



**FOSTERING MULTI-DIMENSIONAL  
MALAYSIA-PAKISTAN  
RELATIONS  
IN THE CONTEXT OF ASEAN**



**Report**

**Keynote Address by**

**H.E. Mohammad Azhar Mazlan, the High  
Commissioner of Malaysia to Pakistan**

**on**

**Fostering Multidimensional Malaysia-Pakistan  
Relations in the Context of ASEAN**

**NUST Institute of Policy Studies (NIPS)**

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## Participants

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- Excellency Mohammad Azhar Mazlan, High Commissioner of Malaysia to Pakistan, Embassy of Malaysia, Pakistan.

### *Opening Remarks*

- Dr. Osman Hasan (TI), Pro-Rector Academics, NUST and Chairperson, NUST Institute of Policy Studies (NIPS).

### *Moderator*

- Dr. Ashfaque Hasan Khan, Director General, NUST Institute of Policy Studies (NIPS).

### *Discussants*

- Excellency Khazar Farhadov, Ambassador of Azerbaijan to Pakistan, Embassy of Azerbaijan, Pakistan.
- Mr. Mohd Syafik Firdaus Bin Hasbullah, Counsellor/Deputy Head of Mission, Embassy of Malaysia, Pakistan.
- Mr. Malik Muhammad Habib Khan, Former Federal Interior Minister for Pakistan.
- Mr. Iftikhar Ullah Babar, Former Secretary, Senate of Pakistan.
- Dr. Shoaib Suddle, One-Man Commission for Minority Rights, Supreme Court of Pakistan and Former Federal Tax Ombudsman.
- Lieutenant General Tahir Mahmud Qazi HI(M), (Retd), Former High Commissioner of Pakistan to Malaysia.
- Lieutenant General Muhammad Masood Aslam HI(M), (Retd), Former Commander 11 Corps.

- Mr. Kamal Uddin Tipu, Former Inspector General Police and Former Chairman, Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority.
- Ambassador Hameed Asghar Kidwai, Former Ambassador of Pakistan and Group Advisor, Hashoo Group.
- Mr. Waseem Haqqie, Former Chairman, Pakistan Automobile Corporation and Former Chief Executive Officer, Pak Suzuki Motors.
- Ambassador Shahid Kiyani, Former Ambassador of Pakistan to Malaysia.
- Ambassador Masood Khalid, Former Ambassador of Pakistan to China.
- Engineer Suleman Najeeb Khan, Convener, Water Resource Development Council (WRDC).
- Dr. Zafar Mahmood, Principal, School of Social Sciences and Humanities, NUST.
- Professor Dr. Rizwan Ashraf, Principal, NUST School of Health Sciences.
- Dr. Amir Azam Khan, Former Principal, NUST School of Chemicals & Materials Engineering.
- Mr. Sabur Ghayur, Chairman, Centre for Labour Advocacy and Dialogue (CLAD).
- Dr. Awais Mehmood Kamboh, Director, Quality Assurance and NUST International Office.
- Mr. Humayun Iqbal Shami, Chairman, Pakistan Economic Forum.

- Mr. Zamir Awan, Former Deputy Director, Chinese Study Center NUST.
- Mr. Iftikhar Mashwani, Editor in Chief, World Tribune.
- Brig Amir Yaqub (Retd), Former Director, NIPS.
- Professor Dr. Muhammad Arshad, Associate Dean, Institute of Environmental Sciences & Engineering, NUST.
- Dr. Sahar Hamid, Head, Department of Behavioural Sciences, School of Social Sciences and Humanities (S3H), NUST.
- Dr. Abdul Salam, Former Chairman, Agricultural Prices Commission.
- Mr. Raja Amer Iqbal, Former President, Rawalpindi Chamber of Commerce & Industry.
- Mr. Afzal Malik, Chief Executive Officer, Universal Systems Engineering and Networks.
- Mr. Ali Shah, Director, NIPS.
- Dr. Muhammad Adil Iqbal, Assistant Professor, NUST Business School.
- Dr Rubina Waseem, Assistant Professor, Center for International Peace and Stability.
- Mr. Sohail Sajid, Turkish Aerospace, National Science and Technology Park.
- Ms Mahwish Khan, Partnerships & Special Initiatives, National Information Technology Board.
- Mr. Nahyan Shahzada, Senior Manager, National Information Technology Board.
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## About the Speaker

