

**LECTURE BY YAB PRIME MINISTER AT SORBONNE
UNIVERSITY PARIS “SOUTHEAST ASIA AND EUROPE:
RECALIBRATING THE TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT”**

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**SOUTHEAST ASIA AND EUROPE:
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LECTURE BY DATO’ SERI ANWAR IBRAHIM
PRIME MINISTER OF MALAYSIA
AT SORBONNE UNIVERSITY PARIS
4 JULY 2025**

Distinguished faculty and students, friends, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a privilege to be here at Sorbonne University, an institution whose restless intellect has not only shaped France but helped define the modern world.

2. From the dialectical precision of Pierre Abelard in the twelfth century to the charged idealism of 1968, this has never been a place for

complacency. You challenge orthodoxy. You sharpen reason. You lead in quantum computing, climate science and advanced mathematics. This speaks to a tradition that does not flinch from difficult questions. And thanks to such a progressive culture, Vive la France is not just a catchphrase of frivolity!

3. You have made significant strides in renewable energy, biodiversity initiatives, and environmental leadership towards a sustainable future going forward.

4. In the arena of political philosophy and governance, I believe it is no cliché to say that Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire, Rousseau, and Montesquieu have profoundly shaped modern democratic principles even as we continue to be reminded of Alexis de Tocqueville's Democracy in America. Not just empty rhetoric – it's habits of the heart that really matters.

5. From Jean-Paul Sartre to Simone de Beauvoir to Albert Camus, we drink from the fountain of profound insight into social justice and equality while the pantheon of French literary giants, far too many to enumerate here, provide the world with universal themes that cut across creeds and cultures.

6. In short, the advancement of French civilization has significantly contributed across the broad spectrum of human endeavour. This rich tapestry of civilizational pursuits should serve as a foundation for the

fostering of relations between France, and by extension, Europe and Southeast Asia.

7. The question then is on what terms should this be conducted?

8. Back in the mid1990's I postulated in *The Asian Renaissance*, the resurgence of Asia, and particularly in the context of Southeast Asia, about the region undergoing political and economic rebirth, drawing from its unique cultural identity and historical experiences.

9. Today, the advancements in Southeast Asia may be gleaned from the trajectory of growth of ASEAN itself which is no doubt a manifestation of the fruition of ASEAN economic integration. This has tremendously promoted intra-regional trade and investment, enhanced the economic resilience and competitiveness of member countries. This is not some slogan chanted in the name of promoting Malaysia as ASEAN chair for 2025. The economic transformation is demonstrated by such rapid growth and development that has made ASEAN the fifth largest economic bloc in the world and fast moving on to number four. The transition from agrarian economies to being rapidly industrializing and serviceoriented is fuelled by impressive GDP growth rates featuring technological advancement and innovation as among the key drivers.

10. I would go as far as to liken the political changes that Southeast Asian countries have undergone as “democratic metamorphosis”, moving from authoritarian regimes to more participatory governance with democratic accountability, in some instances, even “more democratic” than some of the

established systems. In any event, this is a living testament to the healthy political processes and growth of civil societies in the region. This bodes well for political stability and governance.

11. Furthermore, there is much to be lauded in terms of ASEAN's focus on regional diplomacy and cooperation, as a hallmark of its centrality and progressive multilateralism. Barring the crisis in Myanmar, this has yielded momentous progress in helping to address inter-state tensions, manage conflicts, and promote collective decision-making in regional crises.

12. In that spirit, I put it to you that it is time for Southeast Asia and Europe to redefine the terms of our engagement – as equals, as co-creators, as partners in a world yearning for balance.

13. As this year's ASEAN Chair, I come to Paris as a Southeast Asian voice -- seeking to deepen the conversation between our region and this continent. My meetings yesterday with Prime Minister Meloni and later this evening with President Macron form part of a deliberate journey: to renew and rebalance ties between two regions bound by history, but not confined by it. Hence, to expand, to enhance, and to fortify.

Ladies and gentlemen,

14. Few regions have felt the weight of today's uncertainty as acutely as Europe. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has not only shaken the continent's sense of security, but also its assumptions: about deterrence,

dependence and the durability of peace. A war many thought impossible became a reckoning that shattered the illusion of permanence and reminded us that even in the heart of Europe, history still breathes. But we do not forget that while history may liberate, it may also incarcerate.

