

**SPEECH BY
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FINDING COMMON PURPOSE IN A DIVERSE WORLD
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Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Humanity is indeed a marvel. We are a glorious kaleidoscope of races and religions, languages and nationalities. We come from all points of the compass. We live in different countries and climes. We have developed different traditions and customs. Often, we dress different, and we have different cuisines.

2. For Muslims, this diversity is divinely ordained. It is written in the Qur'an, and it translates into the English language as follows:

"O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other)."

3. We were created to be different so that we can learn about each other, appreciate each other, and share this planet together. We were meant to live in peace with one another, not to wage war on each other. We were meant to respect and honour each other, and those things which belong to each other. We were not meant to oppress and exploit, or plunder and destroy.

4. Our common purpose in this diverse world, in my view, is to foster the full flowering of the human person. This flowering should be in all the dimensions, the material as well as the spiritual. We must accept it as our common responsibility to create the environment in which the human person can find his maximum fulfillment in the political, economic, social and religious fields.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

5. This, indeed, is the declared purpose of many of our societies. We state this common goal in different ways. It is variously expressed in terms of human dignity, freedoms, comprehensive and fundamental human rights, the welfare and well-being of the human person, to name a few.

6. In Malaysia, we articulate our common purpose in the long-term vision of the nation, Vision 2020, as "comprehensive development". We have declared that "Malaysia should be a nation that is fully developed along all the dimensions: economically, politically, socially, spiritually, psychologically and culturally".

7. In the United States, its Constitution speaks of the profound desire of the American people to "promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Prosperity".

8. The United Nations Charter reaffirms "faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person." These rights are elaborated upon in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to consist of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. The United Nations Development Programme speaks of

“expanding people’s choices”, to “lead lives they value”.

9. I believe that the full flowering of the human person is recognised by all religions too, though most of them focus on the life Hereafter. My own faith, Islam, stresses the concepts of “human well-being” (Falah and Sa’aadah) and a “good life” (Hayatun Tayyibah) in this world and the Hereafter. For Muslims, the human well-being and the good life are to be attained through the balanced pursuit of both material and spiritual needs.

10. Profoundly diverse though we are, we do share a broadly common purpose. We may express it in different ways. But the full flowering of the human person and his comprehensive development and well-being are our common goal.

11. This region of ours, the Asia Pacific, is unique in several respects. We possess a diversity that is perhaps unparalleled in any other region. Ours is the largest region. It straddles an ocean, the largest ocean. It embraces the most populous country, as well as some of the least populated. The largest economy in our region is more than 3,500 times the smallest economy in APEC. We have a country that is the biggest military power on earth. We also have countries with minimal capacity to maintain the peace or to defend themselves.

12. We have full market economies at one end of the spectrum and centrally planned economies on the other. We also have knowledge-driven economies with very high per capita incomes, and subsistence economies that are virtually at ground zero.

13. Our diversity also extends to the political landscape. Political systems of all varieties exist in the Asia Pacific region. We have absolute monarchies, liberal democracies, military governments and socialist systems. There are countries with a majority of Muslims, and others with a majority of Buddhists or Christians. There are also countries with a mixture of Confucianists and Taoists, as well as Shintoists, not to mention animists.

14. We speak in many tongues, and we write in different scripts.

15. The Asia Pacific region is therefore extremely diverse. But the need to establish regional consciousness never escaped us. As early as some twenty years ago, we began to explore areas in which we have common purpose, and mobilise ourselves around them. We converged around two of the most important areas, namely the economic and the security.

16. We launched the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation or APEC process in 1989, and the ASEAN Regional Forum or ARF in 1994.

17. APEC now embraces 21 regional economies, and its focus is on enhancing our economic well-being. This is to be done through promoting sustainable economic growth, strengthening the multilateral trading system, and advancing prosperity. APEC is also committed to free and open trade among its Member Economies. Following the terrorist attacks on the United States in September 2001, counter-terrorism has also become part of the APEC deliberations.

18. We launched the ARF as another dimension of regionalism, to enhance the well-being of the people and countries of the region through close consultation and cooperation in the security sphere. The ARF’s reach is even wider than that of APEC.

Twenty-six countries participate in the ARF. The Forum has focused on building confidence and trust among the countries of the region, and on developing diplomacy as an instrument for preventing and containing conflicts. It plans to venture into resolving conflicts in the region in future.

19. These trans-Pacific instruments for creating an environment conducive to the full attainment of human dignity in the region are reinforced by constructs at the global as well as sub-regional levels. At the global level we have the United Nations. At the sub-regional level we have in place regional cooperation processes such as ASEAN, the ASEAN Plus Three forum and the recently launched East Asia Summit process. In the other corners of the Pacific we have the North American Free Trade Area, or NAFTA, and the Pacific Islands Forum.

20. These governmental processes are mutually complemented by business, academic and non-governmental processes such as the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council, Pacific Basin Economic Council, the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific and the ASEAN Institutes of International Studies.

21. These multi-layered processes are in turn underpinned by a variety of instruments designed to fully release as well as realize the human potential. They include global and regional compacts to facilitate trade and investment, protect the environment, promote human rights, fight disease and enhance security.

