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His Excellency Mr. George Yeo, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Singapore,

His Excellency Professor Tommy Koh, Ambassador-at-Large and Chairman, Institute of Policy Studies Singapore,

Excellencies,

Distinguished Speakers and Participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First and foremost I would like to express my appreciation and gratitude to the Government of Singapore for the warm welcome accorded to me and members of my delegation and the excellent arrangements made for our meeting.

2. I am deeply honored to be given the opportunity to address this inaugural Asia-Middle East Dialogue or AMED. This is the first forum of its kind in which all the sub-regions of Asia are involved in a dialogue with the Middle East.

3. While we may have excellent bilateral relations with each other and cooperate in the context of the United Nations and fora such as the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), we have to recognize that on the whole inter-regional links especially with the Middle East has been weak. For far too long the Middle East has been seen as a "foreign issue".

4. Over the years, Asian countries have been actively forging close intra-regional and inter-regional ties. In Southeast Asia, ASEAN had played a key role in the establishment of the ASEAN Plus Three process, Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), Forum for East Asia-Latin America Cooperation (FEALAC) and the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD). In South and Central Asia, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) have played similar role albeit on a smaller scale. In all these fora the absence of the Middle East is conspicuous.

5. The absence of the Middle East represents a gap in Asia's quest to promote East-West and North-South region-to-region cooperation. Inclusion of the Middle East through AMED fills this glaring lacuna. Therefore this Dialogue is a significant event indeed. Its significance is also highlighted by the fact that Asia and Middle East are usually on the global political and security 'radar screen'.

6. As a person who had been involved in the initial discussion among ASEAN countries, leading to the formation of AMED, I am deeply convinced that we can collectively benefit from this Dialogue. Though we may differ in terms of history, geography, culture and many other aspects, we are united in our common desire for peace, security, stability and prosperity.

7. Before I venture into describing specific ways in which we can make this Dialogue a beneficial one, let me first identify some of the common concerns and challenges that we face. The challenges are both vertical and horizontal. I refer to complexity of a particular problem as the vertical challenge and the different types or range of problems as the horizontal challenge. However I must hasten to add that it is merely a description of the principal concerns. It is by no means meant to be an exhaustive list.

8. Topping the list are some of the long-standing or chronic inter-state and intra-state conflicts. These include the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Korean Peninsula problem and various separatist conflicts in the region. We also have territorial disputes and maritime issues. Domestically in some of our countries, we face the problem of religious obscurantism and fundamentalism. Since September 11, terrorism has emerged as a main security concern. In all of these instances, the problem of human security looms large. In addition to the human security challenges resulting from man-made problems, human security problems also arise following natural disasters and calamities such as last December's Tsunami tragedy.

9. The resort to unilateral and other approaches outside the multilateral framework by the major powers also poses severe political and security challenges. This is because these approaches not only weaken multilateralism but also undermine the global normative framework that had been developed since Westphalia and more so over the last five decades. In other words, unilateralism has its downside.

10. Foreign occupation, pre-emptive wars, proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction, spread of transnational crime especially terrorism including state-sponsored terrorism are some of the manifestations of the weakening of global norms. Such weakening can also be witnessed in the general failure of multilateral organizations such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and treaties such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to bring about satisfactory outcome.

11. However we may choose to define or classify the political and security threats and challenges facing our region, one thing would be certain – the challenges would indeed be formidable. Clearly we would be setting ourselves an unrealistic goal if we attempt to address them all. As for Malaysia, having the benefit of our long

experience in the framework of ASEAN, we believe that there are certain lessons that can be drawn for a successful dialogue.

12. First, we must be realistic in our objectives and approach. That means that we should focus our attention on identifying a few key issues where we can add value. We need not straightaway attempt to address the most difficult issues. After all, some of the challenges are among the most intractable ones of our times.

13. Second, it is important to ensure that AMED remains focused on what it was meant to do – that is to be a forum for dialogue. AMED must be aimed at creating understanding and cooperation. This also means that we have to be honest in this dialogue. We do not need a forum for rhetoric and grandstanding. There are other fora in which we can do that.

14. Third, AMED must be open and inclusive. I believe that a genuine search for solution calls for an inclusive approach. Any approach that favours exclusiveness or resembles a closed club is bound to fail. After all, dialogue is about talking to each other and not talking of or talking past each other especially in dealing with many of the common concerns.

