

Fair to Flourishing: Thai-Malaysia Relations in the 21st Century and Beyond

*Socio-economic Cooperation in the Border Areas between Thailand and Malaysia **

*Speech by The Hon Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi,
Former Prime Minister of Malaysia, at the 1st Joint Seminar of the
Thailand-Malaysia Think Tank and Scholar Network (TMTTS/MTTTS)
on 13th September 2012 at the
Pullman Bangkok King Power Hotel, Thailand*

It gives me great pleasure to speak to you at this 1st Joint Seminar of the Thailand-Malaysia Think Tank and Scholars Network. This is an opportunity and also an initiative. I would like to thank Professor Siriporn Wajjwalku and her staff at the Direk Jayanama Center of Thammasat University, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, the Thailand Research Fund, and the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia for having collaborated to organise it. I would particularly like to note the valuable role played by the Royal Thai Embassy in Kuala Lumpur for having mooted this initiative, and in seeing it move forward.

In my opinion, the formation of a joint scholars' network is long overdue. Malaysia and Thailand have developed critical relationships across a broad spectrum of human interactions, and I believe that your contributions will greatly deepen understanding and advance the agenda for mutual peace, security, prosperity and good relations between our two countries.

My talk this morning is entitled 'Fair to Flourishing: Thai-Malaysia Relations in the 21st Century and Beyond.' I believe that the relationship between our two countries can be described as more than fair, even bordering, in some respects, on excellent. But there is still so much potential, so much more that can be

** ISIS Malaysia reproduces the full text of the keynote address*



Abdullah Ahmad Badawi

achieved, that the best and flourishing days are yet ahead of us. Yes, there have been occasional hiccups like in any relationship. But the foundations of our relationship are sound. When I was Prime Minister, there were issues of concern between our countries. I found, however, that I could always express our concerns with Thai leaders in a frank and forthright manner. I think that this is symptomatic of a mature relationship. What we need to do now is to build on this foundation for the greater good of our peoples.

Our two countries share more than a common geographical border, the monsoon winds and, in the South, some common biological and cultural roots. We both have significant and

unique individual histories. But I would argue that our mutual influences may run much deeper. There is still so much that we do not know about each other. As we peel away the layers of our ignorance, we will comprehend better just how interconnected our history, politics, culture and socio-economic relations are. After all, modern Malaysia was greatly impacted by less than 200 years of British colonial rule. Thailand and Malaysia have been neighbours for far longer than that.

In the long distant past, the Siamese kingdom and the Northern States of Malaya may have had the periodic conflict. But the two countries in the modern era have never been even close to waging outright wars despite having demarcation differences and disputes as neighbouring countries will do.

We may not see eye-to-eye on some issues. What sets us apart is our ability to go past playing up disputes and seek to work out peaceful diplomatic solutions, compromises and building goodwill. For example, we saw good cooperation in the 1950s and 1960s when we faced a common enemy in the form of the communist insurgency. Malaysia was pleased to have been of some assistance to Thailand in the early days of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. During my administration, the issue of food security became a global problem and we were very appreciative when the Thai government stepped in at short notice to help allay any fears of rice shortages. The late Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej was the person who gave me the assurance.

These examples speak to one fact: that although the majority of Thai and Malaysian people are different ethnically and culturally, although we do not even share a common language and mostly communicate through a third language, English, we are practical and peace-loving peoples. If we look at the broad span of histories of our countries, it is evident that we do not regard one another as threats but value co-existence and friendship.



Badawi greeting the participants

This is not to say that we will not stoutly defend our land and our sacred institutions when they are threatened. However, our worldviews and approaches are guided, I would like to think, by religious tolerance and the values of Buddhism and Islam. It leads us to see the limited usefulness of force and conflict, and the worth to pursue moderation and the golden mean. In this day and age, moderation, tolerance, patience and accommodation are seemingly scarce commodities. Thailand and Malaysia, I believe, can set a good example by demonstrating that it is possible to transcend problems and issues that other countries around the world have found intractable.

For example, in the South, the majority of the Muslim community demands development. They would like to see opportunities for quality education, employment, and human capital development. As citizens of Thailand, they too want to be recognized and to be respected, and to be able to participate in the economic development and progress of their area. If this situation can be addressed, I believe new development and prosperity can emerge.

