ultimately got the film’s writer and director, Stephen Gaghan, to address the audience.

Every year, our little team miraculously pulled off convening the US-Islamic World Forum in Doha, Qatar, involving nearly 200 senior government leaders, policy makers, academics, journalists and businessmen from over 30 Muslim-majority states and the United States. We worked furiously behind the scenes as Turkey’s Recep Tayip Erdogan, Thailand’s Surin Pitsuwan, Ali Shaheed Muhammad (formerly of famed hip-hop group, A Tribe Called Quest), Sudan’s Sadiq al Mahdi, Bosnia’s Mustafa Ceric, the singer Sami Yusuf and Amy Tan (yes, author of *The Joy Luck Club*) exchanged insights. The late writer and activist Gamal al-Banna and Pakistan’s Benazir Bhutto were also attendees, as was the characteristically controversial Christopher Hitchens.

It was also in Doha in 2006 that I was first granted an audience with HRH Sultan Nazrin Muhibbuddin Shah. Flummoxed when His Royal Highness summoned me for a tea-time chat and at a loss as to protocol, I had to phone home to ask my parents how to address the then Crown Prince of Perak.

There were – and still are – an overwhelming number of smart, prominent people in Brookings. Some like current US National Security Advisor, Dr Susan Rice, I simply rode with in the office elevators a few times (she very likely has no memory of this or of me). Others, like my then boss, Dr Peter W Singer – only a few years older than me and Brookings’s youngest senior fellow in its 99-year history – exposed me to the intricacies of private military contractors, child soldiers, and science fiction in battlefields through the books that he wrote.

Like many workplaces elsewhere, Brookings had its share of battle lines and whispers along office corridors. And as in many offices in DC, these usually occurred around election time. Although Brookings is independent and non-partisan, a number of experts worked on the Democratic political campaigns of candidates Clinton and Obama in the run-up to the 2008 presidential election and it was an exciting time for an outsider like me to observe policy work in practice.

No matter their seniority or who they knew, though, all the thought leaders I interacted with at Brookings were accessible and down-to-earth. In typical American fashion, almost everyone was on a first name basis after at least two conversations and respect flowed both ways based on merit and little else.

I left Brookings not because I did not like it there but because it provided little opportunity for upward growth to its junior research staff. This was a real shame, especially since it was prepared to financially invest in legal documentation for its foreign employees, even setting them on the path of US permanent residency.

Still, Brookings provided an unparalleled professional and networking experience in the field of policy and on the margins of power. Above all, I count the close and lifelong friendships I made during my time in DC as the most valuable takeaway I continue to cherish. ●



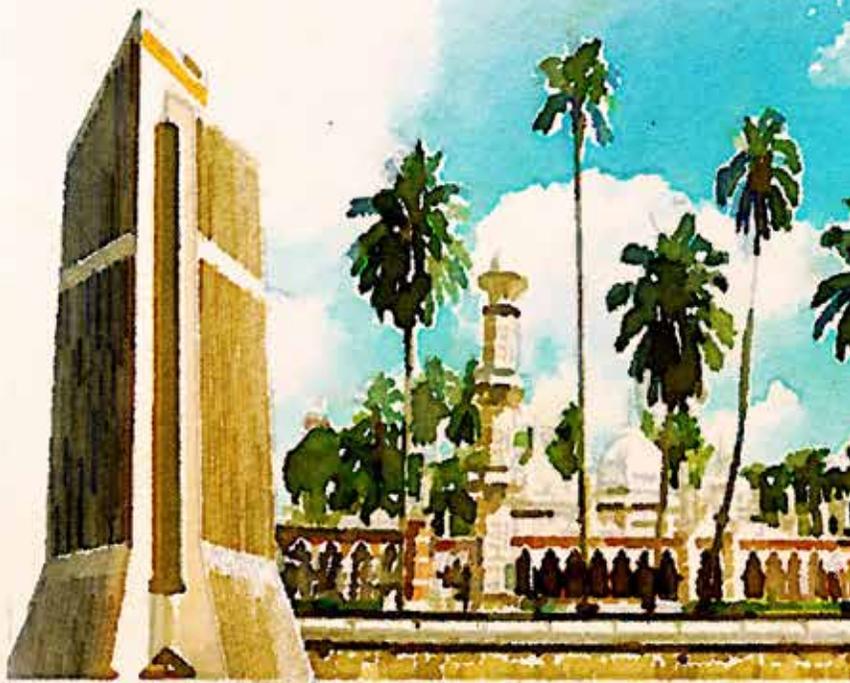
The Early Years

After being set up in 1983 at the initiative of the Malaysian government, ISIS Malaysia swiftly made its mark nationally and internationally. In a 1990 paper, Pauline Almeida and Dato' Steven CM Wong (now ISIS's Deputy Chief Executive) outlined highlights thus far.

