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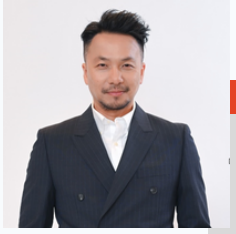

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Navigating Turbulent Waters

Tan Sri Michael Yeoh | President

I believe the Blue Economy offers Malaysia an unprecedented opportunity to build a sustainable and resilient future, especially in an era marked by VUCA – volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. As we look towards a geopolitical landscape increasingly influenced by shifting power dynamics, including the incoming Trump Administration's focus on America-first policies, Malaysia's leadership in the ASEAN region could bring stability amidst uncertainty. With Malaysia assuming the ASEAN chairmanship in 2025, we are in a prime position to champion regional initiatives that drive both economic growth and environmental stewardship across the marine sector.

Our coastal and marine assets are more than scenic resources; they underpin essential sectors like sustainable fisheries, renewable energy, and eco-tourism. In 2022 alone, Malaysia's fishing industry contributed RM11.5 billion (USD 2.5 billion) to the nation's GDP, accounting for 0.8% of our economy. With strategic management and investment, I believe we could amplify this impact significantly. The global Blue Economy, which includes sectors such as fisheries, maritime transport, coastal tourism, and renewable marine energy, could exceed USD 3 trillion by 2030, according to projections in a 2016 report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Even a modest share of this expanding market could bring substantial economic benefits, generate jobs, and help preserve marine biodiversity.

Public-private partnerships are critical to making this vision a reality. By working closely with leading private companies and international organizations, Malaysia's government can facilitate technological transfers and innovations that reduce dependency on fossil fuels, improve sustainable aquaculture practices, and build resilient infrastructure. This collaboration could position Malaysia as a beacon of marine sustainability, especially as we seek to modernize and diversify our renewable energy sources. Malaysia's geographic position, for example, makes it well-suited to harness marine-based renewable energy solutions, such as Ocean Thermal Energy Conversion (OTEC), which could complement our existing solar energy capabilities. Global data on energy trends suggests that by 2050, renewables are expected to account for nearly 85% of new power capacity, making such investments not just strategic but essential.

Local communities, especially indigenous coastal populations, are at the heart of sustainable ocean management. I believe that by integrating these communities into decision-making processes and supporting their livelihoods through eco-tourism and sustainable fishing, Malaysia can set a regional standard in community-led conservation efforts. Tun Mustapha Park, a successful community-led project in Sabah, demonstrates how effective such approaches can be, providing both environmental protection and economic benefits.

Protecting our marine biodiversity through Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) is another pillar of the Blue Economy. Collaborating with international conservation experts will enable Malaysia to balance conservation with sustainable economic activities. By partnering with bodies like

UNESCO, we could develop sustainable tourism models that draw visitors while preserving coral reefs and protecting marine species. MPAs offer a way to safeguard our ecosystems, ensuring they continue to support local economies and biodiversity.

Investment in marine research and technological innovation is essential to unlocking the full potential of the Blue Economy. Partnerships with academic institutions could spark advancements in areas such as coral restoration, sustainable aquaculture, and biodiversity conservation, opening doors to new economic opportunities. Malaysia stands to benefit immensely by building scientific capacity and developing a skilled workforce, positioning itself as a leader in sustainable marine industries across ASEAN.

Climate resilience is crucial to the sustainability of Malaysia's coastal areas. Rising sea levels, ocean acidification, and intensifying storms pose real threats to our coastlines and marine ecosystems. By collaborating with international climate funds and NGOs, Malaysia could accelerate projects such as mangrove restoration, which acts as a natural barrier against storms and supports biodiversity. I believe that by investing in nature-based solutions, Malaysia not only protects its shores but also contributes to global climate efforts, making us a proactive player in climate resilience.

Eco-tourism, when approached sustainably, offers Malaysia the chance to showcase our marine heritage while driving economic growth. By working with global eco-tourism bodies, we could design responsible tourism initiatives that educate visitors on marine conservation, engage local communities, and enhance Malaysia's commitment to environmental stewardship.

Malaysia's strategic position along key shipping routes also provides an opportunity to lead in green port and shipping technologies. Collaborating with global maritime organizations could enable our ports to adopt low-emission equipment, hybrid technologies, and electrified operations. These advancements would reduce our carbon footprint, setting a sustainable example for ASEAN's maritime sector.

Regional cooperation within ASEAN amplifies the benefits of Malaysia's Blue Economy initiatives. Engaging in collaborative frameworks such as the Coral Triangle Initiative enables us to share knowledge, funding, and best practices, ensuring our marine conservation aligns with global standards. With Malaysia as the incoming ASEAN Chair in 2025, there is an opportunity to lead and shape ASEAN's Blue Economy policies and promote a sustainable, shared vision for the region.

In these uncertain times, I believe the Blue Economy represents Malaysia's strategic path to economic resilience. Through meaningful partnerships and investment in sustainable innovation, we can harness the wealth of our seas responsibly. This vision not only balances economic growth with environmental stewardship but also offers a model of stability and sustainability, ensuring the ocean's benefits reach future generations across Malaysia and the broader ASEAN community.

Growing and Liberalizing for the Last Mile

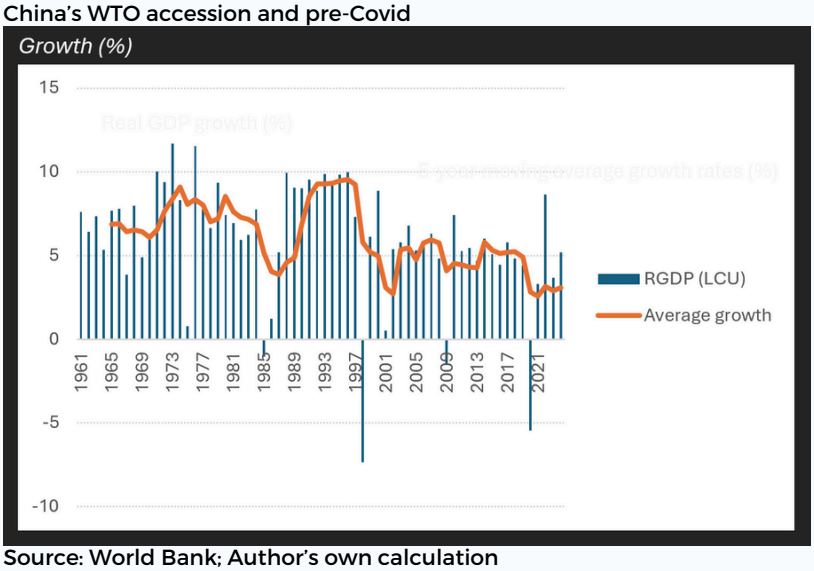
Dr. Wong Chin Yoong | Professor of Economics, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman | KSI Fellow

It is very likely that we're going to attain a 5%, or even slightly higher, growth rate this year. While the number may not sound spectacular, it is indeed vital for the economy at least for three reasons.

First and foremost, the post-COVID growth finally finds its way back to where it has been largely maintained since 2002 (see Exhibit 1). Although it once crossed 8% in 2022, it was an exception rather than the norm. This goes without saying that those in 2021 and 2023 were undisputably subpar.

To keep things in perspective, today's economy is nearly threefold larger than that in 2002, the first year when our growth rates started decelerating to 5% on average. Being able to maintain the pace of acceleration while the ship has been three times larger and heavier indeed tells something interesting about the potential of our economy. So, it deserves credit instead of a lament.

Exhibit 1 | Malaysian economy expanded steadily at 5.11% on average post-China's WTO accession and pre-Covid



Source: World Bank; Author's own calculation

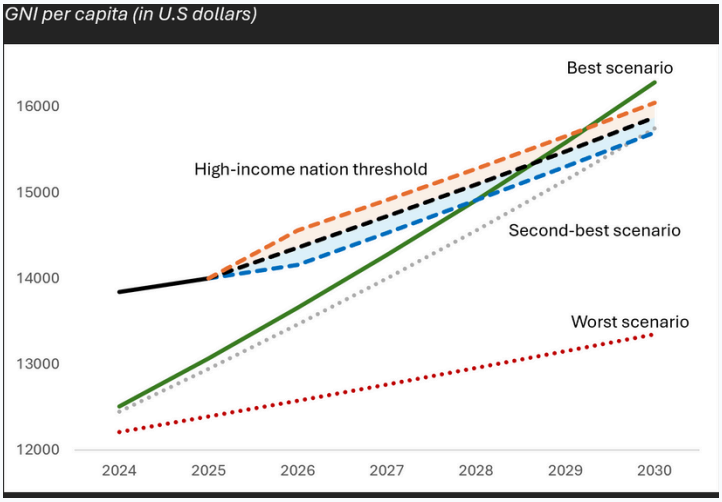
A solid 5%, moreover, is a necessary condition to lift all boats.

Growth keeps the debt-to-GDP ratio manageable despite the growing public debt while providing the government with the necessary fiscal resources to accelerate reform. It underpins the dynamics of the labor market by creating new jobs and facilitating job switching. Narratives that surround decent growth are always useful in rationalizing and even catalyzing business investments. The fact that recent growth episodes are largely driven by business investments, both domestic and foreign, makes the outlook for sustainable growth and pay rise more promising.

Probably what's more important is that 5% is the growth rate we cannot miss if the last mile towards the high-income nation is to be finished.

According to the World Bank's classification, in 2024 one must attain a gross national income per capita in the U.S. dollars of more than $13,845 to qualify for the high-income status. The threshold is a moving target, being raised by approximately 2.5% per annum over a five-year average since 2020.

