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EVENT: At The 2nd Malaysia - China Forum 1996

VENUE: At Beijing, China

DATE: 26 Aug 1996

TIME:

THE ASIA CENTURY A MALAYSIAN PERSPECTIVE

I have been asked to present a Malaysian perspective on the 'Asia Century'. By this I presume we mean the 21st Century which many have predicted will be the Century when Asia will dominate the world. This idea of domination by a continent is too simplistic and is really not in keeping with the times.

2. It is more simple and accurate to describe the 19th century as the century of Europe. In fact European domination of the world started earlier than that. If there is a significant date, it was 1492, the year Columbus 'discovered' America i.e. if we can concede that he discovered it. The misnamed 'indians' were there before him. They had already discovered their land from the frozen North to Tiera Del Fuego in the extreme tip of the horn of South America. But the Europeans have always considered Europe as the centre of the world and all geography and history must be related to it. And so we East Asians are in the Far East. As the world is round, we have every right to use ourselves as the reference point and describe America as being in the East and Europe in the Far East. But we Asians are too polite to be assertive. Actually of course China was the true Middle Kingdom and if there is going to be an Asian Century, then China should resume being the reference point.

3. Part of the 20th Century has been described as the American Century. In the aftermath of World War II America indeed dominated the world. Fifty percent of the world's economy was generated by the United States. It could afford to be generous then and it was. But in the fourth quarter of the 20th Century America or more correctly the United States is no longer the dominant world economic power. It is, however, still the world's dominant military power. If we take this fact into consideration, then the 20th Century can be labelled the United States century. Of course the demise of Communism and the emasculation of the USSR make this assertion quite true.

4. Now there is much talk about the next century being the Asian Century, The European Century and the American century crept on us unawares. We did not realise what was happening until they had, happened. And so we were not able to adjust, much less to resist. One by one we in Asia and Africa and the Americas submitted.

5. But the so-called Asian century, i.e. the 21st Century has been announced early. Indeed it has been a subject worthy of dialogues and seminars. Its implications have been widely discussed, in particular the danger, that it poses to humanity at large.

6. It is the yellow Peril all over again, only this time there are

tinges of brown. There is fear that Genghis Khan and the whole Tartar-Mongol hordes are about to ravage and savage the world, killing and raping and running away with flaxen-haired damsels after the gallant men have been massacred.

7. China has come in for special attention. For years it had been condemned for being Communist and isolationist, practising a close centrally planned economy. Now it has opened up and has adopted a version of the universally acclaimed market system. Instead of being welcomed to the fold, it is looked upon with fear and suspicion. The World Bank has sounded the alarm by predicting that China will emerge in the 21st Century as the greatest world economic power. And fear of China has mounted.

8. Suggestions have been made that China will be a threat if it is not already one. Action must be taken to curb China's increasing economic clout. Alliances must be formed against it, military alliances in particular, but economic alliances also. If China joins any grouping, that grouping must have the presence of a particular Western super power. Japan and Korea have been told to beware. They must not enter into any alliances in which China is a member while Western powers aren't.

9. That China, 'unlike the West, had never conquered much less colonised its neighbours, should not be taken to mean that it will not do so now. China is big and it is powerful and so it must have imperial ambition.

10. That there are today powers outside Asia who have fact tried to arrogate to themselves extra territorial rights do not seem to faze them when they play up the China bogey. We Asians must trust non-Asians because Asians are less trustworthy. It hurts us Asians that people should tell us to trust them simply because they are not Asians. The implication is that we ourselves are untrustworthy.

11. The frame of mind of a lot of people regarding the Asian Century is not healthy. Yet the Asian Century is not likely to materialise even. Asia is not Europe. Asia is only arbitrary geographical entity. It is not a political entity. It is not even an ethnic entity. The peoples who inhabit Asia are so different from each other that they should be identified not as Asians but as distinct ethnic groups. While Europeans and Americans largely follow one religion, the variety of religions that Asians believe in is quite astounding. Animism, paganism and all the other known religions of the world are not only to be found in the Asian continent but they clearly divide Asians into bitterly antagonistic groups. In the extreme West of the Asian Continent, the Muslim Arabs are still fighting their age-old enemy, the Hebrew Jews. In South Asia, Hindus are still fighting Muslims and Buddhists are still fighting Hindus.