His Excellency Dato' Mohammad Azhar Mazlan is an accomplished diplomat with a distinguished career in Malaysia's Foreign Service, marked by various high-level appointments. A graduate of Southwest Texas State University, USA, he entered the Malaysian diplomatic service in 1994, holding pivotal roles both within Malaysia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and in several key international missions.



His ambassadorial career began with his appointment as the Malaysian Ambassador to Mexico from 2015 to 2018. Prior to this, he served as Consul General in Davao City, Philippines, and held diplomatic postings in Rome, Italy, and Suva, Fiji. From 2019 to 2022, he held the post of Undersecretary for the South Asia and Central Asia Division, where he managed strategic relations between Malaysia and these regions.

At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Azhar Mazlan also served as Director of the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR), Deputy Director General at the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT), and held leadership roles in the Department of Policy and Strategic Planning, as well as in divisions focused on West Asia, North Africa, Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

In March 2023, he was appointed Malaysia's High Commissioner to Pakistan, where he continues to strengthen Malaysia's diplomatic and economic relations.

## 1. Executive Summary



The NUST Institute of Policy Studies (NIPS) organized the keynote address by H.E. Muhammad Azhar Mazlan, the High Commissioner of Malaysia to Pakistan, on “Fostering Multidimensional Malaysia-Pakistan Relations in the Context of ASEAN” on Wednesday, August 21, 2024. The keynote was moderated by Dr. Ashfaque Hasan Khan, Director General, NIPS, and attended by former ministers, veteran defense officials and ambassadors, foreign diplomats, academics, experts, researchers, and students.

Dr. Osman Hasan, Pro Rector – Academics, NUST, welcomed the High Commissioner to NUST. In his opening remarks, Pro-Rector underscored that Malaysia-Pakistan higher education cooperation was one of the key drivers of the long-term development of the bilateral relationship.

During his keynote address, the High Commissioner stressed that, characterized by understanding at the highest level, both countries had common positions on key international issues. He said the elevation of the bilateral relationship to the level of strategic partnership in 2019, had provided the comprehensive bilateral cooperation framework that would further strengthen this commonality.

Excellency Mazlan said that Malaysia will host ASEAN Summit 2025 under its chairmanship, opening up new vistas of growth, development, and cooperation in the process. The High Commissioner stressed that Pakistan had immense development potential, adding that Malaysia could help Pakistan deepen cooperation with the ASEAN community of 10 nations, 670 million people, and over \$3 trillion in GDP. The keynote speaker pointed out that ASEAN-Pakistan trade, nearly \$11 billion in 2022, could reach \$20 billion in 2030.

The keynote speaker highlighted that, to enjoy complementary strengths, both Malaysia and Pakistan should work together to promote cooperation in agriculture, education, IT, digital economy, capacity building, textile industry, Halal industry, tourism, green energy, and sustainable development.

The keynote was followed by comments from the audience, highlighting the security, economic, political, social, and cultural aspects of bilateral cooperation.

## **2. Recommendations**

The following recommendations were derived from the keynote address and the discussion session:

### **I. Promote Educational Partnerships**

- Pakistani universities, including NUST, should form partnerships with Malaysian higher educational institutions to foster joint research and academic collaborations. Policies encouraging student exchanges and scholarships for Malaysian students and vice versa will enhance academic standards and cultural diversity in both countries.
- Both nations should co-invest in research initiatives aligned with shared priorities like renewable energy, agriculture, and information technology. Joint projects will promote innovation, knowledge sharing, and technological development.
- Engage in research aligned with national priorities like renewable energy and information technology.
- Collaborating with Malaysian technical institutions can enhance Pakistan's vocational training system, equipping its workforce with skills needed in emerging sectors like manufacturing and IT.