Exhibit 2 | Malaysia is most likely to become a high-income nation by 2029 if the economy grows by 5% and the ringgit appreciates by 1% against the dollar annually on average.



Note: The World Bank classifies countries by income level using the Atlas method. The high-income thresholds for 2024 and 2025 are US$13,845 and US$14,005, respectively. Based on a rolling-window approach to the growth in the thresholds from 2020 onwards, I estimate the threshold average with a range of one standard deviation over the next five fiscal years (2026-2030). The "Best scenario" is computed upon three assumptions: each year GDP grows by 5%, the ringgit appreciates 1% against the U.S. dollar, and the population expands by 1.5%. Whereas for the "Second-best scenario", average growth drops to 4.5% while other conditions remain unchanged. But when it comes to the "Worst scenario", the ringgit depreciates by 1% annually against the dollar on top of slower growth.

Source: World Bank; author's own calculations

This brings us to the importance of 5%, as illustrated in Exhibit 2. Only by persistently growing at 5% over the next five years (the "Best scenario"), we will have a chance to see the endpoint of the last mile in 2028 and realize the long-awaited aspiration with favorable odds by 2029. But once the growth decelerates by just a 0.5 percentage point, it could again be a dream deferred, at least post-2030 (the "Second-best scenario").

However, the last mile challenge stems not only from slower growth but also from a weaker ringgit. While slower growth defers the dream-come-true moment, a sinking ringgit, as in the "Worst scenario" where the ringgit continuously depreciates by 1% per annum vis-à-vis the dollar, is effectively calling the time of the death for the dream.

Unlike growth, which can be vitalized via pump priming and rates cut, the ringgit's dollar value can hardly be lifted via foreign exchange intervention. Bank Negara does intervene to moderate the volatility, when necessary, but rarely, and rightly so, goes against gravity.

When we look back on the past two years of the weak ringgit, the conclusion into which we jump so quickly is to blame the strong dollar. If so, the future is bleak as high-income nation status is beyond reach, isn't it?

According to the World Bank's classification, in 2024 one must attain a gross national income per capita in the U.S. dollars of more than $13,845 to qualify for the high-income status. The threshold is a moving target, being raised by approximately 2.5% per annum over a five-year average since 2020.

After all, Trumponomics has all the ingredients for a strong dollar in the next four years: massive tariff invites dollar appreciation in equilibrium, the adverse supply shock hit by mass deportation and tariff is potentially inflationary that lifts the floor for Fed's rate cuts, and financial assets in emerging markets pale into insignificance when compared with the U.S financial markets fed by the euphoric expectation of tax cut and deregulation.

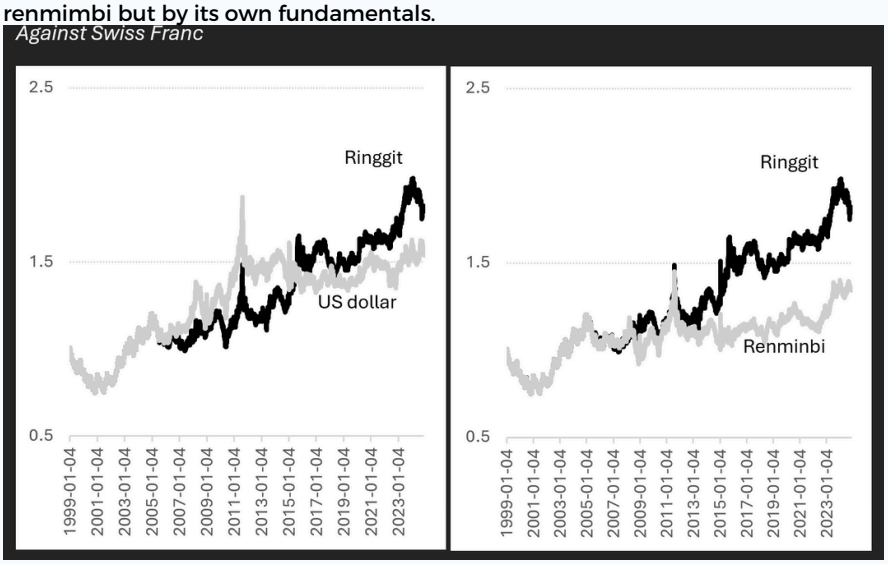
That said, if we compare the ringgit with the U.S. dollar using the same numeraire, the fact tells otherwise. As depicted in the left panel of Exhibit 3, when the dollars depreciate against the Swiss Franc, the ringgit depreciates too. Ringgit appreciation vis-à-vis the dollars observed prior to 2015 was largely due to a magnitude of ringgit depreciation smaller than that of the dollars.

More interesting, the ringgit kept depreciating even when the dollar has plateaued out after 2015. Likewise, in comparison with the renminbi which shows stability after 2013, ringgit depreciation looks like a one-way bet.

Neither a strong dollar nor a weak renminbi as the go-to justifications for a weak ringgit sounds factually convincing.

When there was a dollar shock, thanks to the onset of the Fed's rate hikes in March 2022, dramatic ringgit depreciation was supposed to result in a higher risk premium, as foreign investors would demand so to absorb local currency debt compared to the dollar debt. But on the contrary, as evidenced in Exhibit 4, Malaysian 10-year treasury bond yields were increasingly lower than the U.S. bond yields.

Exhibit 3 | Ringgit depreciation is driven neither by a strong dollar nor a weak renmimbi but by its own fundamentals.



Source: St Louis FRED; author's own calculations

Yes, you read it right! There is no substantial demand for higher bond yields to compensate for the loss of the dollar value of ringgit bond investment. While such an absence of risk premia is benign to public finance and the economy, it has collateral damage: ringgit is expected to further depreciate, self-reinforcing the sinking cycle.

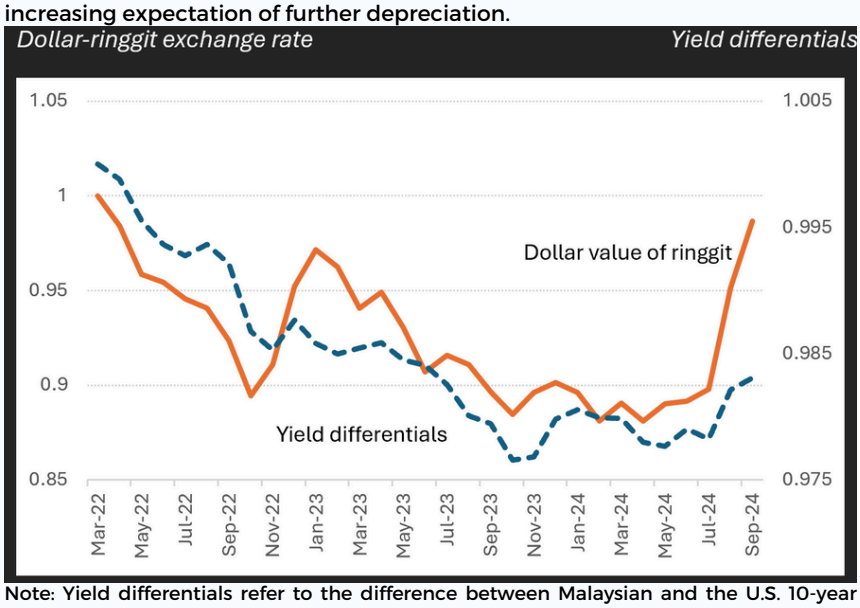
Ringgit apparently has its own plan. Of question is, what plan is it?

Cristi, Kalemli-Özcan, & Unsal's (2024) interpretation is that a strong dollar could be capturing more fundamental, real instead of financial global shocks that require external adjustment in emerging markets.

Putting into our context, a weak ringgit doesn't mirror a financial shock as the bond market is largely ringgit-denominated with no sign of financial fragility. Instead, after years of premature deindustrialization, the declining ringgit will have to "overshoot" its long-run level to move the resources from the non-tradable to tradable sector, and to convince the firms to invest in the much-needed "reindustrialization", as it turns out in recent years.

Persistent ringgit depreciation till now, therefore, is not so much disconnection from fundamentals as shifting the fundamentals in Krugman's (1988) sense.

Exhibit 4 | A strong dollar didn't lead to a higher risk premia in Malaysia. A ringgit depreciation larger than the drop in yield differentials also indicates an increasing expectation of further depreciation.



Note: Yield differentials refer to the difference between Malaysian and the U.S. 10-year treasury bond yields. A declining ratio means the U.S. yields increasingly exceed the Malaysian yields. Whereas for the dollar value of ringgit, a decline (rise) implies ringgit depreciation (appreciation). Both values are indexed in 2022 March.

Source: St Louis FRED; BNM; author's own calculations

As reindustrialization needs ringgit financing, broadening investors' access to ringgit becomes a necessary follow-up policy measure. Bank Negara's recent announcement to allow multilateral development banks and qualified non-resident development financial institutions to issue ringgit-denominated debt securities for onshore use and provide ringgit financing to resident entities is a right step forward.

And it is reasonable to conjecture that what's needed ahead is a sequential reconsideration of deepening onshore access to ringgit debt financing by non-resident private financial institutions, to ringgit equity financing by non-resident business entities, and liberalizing offshore access to ringgit.

All these are the pre-conditions to eliminate financial frictions that disconnect the exchange rate from fundamentals (Itskhoki and Mukhin, 2021) in order to facilitate a ringgit appreciation towards the new fundamentals later.

In a word, growing the economy steadily and liberalizing the capital account sequentially is a path we must take to overcome the last-mile challenge.

