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**MALAYSIA'S U.S. POLICY UNDER NAJIB:
AMBIVALENCE NO MORE?**

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ABSTRACT*

This paper adopts a neoclassical realist perspective to explain Malaysia's evolving policy towards the United States under Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak. It argues that to the extent that there is a "shift" in Malaysia's U.S. policy under the current leadership, the substance and symbolism in Najib's U.S. policy has been driven and limited by the needs of the ruling elite to strike a balance between a variety of structural imperatives *and* domestic considerations. Structurally, in the face of a fast rising China (with whom Malaysia has come to develop an increasingly productive relation in both economic and diplomatic domains, but with whom it has unresolved territorial issues), the leader of the smaller state is increasingly confronted with the geostrategic need to keep a more balanced relationship with all the major players. This is especially so with the United States, which, under the Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia policy, has demonstrated a renewed and enhanced commitment to engage countries in the Asia-Pacific, including Malaysia. This structural push, however, has been counteracted by the smaller state's desire of not wanting to be entrapped in any big power rivalry, and by its concern about the uncertainties of great power commitments. Domestically, there is a strong economic need to further enhance two-way trade and increase the flow of American capital and technology into Malaysia, deemed vital to Najib's Economic Transformation Program. Perhaps more importantly, there is also a political calculation by the governing elite to capitalize on the increasingly warm and close bilateral ties as a leverage to reduce – if not neutralize – Washington's support for the Anwar Ibrahim-led opposition and civil society movements, which have presented a growing challenge to the ruling BN coalition. This calculation, however, has been counteracted by UMNO's domestic concern of not wanting to appear too closely aligned with America, in order not to alienate the country's Muslim majority voters who have been critical of U.S. policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These structural and domestic determinants together explain Malaysia's evolving policy toward the superpower under the current leadership.

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MALAYSIA'S U.S. POLICY UNDER NAJIB: AMBIVALENCE NO MORE?

INTRODUCTION

This essay is about Malaysia's evolving policy towards the United States under the current leadership, as an instance of a smaller state's foreign policy toward a superpower at a time of structural change in the international system. As a case of asymmetric power relations, Malaysia's policy towards the superpower has been marked by *a continuing ambivalence*, in at least two aspects. First, the smaller state, especially under former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (1981-2003), has viewed the United States as a key economic and security partner, *but* simultaneously a source of political irritation and pain. Second, despite the occasional political friction between the two countries, the smaller state has long maintained close military cooperation with the global superpower, *but* this cooperation has deliberately been kept low profile and persistently maintained as a security partnership – and not a military alliance – over the past few decades.

While these aspects of ambivalence have generally endured into the post-Mahathir era, Malaysia's U.S. policy under the current leadership of Najib Tun Abdul Razak (2009-present) has undergone an observable change, both in style and in substance. Since Najib assumed the premiership in April 2009, Malaysia's policy towards Washington has appeared to be more cooperative than confrontational in gesture, and more pragmatic than rhetorical in tone. This change in posture has been accompanied by a change in policy action, as is evidenced by a series of decisions that have demonstrated Malaysia's greater commitment to enhance its ties with America. In the political realm, Najib has made clear his intent to upgrade Malaysia-U.S. relations as a major component of his foreign policy agenda. He has sought to do this by offering to help the United States forge better ties with the Muslim world, by making a high-profile visit to Washington, having face-to-face meetings with President Barack Obama, appointing his confidant Jamaluddin Jarjis as the ambassador (and later, envoy-at-large) to Washington, as well as collaborating with the superpower on issues ranging from nuclear non-proliferation and human trafficking to Iran, North Korea, and Afghanistan. In the economic domain, the Najib government has stepped up efforts to increase the bilateral trade and investment flows, and decided to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations. In the military and strategic spheres, the Najib administration has solidified Malaysia's long-standing military cooperation with the Americans, not only by upgrading Malaysia's status in the Cobra Gold military exercise from observer to participant, but also by entering into the renewal negotiation for the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), which was first signed in 1994 under Mahathir, and renewed in 2005

under Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (Najib's predecessor, 2003-2009).

