

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY
YAB DATO' SERI ANWAR IBRAHIM
PRIME MINISTER OF MALAYSIA
AT THE 37th ASIA-PACIFIC ROUNDTABLE (APR)
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HILTON KUALA LUMPUR**

Bismillahirrahmanirrahim

YB Dato' Seri Utama Haji Mohamad bin Haji Hasan, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia.

Datuk Professor Faiz Abdullah, Chairman of ISIS Malaysia.

Dr Yose Rizal Damuri, Executive Director of CSIS Indonesia, and Chair of the ASEAN-ISIS Network.

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies, and gentlemen.

Assalamu'alaikum, warahmatulahi wabarakatuh and selamat pagi.

1. I am delighted to be able to speak once again to the delegates of the Asia-Pacific Roundtable. We are now entering an era of crisis and uncertainty unseen since the Second World War. Armed conflict and war are becoming commonplace in many parts of the world – Palestine, Ukraine, and Myanmar, but not also forgetting the crises in Sudan, Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Haiti.

2. Meanwhile, areas of progress and cooperation so crucial to the developing world, such as trade, investment, and emerging technologies are now increasingly weaponised by competing world powers. For major and small powers alike today, we are confronted with a strategic landscape compounded with greater complexities and an even more treacherous geopolitical terrain to navigate. The geostrategic horizon ahead is overcast with ominous signs of foreboding, foreshadowing the critical risks, hazards and potential catastrophes in our path that we ignore only at our peril.

3. Last year, when I addressed the APR on this very stage, I spoke about how geopolitical and geostrategic developments have overshadowed some regional mechanisms and multilateral frameworks. Today, a mere 10 months later, I am doubling down on my doubts and misgivings about the world's faith in these mechanisms and the international system. This is a system which was designed in the post-war era to ensure peace and stability, one that held much promise in the rhetoric but proven to be a dismal failure in the delivery.
4. For instead of peace and stability, around the world, more people are dying on battlefields, being forced from their homes, or in need of life-saving aid than in recent memory. Despite our efforts and various international mechanisms, the pursuit of peace is failing. Indeed, it seems to be no longer about maintaining peace, but about preventing the worst.

Distinguished delegates,

5. The preponderance of containment strategies and the shaping of alliances, motivated by competing visions, are re-drawing the contours of our regional order. It is cultivating an attitude in utter abandonment of the values of inclusivity, empathy, and compassion, compounding the likelihood of entirely eclipsing the already disrupted peace and prosperity, not just in the Asia Pacific, but for our global society.

6. Constant discussion and speculation on choosing sides is not only counter-productive but will only add on to the brewing cauldron of mistrust and suspicion. Of late, Malaysia has been perceived as tilting to one side, in a so-called strategic pivot from the other side. This is not only an oversimplification but a gross misperception of our national interests and character. The truth is Malaysia was, is, and will be, on the side of Malaysia.

7. We are fiercely independent. That is to say, we refuse to be defined by how major powers see the world, and Malaysia will continue to strive for our national and strategic interests, defined on our own terms. Malaysia stands for peace and progress, fellow-feeling, and above all, abiding adherence to international law and cooperation.

8. In this vein, Malaysia maintains a strong and fruitful relationship with both China and the United States. At the same time, Malaysia will continue to pursue productive and meaningful relations with our other partners – whether they be our longstanding Strategic and Comprehensive Strategic partners, or friends in the Global South. Malaysia has a proud history of being part of the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War. In remaining faithful to the principle of non-alignment, we have proven that the pursuit of dynamic neutrality is not only feasible but highly desirable.

9. Speaking of the United States and China, I would be remiss, if I did not mention that we mark respective milestones with both countries this year.
10. Ten years ago, Malaysia and the US upgraded our bilateral relationship into a Strategic Partnership. I have often reiterated the importance and value of US-based foreign direct investment to Malaysia, especially in high-tech sectors. The functionality of the relationship is a testament to the enduring nature of our ties.
11. This year too, Malaysia celebrates the 50th anniversary of ties with China – our largest trade partner, a key investor and a close bilateral and multilateral partner. The progress that China has made in the past half-a-decade, especially the vast improvement in the quality of life for hundreds of millions of its people, is nothing short of spectacular. I look forward to the visit of my colleague, Premier Li Qiang, to Kuala Lumpur in a few weeks.

Distinguished delegates,

12. While maintaining the balance between our relationships with key partners is an important part of Malaysia's approach to the world, there are situations that call for unhesitating and unequivocal intervention. I am speaking here of war crimes, flagrant atrocities committed in the killing fields under the pretext of self-defence, and settler colonialism which is nothing short of a systematic campaign of genocide to displace an entire population of indigenous people.

13. The Israeli occupation of Palestine is a scourge on our collective histories and the conduct of nations. The Palestinians live oppressed and besieged while we are alive and free, limited in our influence and power, but sovereign and free. Malaysia is no major power, but make no mistake, we will use our freedom to support the Palestinians' fight for theirs.

14. The humanitarian crisis we see today is not an abstract disaster. We cannot stand idly by and allow this to be yet another chapter of mass killings and displacement that furnishes the historical volume of atrocities that have been committed, recognised, and then tragically but conveniently ignored.

