

The First Malaysian International Studies Association Conference (MISAC 1)

Fakulti Pengajian Islam (FPI)
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Bangi, Selangor

14 & 15 February 2024

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◀ MISAC1 Seminar Report ▶

**Prepared by
Associate Prof. Dr. Bakri Mat
Dr Aini Fatimah Roslam
Han Xian**

Seminar Report

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE MALAYSIAN INTERNATIONAL STUDIES ASSOCIATION (MISAC 1).

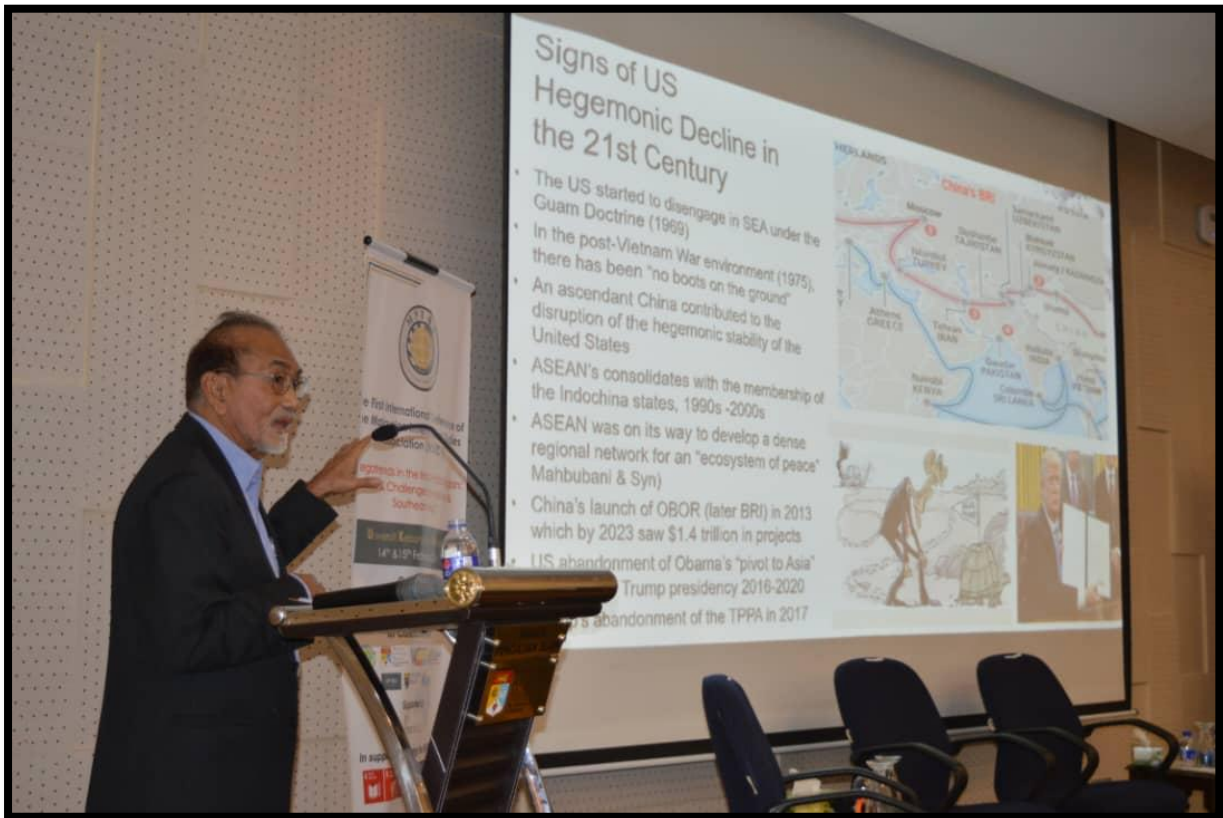
Mega-Trends in the Indo-Pacific Region: Issues and Challenges for Malaysia and Southeast Asia

In 2024, the inaugural Malaysian International Studies Association Conference (MISAC1) marks an important milestone, fostering engagement within the international relations (IR) community, particularly among scholars and postgraduate students. This in-person event explores the theme “Mega-Trends in the Indo-Pacific Region: Issues and Challenges for Malaysia and Southeast Asia,” covering a wide array of topics including geopolitical dynamics, regionalism, foreign policy, security, migration, and non-traditional threats. The conference serves as a platform for Malaysian IR scholars, emerging researchers, and policymakers to exchange insights, highlighted by keynote and plenary sessions featuring distinguished speakers. Notably, the conference also included the official launch of MyISA, celebrating the contributions of Malaysian scholars to IR and supporting the development of the next generation of IR experts.

