

**PUBLIC LECTURE BY YAB PRIME MINISTER AT TIANJIN
UNIVERSITY “SOVEREIGN INTERDEPENDENCE: BUILDING A
SHARED FUTURE IN ASIA”**

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SOVEREIGN INTERDEPENDENCE: BUILDING A SHARED

FUTURE IN ASIA

PUBLIC LECTURE BY

THE HONOURABLE DATO’ SERI ANWAR IBRAHIM

PRIME MINISTER OF MALAYSIA AT TIANJIN UNIVERSITY

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Distinguished faculty and students,

It is a privilege to speak at Tianjin University, an institution that has travelled with modern China through every turn of its history. From its origins as Peiyang University in 1895 to the distinguished institution of today, it has remained true to its mission through struggle and achievement alike. The motto you uphold – “Seeking Truth from Facts” – is a lesson not only for the halls of academia but also for the affairs of nations.

This morning, I wish to reflect on three things. First, the trust that Malaysia and China have built across half a century, and how that trust has been renewed in recent years. Second, the turbulence in the global economy and what Asia might contribute to a steadier order. And third, the lessons of history that remind us never to believe that conflict is inevitable, and never to let nations feel they have no choice but to walk a tragic path.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The relationship between Malaysia and China rests on firm foundations. When Malaysia became the first non-socialist country in Southeast Asia to recognise the People’s Republic of China in 1974, it was a bold gesture of confidence in the future. Half a century on, that confidence has matured into a habit of trust – steady, sometimes quiet, but always real.

The three meetings I have had thus far with President Xi Jinping – most recently during his state visit to Kuala Lumpur this April – were continuations of that long journey. Each encounter carried forward the understanding that our two countries, different in size yet equal in respect, can speak with candour and act with consistency.

That trust has made practical cooperation not only possible but solid and vibrant. We see it in the high-quality infrastructure that's supercharging our commercial links, our growing collaboration in green energy and the digital economy, and in smaller but meaningful steps that touch daily life, such as the introduction of mutual visa-free travel.

What gives this relationship its weight is the assurance that even in uncertain times both countries keep faith with one another. And it is precisely in moments of turbulence that such steadiness matters most.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are at a moment when the world economy feels unsettled. Trade rules that once promised predictability are now capriciously altered or ignored. Trade-distorting subsidies continue unchecked. Export controls are introduced one day and revised the next. Where integration was once assumed, fragmentation is now the prevailing mood.

As the classic Romance of the Three Kingdoms (《三国演义》) reminds: “The empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide. Thus it has

ever been.”（话说天下大势，分久必合，合久必分。） We find ourselves living through another age of fracture. Yet history teaches that such moments are not without pattern. Seasons of division give way, sooner or later, to seasons of renewal. Our task is to ensure that today’s disruption becomes the prelude to a fairer unity – not the preface to deeper estrangement.

Such moments of dislocation are not new. The global economy has been reordered three times since the mid-twentieth century. The first came at Bretton Woods in 1944. There, the victors of a devastating war gathered to anchor the world to a dollar backed by gold. The second came in 1971, when the United States abruptly ended that link. This led to a new age of capital liberalisation and, soon after, the establishment of the G-7. The third reordering is unfolding before our eyes: one marked by tariffs proclaimed as “Liberation Day,” by the weaponisation of trade, and by a growing impatience with the institutions of the post-war era.

Each of these re-orderings was scripted far from our shores. Asia was present – but it was not the author. Today, we have the responsibility to ensure that the next chapter is written with Asian ink as well.

Why does this matter? Because fragmentation carries real costs. The International Monetary Fund estimates that severe fragmentation of trade, combined with technological decoupling, could cost some countries up to 12 per cent of their national output. Behind that statistic are livelihoods diminished, medicines delayed, opportunities denied. Emerging economies are especially vulnerable. For decades, openness allowed them to leap forward, converge toward higher incomes, and pull hundreds of millions

out of poverty. If knowledge, technology and capital now begin to flow only within gated blocs, the ladder of opportunity may be kicked away just as others are beginning to climb.

Some argue that the global order was already broken. And they are right that the old order was not fair to all. Globalisation led to great discontents. But here is the danger: because globalisation had flaws, some now leap to the conclusion that only exclusionary clubs or economic fortresses can provide security. These approaches may serve short-term goals, but they harden division.

They risk turning interdependence into hierarchy, and cooperation into coercion.