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Why the World Can't Ignore Southeast Asia

Zaim Mohzani | Senior Director of External Affairs

I first encountered the concept of "ASEAN centrality" as a young professional attending various think tank conferences. At the time, it felt vague, an idea that could mean everything or nothing, depending on who was speaking. Over the years, I have come to understand its essence: ASEAN must be the driver of the Asia Pacific region's evolving architecture.

However, ASEAN centrality alone is not enough. It must evolve into ASEAN Confidence. We need to be confident in our narrative, our economies, and our development. ASEAN must stand firm against any forces that threaten the stability of our region. Confidence, not neutrality, should define our collective future.

ASEAN Confidence in Action

As Senior Director of External Relations at KSI Strategic Institute for Asia Pacific, I have witnessed ASEAN's potential firsthand. Through three major events hosted by KSI this year, we showcased the strength and leadership of Indonesia, Laos, and Cambodia.

In **Jakarta**, the World Digital Economy and Technology Summit highlighted Indonesia's rise as a leader in innovation and renewable energy. Indonesia's digital economy is projected to grow to $146 billion by 2025, according to the e-Conomy SEA 2024 report. During the Summit, leaders such as Sandiaga Uno, former Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy, and Nadiem Makarim, former Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, reflected the country's ability to modernize while preserving its national identity and philosophy.

In **Vientiane**, the ASEAN Leadership and Partnership Forum underscored Laos PDR's transformation from being landlocked to 'land-linked.' Laos, known as the "Battery of Southeast Asia," now generates 80% of its electricity from hydropower, exporting to countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, and China. During the Forum, President Thongloun Sisoulith and Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone touched on driving Laos' efforts to integrate further into regional supply chains and become a model of sustainability.

In **Phnom Penh**, the Global Chinese Economic and Technology Summit highlighted Cambodia's resilience and ambition. The nation's GDP grew by 5.5% in 2023, reflecting its robust recovery and adaptability to global economic shifts. Prime Minister Hun Manet and President of the Senate Hun Sen are leading efforts to diversify the economy, with a focus on technology and green manufacturing, positioning Cambodia as a rising star in the region.

These events demonstrated that ASEAN thrives when its nations act with confidence. Indonesia's leadership, Laos' innovation, and Cambodia's resilience are not isolated examples but reflections of the bloc's collective strength. ASEAN's diversity is its power, and its future depends on transforming centrality into confidence.

Shaping ASEAN's Narrative

ASEAN Confidence requires owning the narrative. This means shaping global discussions on key issues like climate change and digital transformation, rather than allowing others to define ASEAN's role.

In previous articles for KSInsights, I proposed establishing an ASEAN Climate Change Envoy and an ASEAN Tech Envoy. These roles would position ASEAN as a leader in sustainability and technological innovation. The Climate Change Envoy could drive ASEAN's net-zero ambitions, while the Tech Envoy could champion the region's growing digital economy, ensuring ASEAN remains competitive in the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

ASEAN must also deepen its engagement in multilateral platforms such as the G20 and the United Nations Climate Change Conferences. By asserting its voice on these stages, ASEAN can ensure its priorities are not just recognized but actively influence global agendas.

The Future is ASEAN Confidence

ASEAN Confidence is more than a mindset. It is a commitment to standing tall in the face of challenges, amplifying our successes, and to safeguarding the stability of our region. ASEAN must no longer be content with being a balancing act between superpowers. Instead, it must lead with conviction, shaping the future of the Asia Pacific.

As the Lao proverb reminds us, "When the water rises, the fish eat the ants. When the water falls, the ants eat the fish." This wisdom reflects ASEAN's ability to thrive amid changing circumstances. By uniting its diverse strengths and embracing confidence, ASEAN is poised not just to participate in the action but to lead it.

Testing ASEAN's Resilience & Malaysian Resolve

Elisa Shafiqah | Malaysian youth peacebuilder | KSI Fellow

The South China Sea has evolved beyond territorial dispute; it is now a critical test of ASEAN's resilience, unity, and relevance in an increasingly complex security landscape. With China's expanding claims, grey zone tactics and joint development agreements with nations like Indonesia , the stakes in the region have intensified. Meanwhile, new policies such as the recent Philippines Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act, which risks infringing on neighboring continental shelf, highlight ASEAN members' growing frustration with passive responses.

Despite rising tensions, ASEAN continues to rely on quiet diplomacy and technology-based surveillance, often sidelining the local communities most affected by these disputes. This approach, intended to avoid confrontation, has ironically deepened the disconnect between ASEAN governments and the public they serve — especially as ASEAN promotes a 'whole-of-society' commitment.

As Malaysia chairs ASEAN in 2025, it has a unique opportunity to redefine ASEAN's approach, championing a transparent, community-driven strategy that builds genuine trust and strengthens regional security in the face of evolving threats. Rather than relying solely on behind-the-scenes diplomacy, ASEAN must adopt a model that integrates local voices and adaptable, on-the-ground intelligence as part of a broader security strategy.

Regional Threats Escalate: Grey Zone Tactics and Strategic Pressures

In the South China Sea, China's grey zone tactics — subtle actions below the threshold of war — are shifting regional dynamics. By deploying its 3000+ maritime ships to enforce claims and militarising artificial islands, China is incrementally expanding its influence without triggering outright conflict. Unlike a decade ago, these tactics now blend military and civilian presence, blurring lines and making it challenging for ASEAN to respond without escalating tensions.

China's actions have led to a fragmented response within ASEAN, with countries like the Philippines taking a confrontational stance, while others, like Indonesia, pursue cooperative agreements. This divide reflects growing frustrations with ASEAN's limited ability to act collectively and highlights the divisive impact of China's strategy.

Grey zone tactics subtly shift the status quo, eroding ASEAN's influence without provoking direct confrontation. This "creeping normalcy" exploits ASEAN's reliance on quiet diplomacy, underscoring the urgent need for a new approach — one that is agile, united, and capable of addressing these evolving threats effectively.

ASEAN's Quiet Diplomacy: Falling Short of Its Own "Whole-of-Society" Promises By Over-Reliance on Technology

Emphasizing mutual respect, non-interference, and peaceful dispute resolution. Similarly, ARF aims to build trust among regional powers by focusing on preventive diplomacy and confidence-building measures. These frameworks prioritize dialogue and consensus over direct action.

Here is the catch: TAC and ARF lack enforcement mechanisms. The vague high-level political joint statements during the commencement of these meetings rarely translate into clear, actionable steps for civil servants and security forces. This means the political will at the diplomatic level often fails to become effective on the ground. This is evident when ASEAN lost one-third of their global trade annually just from illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing amounting to USD$10 billion, showcasing how ASEAN has limited enforcement capabilities.

China's grey zone tactics in the South China Sea reveal the limits of this approach. Despite nearly two decades of negotiation, ASEAN's proposed Code of Conduct (CoC) — meant to manage regional disputes — remains stalled, hindered by both China's influence and ASEAN's internal divisions. Without a unified and enforceable CoC, ASEAN's response to maritime pressures remains fragmented and inconsistent.

This quiet diplomacy has also led to a heavy reliance on technology, such as satellite monitoring and automated surveillance, to maintain maritime security. While effective for broad tracking, this tech-heavy approach sidelines local communities, which are essential for on-the-ground intelligence. ASEAN's tech reliance and lack of transparency contradict its "whole-of-society" commitment to shared responsibility and public engagement, detaching policymakers from the communities they aim to protect.

Recommendations: Toward a Transparent, Community-Driven ASEAN Strategy

To tackle today's complex security threats, ASEAN needs an approach that is swift, transparent, and rooted in community trust. As ASEAN Chair in 2025, Malaysia has a unique opportunity to drive this shift by championing a "whole-of-society" approach that moves beyond quiet diplomacy.

Firstly, Malaysia should revitalize its "Total Defense" (HANRUH) doctrine across ASEAN, training coastal communities to act as frontline intelligence. By reporting suspicious activities, these communities create a robust human intelligence (HUMINT) network that complements tech-heavy surveillance. This engagement would bridge the gap created by ASEAN's closed-door diplomacy, strengthening trust through active, on-the-ground involvement.

Secondly, minilateralism for quick, targeted responses. In response to China's growing influence through bilateral deals, ASEAN should create smaller coalitions to handle specific high-stakes security issues. A group of coastal states could coordinate patrols, intelligence-sharing, and rapid responses to grey zone threats. This agile approach would enable ASEAN to act faster and more effectively.

Lastly, by integrating civil society to strengthen ASEAN's regional solidarity. Public interest in regional security is high, as seen at platforms like the Asia Pacific Roundtable. Integrating civil society into ASEAN's security strategy bridges the gap between policy and community needs, making security an every day , shared responsibility. Through resilience training and security awareness, ASEAN can build a security culture grounded in regional solidarity.

Conclusion: A Call for Malaysia to Lead with Transparency and Inclusivity

The South China Sea crisis demands a bold break from ASEAN's quiet diplomacy. Malaysia's 2025 ASEAN Chairmanship is the perfect opportunity to champion a transparent, community-driven approach. By promoting community-based intelligence, adopting flexible coalitions, and actively involving civil society, Malaysia can lead ASEAN to a security strategy rooted in resilience and public trust. This approach not only secures the South China Sea but also reaffirms that ASEAN's strength lies in its people, making regional security a shared responsibility.

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The US presidential Election: Hope in Generational Shifts

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More than half the world's population has gone to the polls this past year with elections taking place in countries such as Pakistan, India, Indonesia, and Bangladesh. Yet, global attention was predominantly focused on the U.S. presidential election. With Donald Trump set to become the 47th President of the United States in January 2025, what can a nation in Southeast Asia understand from Trump's victory, and how might America's experience reflect on Malaysia's own political dynamics?