Notwithstanding progress in these areas, one could argue that Najib's moves are *more an adjustment than a fundamental shift in Malaysia's U.S. policy*. They do not signal a departure from Malaysia's policy, because none of the actions signify a reduction – let alone a reversal – of the smaller state's long-held ambivalence towards the unipolar power. Indeed, despite Najib's concerted efforts to improve Malaysia's relations with the United States, the fact remains that Putrajaya has continued to view Washington as a potential source of political challenges; and despite Malaysia's greater commitment to strengthen its military ties with the lone superpower, the smaller state has persisted in keeping it as a low-key security partnership, with no intention of transforming it into a full-fledge alliance.

What explains the observable change amid the enduring ambivalence in Malaysia's U.S. policy under Najib? This essay adopts a neoclassical realist perspective, arguing that to the extent that there is a change in Malaysia's U.S. policy under the current leadership, the substance and symbolism in Najib's U.S. policy has been driven and limited by the needs of the ruling elite to strike a balance among a variety of structural imperatives *and* domestic considerations. Structurally, in the face of a fast rising China (with whom Malaysia has come to develop an increasingly productive relation in both economic and diplomatic domains, but with whom it has unresolved territorial issues), the leader of the smaller state is increasingly confronted with the geostrategic need to keep a more balanced relationship with all the major players. This is especially so with the United States, which, under the Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia policy, has demonstrated a renewed and enhanced commitment to engage countries in the Asia-Pacific, including Malaysia. This structural push, however, has been counteracted by the smaller state's desire of not wanting to be entrapped in any big power rivalry, and by its enduring concern about the uncertainties of great power commitments. Domestically, there is a strong economic need to further enhance two-way trade and increase the flow of American capital and technology into Malaysia, deemed vital to Najib's Economic Transformation Program. Perhaps more importantly, there is also a political calculation by the governing elite to capitalize on the increasingly warm and close bilateral ties as a leverage to reduce – if not neutralize – Washington's support for the Anwar Ibrahim-led opposition and civil society movements, which have presented a growing challenge to the ruling BN coalition. This calculation, however, has been counteracted by UMNO's domestic consideration of not wanting to appear too closely aligned with America, in order not to alienate the country's Muslim majority voters who have been critical of U.S. policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is these structural and domestic determinants that together explain Malaysia's evolving policy toward the superpower under the current

leadership.

MALAYSIA'S U.S. POLICY BEFORE NAJIB: AN ENDURING AMBIVALENCE

The essay is structured into three main sections. The first part elucidates the key structural and domestic factors that have contributed to the enduring ambivalence in Malaysia's U.S. policy before 2009, with a particular focus on the Mahathir years. The second part details the "change" in Malaysia's U.S. policy under Najib. The third part explains how and why such a change is only a tactical adjustment and not a fundamental shift, by analyzing the structural and domestic factors that have both motivated and limited the Najib administration's move to develop a closer relationship with Washington. The final and concluding section sums up the key findings of the paper.

Malaysia's relations with the United States prior to Najib had been characterized by a persistent ambivalence. It was ambivalent in that the smaller country's succeeding leaders had mostly held mixed feelings about America, viewing the superpower as a vital component to its wellbeing and security, but at times a source of annoyance and pain. Such an ambivalent outlook was most vividly displayed throughout Mahathir's 22-year tenure, in part because of the leader's more confrontational style, and in part because of the domestic political exigencies of the day. However, some elements of ambivalence – albeit to lesser degrees and over different issues – were also present in Malaysia's perceptions of America well before Mahathir.