12. In the so-called Far East, the Chinese and Koreans are still glaring at the Japanese, when Europe had already forgiven the Germans and world Jewry seem prepared to overlook and forget the atrocities committed by the Nazis. Asians cannot yet forget the comfort women, although the generation who fought the war are almost all dead now.

13. With all this diversity can there be all Asian century? Even in the economic field their development is uneven. While many Asian countries are impoverished, others are wallowing in great wealth. Most of the economic

growth is happening only in one corner of Asia, in East Asia. Even South East Asia is not really developed economically. Some are still dependent on aid and are therefore not about to confront the West, the principal members of the aid clubs.

14. The East Asians from where the Asian shock troops for the Asian Century are supposed to come, are unlikely to cooperate with each other. The idea of an East Asian Caucus has been rejected by major East Asian economies simply because they feel their loyalties do not lie with Asia. One gets the feeling that when it comes to the crunch they are quite likely to turn against their fellow Asians rather than against the non-Asians, in the economic field and probably in the military field also.

15. Most Asians have not been able to get over the feeling of inferiority that decades and centuries of colonialism have wrought in them. They are politically independent but psychologically they are still colonised. The desire to please the non-Asians is strong among them. Their value system and their way of thinking is still very much dominated by Western thinkers. Their youth in particular ape the non-Asians in dress, hair styles and behaviour.

16. The point I am trying to make is that the Asian Century, if indeed there will be one, will pose no threat to anyone. They are likely to implode as a result of their own weight and centripetal pressures. Some of them will be powerful, but they will be powerful on their own, as countries of Asia and not as Asians of the Asian continents. And as countries they can be dealt with the way other countries are dealt with. In fact other countries in Asia, far from ganging up with their powerful Asian neighbours are more likely to try and curb them. Certainly they will compete with the achievers among them. In the process the powerful will get weakened and so diminish their threat to the rest of the world.

17. However, it is hoped that there will be no confrontation among Asian countries, nor should there be between powerful Asian countries and non Asia. I would like to think that powerful Asian economies will serve as the locomotives of growth not just for other Asian countries but for the whole world.

18. We have repeated ad nauseam that the world is getting smaller; it is becoming a village. There is very little privacy in a village and there will similarly be less privacy in the global village. We will all be able to look over each other's shoulders. There will be satellites everywhere with the capability for very minute definition. People will be able to see everything that everyone is doing. Secrecy would be practically impossible.

19. What this means is that we, the nations of the world, will not be able to spring surprises on each other. And surprise is the single most important element in any military or economic adventure. Only Japan managed to surprise the unsuspecting world economically. No other Asian will be allowed to do the same again.

20. The massing of troops or the sailing of a fleet in any direction will be on television watched by everyone everywhere. Pearl Harbour and Tora Tora cannot happen now. We are informed that the burying of their massacred victims by the Serbs was recorded on video and still. The testing of weapons, nuclear or otherwise, will be fully observed. If there is going

to be a war there will be a war but there will be no victory for anyone, only total and final destruction of the world. No matter how powerful a nation is it will not relish self-destruction. The present maneuvering is to ensure that only one side has the capacity to destroy the others. We should welcome this, except that that side has made it clear that it is as capable of bullying as the potential Asian super-power. Our choice is really between one super terror and another, and that is no choice at all.

21. But the likelihood of Asia dominating or of one Asian nation dominating the world is actually a fanciful dream. The more likely scenario is at world in which there are many powers, economic powers mainly. These powers are not going to be all Asian. There will be as there are now, European and American powers, each a match for any of the others. All these economic powers in the East and the West, in Asia and outside Asia, will act as the locomotives of growth for the rest of the world.

22. They will invest in the poor countries and they will be the markets for the products of the poor countries, products which will be manufactured by their own subsidiaries. In the process the poor countries will be enriched and then of course they will buy the products of the rich countries. So in investing in the poor countries the rich countries will actually be developing markets for their own products. Surely this will be better than trying to stifle the economic growth of the poor.

23. If this should happen and it is likely that it would happen, then the 21st Century will not be an Asian Century; it will be the century when the world takes precedence over the narrow interest of continents or nations. This is a better scenario for all the denizens of the world.

