

THE 1996 NEW ASIA FORUM

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TOWARDS AN ASIAN RENAISSANCE

Firstly, I would like to thank ISIS for inviting me here today to officiate this "Towards an Asian Renaissance" Forum.

2. A new Asia is on the rise and that is something only the blind and deaf in mind would fail to notice. Asia cannot be stopped. This New Asia must continue to be an achieving Asia, a continent of progress, bringing massive and comprehensive development to all Asians. This New Asia must be a contributing Asia, a continent that contributes not only to its constituents' advancement but to the advancement of mankind as a whole. To do both, this New Asia has to be an empowered Asia, a continent that is a mover and shaker, not the object but the subject of international affairs, not a consequence but a cause.

3. In order for all these to happen, for Asia to be worthy and to have the capability, there has to be a conscious Asian Renaissance, a rebirth that will re-make Asia and re-shape the world. So far the Asian nations have developed separately, disparately and with no vision of the roles they should play for Asia and the world. While Asia must eschew the idea of Asian dominance, it must still insist on being an equal partner for Europe and America. It must reject domination by any of them.

4. In the space of 50 years, Japan has risen from the ashes of war to become the world's second strongest economy, after the United States. Of late there have been some doubts voiced about Japan's potential. But I believe that given time Japan will overcome the harrassments and become re-invigorated.

5. China has emerged from civil war and civil conflict, from the depths of poverty and disorder to blaze a trail of dynamism seldom witnessed in world history. China's modernisation is moving ahead at breakneck speed.

6. South Korea emerged from the ravages of a bitter war, complete destruction of its infrastructure, and utter impoverishment -- from being a clear and hopeless "basket case" -- to become one of the economic miracles of the 20th century, indeed of any century.

7. Taiwan has been another Northeast Asian dragon. It has done so well that it is now saddled with the problem of how to hide its enormous reserves.

8. In Southeast Asia, Singapore was the first Asean tiger. A few days ago, the OECD formally "graduated" Singapore into the ranks of the developed world. The Republic's per capita income is now the ninth highest in the world in U.S. foreign exchange dollar terms, forget purchasing power parity.

9. Indonesia, one of the largest countries in the world, which in its first ten years grew on average by 1.5 per cent per annum, was given up as lost by all and sundry until the mid-1960s. Today, after 30 years of remarkable economic growth, it stands poised to become one of the largest economies of the world, with little doubt about its present and future dynamism.

10. The Western Press was fond of saying that Thailand, that country of coups, could only survive because it was a cat with nine lives. They are wrong. Thailand not only survived but prospered not because it was a cat but because it is a tiger. The Philippines have not done as well as its neighbours, for reasons that I need not go into. But watch out for this ASEAN tiger, one of East Asia's coming economic miracles. Watch out too for Vietnam, already growing into a tiger even before it joined ASEAN. It is now set for a burst of speed. Watch out also for the other countries of Southeast Asia. Watch out for India and the economies to our West.

11. As for Malaysia, I am reminded of the fact that when we were born as an independent country in 1957, most in the Western world saw us as a prime candidate for the dustbin of history. Let us not forget that it was only in 1960 that we managed to catch up with the per capita income of Haiti, the poorest economy in the Americas. Today, one generation later, Malaysia has a standard of living higher than any country in the American hemisphere -- higher than any country in South, Central or North America -- with the exception only of the United States and Canada. Today, this struggling nation of 19 million hard-working people is the 13th largest trading nation in the world. Tradewise, Malaysia is substantially larger than Russia or Australia. We are one and a half times larger than Indonesia or Brazil. We are twice as large as South Africa or India. In terms of market capitalisation of our stock market, we are also number 13. To be sure, we are half the size of that of Germany. But in Asia we are only behind Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Not bad for a primary candidate for the dustbin of history. Not bad for a country which so many 'knew' had no future.

12. In living the present and contemplating the future, we so often forget the past. Let us not forget that even as we are today regarded as a region of dynamos, we were, till very recent times, regarded as a region of dominoes -- ripe and

ready to fall. 50 years ago, every Asian economy, including that of Japan was regarded as economies with little hope for dynamism or progress. We were all hopeless cases. We were all regarded, at one time or another, in the same way that Somalia or Ethiopia are regarded today. And what is worse, many of us believed in the picture that was painted of us and of our future.

13. Now, there is a surprising trend to minimise all that we have accomplished and to argue that even if we have done well in the past, we don't have much of a future. We are destined to slow down. The East Asian miracle is actually not a miracle. It is a flash in the pan. Whatever it is, it is finished.

14. No-one contests the fact that over the last generation we grew on average two and a half times as fast as the European countries, two and a half times faster than Latin America and 25 times faster than sub-Saharan Africa. The mathematical probability of all of us in this region growing like we have is 10,000 to one.