From the 1950s through the 1970s, at the height of the Cold War, despite the fact that the United States was a key economic partner of Malaysia, and despite the fact Kuala Lumpur's international positions were on the whole aligned with those of Washington and its Western allies against the backdrop of East-West confrontation, Malaysian leaders were at times frustrated with U.S. policy over primary commodities like tin and rubber, which were the main source of income for the smaller state during the early decades of its independence from Britain.¹ U.S. move to release its strategic stockpiles of rubber and tin, its production of synthetic rubber, and its lack of support for the effort to stabilize the prices of the two commodities, all fuelled the irritation and perception among the Malaysian elite that America was sabotaging the country's economy.² Later, in the 1980s and 1990s, U.S. actions against

¹ See J. Saravanamuttu, *The Dilemma of Independence: Two Decades of Malaysia's Foreign Policy, 1957-1977* (Penang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, 1983).

² The then Malaysian Commerce and Industry Minister Khir Johari openly criticized the United States in November 1961, saying that the rubber disposal plan represented 'economic subversion', and that "No amount of eloquent speeches from American leaders will do us any good when they have broken our rice bowl." Cited in Pamela Sodhy, *The U.S.-Malaysia Nexus: Themes in Superpower-Small States Relations* (Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Strategic and International Studies, 1991), p. 202 and p. 205.

Malaysia's palm oil and textile industries further reinforced such a perception. The scope of irritation expanded during the Mahathir years, which covered political and international issues ranging from Vietnamese boat refugees, human rights, and the "Asian Values" debate, to U.S. policy in the Middle East, its opposition to the East Asian Economic Group (EAEG), its criticism of Mahathir's capital controls, and its support for Anwar and the *Reformasi* movement.³ All these took place at the same time when the bilateral ties had made steady progress on many fronts, including trade, investment, defense, education, cultural, and people-to-people interaction.⁴

That some form of ambivalence towards America had existed under different leaderships suggests that this enduring feature may have less to do with leaders' idiosyncrasies, but more to do with structural and domestic factors. The pages that follow briefly discuss how the continuing ambivalence in Malaysia's U.S. policy is attributable to factors at these two levels.

The Structural Logic

Malaysia-U.S. relationship is, by all accounts, an asymmetric power relationship. This *structural* condition dictates that, regardless of the leaders in the two capitals, the bilateral interactions will always be framed and constrained by a systemic attribute, i.e. an imbalance in importance, attention, and effects. Malaysia used to complain that while it attached much importance to its relationship with America, "this high regard does not appear to be reciprocated."⁵ Brantly Womack and Alice Ba in their respective writings on China-Vietnam and U.S.-Southeast Asia relations observe that, in any set of asymmetric relations, the vast power disparities mean that while the stronger power tends to "worry and think less" about the smaller actors,⁶ the latter often see the power as "a constant preoccupation",⁷ chiefly because they are more vulnerable and more exposed to the actions and *changing* levels of attention (and commitments) of the power. Consequently, the strong will always have the tendency to do what it wants and what it can, based on its own interests and capabilities, with

³ Sodhy, *The U.S.-Malaysia Nexus*; Pamela Sodhy, "U.S.-Malaysian Relations during the Bush Administration: The Political, Economic, and Security Aspects," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 25:3 (2003), pp. 363-386; Bruce Vaughn, *Malaysia: Political Transition and Implications for U.S. Policy*, CRS Report for Congress RL32129 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, October 21, 2003); Chandran Jeshurun, *Malaysia: Fifty Years of Diplomacy 1957-2007* (Kuala Lumpur: The Other Press, 2007).

⁴ Sodhy, *The U.S.-Malaysia Nexus*; see also James Keith, "U.S.-Malaysia Security Relations and East Asian Region," *Speech delivered at Armed Forces Defense College, Kuala Lumpur*, April 26, 2008. James Keith was the U.S. Ambassador to Malaysia from July 2007 until March 2010.

⁵ Pamela Sodhy, "Malaysia and the United States in the 1980s," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 27:10 (October 1987), p. 1075.