15. Fourth, we must leverage on our strengths. Among our strength is population. Not only do we have a relatively young and growing population, but we constitute close to two-thirds of humanity in terms of numbers. We must also not forget that all human civilizations began in this region. Consequently the AMED region is home to all the major religions of the world including the three monotheistic religions as well. Economically the region is also fast growing though the dynamism may not yet be uniform throughout the region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

16. Having said that, what are the areas in which AMED could add value in terms of addressing some of our major political and security concerns? Again based on ASEAN's experience I would recommend three main areas in which AMED can make a unique contribution. They are:

- Strengthening the global normative framework governing state behaviour and inter-state relations;
- Promoting inter-faith dialogue and understanding about Islam as a religion that is consistent with global norms;
- Undertaking a multilateral approach to countering international terrorism and complementing other regional efforts.

Strengthening the global normative framework

17. I have deliberately placed strengthening the normative framework governing state behaviour and inter-state relations as the top priority. As I have briefly described earlier, I believe that the weakening of global norms is a main source of insecurity. It is heartening to note that the Secretary General's report on the United Nations reform recognizes the primacy of the state. However while the nation-state continues to be the guiding principle of inter-state relations, we must recognize the profound changes that had been brought about by globalization and technological advances and their repercussions on the nation-state. While these changes may have had an impact on the interpretation of certain norms, it certainly does not mean that they have to be abandoned altogether.

18. The actions of certain quarters in the "war against terror" have contributed to the disregard to the observance of territorial integrity, independence and non-interference. Attempts are also underway at re-interpreting principles of international law. So-called thinkers and writers are scrambling to justify these actions through such notions as "pre-modern and modern states" and "functioning core and non-integrating gaps".

19. However it must be recognized that the actions or inaction of some of us have also contributed to this state of affairs. It is indeed ironic for a region that gave rise to the world's greatest religions and had been the fount of knowledge and culture, to be associated with dogmatism, obscurantism, anti-progress and anti-democracy. This region is portrayed as one whose values are in conflict with global norms such as democracy, good governance and human rights.

20. I therefore believe that one of the greatest contributions that AMED could make is to strengthen the normative framework governing state behaviour as well as inter-state relations.

21. In the case of ASEAN, since its inception in 1967 we have been single-mindedly focused on promoting the habit of dialogue among its members based on an unwavering respect for international norms such as respect for territorial integrity, non-interference, respect for sovereign independence and non-use or threat of the use of force in settling disputes. These norms have been codified in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) which is now the de facto regional diplomatic instrument governing inter-state relations. The importance of the TAC is also recognized by non-Southeast Asian States as evidenced by the accession of China, India, Japan, Pakistan, Republic of Korea and Russia. Australia and New Zealand have also expressed interest to accede to the TAC.

22. The habit of dialogue, often derided as a ineffectual mode of enforcing norms, had indeed been the reason for the absence of violent disputes among ASEAN countries. Disputes originating from colonial legacies such as overlapping territorial claims and other bilateral irritants have also been managed in such a

way that they did not degenerate into violent conflicts. Over the years, ASEAN has also managed to successfully extend its experiment to a broader region through the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and other forum in which ASEAN plays a central role.

23. While it is perhaps too early to think of an instrument like TAC for the Middle East, we can certainly start to work in that direction. We should continue to maintain regular dialogue through AMED. We could perhaps begin with an expression of intent. I am sure that ASEAN member countries would be willing to share their experience.

24. AMED can also cooperate in calling on the major powers to support regional efforts to enforce peace-oriented norms. The Southeast Asian countries have for eight years now been encouraging the Nuclear Weapons States to accede to the Protocol to the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free-Zone Treaty (SEANWFZ) without success. Except for China which has expressed readiness to accede to the SEANWFZ Protocol, the other Nuclear Weapon States have not responded positively to ASEAN's calls. There is no doubt that Nuclear Weapons Free Zones do contribute to the strengthening of peace-oriented norms. I therefore believe that the efforts must be re-doubled to realise the Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone. This is one area where AMED countries could cooperate – by supporting each others efforts.