15. We have consistently voiced our concerns about the reluctance of the US and the West to apply pressure on Israel. However, it's important to acknowledge positive developments. Within the constraints of the US political system in an election year, President Biden has recently expressed growing impatience with his Israeli counterpart. He has also begun to push for an acceptance of a proposal for a ceasefire in exchange for the release of hostages.

16. We welcome these early signs of change in America's approach towards the conflict. We hope that the US will keep re-evaluating its approach and hasten an end to the killings and carnage.

Distinguished delegates,

17. The divergences between the Global North and Global South are no longer about “development”, but rather, distinctly ideological, experiential, and perceptual. Opposing perspectives on geopolitics, global threats and challenges have created deep-seated friction between the two “poles”. In this interregnum, we no longer “agree to disagree”. Instead, we disagree, we contradict, and we clash!

18. These differences have transformed the “Global South” from a mere term to one that defines the developing world, moulding it into a strategic configuration of growing significance. The Global South now represents not just the pursuit of prosperity, but a driver of emerging global prosperity and growth. In the battle for inclusion, it represents the reclaiming of a voice not to be ignored in the international order. We see a reflection of this in the urgent call for restructuring the United Nations.

19. Malaysia is steadfast in its view that a comprehensive reform and expansion of the United Nations Security Council is necessary and must ensure equitable and fair regional representation to reflect current realities. While the shortcomings of the United Nations will be “our collective Albatross to carry”, the time is now to push for inclusion and acknowledgement of diverse strategic contexts around the world.

20. Indeed, there is precedence. Just last year we witnessed the inclusion of the African Union into the G20, pointing to greater Global South mobilisation to come, in a trajectory of transformation, at a pace as yet unprecedented. We are cognisant of how Global South narratives today have introspective and empowered undertones which resonate deeply with Malaysia.

Distinguished delegates,

21. Nine years into our Community, ASEAN is in a position of strength to embrace the future with confidence and vigour. In the political realm, ASEAN has served the region well, being the primary forum for dialogue, diffusing disputes between countries and ensuring regional stability. At the same time, as the region's default convening hub for diplomacy, ASEAN has become an indispensable part of adjusting to regional institutional fluxes.

22. In the economic realm, ASEAN has emerged as a dynamic and rapidly evolving economic hub, resilient in the face of daunting challenges. Favourable demographics, industrialisation and urbanisation trends and technological advances, will increasingly make ASEAN an economic powerhouse by 2040.

23. In these times of great uncertainty, it is imperative to redouble our efforts towards further strengthening ASEAN, to be the key platform in managing regional affairs. We need to move from mere rhetoric to concrete action and focus on seeking ways to deliver on its aspirations.

24. It must start with addressing the underutilisation of ASEAN's mechanisms, especially those like the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Plus meetings and East Asia Summit, which have been celebrated for its convening power in the past but now appear to plod along by fact of existence.

25. It should also be anchored on the fact that ASEAN's future development evolves alongside its member states, their national interests, and what we can collectively achieve together.

26. As Malaysia prepares for the chair in 2025, we will strive to lead with moral character, as stressed upon in the principles of Malaysia MADANI. This entails a civil and inclusive approach that celebrates interconnectivity.

27. In upholding our enduring principles of non-alignment and cooperation, the MADANI ideals demonstrate that it is possible to act respectfully while being an active player in shaping our region. Indeed, for Malaysia, ASEAN more than a pillar of our foreign policy is also a force multiplier, and a valuable asset to exercise our agency.

Distinguished delegates,

28. A difficult challenge we must contend with is the crisis in Myanmar, given the scale of death, displacement and fighting. The message ASEAN should convey must come from a unified voice. Failure to act, when there is ample cause to believe that a member state is violating the spirit of the ASEAN Charter, is a dereliction of our moral duty.

29. Of course, ASEAN can only facilitate any efforts when the various parties in Myanmar are ready to do so. But this does not mean that we should not try multipronged, more creative tracks. The status quo is not static.

30. Among the various stakeholders in Myanmar, there are the nascent beginnings of long and difficult conversations of what the future of their country will look like. This includes the possibility of a federation-like system. While it is not our place to decide on what is best for the people of Myanmar, it is incumbent on us, friends and neighbours, to help facilitate what and where we can.

31. As a friend and brother Southeast Asian nation of Myanmar, it is in this spirit which I reiterate that Malaysia consistently calls for an end to the ongoing violence, an end to the history of political marginalisation against all the peoples of Myanmar, and the adherence to the Five-Point Consensus, which was jointly reached in Jakarta, in April 2021.

32. We will work with other ASEAN member states, and Dialogue Partners who have influence on Myanmar, to push for peace, more effective humanitarian mechanisms and the eventual political engagement of all relevant stakeholders in that country.

Distinguished delegates,

33. The challenges we are confronted with are indeed formidable and won't be easy to overcome. And I won't dial back on the apprehension of dire consequences should we choose to ignore the writing on the wall.

34. Yet, the challenges are not insurmountable in as much as it is crucial to remind ourselves that Southeast Asia and the Asia Pacific is a region that remains resilient despite it all. Our realism, as we approach these challenges and prospective solutions, should not be steeped in pessimism.
35. As a collective, we have the opportunity and more importantly, the responsibility to seek solutions that can mitigate the risk of conflict, while guiding us to a prosperous, sustainable, and just future. The discussions that you have had and will have in this Asia-Pacific Roundtable can be part of these efforts.

Thank you.