ISIS's work on global issues has been broad and multifunctional given its specific "international" mandate. In 1986, it was heavily involved with the Malaysian government's efforts to impart fresh impetus to South-South cooperation. Working with the Third World Foundation, it organised the Second Summit of Third World Scholars and Statesmen in Kuala Lumpur, the principal result of which was the decision to form a 20-member South Commission to be chaired by the former president of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere. ISIS also participated in the Steering Committee that led to the Commission's formation and, thereafter, had occasion to provide inputs to it. It organised a Colloquium on South-South Cooperation in Kuala Lumpur in 1988 at the request of the South Commission and actively participated in it.

Also in 1986, the question of whether Malaysia should continue to be a member of the Commonwealth arose. The Prime Minister requested ISIS to study the costs and benefits of membership and called for a parallel study to be conducted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Both reports concluded that Malaysia would better influence events by staying a member of the Commonwealth. In 1989, the country hosted the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.

In 1987, ISIS hosted as the Technical Secretariat to the Group of Fourteen (G-14) on ASEAN economic cooperation and integration. The G-14 was an initiative of the ASEAN Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ASEAN-CCI) and was convened to recommend proposals to the Third Heads of Government meeting in Manila later that year. As part of its work, ISIS organised the First ASEAN Economic Congress and sifted through the numerous proposals that were put to the G-14. It finally arrived at a set of proposals for the

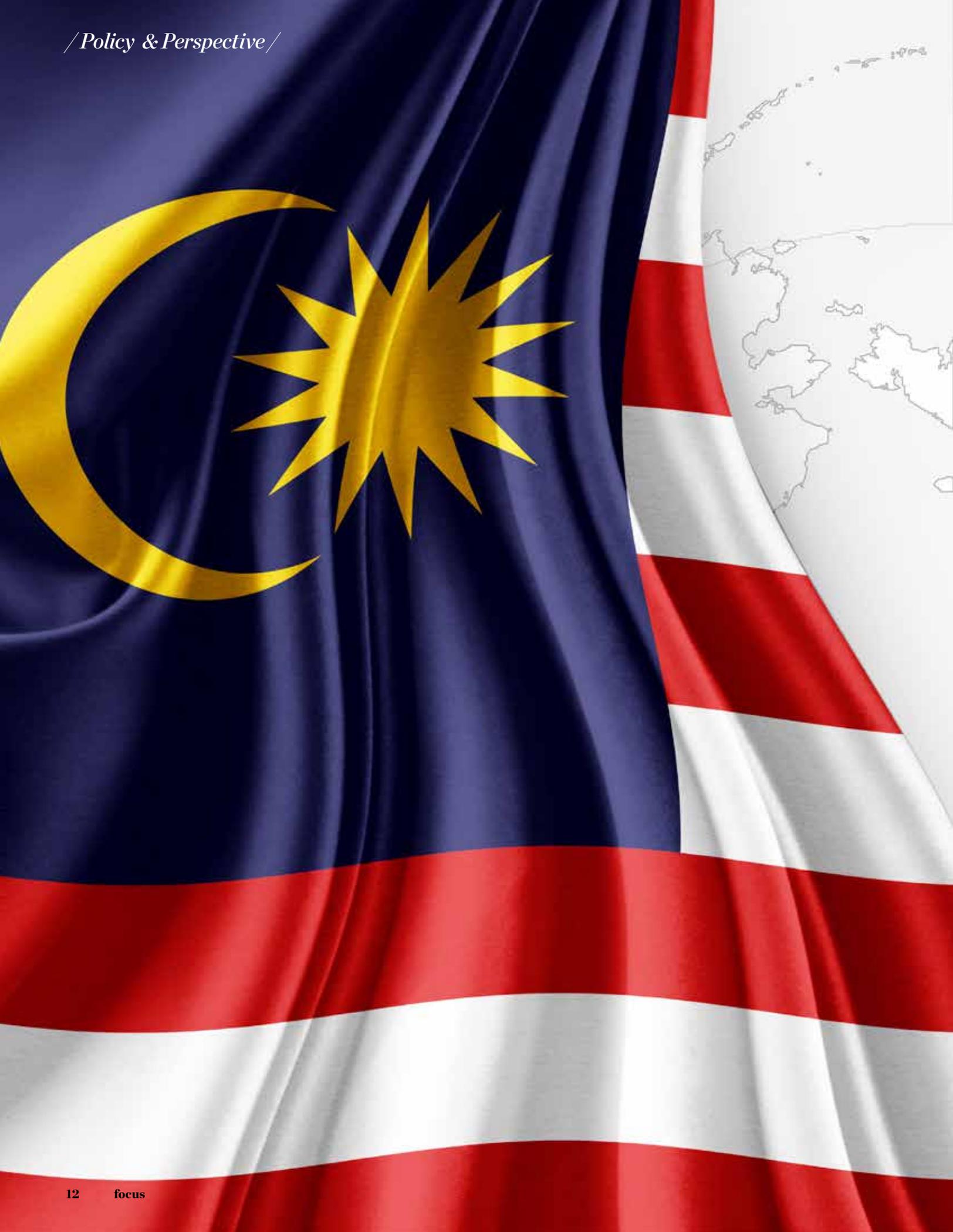


G-14's consideration. The report, entitled ASEAN: The Way Forward, was sent to the Asean-CCI for onward transmittal to the Asean Economic Ministers Meeting.

