

## **Keynote Address at The 33rd Asia-Pacific Roundtable**

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1. Thank you for inviting me to the 33rd Asia-Pacific Roundtable. It is indeed a pleasure to be here to address this distinguished gathering of scholars and policymakers at this conference.

2. This is not the first time I am speaking in the Asia Pacific Roundtable. I am told there is at least a handful among those here today who have heard me addressing this conference several times since the 1980s.

3. And I would like to take this opportunity to warmly welcome back those of you who have been with us all these years.

4. After more than three decades, the Asia Pacific Roundtable has become something of an institution in Asia and to a certain degree, to the world as well.

5. When we began organising the Roundtable in 1987, it was felt that it was a good time to bring together people from different ideological backgrounds to discuss major strategic issues affecting the region and the rest of the world.

6. Malaysia subscribes to the idea that nations which once may be opposed to each other should find common grounds and become partners in ventures and endeavours that would benefit both. Hostility and belligerence benefits no one except those arms traders and of course, war profiteers.

7. And such rejection of wars serves our region well as it had enjoyed relative peace and had prospered from that very peace.

8. I've been saying this and I will repeat it again here today. At a time when we pride ourselves as being civilised, we find leading nations still bent on killing people in the pursuit of their national interest and agenda.

9. There is nothing civilised nor advanced when war is an option to solve problems. We should all work towards criminalising wars. We must campaign against wars and it must be an international creed that must be subscribed to, very much like our commitments to protect the environment, freedom and fundamental liberties.

10. In fact, criminalising wars should be one of the top priorities of the international communities knowing that when wars are fought human lives become insignificant. How can that be acceptable when we know in a war – civilians, children, women, the weak, the sick and the elderly face the same possibilities of being killed as the soldiers.

11. At the same time, as the international communities campaigns for the abolishment of capital punishment seven of murderers, we choose to be silent when the thousands and thousands of civilians and soldiers are killed in military campaigns. And the warmongers love to glorify their killers with medals and statues and repeated mentions in their history books.

12. Wars are about killings and massive destruction. It is primitive and if we consider ourselves as civilised we should oppose wars.

13. This is the creed that Malaysia, new and old have always subscribed to and we are glad that it is shared by ASEAN nations which had made the regional grouping peaceful and dynamic, focused in intra and inter-regional development.

14. When the new coalition took over the governance of Malaysia after the May 9th, 2018 general election, much hope was pinned on the new Government to provide better focus and direction in our foreign policies. Of course, domestically, the expectations are equally high in terms of addressing our economic woes, mostly inflicted upon us by the previous Government.

15. We were and still are, struggling to resolve our economic debilities battered by the financial shenanigans of the previous administration.

16. A year had passed and I am happy to state that we have managed to overcome the worst of the legacies of chaos we inherited.

17. For the information of the regional and international communities, the New Malaysia has forged an image of fairness, good governance, democracy and the rule of law. We reject corruption and has instituted laws, rules and practices to reduce and abolish corruption.

18. While the nation's economic resuscitation hinges on our domestic policies, the regional and global developments threaten to unhinge these strategies and plans. We have to be alert to external uncertainties and disruption and prepare ourselves to counter them.

19. This region has long witnessed regional and global power play first-hand. But we have prevailed and become much wiser. As a nation and collectively as ASEAN we have guarded our independence and neutrality despite our many agreements on trade and cooperation.

20. Present geopolitical uncertainties and the looming battle for trade supremacy have yet again threatened our determination to rise above partisanship and re-alignments.

21. While we welcome international collaborations in ensuring the security and peace in and around the region, we also do not wish to be dragged into the one-upmanship of powerful nations and their military presence in our zone of peace, freedom and neutrality.

22. More than ever, the cohesiveness of the nations of the region is crucial more than at any other period in its contemporary history. We will not allow ourselves to be dragged into conflicts initiated by others.

23. It has been shown that the interests of small nations can be defended if they unite as a regional grouping and Southeast Asia's ASEAN has been credited as one of the more successful regional organisations ever established.

24. ASEAN as a regional community has attained the record wherein no country that has joined it has voluntarily left. Instead, countries from different regions wished to be part of it.

25. Though at this point in time the ASEAN countries may not be posting double-digit GDP growth but it is not a regional affliction but rather a global phenomenon. Within our midst, the Asian “tigers” are still prowling though some may have been hibernating for a while, They will wake up and reclaim their rightful position in time.

26. The ASEAN Community has a population of about 660 million, half of which are below 30 years of age. This year, the ASEAN Community is projected to generate, in purchasing power terms, a GDP of USD9 trillion. In five years, that number is projected to rapidly grow up to USD13 trillion and making all this possible is the jealously guarded combination of peace, security and stability across the region.

27. Member States do not need to agree on everything to work well together. What counts is that we share basic principles of mutual respect, cooperation, sovereign equality and common regional prosperity and well-being.

28. When there is dispute, we go to the table and discuss and negotiate. If we fail we resort to arbitration or go to the international courts of justice. We abide by the decisions. Malaysia won in our overlapping claims of territory with Indonesia but lost in another with Singapore. All parties accepted the decision though we still feel strongly about our rights to the disputed territory that we lost.