Our two countries have benefited greatly from pragmatic approaches towards each other. We have now had longstanding economic, business and social ties. As I said earlier, in other parts of the world where countries have been at each other's throats, the relationship that

Malaysia and Thailand have would be described as 'great'. There is so much as yet unexplored and unexploited potential. The best and most exciting days are ahead of us. It depends on how we manage it. If we manage it well, it will bring advantages to us.

So where do we go from here? How do we proceed? We certainly need to build on the sound foundations of political and diplomatic capital that currently exist between the two countries. But as founding members of Asean and part of the greater Asia Pacific region, we also have strong mutual regional interests and we should endeavour to make our bilateral relationship one of the pillars of strength within Asean. Thus, we do not work in isolation but leverage our partnership so that it contributes to the realisation of the Asean 2015 community building efforts.

One key way to do so is the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT). Since its formation in 1993, this sub-regional cooperation initiative has expanded to encompass 70 million people within the geographic scope. This has expanded to 14 provinces in southern Thailand and includes ten Sumatran provinces and eight Peninsular Malaysia states. The IMT-GT, which I hope will now also include Myanmar, promises to be a significant growth and development driver for our countries. Another such effort is the pivotal role Thailand plays as the Asean-China coordinator. China is important to all of us in the region, indeed the whole world, and greater socio—economic linkages and connectivity will greatly benefit the other countries of Continental Southeast Asia.

In short, our mutual strength also lends strength to Asean's development and economic vision, efforts and cooperation. There should not be exclusivity solely to each other but mutual benefit to the other eight member countries. As the Thai government makes efforts to resolve its problems in the South, Malaysia stands ready and committed to assist in practical and constructive ways. Last week, when our two leaders met on the



From left: Steven Wong, Siripon Wajjwalku and Songsak Saichewa

sidelines of the APEC Meeting in Vladivostok, Prime Minister Dato' Seri Najib Abdul Razak assured Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra that Kuala Lumpur stood ready to cooperate with her government, and various points of agreement were reached.

Let me just say this: If, by mutual efforts and endeavours, the South can be turned into a region that is prosperous and peaceful, I believe that it will become a showcase example for the international community for peaceful resolution of a longstanding problem. There is potential for southern Thailand and the northern states of Peninsular Malaysia to be new and vibrant growth areas. Together we can create this prosperity.

Secondly, while continuing to deepen our economic and business linkages, we need to also broaden the basis for sound cooperation, especially into the social, educational and cultural spheres, emphasising people-to-people relations. On the economic and business fronts, there is much more that we can, and are doing, beyond manufacturing. The recent agreement between our two countries to study the feasibility of a large-scale rubber-based development on the Thai-Kedah border is an example of one such new initiative. I am led to understand that Malaysian companies are also keen to participate in the biogas sector in Thailand, which has huge potential. In the services area, the stock exchanges of Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore

have taken steps this year to expedite cross-listings of one another's companies.

In line with the vision to create an 'Area of Prosperity,' we need to create quality education opportunities for young people, develop human capital and provide employment opportunities to address issues of poverty, unemployment and development. This can be done through an exchange of scholars between countries, and encouraging student mobility, where university students spend at least one semester in a university of a neighbouring country. This will encourage movement of people, expanding of ideas and sharing of knowledge. It will also expand the minds of future leaders and encourage discourse, not just between universities, but between countries.

Thirdly, we need to deepen the nature of the relationship through careful research, leading to greater understanding, and to produce outputs of mutual benefit; something I believe is happening here today at this seminar. Developments from the macro and micro levels though intertwined, affect not just a country but also its neighbouring countries. Therefore, we need to recognise the potential and limits that we have and work towards widening and deepening dialogue.

Furthermore, it is important that academic work and that of think tanks go beyond just presenting research and words on paper, to also be able to develop positive recommendations of policy actions within home countries and build cooperation with the rest of the world. Serving political leaders are somewhat constrained by the many underlying political considerations, but as a former Prime Minister, I think that I can say this. That is why it is important for academicians and policy analysts to act in a flexible and timely manner with the long term vision of enhancing the state of affairs.

It is my hope that this initiative goes beyond mere deliberations and leaves more than just an inheritance of a dusty set of conference papers on your office shelves. I wish all delegates a stimulating and fruitful seminar and I hope that over the coming days, you will build not just work networks but friendships that will see this initiative through for years to come. It is you who possess the knowledge and will to push the agenda forward towards a pathway of peace, prosperity and progress for both Malaysia and Thailand.

Thank you.



Badawi with the Malaysian participants