In 1989, ISIS and the European Institute of Public Administration collaborated to host, on behalf of the governments of ASEAN and the European Community, a seminar on Europe 1992 with specific examination of the implications and responses to the Single Market programme. Later that year, it organised a series of the three, back-to-back conferences catering primarily to Southeast Asian countries, including the socialist countries of IndoChina and Myanmar... ●



“Also in 1986, the question of whether Malaysia should continue to be a member of the Commonwealth arose”



The Future of Think Tanks in Malaysia

In just over 30 years they have come a long way, and a variety of institutions have sprung up. But is there a gap in linking “knowledge” to “power”?



BY MOHD SYAHIR NAUFAL, PUTERI NOR ARIANE YASMIN AND JUSTIN LIM

Malaysia is relatively young and our democratic culture – including the think tank sector – is still growing. The Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia was established in 1983. The Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute (ASLI) was the first private independent think tank when it was set up 23 years ago. Nonetheless, six of Malaysia’s think tanks made it into the 2015 Global Go To Think Tank Index’s list of top think tanks in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. (Although out of the 175 top think tanks worldwide, only one was Malaysian – the Centre for Public Policy Studies, CPPS, which ranked 99th.)

The problems that Malaysian think tanks face are not unique. Attracting and retaining talent, ensuring a broad base of funds, obtaining timely access to data, and staying relevant in the digital age are issues that affect all think tanks. But some of the solutions have already been identified.

With regards to human capital, think tanks could collaborate with universities to detect qualified researchers. Internship opportunities could also be offered. Providing analysts with the freedom and support to research areas of personal interests could give think tanks an edge in hiring over the corporate world, with its competitive salaries and benefits. Perhaps think tanks could invest more in visiting fellows – researchers who live overseas and come to an organisation for a certain period to focus on a topic that interests both parties.

The ability of a think tank to “think freely” is typically related to its sources of funding. Avoiding over-reliance on a particular sector is necessary, in order to ensure that finances do not affect the independence of the research.

Not relying solely on government funds minimises political influence, whereas not having to rely on corporations or individuals minimises the influence of interest groups. “Everybody has their biases,” notes Khazanah Research Institute Managing Director Datuk Charon Wardini Mokhzani, “but there must be sincerity and truth in our studies so we can go forward.”

However, Datuk Charon also claims that gaining timely access to government data in Malaysia is not easy. This matters because data ensures that debates are informed by research as opposed to opinion – an approach vital to the credibility of any think tank.

Finally, the acceleration of the news and information cycle today means that think tanks must “adapt to the growing demand for rapid data and analysis,” as stated by James McGann, Director of the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program at the University of Pennsylvania.

If one of the purposes of think tanks is to build bridges between the government and its stakeholders – the business community, civil society, non-profit organisations and the citizenry – research institutions require buy-in from politicians. As James Jay Carafano, Vice President for Foreign and Defense Policy at the Heritage Foundation, explained in *The National Interest*, think tanks rely on political pressure “to transform their policy recommendations into enacted law.”

There is currently a gap in linking knowledge to power in Malaysia, however, as it is unclear whether politicians are interested or not in the output of think tanks. Wan Saiful Wan Jan, Chief Executive of the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS), believes that politicians are simply better at following public opinion than leading it;

therefore, policies need to be both knowledge-driven and reflective of political demands.

At the same time, there has been an increase in political research institutions in Malaysia. Since Parti Islam Se-Malaysia's (PAS) Research Centre was set up in 2007, others have followed, including: Institut Rakyat, which is affiliated with Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), in 2013; and Bait Al Amanah, set up by United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) Johor, two years later. And in October 2015, Gerakan called on the Barisan Nasional (BN) to set up a national-level think tank to address key issues affecting the nation in time for the 14th General Election in 2018.

A number of state-based think tanks have also emerged, playing a crucial role in advancing state-specific issues that are not normally addressed at the federal level. These include Institute for Development Studies Sabah, Sarawak Development Institute and Institut Darul Ridzuan Perak.

Thus, think tanks in Malaysia could make profound contributions in two key areas – regional developments and domestic policymaking.

In terms of the former, Malaysia has a geostrategic location in the wider realm of international relations – especially at a time which is still often referred to as “the Asian Century”. Washington’s “Pivot to Asia” has yielded the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and an increase in military engagement in the region. China’s One Belt One Road and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank initiatives are seen as a direct response, a part of Beijing’s attempt to reshape the world order.

