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**ADDRESS
BY
HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS
SULTAN NAZRIN MUIZZUDDIN SHAH
ROYAL PATRON
INSTITUTE OF DIPLOMACY AND FOREIGN RELATIONS (IDFR)**

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“SHAPING A NEW GENERATION OF DIPLOMATS”

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. It gives me great pleasure to officiate the 30th anniversary of the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR), and I wish to congratulate the Institute for reaching this milestone. The theme of this event is very pertinent for the challenging times we are living in. With the ever-increasing demands that are being put on the diplomatic profession as a result, the Institute certainly has its work cut out.

2. Many of you here are diplomats, practitioners of the second oldest profession in history, and heirs to the dark arts practiced by Kautilya, Talleyrand, Metternich and Palmeston. You must find the theme of *“Shaping a New Generation of Diplomats”* to be somewhat intriguing. Some of you are certainly better qualified than I am to speak on this topic. Allow me, nonetheless, to share what I believe to be the “contours”, if not necessarily the “shape” of this new generation. I see these contours as being:

- The Diplomat as Historian;
- The Diplomat as Scientist;
- The Diplomat as Communicator; and
- The Diplomat as Bureaucrat.

I would like to touch on each of these in turn.

3. Firstly, let us consider the Diplomat as Historian. The world of the Diplomat is imbued in history. When someone asserts, for example, that “the world is now more complex than before”, they are making, wittingly or otherwise, a statement rooted in history. They may be surprised, bemused, or even saddened by this assertion. But they need not be. Things are the way they are today because of the way they were

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yesterday. And things are likely to be the way they are tomorrow, because of how they are today.

4. In our lifetime, globally transformative events seem to have become compacted within a short period of time, to an extent that was seldom experienced in the past. In the last decade and a half, we have witnessed the global financial crisis and its aftermath; the rise and fall of ISIS state; the Pivot to Asia of the Obama Administration; President Xi Jinping's transcontinental Belt and Road Initiative, the transactional approach to foreign policy of the Trump Presidency; the intensifying rate of technological progress; the accelerating impacts of climate change; and the devastation of the Covid-19 pandemic.

5. In the more tranquil days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when the end of history was even being mooted, who would have imagined that all these developments would occur within such a short timeframe? While the effects of these monumental events have yet to play out fully, one thing that is clear is that the future will continue to be complex and challenging.

6. What we are witnessing today is the historical rebalancing of global power, from one that has been weighted to the West in the past three centuries, and tilted heavily towards a unipolar US world in the last 70 years, to a far more multipolar world. Economic power is becoming much more dispersed. China was already the largest economy in purchasing parity terms by 2015, and is expected to become the number one economy in nominal terms by the end of this decade. It is projected to account for about 20 per cent of global GDP by 2050. India is projected to have the second largest economy, with a share of about 15 per cent. The US share of the global economy is expected to decline. It will become only the third largest, with a share of about 14 per cent.

7. China will become much stronger militarily, but it is unlikely to dominate the world in the same way as the US has done. The balance of military power will likely remain in the hands of the US and its widely-spread network of allies, including Europe, Japan and Australia. The balance of soft power will also likely remain with the US and the West in the foreseeable future, although China's soft power will continue to rise significantly. However, the resurgence of China, and the rise of India, Indonesia and others, do not spell the end of the West's prominent role in international affairs. Rather, it will help to enrich and build prosperity for all.

8. Many relate the current geopolitical shifts at least in part to China's evolving role in the world today. This topic is unsurprisingly the biggest growth sector in the international relations industry. Many commentators view the current instability in the international system as reflecting efforts by the current hegemon, the United States, to contain an emerging China in a modern version of the Thucydides trap. But while

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some in the West may regard Beijing as a new player, China sees itself as a re-emerging power which aspires to regain its position as the No.1 power – as it was for many centuries until the 15th century.

9. As Historians, diplomats must be able to understand the great tides and waves of history that sweep across the globe. At the same time, they must be able to comprehend the smaller ripples which meander across the country to which they are posted. Diplomats who lack a nuanced appreciation of history might struggle to produce the precise and insightful analyses that are so vital for the making of sound foreign policy. Malaysia's prosperity is profoundly shaped by global dynamics, and their accurate assessment by our diplomats as Historians is absolutely essential.

10. If it is History that gives perspective and context to the present, it is science that moves us forward. Many of today's most crucial developments are related to science in one way or another. I would therefore venture to make what may be an intimidating assertion for some: the new generation of diplomats must also be Scientists. Policy makers must have at least a reasonable grasp of science, if they are to respond effectively to the most pressing and complex foreign policy issues of our time. These include the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, and new technologies, all of which are associated with what some term 'non-traditional' security threats.