Established post-Covid on 17 May 2023, MyISA has gathered lecturers from institutions across Malaysia, including UKM, UM, UMS, USM, UniSZA, UUM, UPSI, UiTM, and UniKL. The association's goal is to recognise the efforts of pioneering scholars in IR, honouring their significant contributions to the field. The conference is a collaboration with prominent academic institutions, including the Institute of Malaysia and International Studies (IKMAS, UKM), Research Centre in History, Politics and International Affairs (SPHEA, UKM), Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (FSSK, UKM), and the Institute of International Policy and Management (INPUMA, UM), with sponsorship from Porticus, a Netherlands-based NGO. Special thanks were extended to influential scholars such as Tan Sri Jawahar Hassan, Dato Professor Zakaria Ahmad, Professor Ranjit Singh, Professor Dr. Johan Saravanamuthu, Professor Dr. KS Nathan, and Professor Ruhanas Harun, along with committee members and student volunteers from UKM's Strategic Studies and International Relations Programme.

◀Keynote Address▶

By Prof. Dr Johan Saravanamuttu, Nanyang Technological University (NTU)



Prof. Dr Johan Saravanamuttu presented a keynote on hegemonic instability, emphasising the Indo-Pacific's shift from U.S. dominance to a complex geopolitical landscape influenced by China's rise. He examined the waning U.S. influence in the region since the post-Cold War period, with particular focus on the Guam Doctrine and the resulting withdrawal from Southeast Asia following the Vietnam War. The rapid economic ascent of China, projected to become the world's largest economy by 2030, was highlighted, although the U.S. remains unmatched in military power.

Prof. Saravanamuttu elaborated on the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, introduced in 2017, which reinforces alliances with Japan, South Korea, and Australia and

includes the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with Japan, India, and Australia. The AUKUS security pact, with its provision for nuclear submarines to Australia, marks a significant development in countering regional security challenges. He pointed out ASEAN's distinct vision of the Indo-Pacific, centred on neutrality and centrality in regional affairs, positioning ASEAN as a middle power balancing between major influences. The South China Sea was identified as a critical flashpoint, with ongoing issues of freedom of navigation and territorial claims posing risks to regional stability. The situation in Myanmar was also discussed, highlighting ASEAN's limited progress in managing its internal conflict. Prof. Saravanamuttu concluded by urging ASEAN to assert itself as a 'norm entrepreneur' to set standards for regional peace, using strategies of hedging and balancing to manage external pressures.

◀Plenary▶

Megatrends in the Indo-Pacific Region: Issues & Challenges for Malaysia and Southeast Asia



The plenary session, moderated by YBhg. Tan Sri Mohamed Jawhar Hassan, explored the Indo-Pacific's megatrends and their implications for Southeast Asia. The discussion centred on Southeast Asia's role amid global geopolitical shifts, technological advancements, and sustainability challenges. Tan Sri Mohamed Jawhar underscored the importance of strengthening Southeast Asia's resilience against external pressures and embracing sustainable practices in the face of climate change.

Prof. Dr. D.S. Ranjit Singh examined rising state-centric nationalism in Borneo, specifically in Sabah and Sarawak. He discussed the potential for these states to push for constitutional equal status with the federal government or even a

restructuring of the Malaysia Agreement. Additionally, he noted Indonesia's plans to move its capital to East Kalimantan, a shift that could lead to ethnic tensions in the region due to demographic changes. The implications of these developments for Malaysia's Sabah and Sarawak, as well as for Brunei, were explored, with a focus on potential political and economic shifts.

Prof. Dr. Hajjah Ruhanas Harun analysed ASEAN's mixed responses to the Indo-Pacific concept. She categorised ASEAN countries' stances, ranging from Indonesia's leadership and Vietnam's cautious acceptance, to Thailand's enthusiasm and Malaysia's ambiguity. She stressed the need for ASEAN to maintain its centrality and balance relations with both China and the U.S., particularly as regional dynamics evolve with the Indo-Pacific strategies of major powers.

Prof. Dr. K.S. Nathan discussed the transition from hegemonic stability under U.S. influence to a period of hegemonic instability as emerging powers like China reshape the Indo-Pacific landscape. He emphasised ASEAN's role in maintaining neutrality and promoting regional stability, and highlighted new alliances like AUKUS as responses to these changes. He reiterated ASEAN's potential for setting regional norms, advocating that it use this strength to establish a balanced, peaceful regional order.

Summary

The 2024 MISAC1 conference highlighted the multifaceted challenges and opportunities facing Malaysia and Southeast Asia within the dynamic Indo-Pacific region. With topics ranging from rising state nationalism to regional security threats, the discussions provided a comprehensive overview of current geopolitical shifts and the role of regional powers. Key insights from Prof. Dr. Johan Saravanamuttu's keynote and the plenary sessions underscored ASEAN's critical role as a stabilising force amid U.S.-China rivalry, and the importance of neutrality, balance, and proactive 'norm entrepreneurship' in ASEAN's approach. The conference reflects a significant step forward for MyISA in building academic discourse on international relations, contributing meaningfully to the IR community in Malaysia and beyond.