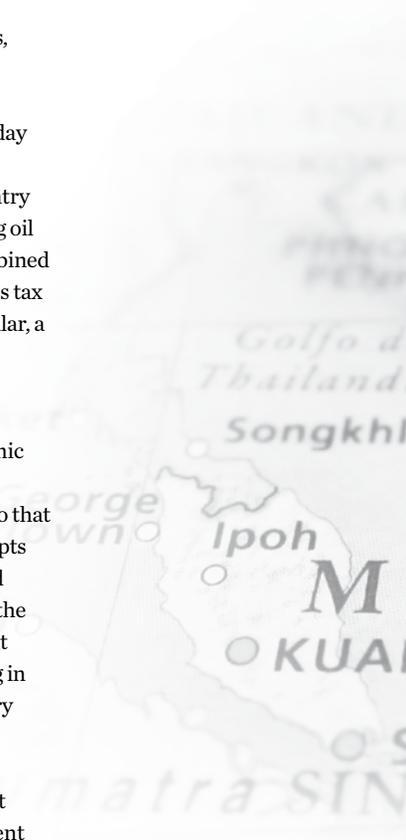
US-China rivalry should be an area of prime focus for Malaysian think tanks, as much of this plays out in our backyard, with far-reaching political and economic implications. Malaysian think tanks could offer a high concentration of regional expertise, which could

subsequently inform engagement among governments, think tanks, non-governmental and non-profit organisations, and the private sector.

In terms of the latter, Malaysia is at a crossroads. Today we have a bigger middle class, a more interconnected population and a politically aware electorate. The country faces a number of challenges such as the effect of falling oil prices on the economy, an escalating cost of living combined with government initiatives like the Goods and Services tax (GST), which may be necessary but has proved unpopular, a trust deficit and ethnic tensions.

According to Datuk Dr Marzuki Mohamad, Associate Professor of Political Science at the International Islamic University of Malaysia, think tanks in Malaysia should promote institutional reforms in a more forceful way so that society as a whole constantly moves towards the concepts set out in Vision 2020. Dr Marzuki’s approach is shared by Andrew Fung Ho-keung, Chief Executive Officer of the Hong Kong Policy Research Institute, who stresses that think tanks should pursue new and aggressive thinking in delivering their ideas. “Creating a noise in society is very crucial,” he says.

In the digital age, think tanks in Malaysia need to be more proactive in order to meet the demand for instant access to information. The benefits of online engagement are clear. Blogs, podcasts, discussion threads and online libraries and magazines promote constant engagement with a larger audience. ISIS Malaysia, for example, has started to develop a more active online platform via the #Viewpoint series on YouTube, whereby researchers and analysts provide commentary on current affairs. Digital platforms allow policy makers, scholars and citizens with different viewpoints to engage with one another. This could,



WHAT DO THINK TANKS DO?

- ✓ Help counter the pitfalls of group decision making and “groupthink”
- ✓ Combat endowment effects – or loss aversion – whereby individuals will resist giving up their existing values, beliefs and attitudes (because they “own” them) even if new ones can be shown to be superior
- ✓ Prevent silo mentality, whereby groups have limited interactions with others outside, and allow a wider range of stakeholders to
- have a voice – and to hear each others’ voices
- and come up with new options and initiatives for consideration
- ✓ Contribute expert advice and research inputs by bringing people with the subject knowledge, experience and time together. Government officials, by contrast, are often constrained by meetings and procedural tasks. They may also lack the necessary capabilities or capacity to do research
- ✓ Provide fresh perspectives on enduring problems and issues,
- ✓ Help bring focus, attention and greater transparency to issues and to increase understanding among the public at large
- ✓ In conjunction with other think tanks and institutions, to quote Professor Paul Evans, they can build “a critical mass of non-governmental players who are informed, inter-connected and actors in their own right”

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Southeast Asia's Youth: THE NEED TO ENGAGE

by ZAIM MOHZANI

Sixty five percent of ASEAN citizens are under 35 years old – that is over 400 million out of a combined population of 620 million. Youth should be a top priority for member states. From my observation, however, it appears that the US has been more effective in engaging young people through its Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI). With the declaration of the establishment of the ASEAN Community in 2015, ASEAN could take a leaf from America's book as we forge ahead.

Youth falls under ASEAN's Socio-Cultural Community pillar. Every year, the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Youth (AMMY) is held to decide direction and coordinate policy. However, awareness of these outcomes and of AMMY itself is low as information is difficult to find. There are

a number of prominent non-governmental organisations and initiatives – ASEAN Youth Organization, ASEAN Young Professionals Network and ASEAN Youth Leaders' Association to name a few. However, their impact tends to be confined to their respective countries due to challenges in resources and geography. YSEALI represents a more ambitious model.

Run by the US State Department, the network has grown to over 55,000 members since its inception in 2013. Nearly 2,000 youth leaders have participated in YSEALI's initiatives: academic and professional fellowships; regional workshops; and grants competitions. President Obama himself has directly engaged ASEAN youth in town halls in Malaysia in 2014 and 2015. With YSEALI's success, I believe youth in ASEAN are more

aware of this American leadership initiative than ASEAN's own youth efforts.