We understand the frustrations that lead to these prescriptions. Yet we must be clear: cures that close doors may worsen the disease. They may deliver not security but stagnation. Malaysia proposes a different path: the path of sovereign interdependence.

This is the art of standing tall without standing apart. It is the conviction that nations can remain fully themselves – sovereign in choice, in voice, and in destiny – while still being open to the flows of trade and investment, of talent and technology, on which prosperity depends. It is the belief that independence and interdependence are not opposites, but complements.

This principle is not alien to Asia. Centuries ago, the voyages of Admiral Zheng He linked Melaka with Africa and Arabia. He brought gifts, but not conquest; exchanges, but not subjugation. Along the Maritime Silk Road, languages, ideas and faiths travelled along with goods. Civilisations enriched one another without losing their distinct identities. And in the Confucian tradition, we find a phrase that captures this wisdom: hé ér bù tóng (和而不同) – harmony without uniformity. Sovereign interdependence is, in essence,

harmony without uniformity translated into the language of international relations.

There is also an intellectual lineage in political economy. A generation ago, scholars spoke of “complex interdependence”: multiple channels of connection, the declining role of force. That was an important step. But today, we must go further. We must design interdependence that fortifies sovereignty rather than undermines it. Interdependence should not make nations fearful that their autonomy will be diluted. It should give them confidence that, by being connected, their resilience is multiplied.

Asia has a special responsibility in this endeavour. For too long, debates about the world economy have been framed in trans- Atlantic terms. But today, Asia is the engine of global growth, home to the majority of the world’s young, and the centre of many of the most dynamic technologies. We are not merely the objects of other people’s strategies. We are the authors of our own destiny.

China, as a civilisational power, has a unique role to play. Its choices will shape the region's openness, its stability, its inclusiveness. Malaysia can make its own contribution: to show that it is possible to be sovereign without being suspicious, open

without being naïve. And Asia, as a community of diverse nations, has the responsibility to ensure that the next economic reordering is not one of division, but one of fairness and shared prosperity.

We must resist the temptation to think that the world has no alternative but to splinter into blocs. Fragmentation is not destiny. We can choose cooperation over coercion, bridges over barriers. We can choose sovereign interdependence.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Tomorrow in Beijing, I will stand with fellow leaders to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. Such moments are solemn. They honour the millions who endured hardship and loss, and they remind us that peace, once broken, is not easily restored.

There are times when nations convince themselves that conflict is unavoidable, when leaders believe they have no choice, when they feel they are backed into a corner. Peace then slips away, and war breaks out.

Our task in Asia today is to ensure that no country feels driven into such a corner. That requires constant reassurance – reassurance that sovereignty will be respected, that dialogue will not be foreclosed, and that the dignity of each nation will be preserved. Peace is not just a matter of treaties or deterrence. Indeed, it rests equally on the patient work of making every state feel that it still has choices, that it still has space to breathe.

This is why ASEAN, under Malaysia's chairmanship this year, has made inclusivity and sustainability its guiding themes. Inclusivity means that no nation should be left outside the conversation, or treated as a problem to be contained. Sustainability means more than green policies; it means sustaining the habits of cooperation and trust that keep conflict at bay.

China, as a civilisational power, carries a particular responsibility. The region looks to Beijing not only for economic dynamism but also for confidence that Asia's future will be open, stable and respectful of diversity. At the same time, countries like Malaysia have their own duty: to act as bridges, to remind the larger powers that restraint and reciprocity are the anchors of peace.

So, tomorrow's parade will carry many meanings. But beyond the spectacle, it should prompt us to ask whether we are doing enough to prevent the return of inevitability. The true measure of strength lies in how nations choose to step back from paths that would entrap them. Asia's responsibility – our shared responsibility – is to ensure that we never again convince ourselves that we have no choice.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I began with the trust Malaysia and China have nurtured for half a century. I spoke of the turbulence in the global economy, and of the lessons of history that remind us how fragile peace can be. Taken together, these reflections point to a simple truth: that Asia's future will rest on steadiness, on the confidence to act without haste, and on the patience to give every nation the space it needs to feel secure.

Our task is to remain fully ourselves while staying open to one another; to stand tall, yet not stand apart. That is how sovereignty is preserved, and how resilience is multiplied.

If we hold fast to that spirit, then Asia can move forward with dignity, assured of its place in the world.

Thank you.

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