11. The pandemic in particular has served to validate the concept of 'comprehensive security' that is espoused by Malaysia as well as ASEAN. This refers to scenarios in which threats may arise from both traditional and non-traditional sources, and in which a successful response does not depend only on the possession of superior conventional and nuclear weapons. The challenge posed by the pandemic has required nations to grapple with more complex conceptions of threat and security. For many ASEAN countries, and beyond, COVID-19 has become the primary threat over the past nearly two years. Indeed, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres described the Coronavirus as "the No. One Global Security Threat in the world today."

12. A strong grasp of how the medical, epidemiological, and public health dimensions of the pandemic are evolving at the local, regional and global levels is necessary. COVID-19 has now claimed over 5 million lives globally. As the UN Comprehensive Response to COVID-19 notes, in addition to its obvious public health dimension, the pandemic constitutes 'a socio-economic crisis, a humanitarian crisis, a security crisis and a human rights crisis'. Our Diplomats must have a grasp of all these aspects, and be able to engage in international discussion and policy-making from an informed position.

13. Through their missions abroad, countries large and small have sought to ensure the well-being of their citizens amidst the chaos of the pandemic. Diplomats around the world have found themselves veritable front-liners – putting their own lives at risk

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by playing an active role in the repatriation of their fellow citizens stranded abroad. COVID-19 has certainly demonstrated the immense value of the presence of diplomatic personnel on the ground. The importance of this presence cannot be lightly dismissed. It is especially invaluable in times of crisis.

14. COVID-19 now tops the agenda of diplomatic engagements at bilateral and multilateral fora. I am aware of the challenging diplomatic negotiations done behind the scenes to secure vaccines for our people through COVAX. The flurry of diplomatic activity engendered by the pandemic highlights the fluidity and cross-cutting nature of the issues dealt with by diplomats. Further, COVID-19 has exacerbated the existing strain on public finances in many countries. This in turn poses significant challenges to foreign ministries in securing the resources needed to sustain their work. Innovative measures are required to ensure that the safety and effectiveness of diplomats are not compromised. New public-private partnership models should be seriously considered to leverage on shared capabilities.

15. The global COVID-19 crisis is still far from over. We cannot assume that there will not be more challenges on a similar scale, warranting collective action. While we must strive to prevent such systemic shocks, diplomats must be prepared for any eventuality. Health diplomacy is thus critical and the diplomat of the future will need to navigate this area. There are already efforts to look at legally binding instruments, if not a treaty, to hold signatory states accountable for reporting and to ensure early action.

16. Indeed, diplomats of the 21st century are expected to deal with an ever-expanding catalogue of issues. International trade, counter-terrorism, transnational crime, climate change, human rights and cyber-security are but a handful of thematic areas that have come to feature regularly in international fora, especially at multi-lateral events.

17. Climate change is of course another major threat facing humanity. Whereas pandemics, deadly as they can be, come and go, climate change is an enduring challenge. Whereas the pandemic afflicts the human race, climate change imperils every living thing and the planet that nourishes and sustains them.

18. Diplomats from all over the world and their army of advisors have been busy over the past two weeks in Glasgow striving to craft a global compact that can mitigate this crisis. The challenges are enormous. The science that is involved is 'new' for the entire diplomatic community. Our diplomats must be able to engage in international policy-making from a perspective that is grounded in at least some knowledge of the relevant science. This includes topics from carbon capture and off-setting to biodiversity and regeneration, weather patterns, renewable energy technologies, waste management, and many more. Discussions at the recently-concluded COP 26

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conference highlighted the wide range of issues involved in responding to the climate crisis.

19. Other non-traditional and newly-emerging threats are associated with technological change, which may be occurring at a faster rate than at any other time in the past. The Fourth Industrial Revolution is characterized by radical innovations across numerous fields. Artificial Intelligence, for example, provides enormous benefits to humanity, in transportation, in medicine, and in other fields. At the same time, it presents an unprecedented threat, due to its particular characteristics. These include its dual application in both civilian and military fields; the ease with which it can be developed and deployed by anyone; as well as its enormous potential destructive power.

20. Diplomats must have an understanding of the transformative and potentially dangerous implications of AI and other new technologies, if they are to help develop effective policies to manage and control them. They may therefore wish to complement their perspective as Historians with a command of the Science that underpins the non-traditional security threats that we increasingly face. Their capacity in both fields will strengthen the ability of our Diplomats to analyse the complexities of today's developments.