I would therefore like to propose the following three programmes:

1. ASEAN Youth Fellowship

This would aim to train a generation of young leaders, giving fellows the opportunity to visit ASEAN countries to learn and appreciate their issues, politics, culture and history. It would include dialogue sessions between fellows and ASEAN leaders, as well as training seminars, site visits and an annual ASEAN Youth Summit. Emphasis would be placed on knowledge sharing, networking and capacity-building. The fellowship would need strong backing from ASEAN leaders to fund it and to coordinate among the ten member states.



“With a predominantly young population, only when ASEAN youth are engaged can ASEAN realise its true potential as a regional powerhouse”

2. ASEAN Youth Incubator

An enabler for aspiring leaders to develop their leadership skills, the incubator could co-design a youth “accelerator” programme with ASEAN ministries of youth. Participants could develop key skills with experts and benefit from insights from leaders from government, and corporate and civil society in ASEAN. They would be mentored to design and deliver community projects in various fields (eg

education, human rights, the environment). The incubator could also run a virtual portal to compile and disseminate all information and opportunities for youth in the region. Partnerships with ministries of youth and corporate companies would be crucial to ensure the incubator’s success.

3. ASEAN Youth Assembly

Taking a step beyond YSEALI, ASEAN could look into establishing an “ASEAN Youth Assembly”, whereby elected youth representatives from member states would deliberate on regional issues encompassing the three pillars of ASEAN. The framework of the Assembly could be modeled on the Malaysian Youth Parliament in which members are elected for a two-year term. The Assembly would convene in an ASEAN capital city for three days, chaired by the youth delegates from the host country. The secretariat could appoint some representatives to promote diversity, and they would be assigned to select committees

to debate relevant motions. The output could be presented to AMMY for endorsement, with the collective voice of ASEAN representatives fostering ownership and unity amongst youth – who ultimately need be involved and contribute to decision-making, as these decisions will impact them, being the population of the future.

ASEAN has made significant progress in developing the region since 1967. As it moves towards building a socially responsible and people-centred ASEAN in 2025, the Association has to acknowledge that new challenges faced by youth will need fresh ideas. With a predominantly young population, only when ASEAN youth are engaged can ASEAN realise its true potential as a regional powerhouse. ●

Zaim Mohzani is the Principal of the Nation Building School – a non-profit organisation in Kuala Lumpur dedicated to turning youth into leaders in Malaysia and ASEAN

A PROSPECTIVE NEW MEMBER OF ASEAN?

By BUNN NAGARA

Timor-Leste formally applied to join ASEAN in 2011. This followed Papua New Guinea's attempt to join in 1976 and Bangladesh's at ASEAN's founding in 1967. Unlike the other two countries, Timor-Leste (the former East Timor) is part of Southeast Asia as a former province of Indonesia.

Compared with the other two, Timor-Leste's application was considered more seriously. However, there was no immediate unanimity of views among ASEAN countries on the advisability of Timor-Leste's membership. Some were originally in favour, a few were not, and the rest seemed non-committal.

The ASEAN Secretariat then commissioned three separate reports to be undertaken by ASEAN research institutes to assess Timor-Leste's suitability as a member. These reports coincided with the ASEAN Community's three pillars: Political-Security, Economic, and Socio-Cultural. For some, that ASEAN should commission these reports at all indicated its serious consideration of Timor-Leste's application.

ISIS Malaysia was appointed the research institute to produce the report based on Timor-Leste's socio-cultural standing. This report would take its terms of reference (TOR) as set out by the ASEAN Secretariat, but its assessments, conclusions and

“There were signs that it had come some way from the years of internal dissension and the turmoil of its independence struggle”

recommendations would be independent and objective. Of the three reports, this one had to cover more areas (16 ASEAN sectors) and had to be completed within five months.

The research comprised both primary and secondary findings. The relevant ASEAN and Timorese documents in the various sectors were examined for Timor-Leste's ASEAN compatibility. The five-person research team made two field trips to Timor-Leste to meet, discuss with and interview key individuals and organisations including government and opposition parties as well as ministries, the Catholic church and NGOs.

The resulting report was made possible only with the combination of documentary research and fieldwork. It was essential for the research team to be on the ground to gain first-hand information as well as get a feel of the situation. The TOR required findings to be set in the context of the ASEAN Community's prospects, ASEAN's interests and those of its member states, and also those of Timor-Leste.

