



**KEYNOTE SPEECH BY
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FOR

“THE FUTURE OF ASEAN”

10 FEBRUARY 2023

**GRAND BALLROOM, ROYAL ORCHID SHERATON,
BANGKOK, THAILAND**

1. Thank you very much, Dr Kanit Sangsubhan, a very profound, respected economists in Thailand and a good friend. Thank you Mr Yeap Swee Chuan, for that kind words of encouragement. Dr Thanong Biyada, former Minister of Finance Thailand, who has been a dear friend for a long time and very passionate about economic development not only in Thailand, but also in Malaysia. There are so many friends here. If I start mentioning I will miss a few. I cannot see too clearly everyone but I am of course very touched by the sentiments expressed. In a short period, in this two days, I have seen so much friendship and cordiality. That would hopefully translate into a stronger, meaningful bilateral exchanges not only in trade investments but also in cultural field.
2. Well, I am a bit sentimental in a way that to me, diplomatic encounters countries or even in politics and governance, is about humanity and compassion. So if you talk about ASEAN in the future, it is about the people of ASEAN. Not the Prime Minister or the Presidents. It is about how we craft a new agenda for the future that will be able to alleviate from the problems of the poor, poor governance in some areas and put ASEAN into new heights.

3. I must not neglect the fact that I have very prominent colleagues here Minister of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia, H.E. Dr. Zambry Abd Kadir, Minister Of Home Affairs Malaysia, Senator Datuk Seri Saifuddin Nasution Ismail and Ministry of Natural Resources, Environment and Climate Change Malaysia, Mr Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad. The Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Of course Jojie Samuel our ambassador and most important to me personally is of course Wan Azizah Wan Ismail.
4. Now for bilateral relations, before I touch on ASEAN and the future of ASEAN, Dr Thanong put it quadrantly and lucidly that the potential of trade, investments and bilateral relations has not been fully harnessed and it is quite concerning. Why is it that among neighbors, Malaysia and Thailand has very good bilateral relations but not substantive in terms of its trade, investments and exchanges between governments? Although between the people or the *rakyat* has been phenomenal.
5. The huge exchanges are at the border and also in terms of tourism. I was pleased that yesterday in our meetings and knowing leaders like Prime Minister General Prayuth Chan-ocha, Deputy Prime Minister, General Prawit Wongsuwon and Anutin Charnvirakul, among others. I have seen that

commitment and eagerness and in the exchanges that we had between both leaders, that whole team yesterday. It is quite extraordinary, very friendly, very frank and some of the concerns are expressed very clearly including the concern about the peace initiative and efforts in the South.

6. I have said yesterday my position is categorical not uncompromising. In terms of zero tolerance for violence in the south and it will take therefore greater efforts from our friends, the Muslims in the South and the establishment here particularly the army to try to resolve this issue amicably. This is purely an internal issue affecting Thailand but as friends, as family members, we have been at least asked to try and facilitate the process, and we are prepared to do that in a more meaningful way. What are the concerns? Of course, the concerns of any minority their language, religion, culture and the trust deficit. The concern in Bangkok is because of the skirmishes and the sporadic violence from time to time, both perpetrated by a minority, but also sometimes the reaction, which was considered to be overreaction. These issues are not really that contentious in the sense that it could not be resolved.

7. I have seen and talked to leaders here. We are quite passionate and determined to resolve and I think we have to persuade our friends in the South. Some of them I know personally and I have interacted, they must be persuaded to understand that they are part and parcel of the Thai community and nation. They may preserve their rights in their culture, religion or language, as I in my political philosophy have tried to do in Malaysia.

8. Malaysia is a multiracial, multi-ethnic, multireligious country and I want to present this new narrative to Malaysia that every single citizen must be recognized their rights, their belief and must feel they are part and parcel of this great Malaysia nation. It is not something inconsistent and I think this is the spirit essentially, in ASEAN, have produced leaders like Thanat Khoman, we had Tun Razak those days and Adam Malik of Indonesia, among others, who had that foresight about ASEAN, which to me is remarkable. I have been in politics in a long time and I have read quite a bit on Thai history, history of Philippines from Jose Rizal and colonial period, and history of Malaysia and Indonesia. It is remarkable that we can actually produce great statesmen of vision for the region although ASEAN has not matured as an entity.

