

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY YANG BERHORMAT
DATUK MOHAMAD BIN HAJI ALAMIN,
DEPUTY MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, MALAYSIA
AT IDFR's FORUM ON ASEAN: SHAPING A MORE INCLUSIVE
AND SUSTAINABLE FUTURE**

SALUTATIONS

YBhg. Dato' Zainol Rahim Zainuddin;
Director General of the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations;

Your Excellencies;

Tan Sri-Tan Sri, Dato' Seri-Dato' Seri, Dato'-Dato, Datin-Datin;

Distinguished Speakers and Moderators;

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Assalamualaikum WBT and good morning to you all.

INTRODUCTION: A TIME OF UNPRECEDENTED CHANGE

1. It is a great pleasure to be here today at the Forum on ASEAN: Shaping a More Inclusive and Sustainable Future. I wish to extend my appreciation to the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR) for convening this forum ahead of the coming 47th ASEAN Summit.
2. This forum is a testament to our shared commitment and dedication to the principles of the **ASEAN Charter**, which calls upon us to create a peaceful, prosperous and people-centred community.
3. As we move towards the end of Malaysia's Chairmanship of ASEAN, **Let's** reflect on ASEAN's achievements thus far. I truly believe that

the most important achievement is **ASEAN's ability to maintain peace and stability** of the region.

4. We are living in a time when the international order is going through profound change. This has resulted in a world that is becoming fragile and fragmented. The resurfacing of competition for spheres of influence and resources has resulted in diplomatic standoffs and economic disruptions.
5. Yet, ASEAN has shown the world that tensions can be managed. When we all come to the negotiation table with the **genuine intention to listen and sincerely work towards actionable solutions**, the flames of tension can be extinguished.
6. ASEAN is one of the most diverse regions in the world. Diversity could be a cause of instability, but for ASEAN, it is our inherent strength.
7. Our diversity has made us more **tolerant of differences and appreciative of our commonalities**. This is what has laid the groundwork for a harmonious society.
8. However, **peace as well as the environment must never** be taken for granted. We need to manage potential risks to our stability, before they impact our shared prosperity.
9. For example, the threat of climate change looms large. Floods, landslides, heatwaves and forest fires have severely impacted our economy and overall well-being of our communities.
10. Some still deny that climate change is real, yet rising temperatures are already increasing food costs in many countries. A mere **1% rise in average temperature** had led to a 1–2% increase in producer prices. If we are not proactive in addressing climate change, its impact can reduce **ASEAN's GDP** by more than 35% by 2050.
11. These are not “future problems.” These are very real challenges that we face today. ASEAN needs to act with clarity, purpose, and a unified vision. It is our collective responsibility to address these risks and secure a better world for us all.

12. As a community of nations that is enriched by its diversity, we have always found ways to cooperate and overcome our common challenges.
 13. The **Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC)** codifies the principles we have long lived by. It has been the foundation for the **peace**, stability and prosperity we enjoy today.
 14. This is a fact the world is starting to acknowledge. Whilst we have always embodied the spirit of inclusivity by engaging with non-ASEAN states, there has been significant interest by countries beyond this region to establish stronger ties and form partnerships with us.
 15. **Nevertheless**, the **success of our regional economic partnership** may be at stake if we do not ensure we are **resilient to threats** like geopolitical contestation and climate change.
-

THE POLITICAL-SECURITY PILLAR: LEADING OUR OWN REGIONAL ORDER

16. This brings us to the **first question** of our forum today:
17. **Can ASEAN lead its own regional order beyond major power politics?**
18. My answer is an **absolute** yes.
19. The establishment of ASEAN was a visionary act, founded on the conviction that we must assume primary responsibility for our own peace, security and prosperity.
20. This foundational principle remains our true north. For nearly six decades, this conviction has enabled us to build a region **the way it is today**.

21. This does not mean we have not had our share of challenges. But what separates us from other regions is our emphasis on **dialogue and diplomacy to address disputes**. This has allowed us to **act with restraint and de-escalate tensions** successfully.
22. The aftermath of any conflict is not a pretty picture. After trauma, trust must be rebuilt. This is where reconciliation comes in, **but it is never easy**. Here, the United Nations' Secretary-General, **Antonio Guterres**, describes Timor-Leste as a nation that is **“teaching the world a lesson of reconciliation.”**
23. This was reiterated by **YAB Dato' Sri Anwar Ibrahim's recent official visit to Timor-Leste**, when he commended Timor-Leste's strong commitment to peacebuilding, dialogue and reconciliation.
24. Yet, reconciliation in Timor-Leste could not have been achieved without the participation of its neighbours. **For one of us to be at peace, all of us must facilitate peace.**
- ~~25. This is why we cannot be complacent.~~
26. Many issues around the world have caused instability and conflicts which reverberate across our region. This has led to other **traditional and non-traditional security problems**, such as the exponential increase in the number of refugees fleeing for safety.
27. Currently, there are **approximately 123 million displaced people** worldwide, of which 36.8 million are refugees. If this issue is left unaddressed, it will result in more humanitarian strains and human rights abuses.
28. **In order to** navigate turbulent security dynamics, the principles of **ASEAN Centrality** remain our compass. It has ensured that we are not swayed by external powers and that we remain objective.
29. It is this neutrality principle which underpins the **Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN)**, one of the ASEAN mechanisms that has helped to secure collective peace and stability.