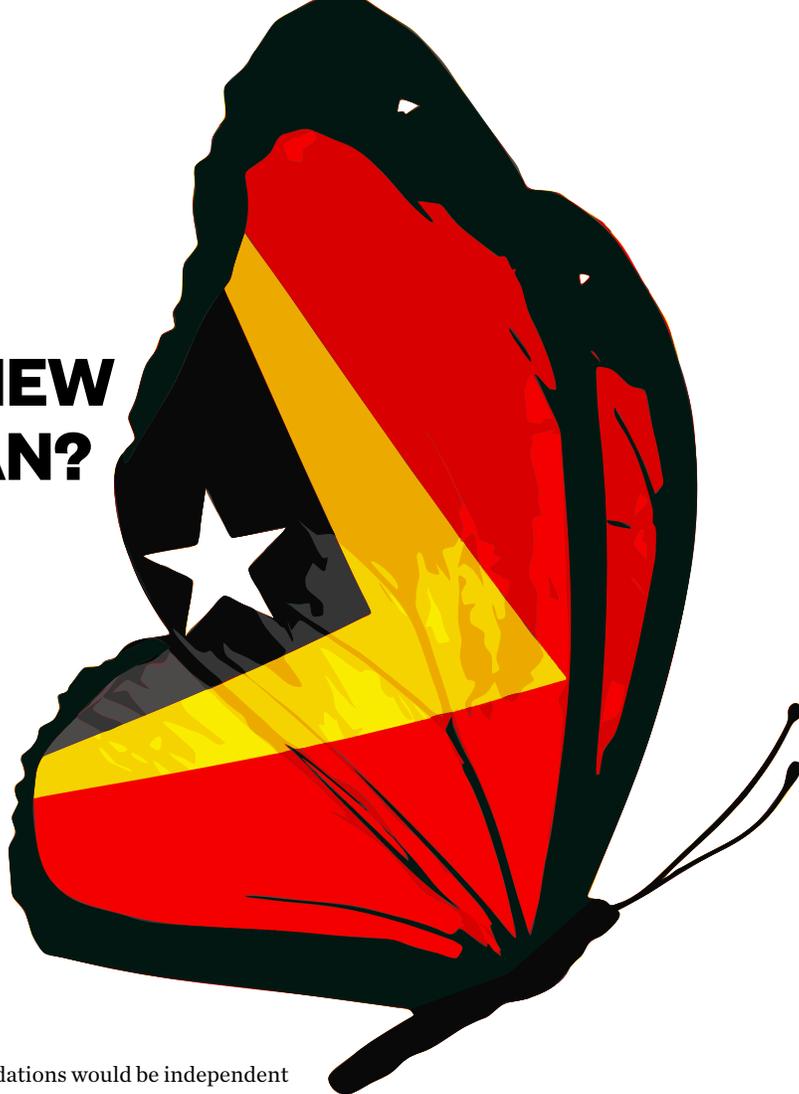
There is no doubt that Timor-Leste faces considerable development challenges. It also became evident that the country is determined to be a member of ASEAN and remains focused on that goal. There were

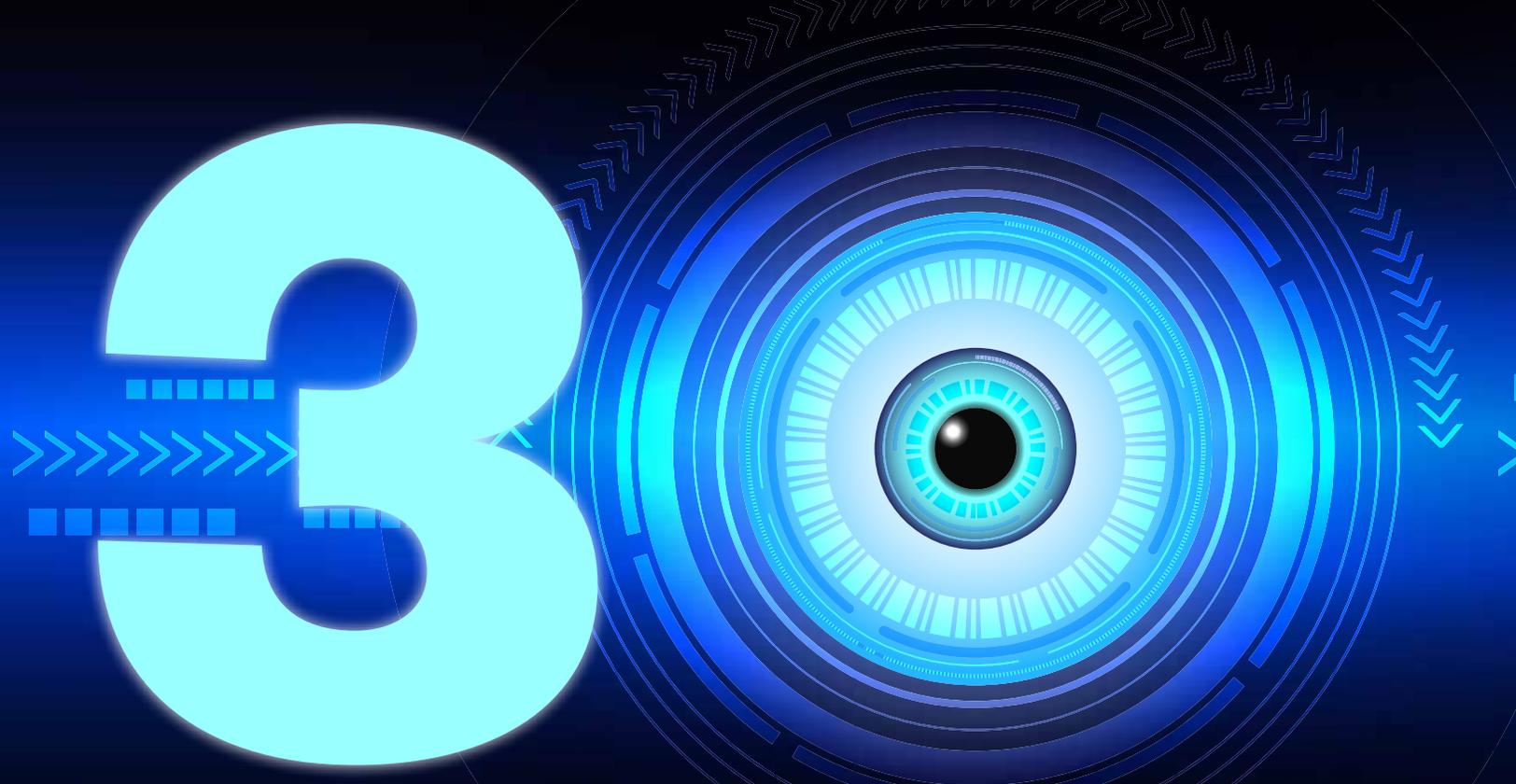
signs that it had come some way from the years of internal dissension and the turmoil of its independence struggle.