24. I am sure everyone will opt for this scenario rather than inter-continental confrontations which the Asian Century conjures. But the century of the world will not happen if we all talk of the Asian Century, especially when we openly voice or fears over the possibility that some Asian nations might become powerful. We should downplay this Asian Century thing but play up the Century of the world, the century when the world comes together, to build greater prosperity for everyone.

25. Even now we can see how we need each other, how continents and countries need each other. The wealth of East Asia did not originate entirely in East Asia. On the contrary much of it originated from trade between the Asian countries and the West; Europe and America. Europe and America served as the engine of growth for Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Singapore and now of the so-called tigers of South East Asia.

26. It is true that trade between East Asian countries is growing by leaps and bounds. This is only natural. As the East Asian countries grow richer then trade will grow, trade between themselves and trade between them and the rest of the world. Let us remember that when East Asia was poor, trade between Europe and America was greater than trade between the West and Asia. Trade goes where there is wealth.

27. Asians, no matter how rich they may be, will not forsake non-Asian countries and continents. They are not snooty. If they smell money they will follow their noses. They have already said that they do not want to form trade blocs. They insist they believe in open regionalism. But clearly the West does not seem to trust them, to take them at their words.

28. Perhaps the West have reasons for doubting the words of the Asians. Some Asian countries have always been unwilling to open up their markets. They say they want to; they say they are, but they create all kinds of obstacles, non-tariff barriers against trade. How can you believe what the Asians say! The West is justified in not trusting the Asians. But is it fair to tar all the Asians with the same brush? Some Asian countries have been open all the time. And some are obviously opening up now. The process is slow but it is happening.

29. On the other hand, although the West seems open, it is simply because they believe that Asians would never have the products, manufactured goods in particular, to compete in their market. They were generous until suddenly they realised that their monopoly of the manufacturing industry had been broken. The cheap poor quality Asian good which had challenged them in the past and which they had carelessly brushed aside, had suddenly changed. Asian goods had become high quality goods while the price remained low. At this stage the West felt they could no longer be generous. And so they took measures to obstruct Asian products, some of which measures can only be regarded as unethical.

30. Asians should really distrust the ethnic Europeans. But they don't. They still believe in the integrity of the Europeans. And they keep on trying to conform to the onerous conditions placed on them in order to continue trading with the Europeans.

31. If only the ethnic Europeans can overcome this prejudices, trade and other intercourse between Asian countries and the ethnic Europeans of Europe and America would get bigger and healthier. If they do, then the 21st century should usher in the century of the world, the century of true international interdependence.

32. Again I say, we all should cease talking about the impending Asian Century. We should talk about the World Century instead. Truly there is merit and profit in the countries of the world believing in being members of the international community than in being Asians, Europeans, Africans, Latinos, etc.

33. If I may I would like to talk about a Malaysian experiment which may have some relevance to the idea of being interdependent members of the world community of nations.

34. In Malaysia as in other countries the Government regarded the private sector as selfish and avaricious. The administration must keep itself apart from the business community. They should make life as difficult as possible for the business people. Rules and regulation, laws and red tapes were designed to impress upon the business people the superiority of the administrators. The business people were mad to realise that although they may have all the money but they will always be at the bottom of the pecking order.

35. Suddenly it dawned upon the elected Government of Malaysia that this confrontative stance of the administration against the business community was not contributing at all to the well-being of the nation. If we must have the private sector, why not cooperate with them. And so Malaysia officially adopted the Malaysia Incorporated concept despite the fact that

Japan Incorporated was regarded as a kind of sneaky arrangement between the Japanese administration and the business community.

36. To cut a long story short, the change from a confrontative stance to one of cooperation between two entities within a nation resulted in accelerating the development of Malaysia. There must have been other factors of course but a business-friendly administration expedited approvals, the main obstacle in the development, of any country. And so Malaysia today is very different from what it was before the adoption of the Malaysia Incorporated concept.

37. The lesson of this experience is obvious, cooperation is better for everyone than confrontation. Now if instead of fearing Asian countries and attempting to obstruct their progress, the West cooperates and helps instead, all will profit in one way or another. There will be less time wasted on finding ways and means to frustrate each other and to delay what must happen some day anyway.