### **II. Enhance Bilateral Trade and Investment**

- Set targets to raise trade from USD 1.8 billion to USD 20-30 billion by 2030.
- Prioritize collaboration in tourism, high-tech industries, and artificial intelligence.
- Create an environment conducive to startups and joint business ventures in innovative technologies.

### **III. Facilitate Skilled Labor Mobility**

- Encourage skilled Pakistani professionals to move to Malaysia and address the recognition of foreign qualifications.

### **IV. Improve Halal Industry Collaboration**

- Pakistan should leverage its potential in the halal economy and tourism. Promoting halal food, cosmetics, and pharmaceuticals can position Pakistan as a key player in the global halal market. Additionally, investing in tourism infrastructure, addressing security concerns, and showcasing its cultural and natural attractions will boost the sector.

### **V. Address Investment Environment Challenges**

- Improve the investment climate in Pakistan by addressing policy inconsistencies and security concerns.
- Strengthen governance and rule of law to attract global investors.

### **VI. Diversify Regional Engagement**

- Pakistan should broaden its educational, economic, and diplomatic ties beyond Malaysia to include China and other ASEAN countries. Expanding engagement with a range of Asian countries will strengthen Pakistan's global position and facilitate regional cooperation.

### **3. Fostering Multidimensional Malaysia – Pakistan Relations in the Context of ASEAN**

**H.E. Ambassador Dato' Mohammad Azhar Mazlan**



#### **ASEAN at 57: A Legacy of Unity and Progress in Southeast Asia**

H. E. Mohammad Azhar Mazlan delivered a comprehensive address starting with the notable history and accomplishments of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Established on August 8, 1967, by five founding countries – Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand – ASEAN marked its 57th anniversary this year. The union has expanded to include five additional members: Brunei, Vietnam, Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Myanmar. Over the past five decades, ASEAN has



achieved significant progress in consensus-building and has successfully navigated challenges such as the diverse linguistic landscape of its member states. For example, Thai, Bahasa Indonesia, Malay, and Tagalog are among the languages spoken in the region. Despite these differences, the member states have managed to foster effective collaboration, focusing on future-oriented goals like regional peace, stability, and the development of their people.

In 2007, the signing of the ASEAN Charter was a pivotal moment, emphasizing the centrality of regional cooperation and underscoring principles such as respect for territorial integrity, sovereignty, non-interference, and the preservation of national identities. The charter also promotes peaceful dispute resolution, upholds human rights and social justice, and supports multilateral trade. Moreover, ASEAN actively encourages regional trade integration and maintains amicable relations with the United Nations and other international organizations, further showcasing its commitment to regional and global cooperation.

### **Malaysia's Chairmanship Agenda: Strengthening Unity and Cooperation in ASEAN**

As Malaysia prepares to assume the chairmanship of ASEAN in the upcoming year, it anticipates a role filled with substantial responsibilities, transcending the ceremonial to address complex global and regional challenges. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Dato Seri His Excellency Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysia has committed to exemplary stewardship of the ASEAN Summit in 2025, with preparations already underway for 257 high-level meetings that will involve ministers, national leaders, and officials. This proactive planning reflects Malaysia's dedication to thorough preparation and inclusive dialogue.

In its capacity as chairman, Malaysia's agenda is to fortify the three fundamental pillars of ASEAN: political and security cooperation, economic integration, and socio-cultural development. The emphasis on these areas aims to enhance regional stability, boost economic growth, and foster cultural understanding among the member states. Through collaborative efforts, Malaysia seeks to leverage ASEAN's extensive network and diverse capabilities to ensure the complete realization of the collective potential of ASEAN and its partners. The approach is geared towards fostering unity and cooperation, with the goal of building a more resilient and prosperous ASEAN community.