We can explore the cyclical nature of history, as theorized by Ibn Khaldun, the 14th-century Arab historian and philosopher, particularly regarding the rise and fall of civilizations. Numerous analyses question the durability of American exceptionalism, such as The End of American World Order by Amitav Acharya (2014), suggesting America is subject to historical cycles and is no more exceptional than others. In the present context, the election of Donald Trump and the rightward shift in politics align with a broader global trend. In Europe, the election of Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy in 2022 and the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland in 2023 exemplifies the rise of right-wing politics. Nevertheless, in 2024, these movements faced electoral challenges from the left, most notably in France and the UK, reflecting the dynamic political landscape across the world.

A striking parallel emerged in Malaysia when the Islamist populist party, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), led the Perikatan Nasional alliance to challenge Pakatan Harapan's dominance in the 2022 general election. Many at the time thought that the lowering of the voting age to 18 would lead to a bigger margin for left-leaning Pakatan Harapan, with the coalition itself championing it in their "Buku Harapan" manifesto in 2018. However, with Pakatan being in government from 2018 until 2020, there were more younger people dissatisfied with them than older generations (Merdeka Centre, 2019). A similar wave of surprise now sweeps across the United States with the question, "How could Gen-Z vote for Trump?" rooted in the assumption that young people naturally lean more liberal.

Two overlooked factors may explain this trend. Firstly, the formative years of today's youth were shaped during the COVID-19 lockdown, a period marked by uncertainty. Many remember Donald Trump as the leader during that tumultuous time, which may influence their political preferences. While critics focus on the fragmented response by the federal government, messaging discrepancies with health experts, and political interference in health agencies, Trump's supporters highlight achievements like rapid vaccine development (GAO, 2021). Similarly in Malaysia, Muhyiddin Yassin as prime minister of Perikatan Nasional during the pandemic was fondly referred to as 'Abah' or father.

Secondly, there's growing disillusionment among the youth with neoliberal policies. The 1990s and 2000s hailed the triumph of neoliberalism, but the 2008 financial crisis sparked questions about its sustainability, paving the way for MAGA-style protectionism. Cultural liberalism also faces scrutiny; debates over transgender rights and abortion took center stage in the recent election between Trump and Harris.

The backlash isn't against equality itself but against what some see as "illiberal liberalism"—a perception that certain progressive ideologies are being imposed. The lack of open, respectful discourse leaves many feeling patronized, much like when the Democrats criticized those who questioned their response to the Gaza war (Shalal & Singh, 2024). We are currently witnessing the cyclical, instead of evolutionary, development of political ideologies between liberalism and conservatism.

This cycle of history offers a lesson for Malaysia. Pakatan Harapan is perceived as the establishment today, with the reformist spirit perhaps having peaked in 2018. In contrast, advocates for Pakatan Harapan may champion equality, but not every Malaysian shares the same belief. Left-leaning liberal ideas are unsustainable without dialogue. As the unity government pushes for reforms, it is crucial to acknowledge the 30% of voters who supported Perikatan Nasional, including the estimated 37% from the youth (in contrast to 35% who voted for Pakatan) (Welsh, 2023). Ignoring their perspectives risks deepening national polarization. By considering diverse viewpoints and promoting open discussions, both Malaysia and the U.S. can navigate the challenges posed by evolving political landscapes, ensuring that progress reflects the entire society's diverse voices. People on the right may hold valid concerns, and bridging divides starts with listening. Liberal democracy thrives on compromise, not simple majority rule. It's crucial to keep political leanings balanced, fostering moderate positions on both sides.

The current rise of right-wing politics is daunting, considering its potential to veer towards extremism. After all, if time is truly a cycle, civilization may regress to when fascism was in fashion in the middle 20th century. History, however, shows that there is hope in cycles;—what goes up must come down. Whilst Gen Z engages with populist right-wing views due to the many crises facing this generation such as economic instability, environmental destabilization, polarization, and mental health concerns, future shifts could see Gen Alpha ushering back neoliberal principles if changes promised by the right do not materialize. Both in the U.S. and Malaysia, political figures like Trump and parties like PAS claim they deserve chances to prove their governance, but if they fail, change via the ballot box is possible. In the 1984 presidential election, Ronald Reagan won all the states except for Minnesota. A mere eight years later, Bill Clinton won for the Democratic Party, showing the impermanence of politics.

For democracy to work, people need to have access to information. Today, many consume media content believing they’re well-informed, yet often remain within echo chambers. Diverse perspectives have always existed, but agreeing on shared facts was the norm—a coherence increasingly fractured in our current media landscape. Words like "fake news," popularised during Trump's first term, illustrate this shift. The integrity of truth itself is questioned, often reducing dialogue to entrenched biases. Remedying this demands a commitment to factual discourse. There is no "post-truth"; reality either exists or it doesn't. Embracing these principles can help counteract polarising narratives and strengthen democratic resilience. This is where we need statesmen, not politicians, who will bring people together. Incumbents will fall but people will continue building the nation.

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A Grim Path Ahead

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This analysis is a critical reflection on the Democratic Party. With mishaps within their domestic policies and the stretched goodwill with what foreign policy they have left, the Democrats are out of touch with the way they campaign and who they have aligned themselves with. Employing old techniques to advantage themselves to a new audience, this analysis goes into what these techniques are, and why, during such an important election, they failed to secure the presidency.

As world leaders scramble to congratulate the now 47th President of the United States, the world sits and waits with bated breath.

The President-elect has already rolled out important positions to his loyalists: a news presenter, who has never held any position in office nor worked at the department he is now set to head, and a TV doctor heading Medicare - a very complex institution that requires years of experience that they do not have. This is not unheard of; falling short of expectations and inconsistent changes that influenced the instability of his first term in 2016, it is none of wonder that his newly appointed cabinet members are ignoring historic non-partisan acts. A familiar taste on what is to come as this administration's threat to dismantle institutions that have been in America's fabric for almost a century.

That is not good news.

A Trump win for a second time seems out of the ordinary. After the severity in under-planning of COVID-19, his reluctance to give government grants and a lack of tact when it came to diplomatically respecting other countries, nevertheless his own appointed leaders, it does not prove a part of stability that America has always been proud to convey. His followers dressed like him after his assassination attempt, the idol worship of his celebrity persona, and with the widespread belief in things that are proven factually false, he has cultivated a following.

With the spike of the word tariff on Google searches days after the election, his promises of alienating government institutions but using them to carry out his own personal afflictions, the Trump presidency is met with what it has been before - disorder and uncertainty.

The question will always be complex; why was there a second chance given? Personal answers range from belief, to economic status and of course, the lines drawn when it comes to the different parties. The problem is more than the conveyed simplicity of bringing the price of things down. It starts to become clearer that this is about a society that does not recognise that they are being left behind in an interconnected world, that consistently struggles to have their basic needs met.

The more glaring answer however, is simpler than it is given credit for, and a harsh truth for many.

In the days following the election loss, Democrats have come out of the woodwork to proclaim a hard truth: a forgotten working class. There is merit that the working class has been sidelined, but so has a hard make of a demographic - the white working class that has made up the majority and roots of the party for so long.

Trump's campaigned gained ground with white, non-college-educated voters, particularly in socio-economic struggling regions. With previous data showing white working-class Americans choosing differently regardless of the cultural messaging, economic preferences will always gain priority in the voting booth. The cultural countenance is not of no importance but long-term data tells us that they will base their political decisions on their economic preferences.

Concurring that a solid analysis of outside forces that have influenced the growth, decline and stalling of American industries, are not in the formula of his rallies. The progression of other economies, labour costs rising worldwide, and new industries surpassing old ones, are just some to name a few that do not make the mark when talking about world expansion that has lent a helping hand to the decline in many areas of work. With an omission to admit that these things have influence over domestic policy, most of his base remain unaware, that could ultimately prove the contradiction of Trump being a champion of the working class.

Trump has tried to raise the taxes on the 4 million of the poorest in the country, allowed employers to pocket employees' tips, and denied overtime to millions of low-wage workers. The grandeur of his speeches though, create an undisputed chant that despite what he has put forth, he will continue to look out for the large working-class base America has. There is a flicker of understanding to why the working class gravitate towards this environment - hearing isolationist policies that can feed into an untruthful bias - where Americans feel in control of their lives and not bending to the will of outside forces. With the class divide becoming more stark, the sharp contrast of being a billionaire and simultaneously appealing to the working class not seeming palpable, but made doable because of his seemingly authentic engagement.

The Democratic Party, although known for staunch beliefs in workers rights, also has strong contrasts. President Biden has not been the friend to the working class that he has platformed himself on. In 1977-1978, during a big push for labor reform, he stalled for months and sabotaged criticism of the bill itself. He authored the bankruptcy bill to reward creditors and punish debtors, and lauded being one of the main legislators of mass incarceration, which has had devastating effects on America's working class. There is a clear disconnect with the Democratic Party's policing; putting forth candidates that either have had to go back on progressive policies to attune to a more moderate level, or have them be moderate: depending on charisma or charm to overlook not so friendly socio-economic strides. The cognitive dissonance shown by the Democrats is a disengagement between the high ranks of the political party and their voter base. Running candidates who do not have the record to back up their pro-labor and pro-union stances. Although attitudes have changed for the current President, it still fosters a air of distrust to the thought process behind when it comes to their voting constituents - knowing what they want but not willing to give it to them.