15. Hence, Europe finds itself grappling with uncertainty in its oldest alliance. As debates over military spending and collective resolve unfold, the ballast of the transatlantic compact is being tested in ways not seen for generations. The European project, conceived to bury war through integration, now finds itself reimagining its defence, its technological sovereignty, and its energy security.

16. Europe's gaze has turned eastward. Indo-Pacific strategies have taken shape – not only among European capitals, but also at the level of the Union itself. Among the voices shaping this vision of policy and diplomacy is President Macron's recent call for “new coalitions for open trade, open dialogue ... and a rule-based order” which offers an insightful articulation of a European role in Asia – one that is principled, cooperative, and forward-looking. We are encouraged by his leadership. Ideas matter – and his words help set a tone of mutual respect and genuine partnership.

17. We welcome Europe's engagement and the deepening of its presence in our region, including through its growing ties with ASEAN. But as we move forward together, we believe this is the right moment for an open and thoughtful conversation about the terms of our partnership – grounded not in hierarchy, but in mutual respect and understanding.

18. We know that there was a time in the not too distant past that this pecking order was necessitated on the hallowed doctrine of a mission civilisatrice that was proclaimed as justification of colonialism and imperialism. It was sacred because there was supposedly a moral duty to spread Western values, culture, and civilization to non-Western societies.

19. Today, while no claim to such patronising pretensions will be forthcoming, nevertheless the terms of engagement between Europe and Southeast Asia are yet to be fully calibrated. To be sure, we welcome partners. But we welcome them as equals. Not as condescending collocutors. Not as instruments for containment, not as cover for anxiety, and not as projections of other people's fears.

20. To my mind, if Europe is to be a trusted and enduring presence in Asia, it must engage with the region as it truly is – complex, dynamic, and self-aware. A stable peace in our region is maintained by a careful balance of diplomacy, credible security arrangements and principled engagement. And it must be clear: agency in this region is not something to be granted – it is already owned, and exercised with purpose.

Ladies and gentlemen,

21. We urge Europe to resist the impulse to universalise its predicaments and predilections, big or small. Our region – and ASEAN in particular – is not a geopolitical mirror to be held up to another's crisis. It has its own past, its own calculations, and its own forms of restraint. Strategic clarity is

just as essential in Asia as it is in Europe. But it must begin with a recognition of difference.

22. We are swinging between extremes. Once, there was a belief – naïve at times, but not entirely unfounded – that economic engagement would soften rivalry, that trade and interdependence would render conflict irrational. We built supply chains across borders, assumed shared prosperity would bind interests, and imagined diplomacy as the engine of peace.

23. Just as we resist the fatalism of conflict, we must resist the cynicism that too often surrounds trade. For Southeast Asia and Europe to build a meaningful partnership, our economic engagement must be guided by the same principles we ask of security: respect, flexibility and restraint. Because in both arenas – security and commerce – the central question is the same: do we act to impose, or do we understand to accommodate?

24. Trade must be a bridge, not a barrier. It should allow us to exchange goods, services, and ideas – not to export one society's preferences as universal truths. Rules and standards do not descend from the heavens; they are shaped by experience, context, and national choices. We fully respect Europe's right to regulate in ways that reflect its values. But when those regulations shut others out, even unintentionally, we must speak openly about the consequences.

25. Let us be clear: we do not ask for indulgence. We ask only that Europe meet us where we are, not where its models presume we ought to be. What

we seek is not favours, but fairness. Not exemption, but equity. If we are to conclude agreements of ambition and substance, they must be grounded not only in economic logic, but in mutual comprehension. Consensus ad idem is as crucial in geoeconomics as it is in geopolitics, and some say even more. That means seeing regulation as dialogue to come to a formula for mutual gain, not fiat pointed at the head for capitulation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

26. In this city, the idea of “fraternité” was not merely a national ideal. It was a moral proposition to the world. It asked us to see others not as strangers to be managed, but as equals deserving of dignity. It suggested that beyond sovereignty lies something deeper: solidarity.

27. Yet today, that idea is strained. Across too many societies, fraternity ends at the edge of identity. Islamophobia – at times coded, at times overt – has become, in certain circles, a socially acceptable prejudice. It manifests not only in policies, but in postures: in the quiet exclusion of Muslim voices, in the framing of Muslims as permanent suspects in the story of the West. Viewed in this light, “fraternité” therefore is not merely an empty catchphrase but expropriated to be used selectively in the pursuit of insidious racism and xenophobia. Yet, it wasn’t always this dismal and dark.