### **Lessons from Malaysia: Guiding Pakistan Toward Economic Resilience and Growth**

During the address, the Ambassador highlighted the World Bank's projection of Pakistan potentially ranking among the top 20 largest economies by 2050. However, this ambition rests on Pakistan's adept navigation through multifaceted challenges including economic, political, social, and climate issues. Effective management and strategic long-term planning were emphasized as crucial for building resilience and adaptability.

Furthermore, the Ambassador underscored Malaysia's readiness to collaborate with Pakistan, acknowledging the significant potential of Pakistan's economy. The existing strong historical ties and shared values between the two countries were seen as a foundation for elevating their bilateral relationship.

The Ambassador drew parallels with Malaysia's historical challenges, particularly the 1969 racial riots which were pivotal due to deep-seated economic disparities and social fragmentation. In response to these riots, Malaysia implemented the New Economic Policy (NEP), aimed at restructuring society to foster more

equitable economic opportunities and reduce income disparities. This policy, which focuses on inclusive growth and continuous adjustment, has been a cornerstone of Malaysia's development strategy.

The Ambassador also suggested that Pakistan could draw valuable lessons from Malaysia's approach to managing diversity and strategic planning. By adopting consistent policy frameworks and long-term planning, Pakistan could effectively leverage its potential and address its socio-economic challenges, thus paving the way to achieving its economic goals.

### **Comprehensive and Strategic Diplomatic Relations**

Since establishing bilateral relations in 1957, Malaysia and Pakistan have cultivated a multifaceted partnership spanning politics, economy, defense, and education. This relationship was elevated to a strategic partnership in March 2019, marking a significant deepening of ties between the two nations. A key manifestation of this cooperation is the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between academic and research institutions in both countries, further enhancing the intellectual and strategic bonds between Malaysia and Pakistan.

The signing of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 2007, a first among Muslim-majority countries for both nations, underscored their commitment to enhancing economic ties. Despite these achievements, the relationship harbors significant potential for expansion. As of 2022, Pakistan stands as Malaysia's third-largest trading partner in South Asia, with trade volumes reaching a record USD 1.8 billion.<sup>1</sup> There is substantial room for growth through collaboration and exploring new areas of mutual interest.

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<sup>1</sup> The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2022.

Both countries have valuable lessons to offer each other. Malaysia, for instance, has positioned itself as a leader in computer manufacturing within the region. Conversely, Pakistan, despite its pool of talented programmers and professionals, relies on importing computers. Malaysia's strategic decision to invite Intel to invest in the country two decades ago has fostered a robust semiconductor industry, contributing to global markets from Latin America to Mexico, and facilitating the local production of affordable computers. This development enhances digital literacy and provides accessible technology for students.

### **Shared International Perspectives: Malaysia and Pakistan's Commitment to Palestine and Afghanistan**

Malaysia and Pakistan maintain aligned positions on various international issues, reflecting their shared values and strong diplomatic ties. Both nations have consistently advocated for the Palestinian cause in the Israel-Palestine conflict, with a focus on the rights and well-being of the Palestinian people. Malaysia has demonstrated its commitment to this cause by providing medical treatment for injured Palestinians, further emphasizing its steadfast support for Palestine.

In parallel, both countries share a common stance on Afghanistan. Pakistan, due to its geographical proximity, plays a pivotal role in regional stability, while Malaysia has also prioritized Afghanistan's reintegration into the international community. Both nations have contributed humanitarian aid and initiated business projects to assist Afghanistan's development. Recognizing Afghanistan's strategic importance, Malaysia and Pakistan agree that isolation is not a viable option and are dedicated to supporting the country's reintegration and addressing its challenges as part of the broader Muslim world.

## **Halal Industry: A Key Driver of Growth for Pakistan and Malaysia**

The annual bilateral trade volume between Pakistan and Malaysia has reached a notable peak of USD 1.8 billion. The ambassador highlighted the substantial potential for this figure to increase, suggesting that it could potentially triple or even quadruple. The discussion emphasized key areas for expanding trade, notably including agriculture, the digital economy, green energy, and the halal industry.