The Democrats have done good when it comes to long term policies, such as mitigating the inflation of COVID and promoting job recovery, emphasising infrastructure and green infrastructure with the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law by allocating $1.2 trillion in November 2021 to over 65,000 projects over the country, all of these long term solutions are key to furthering society and necessary, but they take time. When someone is living month to month, they don't see these policies as lucrative as the fear of falling further down the socio-economic pipeline concludes more in the short term.

The messaging of the Democratic Party then falls on fragmented. There is no immediate impact seen such as an uptick of the standard of living, instead there are complex explanations that voters struggle to connect with and constant stalemates because of hidden conflicts. Policies are often intertwined or rely on one another to benefit people or improve conditions, when one part is understood but the other is not, or not deemed important enough, there becomes a gap in the chain that is supposed to be seamless pathway.

The housing crisis is an acute example of this very thing. Nearly half of renters are "cost burdened" and spending more than 30% of their income on rent. A whopping 60% of Americans live one pay-check to the next, creating an environment that leaves very little room for emergencies or medical problems in an already stressed and hard to navigate healthcare system.

The Democrats have tried to focus on housing supply, but instead of enacting clear cut laws that forbid price gouging or putting limits such as rent control, they have faced valid criticism for not doing enough to regulate corporate landlords for driving up rent and home prices. The issue is made worse when there is little to no action to directly aid low-income renters, furthering a cycle that many cannot retain. Rent increased by 20% over the three years under Biden's presidency. Minimum wage has historically been stagnant, but when it was raised in 2023, they did not keep pace with inflation, leaving many to struggle with a still heightened cost. All these factors can easily domino into unpaid bills which can spread into homelessness - a frightening conclusion borne frequently out of these situations, reaching record levels of over 650,000 people.

Instead of a straightforward narrative, Democratic points are splintered and convoluted, offering little explanation to domestic policies that are affected by global trends and a slow turn around in those issues with constant fighting. Campaigns are not just made of debates, they are made of consistency, especially when connecting with people that have different lived experiences. Jargon that has plagued Democratic speeches for years with soft truths that promise to focus on the bigger picture, has now been favoured to more Republican formulas - to the point, conviction, and honing in on collective responsibility that fosters a strong bond between peers and candidates.

In a turn of events that chronicled his win in 2020, Trump appealing to the collective memory before the financial crisis in 2008. A time that was not shrouded in overt hardship in American society, before a global recession that arguably changed the way the world's various economies relied on one.

Trump unlocked something the Democrats have been trying to for decades - the guts to say exactly what he wanted. He flagged down individualistic ideologies, ramped them up and shoved it back into the general population, making it seem possible that they were all united under a singular agenda, the 'America First' one. When his campaign expanded with so much momentum in such a short time, many rural and lower-income people that make up a part of his base, seemed to have options for the long term. A back-to-basics ideology with a simple message that resonated. When explored, the Trump win does make sense - no matter how archaic to the consensus, or how Democratic leaders say that this is "not the America they know".

This conservative change has been brewing for a long time, since before the Obama administration. Acknowledging mistakes displayed in foreign policy and at home, much of Obama's presidency was slighted by a Republican congress that was clearly using a rigid stance of "If he was for it, we had to be against it." A stark difference to his view of bipartisanship, where he placed two Republicans in his cabinet, extending an olive branch that was never reciprocated. Obama proved what many critics of the Democratic Party had been saying for years; that the liberalism that was afforded to Cold War American politics was outdated, and a new form of progressiveness had to sweep the country to keep people engaged, and further bring up domestic institutions that had been crumbling for decades.

Liberal hegemony prioritises ideological ambitions over pragmatic considerations, often compromising security and resources. This is neglectful of regional dynamics, the limits of power and domestic monopolies that often result in backlash and diminished credibility nationally and internationally. The Democrats face a fundamentally different world, a world that see's a tangible decline of U.S. relative power in real time. Traditional liberals want an active role in global leadership because of what it promotes, whilst more progressive liberals advocate for the scaling back of larger military commitments and focusing on domestic changes that will incite a more positive domino effect. Both need to eradicate the cold war model in a bid to control the narrative that feeds on political dysfunction.

The legacies of liberal presidents do nothing to quell vexation that has grown in a perceived rags-to-riches story. Already warned of a more conservative sweep when Trump won the first time, Bernie Sanders, the leading progressive senator, pleaded with the Democrats to go back to its working-class roots. Unfortunately, prioritising an outdated liberal hegemony, that fed directly into crumbling domestic policy became a downfall. This is part of a bigger reason to why the explosion of Trump was so fierce - he offered something different by promising to not go into overseas affairs, creating national stability on the dissolution of foreign intervention.

The Biden administration is not a stranger to this, opting for policies that meet in the middle, drawing ire from the constituents that voted for the administration in order to enact change. With the collective grief in 2020, the Biden-Harris administration got the American people to come out and vote in historic numbers.

With that secure however, the Democrats got complacent.

When Kamala Harris was nominated as the Democratic incumbent for president, there was hope that there would be a focus on workers, on the disparity of class and race, civil rights being reinstated, an end to the heavily contested foreign policy of Biden's administration. Important issues that should have principled people's vote were not ratified, for favour of having celebrity endorsements that were out of touch.

Identity politics will always rear its head when it comes to anything political in the United States. For a country that has based its policies on race, gender, and class since the beginning of it's conception, it is virtually impossible to not have it at any debate, or at least not present in policies when put forth. The divide in America has always been about class but it is unprecedented to not support that with the reductionism of race, gender, and socio-economic status, those conversations become redundant.

Biden's decision to drop out of the race three months before the general election is a difficult cursor to come to terms with, when trying not to hone on it as selfish. There is selflessness in taking a step back because of the general populations opinion, but it is hard when looking at it objectively, as the nomination was put onto a woman who was not known expansively, making her an easy target for the Trump administration to discredit her, refuse to debate her with nefarious misogynist undertones and ultimately deface her and ultimately everyone who looked like her.

America does seem ready for a woman president, and no amount of backlashing makes that easier to digest. It does not mean that there should not be one, or a decreased ability to do their job simply based on their gender, it means that America has a problem when it comes to quelling something out of the status quo. Especially when that status quo was challenged three months before the election, even if the candidate excelled and surpassed all qualifications against their opponent. The glass celling can be broken, but Kamala Harris's gender, as well as her race were a factor. Regardless if she was the district attorney of San Francisco, and then the attorney general of California, working her way from an immigrant family to the sphere she holds now, or that there was a black president before that set the tone for the outcome of possibilities when it came to race, the results of the election only proved so much. More people united over class struggle, but it does not dispel the fact that systemic attitudes, and charged rhetoric rang true when it came to the voting booth.

The likes of Dick Cheney, someone who famously approved torture techniques, amongst other Republican pundits with less than savoury opinions during the Bush administration, being at the forefront of validation, was a major lack of judgment from the party that touted itself as the reasonable and empathetic counterpart. Her administration thought it was the best move in trying to appeal to moderates across the board. This backfired as it only proved that this misconception in view of bipartisanship was futile; cementing herself further away from the base that she was trying to include and the younger generation, to which the Democrats were very likely thinking, had their vote secured.

The class barrier this election proved multiple things - how demographics vote, how the white voting class in America has been seemingly forgotten, and the uncertainty that is now coming with another period of instability. Arab Americans, Black Americans, Asian Americans, Mexican Americans, Indigenous Americans, and other minorities were not the main focus. It was defeating Trump, and whilst that was important, not addressing the issues at hand explicitly proved to be alienating and ultimately grevious. That does not dissuade the fact that two things can be right at once.

America is a divided nation - ideologically and almost physically. Whilst there have been strides to combat their roots in prejudice, racism, and sexism, the skeletons in their closet are often at times, overwhelming. This is the thorny state they exists in. It is two candidates that continue to say they are fundamentally different, yet in so many ways keep the status quo of being similar.

The American working class has been forgotten, freedoms are threatened with stipulations and minorities suffer. With news of the Pentagon having secret meetings to discuss of what to do in situations where force is ordered but not needed, to military tribunals, to the removal of the Department of Education, America finds itself once again in the middle of a media circus - the difference is that now there is more preperation at the helm. There are a host of people in his arsenal that are not only loyal to him, but strategists with years and even decades operating within the American political system.

The Democrats have lost their spine.

They look in favour of trying to meet in the middle. The Republicans do not do this, yet the Democrats foolishly try to hold onto the idea that somehow there will be a bipartisan meeting. This was proven false with COVID-19, when Obama was president, multiple government shutdowns, and now. That is the inconsistent behaviour that they are afforded. The Democrats show that they are willing to work with their different counterparts, and whilst that is commendable and there is favour in conducive relations, working together does not hold any countenance on the Republican agenda. By consistently pushing a narrative of bi-partisanship, with counterparts that do not see eye to eye on fundamental issues, a visceral detachment echoes. With the largest donors, corporations, and the leaders of the Democratic Party, these ideals they have do not innately affect them. For the representatives that were voted in because the people felt they best represented them, it is conjugated to a difficult reality.

Shaking hands with people who actively try to vote against their constituents' very own interests and person is not a moment that should be enshrined, it is a moment that many feel pain towards and sparks vindictiveness. The party that used to be about the working class has changed to petty comebacks and the constant threat of civil rights in the past decade. The party that took a more nationan-centric approach is brazenly knocking on doors that employed tactics to one of the worst wars the world has seen in contemporary history.

American politics has become a celebrity ping pong match over the past decade; who can yell the loudest instead of who is making sense, making things more akin to a service, rather than a country. The parties that America has do not end up representing the crux of the people with out-of-touch politicians that have fundamentally lost the ability to relate.

