



**A SPECIAL LECTURE BY**

**YAB DATO' SERI ANWAR BIN IBRAHIM  
PERDANA MENTERI**

**ON**

**SUPER POWER RIVALRY AND RISING TENSIONS IN THE  
ASIA PACIFIC : THE VIEW FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA**

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**UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
BERKELEY**

1. It is a rare pleasure and honour to be back here. I have been here in a couple of times, addressing students and faculty, engaging in very vigorous debate, some are of the known contentious issues of our times. But it is always a pleasure to be here.
2. Traversing the grounds beneath the silent gaze of the towering campanile, I am vividly reminded that here the fires of innovation, debate and progress have burned brightly for generations. Berkeley represents more than a mere academic sanctuary. It is indeed a crucible where the visions of tomorrow are not just dreamt but actively forged and refined.
3. It is perhaps understandable if Malaysia's relations with the United States of America (US) do not capture the same kind of attention as those involving China, Japan, or now the Philippines because it is neither an alliance nor particularly contentious. It often seems as if the relationship is destined to hide in plain sight. But thinking so, that would be a disservice to the long years of collaboration and mutual respect that our two nations have built.

4. Let me put it this as plainly as I can. Malaysia regards its strategic relations with the US as crucial to its economic vibrancy and national security interests. This position stems from an objective, rational, and perhaps utilitarian assessment of how best to serve Malaysia's needs on the world stage. The facts speak for themselves. The US ranks amongst our largest foreign investors, with over USD100 billion pledged just this year across manufacturing, services and digital sectors. And that is likely to undercount as many US firms channel investments through subsidiaries across Asia and Europe.
  
5. The US stands as Malaysia's third largest trading partner, while we are US's 17th largest export market. Defence and security cooperation represents a vital anchor for the broader relationship. Malaysia conducts more bilateral and multilateral military exercises with the US than with any of our other partners, eleven bilateral and five multilateral exercises annually. This helped to build critical capacity and readiness of our forces. Between 2018 to 2022, US security assistance exceeded USD220 million; providing equipment, training and other vital support.

6. In addition, we engaged in cooperative efforts to enhance maritime security and combat transnational menaces such as cybercrime, terrorism, violent extremism, and drug trafficking. These concerns surpass national boundaries, and their resolution necessitates collaborative effort that capitalizes on collective capacities.
  
7. Malaysia has become a robust partner to the US across spheres like education, climate change, public health, and empowering marginalized communities. But why should all this matter to the US? At the core of Malaysia's global offering is an unmatched capacity to be a reliable partner on critical technologies. For over 50 years, Malaysia has been home to leading technology multinationals, particularly in electronics and semiconductors. Malaysia plays a pivotal role in the global tech industry, supplying 25% of the semiconductor components that power the US technology demands.
  
8. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Ford's production of the iconic F-150 pickup truck hinged a crucially on Malaysia's decision to reopen its industrial operations. Half of all composite wing parts of Boeing and Airbus planes are made in Malaysia. We are also a vital link in medical

technology supply chains, with nearly 300 companies employing 70,000 skilled workers.

9. As strategic competition intensifies between US and China, Malaysia approaches relations with both pragmatically and judiciously. We will work with ASEAN to minimize risk, namely outright conflict or the bifurcation of the global economy into rigid blocks. Neither seems likely soon, but both have become plausible under today's mounting pressure.
10. Recognizing contradictions will inevitably emerge. Malaysia still sees value in engaging both Washington and Beijing. US's economic dynamism, culture of innovation and central role in underwriting regional stability will ensure it leads in many spheres for the foreseeable future.
11. China will remain central to regional affairs due to its size, proximity and deep linkages with Southeast Asia. As chinese economy matures, it will shift emphasis from investment and exports towards domestic consumption and services. Engaging both major powers provides us with more strategic space to advance our national interests. To my mind, this mantra applies across the

board for Southeast Asia, although there will be shades of differentiation in the details.

12. Turning to the more contentious South China Sea issue, Malaysia's position is rooted in enduring strategic and economic imperatives. We strongly oppose any actions undermining our territorial integrity of freedom of navigation. Unfettered sea lines of communication through the South China Sea are critical, as our nation would be bifurcated without them.
13. Nevertheless, Malaysia believes in the power of diplomacy as the best tool for conflict resolution. We also rely heavily on oil and gas resources within our lawful exclusive economic zone, which accounts for up to 40% of government revenue depending on commodity prices. While periodic challenges arise, Malaysia has succeeded in pursuing a strategic partnership with China, enabling enhanced cooperation in areas like trade, investment and tourism.
14. There is no doubt that the continuous US-China rivalry will be the structural reality in world affairs. Almost all major aspects of international relations will be shaped by this condition.