The ambassador further emphasized the halal industry as a major growth area, citing its global market worth around USD 3.3 trillion. This sector offers substantial opportunities for Pakistan and Malaysia, with Malaysia's leadership highlighted through its support to Japan during the 2020 Olympics. The ambassador noted that the halal industry fosters inclusivity, appealing to both Muslim and non-Muslim consumers, and spans beyond food into cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, and tourism. During the visit of the Prime Minister of Pakistan, H. E. Muhammad Shahbaz Sharif, to Malaysia, discussions with H. E. Prime Minister Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim revealed the industry's significant potential. To capitalize on these opportunities, the ambassador stressed the need for both nations to adopt practical, sustainable strategies that leverage their combined strengths.

## **Expanding Cooperation: Textile, Defense, and Educational Opportunities Between Malaysia and Pakistan**

The ambassador highlighted the need for sustainable policies that ensure long-term stability and continuity across political changes. Malaysia and Pakistan can both benefit from such consistent approaches.

He said that Pakistan's agricultural sector shows great promise, with potential for global growth. Malaysia's imports from Pakistan such as Basmati rice, mangoes, halal meat, and onions indicate expanding trade opportunities. Investing in Pakistan's agriculture could further enhance development, utilizing its youthful population.

Other areas for collaboration include Malaysia's expertise in technology, rubber, palm oil, and the halal industry. Malaysia's success in these sectors could serve as a model for Pakistan, strengthening economic ties. Additionally, the textile and defense industries offer further cooperation opportunities. Malaysia's role in ASEAN presents Pakistan with investment and educational prospects, exemplified by the 5,000 Pakistani students currently studying in Malaysia.

### **Tourism Sector Development: Malaysia's Support for Pakistan**

Malaysia is eager to partner with Pakistan to develop its tourism sector, recognizing the potential benefits for both nations. Malaysia's diverse attractions and strategic location make it a popular destination and transit hub. Pakistan, with its northern regions and high peaks, has the potential to significant tourism potential. To unlock this, Pakistan needs to address security issues and improve infrastructure. Malaysia is ready to share its expertise to help Pakistan build a vibrant and sustainable tourism industry, enhancing both countries' global tourism profiles.

### **Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Collaboration**

Malaysia and Pakistan are exploring joint ventures in technology and vocational training. Malaysia seeks to share its TVET expertise with Pakistan, but a challenge remains in recognizing foreign qualifications, which impacts Pakistani professionals in Malaysia.

Addressing this is essential for maximizing skilled labor contributions.

Both countries are also focusing on climate action. They face similar climate challenges, such as monsoon floods. Malaysia's commitment to sustainable practices and Pakistan's advances in climate technology highlight the potential for effective collaboration on climate initiatives.

### **ASEAN and Pakistan: Strengthening Cooperation and Economic Potential**

ASEAN values its partnership with Pakistan and appreciates Pakistan's consistent support for the ASEAN Community. This partnership aims to enhance engagement across ASEAN's three pillars: Political-Security, Economic, and Socio-Cultural. Pakistan, represented by Ambassador Haroon in Jakarta, is actively seeking to upgrade from a sectoral to a full dialogue partner, a transition supported by Malaysia.

ASEAN-Pakistan cooperation includes trade, investment, agriculture, education, culture, tourism, and technical collaboration. The ASEAN-Pakistan Free Trade Agreement, effective since 2013, highlights strong economic ties. With ASEAN's 673 million people and Pakistan's 235 million, their combined market, with a GDP over USD 3 trillion, offers significant opportunities. In 2022, trade reached nearly USD 11 billion, with goals to increase to USD 20-30 billion by 2030.<sup>2</sup> Pakistan needs to broaden its market focus from the Middle East and China to ASEAN.