15. I am constantly surprised by the number of great minds from outside Asia who believe that the astonishingly positive accomplishments that have been made in East Asia in the last half century cannot be sustained. At the same time, there is the equally remarkable assumption that every failure and weakness of the last fifty years cannot but be sustained.

16. In other words, it can be assumed that we in East Asia, who have produced results never before achieved in world history, cannot continue to do all the good things we have so far achieved. On the other hand it can be safely assumed that all the bad things will continue.

17. This belief in our infinite ability to fail and in our limited ability to succeed is touching. There are predictions galore. Malaysia's political stability for example cannot be sustained. It is only a surface phenomenon. Underneath there is turmoil and any time now it will burst like a boil. Why, even the twin towers we are building are tilting and will soon fall over. How can they, how dare they try to be one up against their seniors. Some day it will happen. If it does not then just wait. It will happen.

18. If East Asians have been good at anything, we have been good at confronting problems, facing challenges and surmounting obstacles. Very often, we have done better than others not because we are smarter. Very often others are much smarter than us. We have done better because we have been pretty good at doing what needs to be done, even if this is

utterly against the so-called accepted norms, the norms formulated because the formulators have forgotten their past and in any way are not in a position to breach them, having lost their colonies and their claims to supremacy.

19. If we believe that the next great economic crusade we must launch must be the crusade for efficiency and productivity, not just for human resource development or foreign investments, I somehow suspect that we are going to see a massive crusade for efficiency and productivity in this region. The consequences of this crusade, I also suspect, will be even greater efficiency and productivity.

20. Even as there are those who accept our undeniable economic feats and go on to argue that we cannot continue to succeed, there are so many, especially among the controllers of the Western Press, who concede that our strategic environment is better now than since the end of World War II or even since the mid-19th century. But they go on to argue that our peace cannot possibly last.

21. As to why this peace and stability can't go on, many scenarios are conjured up. Perhaps North Korea will acquire nuclear weapons. This was a hot favourite in 1994. Perhaps you will fight on the Korean Peninsula. This was a hot favourite for many months last year. Perhaps Taiwan might declare independence. China would then be forced to take military action. This was another favourite war scenario and seems to be hard to lay to rest despite the fact that the Taiwanese electorate recently delivered a clear verdict: they don't want war with China; ergo, no playing the fool with independence.

22. Besides the perennial Korean War scenario, which has always been utilisable over the last 40 years, there are three trusty bogies. First, the arms acquisitions in East Asia. Second, the South China Sea. Third, and this can always be counted upon to be the all-purpose block-buster, the "China threat".

23. The naivete of the victors of the Pacific War when imposing a one percent of GDP limit on Japan's arms spending reflects the belief that Japan would be down and out forever. Today they know that one percent of Japan's GDP is much more than what many European nations can afford to spend on arms.

24. It would be obvious to everyone that as a country's economy grows, its expenditure on arms will also grow. The percentage of the GDP or whatever may remain the same, but in absolute amounts the expenditure can be very big indeed.

25. The situation is not improved by the aggressive marketing of arms by the West. Their salesmen point out the threats that each Asian country faces and persuade us to buy their sure fire weapons. No sooner had we bought when they tell us that our potential enemy has better weapons and can only be countered by the new weapons that their Governments have now just allowed us to acquire. Of course they sell to the potential enemy as well, probably telling the same story; that we have acquired this deadly weapon and they should have a particular weapon which has just been taken off the restricted list and is now available for acquisition. And so it goes on, with more and more effective weapons being invented at massive cost and necessitating their worldwide sale to recover the financial outlay.

26. In the meantime, the so-called Western controlled free press reports on arms race going on in Asia, completely ignoring the involvement of the West in the sales of these weapons. It never occurred to them to stop the billion-dollar researches on weapons of destruction going on in their own countries.

27. If there is a threat, that threat is not from Asian countries. Asia knows that the threat comes from outside Asia, from countries which are forever upgrading their capacities to kill and destroy. All the Asian countries put together cannot match the \$265 billion budget for the arm forces by just one western country. Who is the enemy one may ask? Is it any one of us in Asia? The regard and respect for Asia is best exemplified by their choice of sites for testing their nuclear weapons. And yet Asians are being told that they must arm against other Asians, and not against those who obviously regard Asians as enemies who must be made to appreciate the forces ranged against them.

28. Yes, Asians are arming. But they are arming commensurate with the level of their economic development and to fulfill their legitimate security needs. They would rather not arm, but they are not reassured when, despite their independence they are perpetually being badgered to do this and that and the other. They cannot but feel threatened when powerful Asian economies are instructed not to talk to some Asian countries which are mere non-entities, because the leaders of these countries did not wear coat and tie when the envoy of the powerful called.