29. In the case of overlapping claims with Thailand, we decided to jointly share in the extraction of oil under the Joint Development Authority. We have profited tremendously, though this unique cooperation.

30. Fifty-two years on, ASEAN has become a thriving community in a stable and peaceful region. As I've pointed out earlier, disputes have been managed though a few have not been resolved.

31. For many ASEAN member nations, ASEAN is important enough to be a major factor in the charting of their foreign policy.

32. ASEAN regionalism seems to be taken for granted, and sustained only by fulfilling a thousand routine obligatory meetings each year. The much-debated concept of ASEAN Centrality deserves greater commitment.

33. A modern competitive world expects and demands pro-active regional policy energised by fresh thinking. ASEAN has room for taking leadership on this front.

34. ASEAN has no shortage of transnational institutions to drive it: the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, to name a few.

35. ASEAN Plus Three for instance, denotes an East Asia characterised and led by an ASEAN at peace with itself and its partners. ASEAN has no less than 15 formal partners spanning the globe: as Dialogue Partners, Sectoral Dialogue Partners, and Development Partners.

36. Among the more prominent perhaps is the Dialogue Partnership with the European Union, which is covered in a session of this Roundtable. This

is potentially of intercontinental significance, being a partnership between a region of Asia with much of Europe.

37. More than any other region perhaps, Southeast Asia holds the promise of both high sustainable growth and peace with stability among neighbours. Its past achievements are on record.

38. Southeast Asia as a whole has the distinct advantage of still being a developing region. That means it can develop further, unlike developed regions where development has levelled off.

39. A decade ago, ASEAN rolled out its master plan for connectivity by 2025. You could say that China's plan to revive the ancient Silk Road today is ASEAN's master plan writ-large.

40. We in ASEAN can enjoy net gains if the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can be designed to serve national and regional interests, just as the ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan is intended.

41. There should be no doubt that the BRI with the full and fair participation of all stakeholders, can be a win-win proposition. National and regional development efforts would then be mutually complementary. Much depends on how we discuss and negotiate.

42. We should then all work closely to see how we can identify and energise complementarities. Since Japan and others have their own connectivity and infrastructure development plans, these we also welcome.

43. If ASEAN does not seize this moment when these initiatives are for the taking, others may do so and in their own way – or nothing positive may happen at all.

44. I have previously proposed new, improved rail networks between East Asia westwards through Central Asia and Eurasia to Europe. Freight by rail is faster than by ship and cheaper than by air.

45. At the same time, we can enhance maritime connectivity eastwards across the Pacific to the Americas. Freight by sea is of course cheaper than by air and rail. Albeit it is slower.

46. But adequate maritime security and freedom of navigation, consistent with friendly trading relations with all states and parties, must be assured across oceans. Ports and naval assets en route can then refocus their purpose from dead-end war preparedness to a greater readiness for flourishing commerce. Some security provisions, already in place, can offer safer trade and travel for all.

47. That is why I have emphasised that large warships on the high seas should be replaced by smaller patrol crafts better suited for routine policing against crime, terrorism and other non-traditional threats.

48. We have to re-prioritise and re-orient our mindsets from a lose-lose war scenario to a win-win commercial prospect. But this requires strong political will. Issues of freedom of navigation and maritime security are better handled through cooperation, not confrontation.

49. A major challenge for all of us now is the US-China trade war. Its deterioration from a trading skirmish to a trade war has been most disappointing, with the prospect of worsening into a long-term Cold War.

50. That would impact negatively on the rest of the world as hapless “collateral damage.” Both the United States and China would not be spared either, since the purpose of any war is to hurt each other.

51. Some would say such a conflict is inevitable. China is clearly rising rapidly, on virtually every front, and along-dominant United States seems unable or unwilling to accommodate it.

52. Part of China’s rise is its expanding global connectivity, which includes electronic and transportation connectivity. That is part and parcel of globalisation once championed by the United States.

53. I hope the US and China will soon see enough sense to replace conflict with cooperation. Everyone will stand to gain much more when we

collaborate with each other, but healthy competition should also be acceptable.

54. As for Malaysia, our external security priorities will continue to be self-evident: the promotion of a peaceful, stable and strategically autonomous neighbourhood.

55. When Thailand and Malaysia were confronted by insurgents along our common border, we acted together to resolve the problem.

56. When violence flared again on the Thai side, Malaysia offered to bring the contending parties together in negotiations. But any approach would be for the Thais themselves to make.

57. Malaysia's role itself was possible only upon the agreement of all the Thai parties, and upon the invitation of the Thai authorities. The same applies for Malaysia's role in the southern Philippines.

58. When piracy worsened in the Straits of Malacca, Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia joined forces to tackle it. Thailand later joined in the multinational effort.

59. Where there is a willingness to negotiate with the shared goal of peace, there is hope. We trust such prospects can exist in Myanmar's Rakhine state, between the government, vigilante groups and the Rohingya community.

60. If a country or region can deal with its own challenges successfully without creating problems for others, there is no need for external intervention. Sovereign nations generally do not like external intervention.

61. Fruitful international relations are possible only when national circumstances are equally healthy. Towards that end, we believe Malaysia and the region will prevail.

Thank you very much.

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