Pakistani investments in Malaysia, particularly in textiles and palm oil, total USD 100-200 million, with potential for growth. Malaysia's

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<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan, 2022.

favorable investment climate, including tax incentives for electronic vehicles, has attracted global companies like Tesla, Microsoft, and Alibaba. Pakistan's freelancers and digital workers can benefit from these opportunities, with Malaysia offering a supportive environment for digital nomads to thrive and contribute to both economies.

### **Future Prospects**

To elevate the ASEAN-Pakistan partnership into a significant economic powerhouse, both parties must maintain strong political will and commitment. Malaysia is particularly focused on deepening its relationship with Pakistan, with a goal to expand trade beyond the current USD 1.8 billion. This ambition is supported by the close relationship between the prime ministers of both countries, with Malaysian Prime Minister Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim scheduled to visit Pakistan in October. This visit aims to explore new avenues for enhancing and expanding bilateral relations.

Both the Malaysian and Pakistani governments are committed to working together to achieve mutual prosperity and social advancement. Their collaboration is expected to yield substantial benefits, transforming the ASEAN-Pakistan relationship into a prominent example of progress and cooperation. By 2050, this partnership could significantly boost economic growth and contribute to regional stability, showcasing their collective strength and commitment to long-term development.



## 4. Discussion

Following the keynote address, a dynamic question-and-answer session unfolded, featuring His Excellency Ambassador Mohammad Azhar Bin Mazlan. The discussion primarily addressed Malaysia-Pakistan bilateral relations and broader ASEAN and development strategies.

In response to questions about the Malaysian Prime Minister's upcoming visit to Pakistan and anticipated agreements, Ambassador Mazlan highlighted the strategic partnership focusing on trade and investment. He emphasized potential collaborations in tourism, high-tech industries, and artificial intelligence, stressing the importance of mutual learning and best practices. He also highlighted Malaysia's interest in attracting skilled Pakistani workers, given Malaysia's current labor dynamics.

On educational partnerships, Ambassador Mazlan noted that Malaysia hosts around 5,000 Pakistani students and highlighted Malaysia's commitment to high educational standards. He also mentioned Malaysia's collaboration with international bodies to enhance its educational sector.

Addressing inquiries about Malaysia's investment in the halal industry, Ambassador Mazlan explained Malaysia's approach to halal certification. He detailed Malaysia's practice of bilateral agreements for certification and rigorous checks to ensure compliance with halal standards, as already implemented with countries like Australia and Brazil.

Regarding ASEAN, Ambassador Mazlan confirmed Malaysia's plans to invite Pakistan for ASEAN engagement in 2025, offering it sectoral dialogue partner status to enhance cooperation. He

clarified that ASEAN is not planning expansion but is focused on addressing internal disparities among member states.

One of the participants asked about Malaysia's economic stability and lessons for Pakistan. In response, Ambassador Mazlan attributed Malaysia's success to consistent yet adaptable policies. He stressed the need for frequent reviews and industry consultations. He also noted that attracting Malaysian investors to Pakistan requires addressing policy inconsistencies and security concerns, while emphasizing Pakistan's potential due to its young population.

## 5. Moderator's Note

**Dr Ashfaque Hasan Khan**



Pakistan possesses considerable potential for growth and development. To unlock this potential, it is essential to address internal challenges and improve governance. Effective management and strategic investments in education and infrastructure are crucial for attracting international investors, including those from Malaysia.

ASEAN countries have achieved remarkable economic progress and high labor productivity through strategic investments in education, healthcare, and governance. Their success demonstrates that focusing on human capital development, maintaining the rule of law, and fostering regional cooperation can drive significant economic benefits.

For Pakistan, these insights are valuable. With a youthful population and significant opportunities for growth, Pakistan should prioritize investments in education and healthcare, enhance governance structures, and create a conducive environment for investment. By adopting these strategies, Pakistan can strengthen its economic position and build more robust relationships with ASEAN and other international partners.

The commitment to applying these lessons and fostering regional cooperation will be key to Pakistan's future success and stability.

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