21. The Diplomat must also be a skilful Communicator. The very first Diplomats were heralds and messengers, who brought the views of their sovereigns to foreign lands and courts. While this essential function remains unchanged, it is being transformed by technological advances, which create new opportunities and challenges. The emerging borderless world – characterised by economic interdependence as well as increased communication, trade and travel among nations – has brought about a greater degree of contact between different cultures, belief systems and traditions. Unfortunately, this has also increased the potential for conflict among states as well as other actors.

22. States hardly have a monopoly over information and communication in the twenty-first century. The role of the electronic and print media in shaping public opinion is widely acknowledged. The speed and breadth of coverage of modern information exchange, and its instant accessibility, are indeed a boon to the diplomat's work. They vastly facilitate discussion, decision-making and training. Yet many traditionally trained diplomatic personnel lack the skills to understand, manage and maximise the potential benefits from dealing with the media effectively.

23. Entrenched mutual distrust between the public sector and media outlets impedes the development of more constructive relationships between them. As the front-line defenders of the country's interests abroad, Malaysian diplomats should not only be sensitive to the impact of media coverage on the national development

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agenda. They must also be skilled in the art of optimising it. Our diplomats must be able to deal deftly with domestic and international media, in order to ensure accurate and effective messaging on foreign policy issues. The ability of diplomats to engage effectively with the substance of new issues is of paramount importance, if they are to add value to ongoing discourses.

24. Social media is playing an increasingly significant role in tandem with the rise of the Internet. Indeed, social media is fast influencing the conduct of modern diplomacy. Today, everyone from a Head of State to an ordinary citizen has the opportunity to communicate directly and virtually instantaneously with a large number of people. While this democratisation of public space has been beneficial in many respects, it also creates new challenges for the diplomatic service. It has increased the number of domestic and international actors whose activities impact upon diplomacy. The public is now more sensitive to foreign policy issues and seeks to influence diplomacy through social media and other platforms. Misinformation can be spread with ease, with the resultant damage often difficult to mitigate. Familiarity with social media platforms, and a recognition of both their value and the problems they may pose, are essential for diplomats of the 21st century.

25. Another key challenge arising from the growth of ICT is the greatly heightened risks and vulnerabilities that can result, as seen from the divulging of diplomatic dispatches by Wikileaks and others. While secrecy and discretion remain absolutely essential tools of the diplomatic art, they are increasingly compromised by technological advances, which are being wielded by actors beyond those traditionally involved in this space.

26. I would therefore like to encourage our diplomats to embrace this so-called digital diplomacy. Digital diplomacy and internet activities should not be viewed as a substitute for traditional face-to-face diplomacy, however. Rather, the two must co-exist and complement each other. Digital diplomacy and internet activities as a whole can greatly assist in projecting a state's foreign policy position to domestic and foreign audiences. A nation's ability to embrace digital diplomacy will largely depend on the level of ICT infrastructure possessed by its Foreign Ministry.

27. I would like to now turn to a role that continues to evade the public eye – the Diplomat as Bureaucrat. Like all national policies, Malaysia's foreign policy is approved by the Cabinet. But the Foreign Ministry and its diplomats play the central role in the crafting of this policy. They weigh the national interest relating to external issues, assess the challenges and opportunities presented by them, and plot the policies and responses that appear best suited to the situation.

28. The process is at heart bureaucratic. It involves consultation with all stakeholders and soliciting the inputs of professionals and experts as well, as needed.

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The views and contributions of relevant ministries and government departments are sought. Their perspectives and interests are thoroughly discussed and considered. Due weight is given to the concerns of the agencies responsible for such matters as trade, defence, security, the environment and foreign labour. Conflicting interests and competing priorities, if any, are ironed out based on the best interests of the nation.

29. Other agencies may take the lead in particular areas in international forums such as those on trade, defence and security. But the indispensable constant in all of them is *Wisma Putra*.

30. As the twenty-first century progresses, *Wisma Putra* must perforce engage even more intensely with the private sector and civil society organisations at home and abroad. Malaysia relies heavily on the private sector for generating much of the country's wealth. Civil society organisations possess tremendous talent and expertise. Their international networks and platforms are playing increasingly critical roles in promoting the national and global good in areas such as human rights, the environment and gender empowerment.

31. In order for *Wisma Putra* to better equip itself to fulfil the mission entrusted upon it in foreign affairs, our diplomats must continue to cultivate and enhance their roles as Historians, Scientists, Communicators and Bureaucrats.

