

**Closed Door Discussion with James Crabtree, Executive Director of
IISS Asia on “Deepening Sino-US tensions: Implications for Malaysia
and Southeast Asia”**

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Welcoming Remarks by
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1. Competition and rivalry between states is very much the norm in international relations and indeed one might say a defining feature of modern-day diplomacy. But when competition and rivalry takes on an adversarial turn between two superpowers, the dynamics in international relations could become supercharged as well. If unchecked, the consequential impact could spell dire, if not altogether disastrous, consequences for the rest of the world.
2. Here, we are reminded of the ‘Thucydides trap’ and the sinister warning of the risk of war breaking out between the rising power and the incumbent ‘ruling’ power. Certainly no one but a few would want that to materialise, leaving aside of course the ever-burgeoning military complex or complexes, situated wherever they may be.
3. Is there some way out of here, as Bob Dylan would ask? Or would it be a case of getting out of the frying pan into the fire?
4. In other words, is there an effective way to deal with this formidable challenge that’s confronting these two giants, namely, to get out of the frying pan of Thucydides and escape falling into the fire of ‘Churchill’s trap’?
5. Are we prepared to see a revival of a long drawn Cold War and repeat the errors of our ways as was played out between the US and the USSR in the not too distant past?
6. What is the alternative, one might ask, in light of the current Sino-US conflict? If geographical demarcation is no longer the yardstick for staking claims, perhaps, hegemonic war and cold war may not be the only alternatives.

7. Today, it is clear that competition and rivalry between China and the US has taken a turn for the worse that will impact the regional geostrategic order and its corresponding architectures and norms for the foreseeable future. We see the resulting tensions across numerous fronts, strategic, political, tech and economic – leading up to the next level – a battle of influence.
8. Thus, we see a race for engagement and influence in regions around the world and Southeast Asia has become a prime ground for the new “Great Game”. There couldn’t be a more strategic arena: vast, diverse resources-rich region with an emerging market, relatively young population and outward looking policies that have made the region an opportunity neither power would want to miss.
9. For China, you see engagement through the expanded market access, facilitated by various bilateral and even multilateral trade pacts while going on overdrive in economic diplomacy via enhancing cooperation in e-commerce, digital economy, infrastructure development under the Belt and Road Initiative. Naturally, these interests have expanded to include anti-terrorism, climate change, cybersecurity, and cross-border law enforcement.
10. For the US, we see them seeking to reassert influence in Asia after much criticism and questions over their role in and commitment to the region. They have sought to deepen its economic involvement and enhance security cooperation with both old and new partners, all working towards ensuring the continuation of their Indo-Pacific strategy.
11. But we should also be looking at this from another perspective: ours – as Malaysians and as Southeast Asians. And a question that is often asked is “do we need to choose a side?” Perhaps the question we should be asking is “if a side will be chosen for us?”
12. This is something we need to think about carefully. We need to recognise that Malaysia is in a position that is both advantageous but also precarious. We are an integral part of multilateral mechanisms and global supply chains. Therefore, splitting this between two major powers can interrupt the seamlessness and interconnectedness that we have long enjoyed.

13. To help unpack this complex conundrum, we are most fortunate to have with us James Crabtree. He is currently the executive director of IISS-Asia. Previously, he was a senior policy adviser in the UK Prime Minister's Strategy Unit under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, and was also with the Financial Times, most recently as their Mumbai Bureau Chief.

14. The rivalry and tensions at hand has been compared quite often to the Cold War, as I've alluded to earlier, with some even calling it 'the new Cold War.' We should avoid taking such a direct comparison, as tempting as it may be. Rather, we should acknowledge the unique history of rivalries and regional contexts, and understand that tensions created by this rivalry will continue until a new equilibrium is found, and it is in our best interest to learn how to best navigate through it.

Thank you.