29. Despite the overbearing attitude of those outside Asia, Asia and Asians must never be confrontative. The Asian renaissance must presage a better world, a world free from power politics, of covert imperialism, of threats and impositions.

30. I have enraged many in the past by talking of a New Asia, by envisioning an achieving Asia. What impertinence!

31. I have also enraged many by envisioning an independent and contributing New Asia. Apparently it is not acceptable that Asia has a contribution to make, that it is high time for Asia to stop making apologies, to rise to its feet.

32. Many in Asia believe that we do have values and ways of doing things which are, for want of a better word, "Asian". This is heresy to those who believe only in their own values and ways of doing things as being universal. Cannot Asian values too form a basis for universal values? Is it that non-Asians have a monopoly to determine what is right and what is wrong and Asians don't?

33. When something is universal, then it must be found everywhere in this world if not the universe. If it is not found in such a large chunk of the world as Asia constitutes, can it then be said to be universal?

34. Asians do believe in human rights, in press freedom, in democracy, in the rule of law. We do believe in the goodness of being good and the badness of being bad. But we also care for the results.

35. Recently when the confrontation between the U.S. Government and the Republican resulted in a shut down of the Government, the first comment of an American media personality is that it reflects democracy. The hardships and the travails of some hundreds of thousands of Government employees are irrelevant as long as democracy is upheld.

36. Imagine an Asian country having such a Government shut-down. Would it be described as democratic? More likely it will be labelled as anarchic, as Asian incompetence, Asian politics, Asian selfishness and uncaring attitude.

37. But the shut-down did not happen in Asia. It did not because Asians interpret human rights and the rule of law as being for the good of the majority, not the freedom for a few politicians, or for that matter the leaders of the perpetually disgruntled minority parties or trade unions. They can have their freedom but their right is restricted to hurting only themselves. If they hurt innocent bystanders then they are abusing their democratic right. They must not hold others, hold society at large to ransom.

38. Is this so wrong? Is caring for the majority of the people, caring for their welfare and indeed their freedom from the oppression of the few so wrong? Is it so wrong for Asians

to reject the touted universalism of Western values and adhere to their own? Indeed cannot they claim that their values too should be accepted as universal?

39. But of course Asians and Asian countries should not seek to impose on others as much as they resent having other values imposed on them. Asians must prove that their values, their ethics, their cultures have merit and benefit the community. The best way to do this is of course to sustain our peace, to develop our economies and to practise democracy pragmatically.

40. The Renaissance of Asia has actually been going on unnoticed. It is time that we make ourselves aware of it. We should come together, not to confront others, not to form a trade bloc, not to be obstreperous and arrogant. As much as we should not be apologetic, we should bear no grudges. We must only assert our democratic rights, as nations, to be equal and not to allow ourselves to be mentally, informationally and diplomatically bludgeoned. We must point out that it is undemocratic of others to stop us from forming a talking shop like the EAEC when they themselves are forming protectionist trade blocs.

41. This Asian Renaissance must be a psychological and cultural rebirth, freeing us from the bonds of mental servitude and enriching our arts and our cultures. It must be an economic renaissance, vigorously propelling our material condition of life forward whilst ensuring social and economic justice for all our citizens. It must be a political renaissance, founded upon the richest development of different forms of democracy and the greatest respect for and nourishment of all the rights of the individual person in the contact of community rights in which the individual exists.

42. This Asian Renaissance must also be a social renaissance, righting the wrongs of centuries, providing dignity, egalitarianism and opportunity to all regardless of gender, position, race, colour or creed. It will confront no one, no country, no continent.

43. The task will not be easy. There will be opposition. The proxies of those opposed to the Asian Renaissance will be the tyranny of the western controlled International News Media.

44. They have a vested interest to see that the Asian rebirth is aborted, partly because bad news make money for them and partly because the West to which they belong feel threatened. They want the status quo because it upholds their tyranny, their right to deny news which do not fit their agenda, to promote their own views and to give them the role of king-makers everywhere.

45. It is dangerous to call a tyrant a tyrant in his face. In the old days one would be incarcerated in prison and left to rot. The modern equivalent to this is adverse and damaging publicity and news which undermine leaders and nations and stunt their economic and political health. Western journalists and in particular newscasters are used to having their victims cringe during interviews. They enjoy this sense of power. And they will not hesitate to use it to prevent the Asian Renaissance.

46. So the rebirth of Asia is not going to be easy. But Asians must work at it and work hard. Only success will ensure that we will be treated as equals and given our place on this planet.

47. We must pursue this Asian Renaissance not as a response to anyone; not as a challenge to any continent. We must pursue this Asian renaissance as a response to the needs of our people and in devotion to our duty to our nations. Not to do so is to betray the promise of our future.