30. We are blessed to be in a region that can maintain our independence from interference by outside powers. This has allowed **all Member States** to equally contribute to ASEAN's agenda of sustainable development.
 31. This inclusivity - where Member States all have a voice and stand on an equal footing - has built trust among us and facilitated genuine dialogue. This has helped us in coming to fair agreements that can be implemented for the benefit of everyone involved.
 32. This is **The ASEAN Way**.
 33. We have proven to be an **honest broker** in a world where there is great competition and intense rivalry. Our emphasis on consensus-building, peaceful resolution of disputes, and quiet diplomacy has proven to be effective because it reflects the true spirit of inclusivity.
 34. This is why we must continue to strengthen ASEAN-led mechanisms, including the **East Asia Summit (EAS)**, the **ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)** and the **ADMM-Plus**.
 35. We must always engage as equals. Malaysia has always emphasised that **we must be the speakers, and not the spoken for**.
-

THE ECONOMIC PILLAR: POWERING THROUGH UNCERTAINTY

36. When our political security is preserved, we will be better equipped to withstand global economic headwinds such as rising protectionism and volatile supply chains.
37. This brings us to the **second question** of this forum:
38. **How can ASEAN ensure its economic security in a fragmented global landscape?**
39. Our region represents a vast and vibrant market of 660 million people and is the **world's fifth-largest economy**. It is very

encouraging to note that in 2023, ASEAN received a record **\$230 billion in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)**, making it the top investment destination among developing regions and accounting for 17% of global FDI.

40. Over the past decade, **ASEAN's combined GDP grew** from roughly \$2.5 trillion to nearly \$3.9 trillion, highlighting the strength of its markets.
41. Our market is growing despite the tense geopolitical situation globally. This is because ASEAN is inclusive in our engagements with all our external partners.
42. ASEAN being “**friends with all**” has benefited our economy greatly. This is reflected in our **trade between ASEAN and its Plus Three partners** - China, Japan and South Korea - which has reached US\$1.2 trillion in 2024.
43. Through the **Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)**, our economy will be even stronger as we enhance regional cooperation beyond ASEAN.
44. The RCEP will also allow us to gain **market access** to a population of **2.2 billion people - one-third of the world's population**. This will greatly accelerate ASEAN's growth and global development.
45. However, to achieve our full potential, we must prioritise the collective interests of all ASEAN Member States. The digital economy is poised to be one of the primary engines for our next wave of growth.
46. This is why we are accelerating efforts to conclude the **ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA)**.
47. Whilst we forge ahead to strengthen our digital potential and secure our economic interests, sustainability must be at the heart of our economic agenda. Hence, ensuring the success of the **ASEAN Power Grid (APG)** is a key priority.

48. The **ASEAN Power Grid (APG)** will lower energy costs, facilitate energy trade, and spark new jobs and investment in the green energy sector. This will propel our green energy transition and bolster our region's long-term energy security and competitiveness.
49. The launch of the **Lao PDR–Thailand–Malaysia–Singapore Power Integration Project** is a landmark achievement for cross-border electricity trade. This sets a powerful precedent and builds crucial momentum for more initiatives to expand the **ASEAN Power Grid (APG)**.
50. The impact of digitalisation may open great opportunities for some. However, **there are others - particularly less advantageous groups -** who are often left out. This is a challenge that ASEAN as a region is working hard to address.
51. The **ASEAN Digital Economy Agreement (DEFA)** and other initiatives are not only for enriching our economy. More importantly, it aims to **close development gaps** which exist in communities around the world.
52. By acting collectively and with strategic autonomy, we can shield our economies against external shocks and ensure our **shared prosperity is sustainable for generations to come.**

THE SOCIO-CULTURAL PILLAR: BUILDING A FUTURE FOR ALL

53. Ultimately, **ASEAN is about its people**, which brings us to **the last question** of this forum:
54. **Can ASEAN build a future that is inclusive for all?**
55. In this regard, the **ASEAN Community Vision 2045** serves as our blueprint for a resilient, innovative, and people-centred region. This requires us to champion sustainable development that is both just and inclusive.