With rampant digitisation and rapid dismemberment of our data, privacy, and general education, a new era of information has promoted a wave of inexperience, slowly chipping away and decaying society. There is a celebration of ignorance, not only by the public but by government officials; people with unprecedented levels of power and monumental influence, who champion and applaud fierce misinformation, instead of putting forth policies that care for much of the population and further generations to come.

The Democratic Party has a grievance to take care of within. They are not united as one, something that their neighbours are very good at doing. Even during a contested election, the party was still rife with weakened communication and constant disagreement, fostering ill will and a cracked facade on where they stood and what their true agenda was. Beating Trump seemed like it was not enough and things became stagnant because they were at a loss when they realised that it failed to change minds.

Trump on the horizon is not looked fondly upon - there is little argument that he will be worse when compared to his adversary. A high point of conflict was Project 2025, becoming a hot button issues as election day grew closer, and the debates pulling a tug of war between policies that border on the ridiculousness of dismantling federal agencies, reversing climate policies and even compromising patient privacy with a family planning agenda. Considering most polls show that Americans favour progressive policies, Project 2025 is a guarantee that most working people will not be directly benefitting. It is a danger to not just the democracy that America so valiantly positions itself on, but a cursor for other countries and governments to follow suit as they please. Having that much power in the world means that the influence wielded is of the same caliber.

Wanting dependability from overt people in power seems futile when one side is reassuring cold war liberal hegemony politics that are outdated, and the other does not want consistency by making the role of government so minute that no one trusts institutions anymore. To most, the Democratic Party may offer a head of stability, but even that has shaky foundations at best because of the recurrent problem of out-of-touch messaging, and a deep untrusting nature that has been cultivated.

Many are fighting for a place in the world that they do not recognise anymore, and instead of changing the tired conversation by addressing systemic issues, not letting key acts expire in congress, and listening to their constituents, the Democrats babied the Republicans and went back on their once strong doctrines about class. The question remains to whether they will change the tide of their own discretion. Picking another senator that has the most magnetism to take the mantle and redistribute what influence they have left, does not quell the overarching problem.

America's self-declaration as the world's police officer and bringer of peace has become an ironic hallmark of its contemporary history, marked by interventions that have often undermined its credibility. The pressing question for Democrats now is whether they can learn from such hazardous shortcomings and take meaningful steps to rebuild trust—both domestically and globally—or if they will persist with a hollow ideology that will only further fuel the growing discontent looming.

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Death By a Thousand Cuts

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Empires rise and fall. From a big enough vantage point, armed with the wisdom of hindsight, we can identify the junctures where empires collapse. However, as someone living through these shifts, the task becomes nearly impossible. It's hard to discern when exactly an empire begins to crumble under its own weight.

Historians argue that, during the timeline of an empire's collapse, no single event marks the precise moment when it ceases to exist. Instead, empires experience a slow death by a thousand cuts—a series of injuries that, each alone, might not be fatal, but collectively weaken the core until it can no longer hold. At these points of infliction, empires limp, trying to muster whatever strength they can to wrestle control of their peripheries.

The Slow Demise of Empires

There are common patterns that precede the collapse of empires:

- **Expansion and Overreach:** Empires often expand aggressively, extending influence and control over vast territories. This expansion is fueled by ambition, but it also strains resources, demanding continuous investment in administration and defense.

- **Inequality and Social Disparity:** As empires grow, sharp economic and social disparities begin to emerge. The divide between the powerful elite and the struggling masses widens, creating unrest.

- **Heavy Reliance on Military Might:** Empires rely heavily on their military to maintain control. Yet, over time, this reliance becomes a burden, with more resources diverted to maintain power rather than to foster growth or stability.

- **Internal Contradictions:** Eventually, contradictions within the system—such as the tension between continued expansion and the ability to manage diverse regions—create vulnerabilities.

Decline Over Generations

The decline of an empire is seldom a sudden collapse. It is more often a slow deterioration over generations—a decline marked by compounding minor failures, systemic mismanagement, and the inability to adapt to evolving challenges. Economically, politically, and socially, the empire begins to lose coherence.

Telltale Signs of Decline

1. **Economic Instability:** Economic crises become more frequent, and the empire struggles to manage them effectively.
2. **Military Overextension:** Resources are drained by excessive military commitments that yield diminishing returns.
3. **Social and Political Divisions:** Internal divisions deepen, and societal conflicts become more pronounced.
4. **Inadequate Crisis Management:** Major crises, such as pandemics or economic downturns, are mishandled, further accelerating decline.

Systemic and Cultural Issues

A sense of exceptionalism often pervades empires, giving rise to the belief that they are immune to the historical patterns of rise and fall. This belief, coupled with unsustainable military and economic policies, fosters complacency and detachment from reality.

Historical Parallels

Trump's recent victory, marking the beginning of his second term, signals a shift in U.S. policy towards economic isolationism. On the surface, these policies might seem like attempts to increase U.S. revenue, but a closer look reveals underlying issues. Trump's economic isolationist policies are symptomatic of a larger malaise—the slow unraveling of the U.S. empire.

Pundits have highlighted the seemingly "irrational" choice by the American public to elect a leader known for his destructive tendencies. Yet, this decision can be explained by the desperation of a public that has faced years of stagnation and unrest. When an empire is stretched too thin, internal unrest is inevitable, sharpening the divide between the "haves" and the "have-nots." The economically and socially marginalized will turn to radical policies and leaders for a fleeting sense of control over their lives.

Historical Echoes: The Roman and British Empires

The symptoms of decline that the U.S. faces today have their parallels in past empires:

- **Roman Empire**: The Roman Empire faced economic strain from maintaining a vast military presence, which drained its resources. To cope, Roman leaders debased the currency, which led to inflation and eroded trust in the economy. Barbarian invasions disrupted trade, isolating the empire economically and contributing to its eventual collapse.
- **British Empire**: The two World Wars drained the British Empire's resources and shifted focus to war efforts over global trade. Protectionist policies after the Great Depression, like the Ottawa Agreements, aimed to protect the domestic economy but stifled international trade. The Suez Crisis of 1956 exposed Britain’s weakened global position, leading to a rapid decolonization process and the empire's contraction.

In both cases, economic isolationism compounded the problems they faced. For Rome, economic instability combined with external threats hastened its collapse. For Britain, protectionist policies and the loss of international influence accelerated its transformation from a global empire to a nation-state in a globalized system.

The U.S. Today

The U.S. under Trump's administration has similarly embraced protectionist measures. Policies such as withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), renegotiating NAFTA, and imposing tariffs on imports are driven by nationalist economic theories. Yet, these measures may end up hurting the U.S. economy more than they benefit it.

The administration's attack on global trade institutions like the WTO, blocking the appointment of new members to its Appellate Body, and refusing to sign free trade statements, signals a departure from the cooperative global economic order that the U.S. once championed.

These moves reflect a desperate attempt to rein in the periphery, as major players like China and the BRICS nations edge towards greater autonomy from U.S. influence. Just as Rome and Britain struggled to maintain their influence over increasingly independent regions, the U.S. faces a similar challenge.

The Beginning of the End?

The gradual unraveling of the U.S. bears a striking resemblance to the late-stage Roman and British Empires. The current world order barely flinched at Trump’s threats of tariff increases, hinting that the U.S.'s influence is no longer what it once was.

The death of an empire is not marked by a single catastrophic event but by a thousand small wounds—wounds that weaken the core, leaving it vulnerable to collapse. The current trajectory of U.S. policy—marked by economic isolationism, internal division, and reliance on military might—could well be the beginning of such a decline. History reminds us that empires fall not from a single strike but from an accumulation of cuts, inflicted over time, until the center cannot hold.

The Role of Institutions and Governance for a New and Changing World

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The Context: Undercurrents and Societal Change

How do we deal with drastic social change and upheaval? In 1944, Karl Polanyi sought to address this question through his work The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time. Today we are observing fundamental changes to the foundations of societies everywhere in the world. It is cliché, but our thoughts need to be restated. Our present problems at the global and national levels are massive, from inequality to climate change, political instability to technological disruption, and geopolitical conflicts and civil strife to distrust towards public institutions and incumbent political elites.

In Malaysia, however, the challenges are not cliché. They are manifold and acute, and of the nature we have never discerned as a nation and society. We are confronting unprecedented conditions of: 1) erosion of a dominant political entity, whereby politics has taken a form beyond fixed two-party or two coalition configurations; 2) inequality that is multi-dimensional and multi-generational in nature; 3) imbalanced development between regions; 4) public monetary constraints; 5) the migration and movement of populations both formal and informal; and 6) increased cultural consciousness heightened by ethnic and religious fault lines.

These 6 conditions that characterized our times emerged at the back of the COVID-19 global pandemic that has badly affected Malaysia's progress as a democratic and developed nation. Malaysia now connotes different things to different people and communities. The idea of Malaysia and what it means is uncertain and contested. As Polanyi insightfully observed during his time and which conditions reflect similarly to ours in the present, in the periods when economic and political foundations are collapsing it is 'peace' and 'freedom' that must be the 'chosen aims of the societies toward which we are moving' and 'institutions' are key as 'institutions' are 'embodiments of human meaning and purpose.'

Issues and Challenges: The Problem of *Development*

As the Malaysian sociologist and public intellectual Rustam Sani reflected on throughout his life, the idea of Malaysia is a project of nation-building. As a society and through its leaders, we cannot just muddle through this process. Economic growth and development remain a key agenda. The structural basis of the Malaysian economy is shifting. The political and economic foundations of Malaysian society are being questioned. Both by external changes in the global arena and internal contradictions within our borders. Charles Dickens summed up such a world aptly: 'It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.' In troubled times, how do we ensure equitable growth and fairness in wealth redistribution across all regions and sectors of society?