32. The Malaysian diplomatic establishment faces varied and complex challenges that are compounded by institutional, financial, human capital and other constraints. For *Wisma Putra*, resource limitations in particular have become a major concern. Efforts to address the challenges and constraints squarely are urgently needed. Failure to adapt and enhance our capabilities will limit our capacity to deliver and impinge upon our standing in the international community.

33. In the evolving globalised world, diplomats should be ever ready to capitalise on new opportunities in what is a highly competitive environment. As a relatively small country, we should continue to pursue increased strategic collaboration with like-minded states, particularly those in our region. In this regard, Malaysia and its Southeast Asian neighbours have done well to optimise their political and diplomatic capabilities as small to middle powers, by leveraging on productive regionalism to empower themselves further.

34. The ASEAN founding fathers who gathered in Bangkok in 1967 established an organisation that would help create a Southeast Asian region of peace, freedom and prosperity. Today, as a regional enterprise with over 650 million people and a combined GDP of around 3 trillion USD, ASEAN has tremendous market potential. ASEAN's convening power has, as well, allowed it to function as a platform for dialogue and cooperation among leading international players.

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35. Nevertheless, major challenges remain. The ASEAN community envisaged in the ASEAN Charter is very much a work in progress. Substantial portions of all its three pillars – the Political-Security Community, the Economic Community and the Socio-Cultural Community – remain as aspirations on paper rather than reality on the ground. Different members face challenges of different natures. While we are all understandably progressing at varying speeds, we must all do more. Good governance, inclusive growth, sustainable development and democracy demand particular attention. As Malaysia approaches its next turn as ASEAN Chair in 2025, the Foreign Ministry should map out priorities that best promote regional and national well-being, with the support of regional partners.

36. Malaysian diplomacy faces other important tasks as well further afield. A successful and early conclusion to ASEAN's negotiations with China on an effective Code of Conduct for the South China Sea would be in our mutual interest. The negotiations have lasted for nearly twenty years. The Code will facilitate more harmonious relations among the littoral states that have overlapping claims and disputes in the South China Sea.

37. The world is witnessing a resurgence in geopolitical competition among the major powers that intrudes into our region as well. It is our fervent hope that the competition remains peaceful and benign, and does not deteriorate into open confrontation. Sometimes, all it has taken to spark violent conflict has been an accidental incident at sea or in the air.

38. Malaysia and ASEAN have remained neutral in the past. They have distanced themselves from such confrontations and conflicts. This has been the fundamental premise of ASEAN's Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality, which has served the region well. Malaysian diplomacy must strive hard to sustain the equidistance of ASEAN as an organisation, even if some member-states may be susceptible to persuasion or pressure to tilt towards one side or another. It is critical for Malaysia and ASEAN to work cordially with all states for mutual peace and prosperity.

39. Malaysian diplomacy must also commit to enhancing its efforts to work with other government and non-governmental international institutions to foster a more peaceful, just and humane international order. The United Nations General Assembly is an obvious platform for such efforts.

40. The International Criminal Court, the International Court of Justice, and the UN Human Rights Council are also important institutions for promoting the rule of law in the relations among states. Together with humanitarian organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, the UN World Food Programme and World Health Organisation, they form part of an international order that strives to discipline the conduct of war and alleviate the suffering of those unavoidably affected. The

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keepers of this international order represent values and norms to which Malaysia passionately subscribes.

41. The challenges confronting diplomacy continue to evolve and change. Malaysia must meet them squarely, adapting to them where we must, and leveraging them to our best advantage where we can. We need to reimagine the “diplomat of the future”. Institutions like IDFR need to continually adapt and upgrade skills training to meet future challenges – so that we are not caught totally unprepared by black swan events. This requires diplomats to partner and engage with a wide array of experts – both professional and civil society – who understand realities on the ground and can thus enrich the authenticity of discourses.

42. Whatever the future holds, we must remain resolute to the attainment of our abiding international goals: shared peace, mutual prosperity, freedom from oppression, and justice for all. We will pursue these ends by scrupulous adherence to the international norms and principles that are enshrined in the UN and ASEAN Charters.

43. In that spirit, it is my fervent hope that the new generation of Malaysian diplomats will keep the Jalur Gemilang flying high in the international arena, championing our national interests with pride and distinction. I have every confidence that IDFR will benchmark itself against the best in its field, ever-striving to equip our diplomatic officers with the competencies, knowledge and values necessary to practice world-class diplomacy in the 21st century.

Thank you.