22. All these instruments are instruments of common purpose. They were forged from a diversity of interests and aspirations. They were created through consultation and consensus.

23. These cooperative initiatives have contributed significantly to prosperity, peace and well-being in the region. At the economic level they have helped increase regional trade by lowering tariff and non-tariff barriers. They have also promoted networking, facilitated business and made possible exchanges on best practices, among other things.

24. At the political and security level they have helped increase trust, build confidence, and provide assurance. It is a fact worth noting that in the APEC region, we do have once bitter adversaries as well as present rivals sit at the same table, discuss problems and solutions, and work out shared perspectives and common approaches.

25. The regional networks have also facilitated cooperation across borders to build capacity and reduce disparities. They have also promoted collaboration to contain disease, mitigate environmental pollution and provide assistance for disaster relief.

26. But these accomplishments notwithstanding, there is much more that needs to be done. Regional cooperation may be said to be still in its preliminary stage in the Asia Pacific region. Even in Southeast Asia, where the progress is most evident, much work remains to be done.

27. The challenges to human development across the region are still formidable. The Asia Pacific is where growth is most dynamic. Yet millions are still poor in the Western rim and in the Pacific islands. While income gaps have been narrowed in many areas, disparities are still great, both among nations and within societies. Some of the highest incidences of HIV/AIDS are found in the Asia Pacific.

28. We salute the phenomenal development of China and India. But it is also posing a severe challenge to the competitive edge of many countries and their continued ability to attract much needed foreign investment. It is fuelling political and security apprehensions in some countries. At the same time, certain major structural imbalances are yet to be addressed, and future economic stability remains at risk.

29. On the political and security front, improvements in some parts of the region have been counter-balanced by regression in others. Southeast Asia remains largely peaceful although insurgencies and terrorist threats persist in a few countries. The situation in Northeast Asia however has deteriorated further, with more severe tensions and strains among some regional states. The issue of nuclear proliferation in North Korea must be addressed, albeit in a peaceful way.

30. The United States has become seriously exposed to security threats despite its unchallenged military superiority. It faces terrorist threats not only at home but also against its interests all over the world. Its position in Iraq and even Afghanistan is becoming increasingly unsustainable.

31. Strengthening our resolve in pursuit of mutual and comprehensive well-being therefore remains a compelling challenge for this Asia Pacific region of ours. I would like to flag five priorities for the immediate future in this regard.

32. The first is the work that needs to be done at home, in each and every Asia Pacific country, by each and every government, to allow for the full flowering of the human potential. The challenge is most severe in North Korea and Myanmar. But it is also grave in every other country where significant numbers of people endure political marginalization and economic hardship. Strange as it may seem, this can and do happen in democracies as well.

33. The second priority is to reduce the tensions that exist between Japan on the one hand and China and South Korea on the other. The animosities are an obstacle to the cultivation of the goodwill and friendship that are essential to the building of common purpose for greater regional cooperation. They have affected regional harmony and stability, and more seriously they threaten to unravel consensus on community building initiatives in the region.

34. This leads me to the third priority, which is to ensure the integrity and smooth functioning of the processes for regional cooperation that have been put in place. I refer particularly to the ASEAN Plus Three and East Asia Summit processes. The former is the primary vehicle for community building in the region. The latter can usefully complement as a forum for dialogue on strategic issues involving additional participants in support of community building in East Asia, for mutual benefit. It is critical that we preserve the integrity of the respective processes. We must not allow the pursuit of narrow national interests to subvert the integrity of one process against the other process.

35. The fourth priority, in my view, is to establish a proper and correct appreciation of the challenge or perceived threat that is posed by a rapidly prospering China. This has caused some economies to adopt "hedging" strategies which will constrain full regional cooperation. This will impede the building of the common purpose. What really is the challenge posed by China? What is the best, and worst, response? What are their implications to regional well-being?

36. Since this is an APEC forum, I would like to suggest that the fifth, and probably the most urgent, priority is to refine the role of APEC in the emerging regional architecture, and make it a more effective process for regional cooperation in its specific field. Among the things we might want to do is to make the APEC agenda more relevant to the needs and aspirations of all Member Economies and not just a few. Common purpose can only evolve from a sense of shared ownership, and this will only exist when the APEC agenda serves the interests of all members as much as possible. All Member Economies need to be accorded a sense of equality and their concerns addressed with equal measure.

37. APEC should also return to its original purpose as an instrument for promoting economic growth through fostering freer, and fairer, flow of trade. Its assumption of some security role following the September 11 attacks in the United States has compromised its original purpose and blurred its focus. Security, after all, is the express concern of the ARF.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

38. Let me conclude by underlining what I consider to be the most important prerequisite for building common purpose in a diverse world. A strong common purpose leading to effective cooperation and collective action will only exist when there is the realization that whatever our nationality, race or religion, and whatever our economic condition, we are one. There must be the recognition that we share essentially the same aspirations and deserve to sit at the same table. Only then will we be truly committed to launching a common destiny and establishing a shared purpose. Only then can we faithfully provide for the emancipation of the human spirit.

Thank you.