The ten poorest districts in Malaysia were highlighted in the Twelfth Malaysian Plan (RMK-12). Of these 10 districts, 8 are located in Sabah – Kota Marudu, Kota Belud, Kudat, Pitas, Beluran, Telupid, Tongod, and Nabawan; 1 one in Sarawak – Pusa; and another in the state of Kelantan – Lojing. In Sabah, of the 8 districts, Tongod recorded the highest incidence of hardcore poverty at 5.9 percent, and Lahad Datu with 2.4 percent. There are approximately 6937 households that are in the hardcore poor category in Sabah as of July 2024.

Over the years, new developments in the understanding of poverty have taken place. Poverty is commonly measured through income levels. The latest Poverty Line Income (PLI) in Malaysia, for instance, is now RM2589 as updated in 2022. However, the latest studies and grounded research have emphasized the need for a multi-dimensional understanding of poverty. Conditions of poverty are closely linked to and shaped by factors such as quality education, access to health services, and decent living standards. These observations are revealed by case studies and grounded research undertaken by the All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia on Sustainable Development Goals or APPGM-SDG.

APPGM-SDG is a bipartisan parliamentary supported by a secretariat anchored by the Society of the Promotion of SDGs, that focuses on the localizing of SDGs at the parliamentary constituency level. The project studies undertaken by the research team in APPGM-SDG affirm and complement previous research by organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Ungku Aziz Centre for Development Studies, University Malaya, and the faculty at the School of Social Sciences at the University Sains Malaysia (USM), and a study undertaken in Permatang Pauh that spanned from 2019 to 2021.

The magnitude of the problem of poverty and its link with other accompanying social, environmental, and governance factors are reinforced by current events such as the ongoing engagement process to gather inputs for the Thirteenth Malaysia Plan (RMK-13, 2026-2030) between the Federal Government through the Ministry of Economy with regional and state governments. In meetings with the Sarawak regional government and Kelantan state government, for instance, the former has expressed how it would need around RM 5.2 billion for education infrastructure, around RM 7.89 billion for health facilities, RM 1.3 billion for the upgrade of electricity supply, and RM 20 billion for the improvements to water supply and coverage.

All in all, the Sarawak government estimated that around RM 100 billion is needed in 5 years to undertake the identified development initiatives. Elsewhere on the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia, the Kelantan government assessed that around RM 500 million is needed to upgrade the sewerage system in the state. To further facilitate the local economy, approximately RM 445 million is required as part of the work to construct a border wall along the border of Kelantan and Thailand. The measures serve to prevent flooding and maintain security.

These engagements and those issues require attention. Poverty cannot be confined only to income levels and job creation. Although both elements are key enablers and indicators to evaluate economic progress. Poverty manifests in different conditions and encompasses various faces.

For many decades development implementation monitoring and impact assessment have focused on the bigger state capitals and urban centers. There are gaps in the delivery of development facilities and services at the rural and semi-urban towns and border territories. The reports on local issues, solution projects, community initiatives, and capacity-building programs carried out by the APPGM-SDG, for example, reveal these problems at the ground level. Many of these issues are also systemic and institutional related.

The Prospects: Returning to the Basics

As the economist and Nobel Prize winner, Joseph Stiglitz, would argue 'You don't create jobs and growth by firing workers and cutting spending.' He would argue further that in order to create more jobs there is a need 'to make long-term investments that America so badly needs in infrastructure, technology and education.' To narrow the gaps between city and town or village, and the urban with the rural, both social policies and effective implementation and monitoring of the programs that arise out of these policies need to focus on the expansion of public services and infrastructure.

Basic goods such as quality and affordable education, accessible and good healthcare, decent living spaces, and environmental management are crucial for the well-being of vulnerable communities. A report by the UNDP in 2024 highlighted how government expenditure in what is perceived as public domain services and goods should not be seen as a cost to the government but as an investment by the government for the future. Many policies and measures have been recommended by academics, policy analysts, public sector officials, and the public policy community.

For our purposes, this paper focuses only on one theme or domain: that of governance reform and public policy innovation. The problems that we confront today can only be addressed if we re-conceptualize and re-constitute our structure of public institutions and methods of governance. Many have highlighted the importance of institutional reforms and modernizing of the civil service. However, there is still a need to critically analyze global trends and model or best approaches to governance. In this process evaluate how such comparisons can contribute to improving and modernizing our approaches to institutional building in the Malaysian context. Without these improvements, any policy, blueprints, or action plans would be futile if they were not executed by government machinery with suitable mechanisms and human capacity. The task is, therefore, to think and put into action up-to-date and innovative ways of public management and administration.

The economist Mariana Mazzucato reminded us in 2021 through her influential work *Mission Economy*, that the 'wicked' problems of our times 'require not just technological, but also social, organizational and political innovations.' The nature of the issues that we encounter in Malaysia today are multi-dimensional and cross-sectoral.

An example of such an issue consists of those pertaining to the environment. Specific concerns such as environmental conservation and flooding cover also economic and social domains in addition to the environmental domain.

The implication of these dynamics, to state briefly, is that issues identification, policy formulation and implementation, and program execution must involve institutionalized intra and inter-ministerial coordination. Such governance structures and processes should not take place only on an ad-hoc basis. In Malaysia, ministries and their focus areas, and the ministerial departments under their purview may perhaps be readjusted to align with the newest problems and trends. One example would be to think of culture in a different way and instead of linking it with tourism, it could perhaps be linked to education and human capital development. In Indonesia, culture is placed under a ministry known as the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. There is a need to bring the conversation between the State and government back to the center of research and policy advocacy. The call of Mazzucato serves as a poignant reminder:

> *"In it, I have argued that tackling grand challenges will only happen if we reimagine government as a prerequisite for restructuring capitalism in a way that is inclusive, sustainable and driven by innovation. First and foremost, this means reinventing government for the twenty-first century - equipping it with the tools, organization and culture it needs to drive a mission-oriented approach. It also means bringing purpose to the core of corporate governance and taking a very broad stakeholder position across the economy. It means changing the relationship between public and private sectors, and between them and civil society, so they all work symbiotically for a common goal. The reason for the emphasis on rethinking government is simple: only government has the capacity to bring about transformation on the scale needed. The relationship between economic actors and civil society shows our problems at their most profound, and this is what we must unravel."*

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Effectiveness of Human Resource Development Training

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Human resource development training is a cornerstone of workforce transformation across ASEAN, enabling individuals and organizations to adapt to economic and technological shifts. Countries like Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines have implemented diverse human resource development frameworks to address skill gaps, promote lifelong learning, and meet industry demands. However, the region also faces shared challenges in ensuring equitable access, sustaining training outcomes, and preparing for Industry 4.0. This article explores policy frameworks, implementation strategies, and outcomes while addressing challenges and opportunities for collaboration to further enhance human resource development effectiveness in ASEAN.

Singapore: SkillsFuture Singapore (SSG)

Launched in 2015, SkillsFuture Singapore (SSG) exemplifies Singapore's commitment to lifelong learning. With initiatives like the SkillsFuture Credit, which provides Singaporeans aged 25 and above with S$500 in training credits and S$4,000 top-up for those aged 40 and above, SSG addresses affordability and accessibility barriers. These measures encourage citizens to pursue skills upgrading aligned with industry needs.

The program's outcomes are impressive, with training participation rates rising from 35% in 2015 to about 50% in 2022. Programs like the SGUnited Skills (SGUS) and SGUnited Pathway Programmes (SGUP-CT) were critical during the COVID-19 pandemic, supporting over 26,000 participants and helping more than half secure employment within six months. These initiatives transitioned into the SkillsFuture Career Transition Programme (SCTP) in 2022, a long-term initiative addressing hiring opportunities in high-demand sectors.

However, challenges persist in bridging the gap between training and job application. Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) face difficulties in selecting relevant courses from over 29,000 options, and manpower shortages often disrupt operations when employees attend long-term training. To address these issues, more work skills-focused programs and flexible delivery formats must be emphasized to ensure that learning translates into real-world impact.

Malaysia: Human Resource Development Corporation (HRD Corp)

The **Human Resource Development Corporation (HRD Corp)** plays a central role in Malaysia's workforce upskilling efforts by managing employer training levies and funding participation in programs. While initiatives like the **Train-the-Trainer (TTT)** program equip trainers with skills in facilitation and evaluation, broader challenges remain.

Many employees attend training primarily to fulfill career promotion requirements rather than out of genuine interest, while companies remain hesitant to invest in training due to concerns over post-training attrition.

Moreover, ESG-focused training programs, though gaining popularity, often fall short of driving actionable organizational strategies. Without a structured follow-up mechanism, such as assisting companies in developing sustainability roadmaps, the impact of training is limited—unless organizations proactively commit to post-training strategies.

To address these challenges, the Malaysian government could introduce additional incentives to encourage companies to implement post-training action plans, particularly in critical areas such as ESG and sustainability. Promoting cross-industry collaboration and establishing shared learning platforms could further enhance the effectiveness and impact of human resource development programs.

Thailand: Skill Development Program

Thailand's Skill Development Program, overseen by the Department of Skill Development (DSD), focuses on enhancing workforce competencies in emerging industries such as electric vehicle (EV) manufacturing, green technologies, and advanced digital automation. The program incentivizes businesses to invest in employee development, fostering public-private partnerships that ensure training remains relevant.

While the program's emphasis on collaboration is a strength, businesses often struggle to measure the return on investment in training. Participants also report difficulties in applying newly learned skills in workplace settings. To maximize effectiveness, Thailand could explore regional collaboration under ASEAN Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs), enabling cross-border trainer exchanges and industry-aligned curricula.

