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**Welcome Remarks
by
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Regional Outlook Forum 2019
Disruptions, Re-alignments and Opportunities

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Island Ballroom, Shangri La Hotel

Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Colleagues and Friends,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like first of all to extend a very warm welcome to all of you present here today for the Regional Outlook Forum 2019 and especially thank our foreign speakers and guests who have flew in from abroad to join us.

The Regional Outlook Forum is ISEAS' flagship event held at the beginning of each year to highlight the strategic trends and issues around the world that have an impact on Southeast Asia, as well as specific developments in the key countries of Southeast Asia that fall under ISEAS' focus for research.

This year's Forum revolves around two main themes. The first theme is related to the geo-strategic and economic competition between the United States and China that has intensified over the past year and looks set to become a regular feature of the US-China relationship.

From the US perspective, the strong sentiments against China appears to have a broad cross-section of support that includes those in President Trump's administration, Congress, think-tanks as well the business community. The most stark indication of these strong sentiments is US Vice President Mike Pence unusually blunt remarks at the Hudson Institute in October 2018, in which he accused Beijing of (and I quote) "employing a whole-of-government approach, using political, economic, and military tools, as well as propaganda, to advance its influence and benefit its interests

in the United States” (unquote). The vice president also reiterated the US’s resolve to act decisively to protect American interests and American security against China’s actions.

On its part, China, while favouring a peaceful and negotiated settlement with America, has said that it will not shy away from a firm response if necessary. It is unclear what kind of a deal the two major powers can strike in the 90-day period that ends on 1 March 2019. There are those who hold the view that even if such a deal were to materialise, it is unlikely to substantially improve the unpredictable nature of the US-China relationship. In the opening session of the Forum, Ms Bonnie Glaser and Dr Zha Daojiong will share their views on the state of US-China ties and how this relationship is likely to unfold. Mr Peter Varghese will provide us with the perspective of Australia, a third party with much at stake from both sides.

The second theme that underpins this year’s Regional Outlook Forum is related to the pre- and post-election politics in the run-up and wake of nationwide elections in a number of Southeast Asian countries that will shape the political landscape in these countries in the years ahead. One prime example is Indonesia whose citizens will head to the polls for presidential and legislative elections on 17 April 2019. This will be the first time that these two elections are held on the same day. Pak Endy Buyani and Mr James Castle will assess the electoral platforms and prospects of the presidential and vice presidential candidates, and the likely political and business landscape in the lead-up to and after the elections.

Thailand will be another key country that will be heading to the polls. Although not set in concrete, indications are that elections may take place next month on 24 February 2019 after several failed election promises. Mr Matthew Wheeler will speak on the electoral prospects of the contending parties and individual candidates and address the pertinent question of whether the forthcoming elections will resolve the issue of political legitimacy which is a key ingredient for political stability.

Malaysia has already held its nationwide elections in May 2018 and, as we all know, it dramatically saw a new government being swept into office for the first time since its independence. The Pakatan Harapan coalition, comprising four diverse

parties, has been at the helm for several months but does not seem to be consolidating its position. Dr Wong Chin Huat will comment on the viability of the Pakatan Harapan government in light of the recent bickering and jostling for power among prominent members of the component parties.

On the other hand, UMNO which now finds itself in the opposition, is still a party that bears watching. Mr Khairy Jamaluddin will share with us his views on the prospects of UMNO reinventing or rejuvenating itself to stay politically relevant.

Myanmar is still in political transition after the historic nationwide elections in 2015 that saw the National League for Democracy led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi sweeping into power. Since that election, the civilian Myanmar government has had to grapple with much-needed socio-economic reforms while coping with stability issues related to ethnic minority groups and the crisis in the Rakhine state while sharing power with a still influential military. U Min Zin will be sharing his insights on these topics.

The only country where the dominant role of the ruling party is not threatened and which the Regional Outlook Forum is focusing on for the first time is Vietnam. We are giving due attention to Vietnam in light of its relatively large and dynamic population of over 90 million and a GDP growth rate that has exceeded six percent in recent years. Dr Alexander Vuving will examine the power dynamics among the top leadership, the state of its anti-corruption drive and Vietnam's relations with key external countries. Dr Vu-Thanh Tu-Anh will elaborate on the state of Vietnam's economy, particularly the quality of growth and the need for new sources of growth.

With this brief overview of what exciting things to expect in each of the sessions in this Forum, I hope I have whetted your appetites for what our speakers and moderators will be serving you today. They will be doing all the hard work today and I thank them for it. I would also like to invite our audience to actively participate during the Question and Answer Session that will take place in every session after the speakers have made their presentations. Please also share your feedback on the Forum with us so that we can continue to make the Forum relevant and useful to you.

Finally, I would further like to thank our main sponsors, especially Albizia Capital, for their generous support that has made the hosting of this year's Forum possible. I wish you all an enjoyable and fruitful Forum. Thank you.

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