15. Yet it would be too simple to reduce and boil everything down to just these two countries. Due to its size, growing confidence on the international stage and highly influential culture, including Bollywood and global diaspora, India will figure increasingly prominently in global affairs.
16. Despite the naysayers, it is never wise to bet against Japan, whose economy has regained some of its previous lustre and demonstrating its sheer resilience. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida was just in Kuala Lumpur earlier this month, and I was pleased to welcome Japan's desire for more trade and defence cooperation with Malaysia.
17. We also look forward to South Korea extending its role in stabilizing the broader Asia Pacific. A confluence of many nations, each seeking a responsible role and stake in the region will generate an equilibrium that will sustain peace and prosperity.
18. Now, this is a time of profound disruption across all faces of international relations. As information technology reshapes societies everywhere, we have reached an unprecedented intersection between opportunity and risk. Malaysia has long been heralded as a beacon of moderation, demonstrating a harmonious balance

between its rich Islamic heritage and modernity.

19. Historically, Malaysia has navigated the complex waters of religious expression with a deft hand, allowing for a pluralistic society where different faith co exist peacefully under the umbrella of a predominantly Muslim population.
20. However, the ubiquity of social media platforms has ushered in new challenges. The digital age has allowed for the rapid dissemination of formation, but it has also become a conduit for more intolerant ideologies to seep into the Malaysian discourse. These trains of thought, often rooted in a more rigid interpretation of Islam, have found fertile ground in the unregulated expenses of the online world.
21. This phenomenon is not unique to Malaysia. It mirrors the rise of fascist right wing elements in Europe and beyond where misinformation campaigns have successfully amplified fringe views into mainstream consciousness. I am careful I did not mention US. In the process, falsehood trumps truth, providing further to spin narratives founded on lies and deceit.



22. Take the case of the web of duplicity and disinformation spun around the narrative on Malaysia's position on the current Palestinian-Israeli conflict. As I declared in the Malaysian Parliament, there are no two ways about it. We condemn terrorism in all its forms, and we categorically condemn the actions of killing innocent lives and taking women and children as hostages.
  
23. Likewise, we unequivocally condemn the mobbing of civilians, of homes, of hospitals and the consequential atrocities against innocent lives. Children, women and men being carrying out day and night in Gaza with impunity. These are blatant violations of international law. Malaysia views this as a humanitarian crisis precipitated by brutal and indiscriminate war. Ultimately, this is not about which God we pray to.
  
24. After all, the more than 11,000 victims in Gaza comprised Muslims and Christians as well as nationalities of various countries. This is about preventing more death, more suffering and more hate proponents of the Palestinian cause are neither purveyors of hate speech nor supporters of terrorism.

25. Look at the historical antecedents. The position has been and has remained consistent. The voice of Mahatma Gandhi – India, Albert Einstein – US , NelsonMandela – Africa, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X. All of them spoke courageously against colonization and politics of dispossession.
  
26. My message today resonates with urgency as we stand here in Berkeley, not far from the technological epicentre that is Silicon Valley. Even in Malaysia, the forces of obscurantism are harnessing every noble technology and technique to disseminate falsehood. This burgeoning crisis is reaching a tipping point, signaling an impending need for government intervention and international cooperation to renew the chaos. Tech companies, especially those that have flourished in the fertile ground in Silicon valley, carry the crucial responsibility as custodians of modern communication.
  
27. They are tasked with implementing policies that counter misinformation and disinformation while upholding the right to free speech. These platforms need to serve as conduits for constructive dialogue rather than channels for deceit and manipulation.

28. Democracy, despite its flaws, remains our best hope, and its endurance depends on our collective vigilance and continuous improvement, echoing the dedication of those who came before us and I see hope when I am on university campuses. It is in best terms of learning where we are going to find solutions, or at least near solutions to the complex problems that we face, where politics and deeply held beliefs intersect with technology.
29. After all, it is on campuses like Berkeley that we have students who can decipher quantum physics equations while simultaneously advocating for climate change awareness. You are the experts at debating the intricacies of political philosophy, all while pondering the eternal question; is it too late to order pizza?
30. In all seriousness, the problems we face are not neatly confined to a single field of study. They cut across boundaries, demanding knowledge from multiple disciplines to unlock their secrets. So whether you are physicist, a philosopher, an engineer, or a pizza enthusiast, remember that collaboration and the melding of diverse perspectives will be our greatest assets in finding the answers we seek.

31. Walt Whitman once said, gratitude, anyhow, has never been made half enough by the moralists. It is indispensable to a complete character, men's or women's, the disposition to be appreciative and thankful. I am deeply grateful for your engagement and consideration today because my life has been somewhat turbulent. I expect fair questions. I have endured too much torture. Please don't act into my misery.
  
32. I look forward to our path converging again as we labor in pursuit of our shared aspirations for prosperity and justice. Until then, let us each pledge to contribute to the others yet rewarding task of nurturing a world where truth prevails and democracy thrives.

Thank you.