Philippines: Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA)

The Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) is a cornerstone of human resource development in the Philippines, offering competency-based training and national certifications. It emphasizes hands-on learning through on-the-job training, apprenticeships, and collaboration with industries, effectively bridging the gap between classroom theory and practical workplace skills.

However, TESDA faces challenges in reaching underserved areas and addressing emerging skills like digital literacy and green technologies. To address this, TESDA could leverage mobile technology and virtual platforms to scale its community-based training programs. Expanding partnerships with private companies to co-develop curricula in high-growth sectors like AI and renewable energy would also help align training with future demands.

Strengthening Regional Collaboration

While individual countries have made significant strides in human resource development, ASEAN nations could achieve greater impact through regional collaboration. The ASEAN Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs) provide a foundation for aligning certification standards, enabling worker mobility across borders.

Establishing shared digital learning platforms and trainer exchange programs could further enhance skill development and foster regional integration.

For example, Singapore's successful implementation of modular and hybrid learning models can serve as a valuable reference for developing similar approaches in Thailand and the Philippines, helping them create more flexible and accessible training programs. Similarly, Singapore's and Malaysia's growing emphasis on integrating ESG principles into training initiatives highlights opportunities for ASEAN countries to collaborate on developing more sustainability-focused programs across the region. By learning from each other's successes, ASEAN countries can create a unified, future-ready workforce.

Addressing Emerging, In-Demand, and Future Skills

ASEAN countries must ensure their human resource development frameworks not only meet current industry needs but also anticipate future trends. In-demand skills such as data analytics, customer service, and project management are vital for sustaining business operations. Emerging skills in areas like artificial intelligence, green technologies, and cybersecurity are becoming increasingly essential. Future skills related to automation, robotics, and sustainable development will define the next stage of workforce transformation.

Experience-based learning opportunities such as apprenticeships, job shadowing, and project-based work can enhance skill application and relevance. TESDA's collaboration with enterprises for on-the-job training and Singapore's modular course offerings serve as effective models. By incorporating these approaches into national human resource development strategies, ASEAN countries could better prepare their workforces for Industry 4.0.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Despite their differences, ASEAN countries share common challenges in ensuring the real-world applicability of training, addressing urban-rural disparities, and motivating participants to engage meaningfully with programs. Governments must prioritize outcome-oriented frameworks that emphasize measurable skill application in workplaces. To enhance training effectiveness, human resource development departments can consider the following strategies:

- Flexible Delivery Models

To accommodate workforce constraints, training programs should offer hybrid or modular formats. These approaches can reduce operational disruptions, particularly for SMEs, while providing participants with the flexibility to balance learning with job responsibilities. By enabling employees to learn at their own pace or in shorter intervals, modular learning also supports better knowledge retention.

- Technology Integration

Technology should play a central role in human resource development training. From digital learning platforms to virtual reality-based simulations, integrating technology can enhance both accessibility and engagement. This is particularly critical in reaching remote or underserved areas. Technology not only bridges geographical gaps but also enables innovative training methods that align with future skill needs.

- Expanding Rural Access

Investments in infrastructure and mobile training units are essential to bridge urban-rural disparities. For example, TESDA's community-based training programs could be further scaled to ensure nationwide inclusivity. Additionally, leveraging mobile technology for training dissemination can enable workers in rural areas to access the same opportunities as their urban counterparts.

- Fostering Lifelong Learning

Governments should continue to promote lifelong learning as a cultural norm. Incentives such as Malaysia's training levies and Singapore's SkillsFuture Credit are excellent examples of policies that encourage continuous upskilling and reskilling. By embedding lifelong learning into national strategies, countries can ensure that their workforces remain adaptable and future-ready.

Conclusion

Human resource development training across ASEAN demonstrates both diversity and shared priorities, reflecting the region's collective effort to build a resilient and future-ready workforce. By addressing skill gaps, fostering lifelong learning, and leveraging regional collaboration, ASEAN nations can enhance the effectiveness of their human resource development initiatives. These efforts, combined with a focus on emerging and future skills, will prepare the region's workforces for Industry 4.0 and position ASEAN as a global leader in workforce adaptability and innovation.

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To Empower The Youth

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"You're just too young to understand. I know what's best for you." As a child, I heard this phrase countless times—a refrain that dismissed my opinions before they could even take shape. This resistance was not merely personal but systemic, rooted in adultism: a pervasive bias that prioritises adult perspectives while disregarding the voices of young people. Adultism assumes that maturity and experience automatically outweigh the insights of youth, sidelining their potential to contribute meaningfully to decisions about their own lives. Within the context of education, this paternalistic approach denies students the agency they deserve, reinforcing a cycle where they are passive recipients rather than active participants in shaping their futures.
As a result, students are frequently excluded from decision-making processes, with adults developing policies based on assumptions from their reality, rather than the current realities. The impact of adultism on education policy is particularly harmful, as it silences those most directly affected by the policies being implemented. Overcoming this bias requires challenging entrenched power structures and recognising young people as active agents who bring valuable, lived experiences to the table.

The question of whether schools serve to indoctrinate children or provide a collaborative environment where students actively shape their education is critical to the future of learning. In an age of rapid change, it is essential to move away from top-down, one-size-fits-all approaches and embrace a more inclusive model—one that recognises students as valuable partners in their own education. By giving students a voice and a role in decision-making, we not only improve educational outcomes but also prepare them to be proactive citizens and leaders in their communities and beyond.

Malaysia's formal education system spans from preschool to tertiary education. Preschool is offered by both government and private institutions, with Ministry of Education (MoE) preschools accounting for only a quarter of total enrolments. At the primary and secondary levels, the MoE is the largest provider, offering free education to Malaysians, while post-secondary and tertiary education in public institutions is heavily subsidised. In 2020, approximately 7.3 million students were enrolled in formal education, but only 17% pursued tertiary education. Automatic promotion policies reduce the number of students repeating grades, yet the academic, technical, and vocational pathways available are not equitably accessible across urban and rural areas.

Education is the cornerstone of national development, promising social mobility and global competitiveness. However, how can educational policies truly succeed without meaningful input from those most affected by them? As a young person myself, I believe in the necessity of a formal, inclusive national youth advocacy platform to effectively channel student voices in educational reform. Such a collective would bridge the gap between students, policymakers, educators, and NGOs, ensuring that the voices of those directly impacted by educational policies are not only heard but actively shape the system's future.

A successful youth advocacy platform must have a clear, focused mission. It should prioritise critical areas such as curriculum relevance, multilingual integration, equitable access to resources, and teacher quality. These priorities reflect real challenges students face in the classroom, including outdated learning materials, insufficient support for learning in multiple languages, and inconsistent teaching quality across regions. A purposeful mission ensures the platform's efforts are rooted in actionable goals that deliver tangible benefits rather than abstract ideals disconnected from students' realities.

One of the platform's core functions would be to facilitate direct dialogue between students and key stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Education, policymakers, and NGOs. This could be achieved through town halls, interactive policy sessions, and student-led forums that address pressing issues like overcrowded classrooms, limited access to digital resources, and the challenge of learning STEM subjects in English without sufficient support. By formalising these channels of communication, students can provide real-time feedback on existing policies, ensuring that reforms are informed by lived experiences rather than assumptions.

Such a platform would not only empower students by giving them a voice in shaping the education system but also foster a sense of ownership and responsibility for the policies affecting them. Their engagement would provide policymakers with invaluable insights into the practical barriers students face, ensuring that reforms are both relevant and effective. By encouraging collaboration between students, educators, and stakeholders, Malaysia can create an education system that is responsive, inclusive, and transformative.

Advocacy is a powerful tool for nurturing leadership and critical thinking. When students engage in policy discussions and advocacy efforts, they develop skills in collaboration, critical analysis, and navigating complex social and political issues. These skills extend beyond the classroom, shaping informed, capable leaders who are prepared to address challenges in a rapidly changing world. Involving students in decision-making ensures that education becomes a partnership between educators and learners, fostering a culture of collaboration and innovation.

Currently, the absence of formal, accessible platforms for youth engagement in policy discussions and advocacy is a significant barrier. While informal avenues such as school-based student councils and youth groups exist, they often lack the recognition and resources needed to influence policy meaningfully. Without structured mechanisms for advocacy, students have no clear path to voice their concerns, suggest reforms, or participate in decision-making at higher levels. This lack of formal platforms not only marginalises student voices but also prevents the systematic collection and integration of their perspectives into education policy.

Creating such platforms would amplify youth voices and ensure that policy decisions are informed by those directly impacted. These platforms must be inclusive, transparent, and provide meaningful opportunities for youth to collaborate with educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders. By fostering this collaboration, Malaysia can bridge the gap between top-down policy intentions and on-ground realities, paving the way for an education system that is equitable, inclusive, and transformative.

Involving students in decisions about their education is not only about improving the system—it is about preparing them for the future. By cultivating a culture of collaboration, leadership, and innovation, we ensure that students are not merely recipients of knowledge but active contributors to the world around them. In this way, education becomes not an act of indoctrination but a partnership where educators and learners work together to build a brighter future for all.

Students, as the primary beneficiaries of education policies, are uniquely positioned to provide insights into the system's effectiveness and identify gaps. Their feedback on areas such as digital literacy, which is increasingly critical in the global job market, ensures that policies are grounded in reality and remain relevant as society evolves. With the rapid advancement of technology and shifts in the workforce, policies developed without student input risk becoming outdated and ineffective, leaving future generations unprepared for the challenges ahead.

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