28. Marcel Proust has shown us what is to be gathered and learnt in search of lost time – *a la recherche du temps perdu* – and lost lessons as well. Perhaps, if we journey back to the 8th century AD we could relearn

some of them too. As the story goes, while the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne and Abbasid Caliph Harun alRashid were the righteous representation of their respective faiths, and thus, were notionally “enemies”, nevertheless, there were cogent geopolitical and economic dictates that nudged them to walk along the path of amity and goodwill, transcending civilizational lines. Therefore, contrary to general notions, Christendom and Islam were never destined to be mortal enemies, except by the designs of those bent on conjuring a different impression, by sowing discord and animosity.

29 On the other hand, given the right circumstances, they were ideally suited for a symbiotic partnership. In his seminal work, *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, Henri Pirenne posits that if not for Islam, the Carolingian dynasty, would probably never have seen the light of day. The logical conclusion therefore is that without Muhammad, Charlemagne would be inconceivable. This postulation, which we know as the Pirenne thesis, flew against the general tide of opinion that the Dark Ages had been caused by the destruction of the Western Roman Empire by the barbarian invasions of the 4th and the 5th centuries. Pirenne’s contention was that it was the Muslim conquest of North Africa that enabled the expansion of the Frankish empire, and hence the genesis of a new distinctly-western form of government. The point about this theory therefore is that the notion of some deep-seated inherent incompatibility between Islam and Christendom really has no leg to stand on! And yet such generalisations and misconceptions are spread across the wide canvass of history fomenting prejudices and breeding predilections.

30. For instance, in geopolitics, for too long, Southeast Asia has been seen through borrowed lenses: as a flank in a great power rivalry, a fulcrum for

supply chains, a zone of contestation between forces larger than itself. We are used to being described, but we are less accustomed to being heard.

31. This is not a call for special treatment. It is a call for consistency. If we claim to uphold universal values, then let them be universal. If we speak of liberty and dignity, they must extend to those who do not look, worship, or live like the majority.

32. Nowhere is this more urgent than in Gaza. What is happening there is not merely a tragedy. It is a collapse of conscience – of empathy, of leadership, and of the ability to distinguish suffering from strategy. We have seen schools turned to rubble, hospitals without power, families erased in seconds. When we fail to acknowledge the humanity in others, we risk losing our own. The statistics are not mere numbers for each represents a human story, of mothers, children, parents, and their experiences should evoke not just sympathy but a call to action in each of us.

33. We speak of human rights and democracy and the imperative to protect the sanctity of life and yet the global community appears to be powerless to put an end to this protracted genocide. While we welcome the verdicts by the ICC and ICJ, they are treated with utter contempt and impunity by the perpetrators.

34. There are no two ways about this: it is incumbent on leaders of the world to speak with greater moral clarity on this issue, and to act with firmer resolve to end this mayhem and killing. Yes, we see the flickers of

hope emanating from the recent efforts and actions of students and faculty members in colleges and universities as well as civil society organisations around the world. In their condemnation of the genocide, and their calling for an end to this brutal violence, we find hope and comfort but we need more. In this vein, we need to continue to call for global solidarity, advocacy, and the relentless pursuit of justice.

35 The imperative for moral clarity extends to all. Unfortunately, what we witness is the double standards, hypocrisy and moral haziness in how the world approaches the question of Iran. No one is above international law. But neither should any country be beyond dialogue. The selective application of norms tears away the very fabric of the rules-based order.

36. This is the thread that runs through our time: a growing gap between the values we profess and the realities we permit. If we defend freedom in one theatre, we cannot excuse its suppression in another.

37. This is not about seeking perfect symmetry. It is about finding coherence for without it, words like “order”, “rules”, and “justice” begin to lose their meaning.

38. And if we are to rebuild trust – across continents, across faiths, and across histories – it must begin with a renewal of that idea: that dignity is not a scarce resource. It is indeed a shared inheritance.

39 Let that be the basis of our engagement. Let it be the measure by which history will judge whether we rose to meet this moment, with unwavering resolve and utmost courage, or resile from it, succumbing to divisiveness, despair, and passivity.

40. Europe is West and Asia is East but the twain shall meet, not by denying our differences, but by transcending them with the courage of our convictions and affirming our commitment with that tenacity of purpose and determination, knowing that our efforts today will influence the generations to come.

Thank you.

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