Timor-Leste is still a relatively new country and will continue to develop, as it should. Its leaders insist that it is ready to join ASEAN, but that view is not uniformly shared among all ASEAN countries although mutual goodwill persists. With a population of just over one million and limited resources, it has several hurdles to clear.

ASEAN has not spurned the wishes of less developed countries to join. The CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) came on board from the 1990s and have since shown a capacity to be responsible and dutiful members. The fate of Timor-Leste's application is entirely in the hands of ASEAN, and it will be known only when the Secretariat announces it. ●

The ISIS Malaysia research team on Timor-Leste's application to join ASEAN from a socio-cultural perspective comprised Bunn Nagara (team leader), Farlina Said, Nurul Izzati, Muhammad Sinatra and Thomas Daniel





The Asia-Pacific security landscape: **LOOKING BACK OVER THE LAST 30 YEARS**

By ROSS GARNAUT

There have been vast changes in the weight of Asian economies in the global system over the past three decades. In the mid-1980s, China was at most a middle power economically and in fundamental strategic weight, and in the early stages of its move towards being the world's largest exporter, the world's largest economy in purchasing power and one of the two great global powers. Southeast Asia was at the beginning of what became a powerful episode in outward-looking industrial development. Indonesia was still highly dependent on petroleum exports, and starting to introduce the policies that would guide a period of rapid export-oriented industrial development. India was yet to begin its transition from the "Hindu rate of growth" to sustained strong economic expansion.

Three decades ago, the ASEAN countries, many with longstanding and confident leaders, were beginning to play a central role in defining new cooperative patterns of relations among themselves. This was a foundation for ASEAN playing a leading role in shaping the institutional architecture through which ASEAN and its larger neighbours related to the great powers outside the region.

At that time half the countries of mainland

Southeast Asia – Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos – were tied into the strategic systems established by the large Communist countries to the north. There was great suspicion between Vietnam, still closely allied to the Soviet Union, and the earlier ASEAN members. Laos and Cambodia were caught in uncertain territory between the large Communist powers.

While the Philippines was the "sick economy of Southeast Asia", in the later stages of a detour into authoritarian government, the original ASEAN economies were nevertheless at the beginning of a period of beneficent internationally-oriented industrialisation. There was increasing and eventually great confidence in the economic security provided by deep integration into the global economy.

The whole context of Asia-Pacific security has been transformed over the past three decades by the rise in economic and strategic weight of China and Southeast Asia and, more recently, of India; by the political reorientation of the Communist states of Southeast Asia with the demise of the Soviet Union; by the collapse of the economies of old ASEAN in the financial crisis of the late 1990s and the resulting caution about

international economic integration; by fundamental changes in political systems in Indonesia, the Philippines and Myanmar; the rebalancing of mainland Southeast Asia outwards and towards its own region, importantly through the ASEAN membership of Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar; and the institutionalisation of discussion of shared interests between Southeast Asian and external powers through APEC and the ASEAN Regional Forum.