38. Malaysia believes in prospering thy neighbour, not begging thy neighbour. Malaysia believes that by prospering thy neighbour Malaysia will prosper also. On a grander scale if the West will help Asia to prosper, the West will prosper too. Indeed if Asia and the West prosper, then the whole world will prosper, including Africa and Latin America.

39. There will then be no Asian Century. There will be for the first time a world century - a century of prosperity for everyone. And all that is needed is to stop making a bogey of Asian countries. We do not want to be prosperous for the purpose of making others poor. It is not a zero sum game that we are after. A world of haves and have nots adds nothing to the sum total of the achievement of this modern world. A world of haves will result in creating more wealth for everyone.

40. Perhaps this sounds too idealistic. But if we are not allowed to have ideals then life would become very barren indeed. Ideals are for striving towards. We may not achieve this high aspiration but we may get some way towards it.

41. As I said at the beginning I have been asked to talk on the 'Asia Century'. For an Asian, it is a tantalisingly attractive idea, most appealing to the Asian ego. But this is not the 19th century or even the early 20th century. The 21st Century will see a different world, a world so shrunken that we cannot even recognise borders anymore. We are told that with Information Technology we have to accept a borderless world. If there is to be a market it will no longer be a European market or an American market or an Asian market. It will be a world market in which no continent or country can be neglected. With this there can be no isolating anyone, neither countries nor continents.

42. Europe has become the European Union, America has NAFTA, the Pacific has APEC etc. Everywhere countries are merging, across borders and across continents. If there is any division at all it is within continents. Asia is divided. Europe and America are not. And so although there was a European Century, an American Century, there cannot be an Asian Century. It is just not in keeping with the times.

43. Some countries in Asia will emerge as great economic powers. But

most will be mediocre or actually poor. Just because a few will be rich and presumably powerful does not mean that Asia would be powerful. The average Asian per capita will remain very low by comparison at least, if not in absolute terms. The situation will not be deserving the appellation, the Asian Century. It cannot be described as the East Asian Century even.

44. Let us forget these ego massaging theme, the Asian Century. Let us not make a bogey of it. If China becomes, by sheer weight of numbers, the world's greatest economic entity, it will still not become the Middle Kingdom again. There will be no Silk Road, no Genghiz Khan, no Tartar or Mongol hordes. But there will be a lot of Asians and ethnic Europeans scurrying around to do business in the Century of the world. Excepting for Japan, technologically the ethnic Europeans will still have the edge. Asians will continue to buy European technology and apply it to their business. And the world will be richer for it.

45. Besides, the peoples of the world are going to be more and more mobile. They are going to migrate, at times in very large numbers. They will not be so easily assimilated. As a result there will be practically no single ethnic nation. All countries will have multiracial population like Malaysia. Most of them will not only remember their roots, they are going to retain their links with their countries of origin.

46. So far we have seen only African, Arab and Asian migration to European countries. The day will certainly come when Europeans will migrate and settle in Asian and African countries. They will come from Eastern Europe initially but eventually the Western Europeans will follow.

47. In the new Central Asian Republics there are already Russians, Ukrainians and Germans, beside the Koreans. These Europeans apparently live quite comfortably not in exclusive enclaves but mixed with the people of Turkic origin. It is not too difficult to imagine other Europeans settling in other Asian countries. In Africa, European settlers have always been common.

48. The implication is that Asian may not mean Asian any more in the 21st Century. The countries may be of Asia but the peoples will be mixed, with increasingly larger European minorities. The cross fertilisation of cultures will change the character of Asia as it will change Europe and America.

49. The result will again the no monolithic Asia to dominate the 21st Century. Again there cannot be an Asian Century.

50. The Asian Century is a myth, a tantalising myth for Asians, a scary myth for Europeans; but a myth nevertheless. No one should be flattered by myths nor should anyone be frightened by them. Let us all forget this Asian Century myth and settle down to make the World Trade Organisation (WTO) a great organisation that will benefit rich, and poor alike; an organisation dedicated to international interdependence and friendship, free of arm-twisting and big-power dominance. Our next enemy is still in Mars, struggling to evolve from a one-cell animal to something like the creatures we are familiar with on earth. That evolution will take a few million years, as it did on earth. We have ample time to prepare. Let us prepare for that distant eventuality by strengthening the earth through mutual enrichment. Let us now begin the creation of the Century of Planet Earth.