56. We must tackle the **challenge of inequality**, which affects those in rural AND urban areas. Yet, the urban poor are sometimes neglected when it comes to policies tackling inequality and poverty.
57. Poverty **is not** just a rural issue; **it is** a growing problem in cities too, often made worse by rapid urbanisation. To tackle this, ASEAN needs to ensure its policies reach all parts of society, **guaranteeing that no one is left behind**.
58. This is why emerging technologies like **artificial intelligence** should be harnessed. **Artificial Intelligence (AI)** has the potential to provide new opportunities and close inequalities by democratising access to essential services, skills, and economic resources.
59. Yet, it is **not without challenges**. Without ethical guardrails, AI can become a weapon for deception - fuelling a new era of misinformation and sophisticated scams.
60. Left unchecked, its misuse can erode public trust and fuel tensions and destabilise our communities.
61. This is why we must commit to comprehensive reforms in education and digital literacy. We need to empower our workforce towards a **responsible, technologically advanced** populace.
62. To achieve this, we should acknowledge that **not everyone has equal access to connectivity** - and that may result in the loss of opportunities. Therefore, we must ensure that everyone can benefit from technological advancements so that they act as a great equaliser, and not a tool that deepens existing divides.
63. **Accelerating Action for Gender Equality** is also a priority when it comes to building a future that is inclusive for all.
64. ASEAN Member States have made significant strides in empowering women and girls by expanding their **access to education and the labour force, improving reproductive health services and granting them the autonomy** to make their own choices.

65. The **ASEAN Women Impacting Social Enterprise (WISE)** programme is one such example. Through ASEAN-WISE, ASEAN was able to provide **customised capacity-building, mentorship, and funding support to help women and indigenous-led social enterprises.**
66. This has allowed scale and secure investment, which has **significantly advanced women's entrepreneurship** across the region.
67. However, there is always room for improvement.
68. Although women make up slightly over half the population in ASEAN, women generally **earn between 30% and 40% less than men.**
69. **The ASEAN Community Vision 2045** is essential because it champions gender equality - ensuring the **empowerment and meaningful participation of women** in all levels of community-building and decision-making.
70. When the rights of women and girls are upheld, **the entire society does not just progress - it prospers.**

CONCLUSION: A SHARED FUTURE, A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

71. It is imperative that our sense of shared purpose is extended beyond our region. ASEAN Member States have openly condemned the attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure, as well as the appalling humanitarian disaster unfolding in Gaza.
72. This was reflected in a joint communique at the end of the **58th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting** in May of this year.

73. However, we can be even more persuasive when we leverage on the strength of our collective voice. We must demand a just and **peaceful order not just for ASEAN, but for all States and vulnerable people** - such as **the people of Gaza in Palestine**.
74. The United Nations describes the situation as an “absolutely catastrophic” situation, with Gazans enduring a “horrendous maelstrom of human misery.”
75. This is more than a geopolitical crisis; it is a crisis of humanity. Our Prime Minister, YAB Dato’ Sri Anwar Ibrahim rightly said,
76. ***“Let us not be remembered as those who stood by. Let us be guided by our conscience, to answer suffering with compassion, and to pursue peace for the sake of our humanity.”***
77. What is happening in Gaza is a test of our collective conscience. Malaysia has consistently called for a two-state solution and recognition of the State of Palestine. We continue to be committed to alleviating the suffering of the Palestinian people, with our recent **pledge of RM100 million** in humanitarian aid for Gaza.
78. The COVID-19 pandemic taught us that we live in a more interconnected world than ever. When one country is experiencing a calamity, the world will inevitably feel its implications.
79. This is why we need to extend our hand to everyone in need, as we, too, may be tested one day. If that day comes, I am confident we will come together as a region and help one another.
80. With all the brilliant minds gathered here today, I am sure that this forum will help to identify possible solutions which can be implemented.
81. We need not succumb to geopolitical pressures. Instead, we must look to our **shared wisdom** to help us navigate the journey ahead.

82. ASEAN has built a solid foundation for almost 6 decades, and we will be strengthened with the anticipated accession of Timor-Leste within our folds at the end of this month. This reflects the **spirit of inclusivity** that people often **talk** about.
83. ASEAN has demonstrated, time and time again, that the principle of “**prosper thy neighbour**” can improve economic relations and cooperation of **all** Member States, old and new alike.
84. We are all in this journey together. When one of us prospers, all of us will benefit. I truly believe we have collectively shown that the **ASEAN framework** is not just a model, but a beacon of hope for a world that needs it the most.

Thank you. *Terima kasih.*

-END OF KEYNOTE ADDRESS-