9. Dr. Thanong made a correct reference that particularly he is a banker. So in terms of financial, trade, investment, you can see this deficit, but in terms of vast achievements in peace, security and good neighborhoods, this is unprecedented internationally or globally. So I think we in the present generation and the future generation must take cognizance of that and try to relieve the initial spirit, the idealism and the foresight among the leaders of that generation and work beyond that.

10. Unfortunately, we have to deal with this semi turbulence in Myanmar. Yesterday, I appealed to Prime Minister General Prayuth Chan-ocha because he has to face the major brunt because of the border with Myanmar. But in Malaysia, we have to face a major problem of close to 200,000 refugees, most of them Rohingya and some from other ethnic groups in Myanmar. Of course, we say engagement and we have been engaging for the last 40 years but there is a limit that countries can do. But I believe, and I have talked to President Jokowi of Indonesia, who is now chairman of ASEAN, talked to Prime Minister General Prayuth Chan-ocha, and the Sultan of Brunei on this. Next week also with President of Philippines, Bongbong Marcos.

11. Now to appeal to them, we have to go beyond. We do not want outsiders to interfere and we do not want the United States or Europe to tell us what to do but we have to do something. We have to be courageous enough to try and resolve this. They say the internal affairs of Myanmar is wide right. I do not think we should go interfere and enter into a battle with them. But it is affecting us, it is affecting Thailand, a huge number of refugees affecting Bangladesh, who is struggling to uplift their economy, and Malaysia, which has the largest number of refugees from Myanmar.

12. I am a junior in the game among the leaders of ASEAN in terms of responsibility and experience and I have of course appealed to them and would seek their wisdom and guidance in trying to resolve this. But this is a negative side block in the whole ASEAN move in dealing with the future. We are stuck with the past, we are stuck with the issue of atrocities, we are stuck about the issue of discrimination and intolerance and gross injustice. Having said that, we should still go beyond, and this is what I believe ASEAN leaders must reflect upon in this year and the years ahead.

13. I have said there were initiatives. I remember my good colleague, Khun Supachai Panitchpakdi from Thailand, who was so determined to make sure he pushed ahead the trade

agenda amongst the ASEAN nations. I think finally, he was quite frustrated and he went to World Trade Organization (WTO) and did reasonably well there. He had that foresight, as I said, yes, we inherit a phenomenal success in ASEAN collaboration but we must go beyond. It is about economy, connectivity, digitalization, new investments and it is about using having this as an important base for the great powers economically, both for China or United States. It is unfortunate that we have to grapple with the problem of tensions between China and United States. A very little we can do other than making sure that we remain fiercely independent whilst engaging well with China and United States and benefiting in terms of new investments, new facility which would positively affect the vast majority of our people.

14. So ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and all the other initiatives which has been ongoing. The Malaysian Foreign Minister seemed very concerned because he thinks I am too critical of ASEAN but no, I am not critical of ASEAN. I am acknowledging the vast success but I am also trying to push this issue of trade and investment by using this comparative advantage of countries. Those days we compete against each other. If there's a country producing cars in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia will produce car.

We compete with each other. We cannot even think of someone should produce lorries and the other one bus or the other car. We cannot think in that action because we are fiercely independent and protectionists.