25. There are also other areas where we, depending on our needs and situation, can work towards supporting other universal norms. In Malaysia, gender equality is not an issue. Women are free to study and work. Indeed, they contribute to national development. We have women cabinet ministers, civil servants, elected representatives and even women soldiers. Women play important roles in both the public and private sector. Indeed in Malaysia there is no such thing as solely male preserve.

26. Similarly, notions of democracy, good governance, human rights and transparency need not be inimical to national interests. With the relentless onslaught of globalization, these issues will only gain greater prominence. Governments will have to find ways to deal with these issues in a win-win manner. Otherwise we may very well find that the "political cost" of ignoring or downplaying these issues would be far too great.

27. Though we may have different approaches to governance, I would like to stress that Malaysia does not subscribe to the notion of "one size fits all". These are difficult and sensitive issues. We therefore believe that dialogue and sharing of experience among AMED countries would be beneficial.

Promoting inter-faith dialogue and understanding about Islam

28. The second area where AMED could contribute is in promoting inter-faith

dialogue and promoting understanding of Islam as a religion that is consistent with global norms of modernity, equality, human rights, democracy, good governance, progress and prosperity.

29. One of the main victims of the September 11 events is Islam and Muslims. It is unfortunate that terrorism is often associated with Islam. The unsettled situation in the Middle East together with the excesses committed by the former Taliban regime had done a lot of damage to Islam. The impact of the negative image translates itself in various ways. Trade and investment suffers if a country is perceived as unstable and susceptible to threat. The wrong impression created of Islam also hurts tourism and further exacerbates the divide among cultures and civilizations.

30. Therefore I believe that AMED could render a service to humanity by promoting inter-faith dialogue. After all, the great civilizations and religions were born in our region. Such an inter-faith dialogue could take place in the form of lecture series by prominent personalities. These efforts could complement the various other inter-faith dialogues that are being undertaken by other forum.

31. Recently the Prime Minister of Malaysia introduced the concept of Islam Hadhari or civilisational Islam. The concept emphasises development as being consistent with the tenets of Islam. This concept has been accepted and understood by all Malaysians including Muslim and non-Muslims alike. This concept works for Malaysia as it makes it more difficult for terrorist groups and deviationist teachings of Islam to corrupt the society. In addition, it also dispels fear about Islam.

32. Some of our countries have their own programmes. I believe we could support each others efforts in order to achieve our broader aim of promoting the understanding about Islam as a religion that is consistent with global norms of modernity, equality, human rights, democracy, good governance, progress and prosperity.

Counter terrorism cooperation

33. The third area where AMED could add value is by promoting cooperation against international terrorism to complement other regional efforts. AMED's contribution could be both in terms of form as well substance. We could contribute by disabusing the notion that terrorism is associated with any religion, race or ethnicity. While we can and should be united in disabusing such a notion in international fora, the moral force of our argument would be lost if governments are not seen as acting decisively at home.

34. In Malaysia, the government is ever vigilant against religious groups using religion to incite hatred and violence. We have adequate legal provisions to deal

with such a menace. One of the ways we could help each other is in the sharing of information on such groups.

35. As far as counter terrorism cooperation is concerned ASEAN countries have our own work programme. Under this work programme there are provisions for cooperation in sharing of information and intelligence. In addition, ASEAN also has counter-terrorism cooperation agreements with its Dialogue Partners.

36. Over and above these, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand have their own centres for training and capacity building in counter terrorism. We have the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter Terrorism (SEARCCT) in Malaysia. In Indonesia there is the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation (JCLEC) whereas in Thailand there is the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA).

37. Perhaps formal and structured cooperation in the field of counter-terrorism among AMED countries is something that could be explored. Our officials could perhaps work out a counter-terrorism framework agreement which would complement the efforts that are already being undertaken in the region. As far as training is concerned Malaysia would be happy to extend the services of SEARCCT in providing training courses to AMED participants.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

38. In conclusion I would like to once again underscore the significance of this Dialogue. The challenges that we face are multifarious and complex. With political will I am convinced that we can realize our common desire for peace, stability and prosperity. Towards this end, I have tried to conceptualise three possible areas of cooperation for AMED. I am sure that there will be other ideas too. But at the end of the day, the greatest contribution that AMED could make is to keep this dialogue alive and to maintain an open and inclusive character.

Thank You