The APR hosted by ISIS Malaysia since 1987 has provided an important locus for the discussion of emerging trends affecting strategic relations within the Asia-Pacific. It has contributed significantly to the ideas that shaped the new regional institutions. By anticipating emerging tendencies it has allowed intellectual and political leaders to respond to change not only as threat – but also as opportunity. ●

Ross Garnaut is Distinguished Professor of Economics at the Australian National University, an adviser to successive Australian Labor governments, and a former ambassador to China. This year marks the 30th Asia Pacific Roundtable, hosted by ISIS Malaysia, 30 May-1 June at the Hilton Kuala Lumpur



MALAYSIA IN THE TPP: LABOURING THE POINT

By FIRDAOS ROSLI

It has been six months since ISIS Malaysia's National Interest Analysis report on Malaysia's participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was made available to the public. Since then, the study team has been presenting the key findings to foreign embassies, government-linked and private companies as well as non-governmental organisations. There is one question that always comes up: out of the issues that are highlighted in the report, beneficial or otherwise, which is potentially the most disruptive to Malaysia?

The answer is that the commitments under the Labour Chapter of the agreement will drastically change the landscape of the labour market in this country. There will be no transition period given to Malaysia in order to adhere to the new labour rules. The sudden wholesale imposition of these principles will require revision of a raft of existing domestic labour laws. Contrary to what some have said, however, this chapter is a disciplinary one that

contains rules to ensure trade and investment activities between TPP countries are not carried out at the expense of workers' rights.

All parties are expected to adopt and maintain the key points in the International Labour Organisation Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its Follow-Up (ILO Declaration 1998). Malaysia will need to amend and ensure effective enforcement of eight laws in areas related to freedom of association and forced labour:

- Employment Act 1955
- Trade Unions Act 1959
- Child and Young Persons (Employment) Act 1966
- Industrial Relations Act 1967
- Sabah Labour Ordinance (Chapter 67)
- Sarawak Labour Ordinance (Chapter 76)
- Private Employment Agencies Act 1981
- Workers' Minimum Standards of Housing and Amenities Act 1990

“The increase in wage ratio must be commensurate with the increase of employer-employee income”

The side letter entitled “Malaysia-United States Labour Consistency Plan” acts as a checklist to the chapter's obligations. Workers at all levels are expected to gain much higher protection when trade unions are empowered to self-regulate their own activities. It is important to note that the commitments are consistent with the government's aspiration to move the nation towards a more developed society whereby the protection of workers' rights, via their ability to form, join and leave organisations of their own choosing, is a reflection of a free and open society that is supported by a modern and democratic legal system.

This will eventually lead to a much higher cost of hiring and firing of workers in Malaysia. On the positive side, this is in line with the government's plans to gradually increase the wages-to-GDP ratio from around 34 percent at present to 40 percent. On the negative side, this may not necessarily lead to higher wages. If there is a failure to link higher wages to productivity and value-added activities, Malaysia would be at risk of losing its competitive advantage in labour costs. The increase in wage ratio must be commensurate with the increase of employer-employee income.

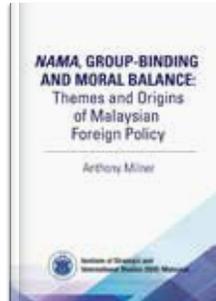
The biggest challenge here is to reach the optimal balance between social justice and economics. There are many public policy advocates, including economists, who tend to look at the two issues individually and not under the same magnifying glass. At the end of the day, it is not about the wage level, or even the wage-to-GDP ratio, but what take home pay represents to each worker. It is the about the equilibrium of all economic variables, and not just wages alone. ●

Firdaos Rosli is a Fellow in Economics at ISIS Malaysia

/ Selected Publications /



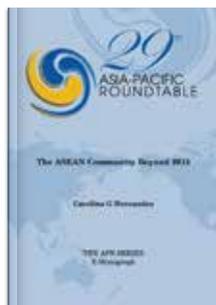
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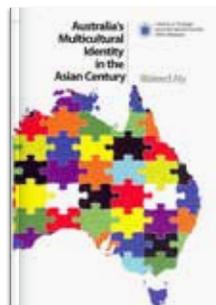
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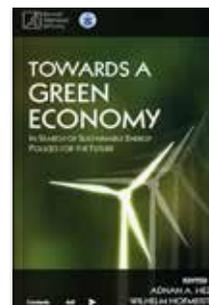
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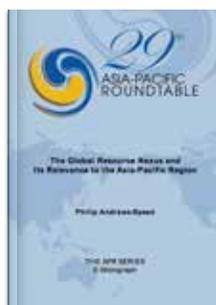
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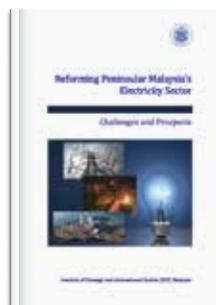
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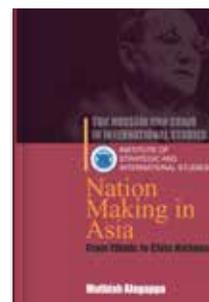
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