15. So I think going beyond there are new areas where we can ensure that we would benefit because this relates to issue of paradigm and technology. The issue of paradigm technology means that these new areas must be fully harnessed and we are still lagging behind. I mean, Malaysia is of mean in that sense. Comparatively, Thailand is more successful. I mentioned in food technology, digitalization, the modernization of the energy sector. I think if we would work together and benefit also from your plan new investments which I will personally ensure that is, given the desired support.
16. We had, of course, the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI) on trying to have new arrangements in the financial sector. Dr. Thanong even referred to the Asian Monetary Fund, which we thought could be a buffer. We cannot have the international financial infrastructure decided and determined by one corner of the earth. We will have to work with them but we should have our own domestic, regional and Asian strength. Not to necessarily to compete, but only

to have a buffer zone. From those of us who had some experience dealing with it, it would help immensely. Every time there is a sign of problem brewing, even those days, we immediately have a session and start politely cautioning each other. When we look at the balance of payments or for example, the issue of the fall of the currency immediately we alerted our friends and sometimes be cautioned. This is because sometimes you are faced by your own internal domestic pressures and politics. Those days, of course, we are ruled by somewhat authoritarian leaders.

17. The finance ministry of course, the most unpopular in the cabinet. That is the reason why temporarily I am holding the finance portfolio so that my colleagues will not be too rough against the Minister of Finance because the Prime Minister was there. Notwithstanding on what I have said, the proposal, the ASEAN-Plus Three (APT), which is somewhat related to the initial proposal on the Asian Monetary Fund. It should not be revised in the context, the demands and the dictates of the period, which should include Japan, China, South Korea, or if they would like to include Australia, India, I have no strong views on that. I will have to respect and build a consensus among ASEAN.

18. I am still optimistic with the future of ASEAN. We should call Myanmar out for now and I do not think Myanmar issue should frustrate our moves. It would be ideal if we could have just a strong consensus in giving a strong message to the Myanmar regime. You have every right to have your own domestic policies and priorities but no country in this times should ever continue with discriminatory policies, marginalization of their people or intimidating or worse, perpetrating violence against your own people.
19. Hopefully, that position has been taken to be fair. ASEAN has although in the diplomatic nuances have repeatedly stated this position to no avail but ASEAN is also mindful that they do not want other regions to be dictating. So there is not necessarily contradiction in terms, but that should be taken as a challenge. If we do not want others to interfere, then we will have to promote, to suggest new mechanisms and make sure that these atrocities perpetrated against their own people must end.
20. First, we do not tolerate them. Secondly, the repercussions is affecting the whole of ASEAN. Even beyond ASEAN, like Bangladesh, it is not just Malaysia, Thailand in terms of refugees but Indonesia is facing that issue now.

21. In conclusion, I would say that to me, we have achieved some remarkable results but for Malaysia, as I have said yesterday in my remarks to our Malaysian diaspora in Thailand, we will have to grapple with problems of good governance, reducing the country of endemic corruption, and to give meaning to what we believe and understand as democratic accountability.
22. Democracy to us in Malaysia is not about elections. Democracy is about accountability. Leaders are not only accountable once in four or five years to their people. Leaders are accountable to the mandate, the spirit of the constitution, and to honor the promise of the people that they are supposed to lead a clean government that will use resources to champion, to promote the economy, propel the economy to ensure there is justice for all its citizens. I think that is a major challenge in Malaysia. Yes, we mentioned about the tribulations of the past but I think, as you said, I am talking about the future of ASEAN. So if I come here to talk about the past, a lot of story have to say. As Mandela used to say – “We must forgive to move on but we should not forget. Because that should teach us and the people that any injustice should not be tolerated.”

23. I have learned the hard way the tribulations is not easy. It was easy to say I was here last few years to launch the book by Leonard Quinn's council about the Anwar trials. Even then, I refrain from dwelling too much about the past and to say that we have to learn from that experience. How the enforcement agencies can be compromised, how even the judiciary can be complicit or working at the behest of the executive. We must make sure there is rule of law, democratic accountability and to ensure that, the economy must be propelled. We are not to serve the interests of a few but to serve the interests of the majority of our people.

24. So let me thank you again, Dr Kanit Sangsubhan, Dr Thanong Biyada, Malaysian-Thai Chamber of Commerce (MTCC), for giving me this opportunity. I am always happy to be back here in Bangkok, and I must apologize in the short trip as I am not able to meet all. But please be assured that you have in me personally in Malaysia a true friend.

Thank you very much.