⁶ Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁷ Alice Ba, "Systemic Neglect? A Reconsideration of US-Southeast Asia Policy," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 31 (2009), pp. 369-398.

or without taking the weak state's interests into consideration. In this regard, the role of the strong is usually mixed. That is, it may both be a source of problem *and* a source of assistance to the weak, because its actions may hurt the latter on certain existential aspects (political, economic, and/or military fronts), but at the same time they may serve as an indispensable asset for the weak to cope with problems in other areas.⁸

For Malaysia, the effect of such an asymmetric power structure is that the United States *can help and harm its interests much more than any other actor* (with the obvious exception of China). This is not just limited to the economic and development domains, but also extends to political and strategic realms. Malaysia's interactions with America during the early years of independence, as briefly discussed above, indicates that the superpower has been both a source of assistance and a source of trouble – intentional or otherwise – to the smaller country.

This structural issue is complicated by another systemic variable, namely *the inter-great power relations and its associated uncertainties*. A smaller state's relationship with a great power, very often, is not just about its relations with that power, but also about its relations with *all the powers that matter* at a given time. During the Cold War, Malaysia's policy towards America was closely tied to its policy considerations about the communist powers, the Soviet Union and China.⁹ During the post-Cold War era, while Moscow is no longer a major concern for Malaysian policymakers, the China factor has continued to loom large in Malaysia's U.S. policy (especially in light of the growing U.S.-China rivalry in recent years, discussed in the next section). How to position itself vis-à-vis the different powers has always been a matter of high stakes to Malaysia.

The Domestic Logic

For smaller states like Malaysia, exactly *how close* or *how far* a distance should be maintained with which power(s), and over which domains, is determined more by *domestic political calculations* on the part of the ruling elites of the day. This is where structural conditions are filtered through and interact with internal variables. Put differently, structural factors like asymmetric power in and by themselves do not determine what *kind* of relationship a smaller state would choose to maintain with a great power; it is the state elites' *bases of political authority* and *pathways of legitimation* that will prompt the elites to: (a) define the contents and priorities of "national" interests; and then (b) decide how close (or how distant) a relationship the state ought to maintain with a particular power, for the

⁸ Cheng-Chwee Kuik, *Smaller States' Alignment Choices: A Comparative Study of Malaysia and Singapore's Hedging Behavior in the Face of a Rising China* (Ph.D. dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 2010).

⁹ Hari Singh, *Malaysia and the Communist World, 1968-81* (Ph.D. Dissertation, La Trobe University, 1988).

ultimate goal of using that relationship (be it close, distant, and/or confrontational) as a vehicle to enhancing, justifying, and consolidating their authority to rule at home.

In the case of Malaysia's U.S. policy, the kind of ambivalent relationship that the smaller state has developed with the superpower over the past few decades – close and cordial in certain domains, but distant or reserved in other aspects – is essentially a function of the ruling United Malays National Organization (UMNO) elites' efforts *to find a balance between multiple legitimation pathways before multiple domestic audiences* at a given time. These pathways include: enhancing economic performance, championing Muslim causes, protecting Malay/Bumiputera interests, preserving national autonomy, and safeguarding national security. Finding a balance between these pathways is crucial to the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional (National Front, hereafter BN) coalition, in order to project itself before the electorate as a more credible coalition than the opposition forces to perform the governance functions.

Together, these multiple pathways constitute the basis on which the ruling elites would define the priorities of “national” interests, and decide on the preferred approaches to be pursued. These, in turn, determine the ways in which the country would choose to position itself vis-à-vis a key external actor such as the United States.

To the extent that one or more pathways require the state elites to move closer to the superpower in order to maximize economic, security, and/or political gains that are deemed fundamental to preserving and enhancing the elites' domestic authority, the state would make policy moves that embrace the U.S. power. Conversely, to the extent that a certain pathway requires the state elites to keep a distance from or even challenge the U.S. position in order to project a sense of independence, to maintain the maximum degree of maneuverability, and/or to champion a religious cause *before their intended domestic audiences*, the state would confront the hegemon even in the face of asymmetric power (as was seen most clearly in Mahathir's U.S. policy, discussed below).

The *net effect* of these contrasting dynamics is that, the successive leaders of the smaller state have sought to – in one way or another – steer a “balance” by pursuing some form of dualistic approach towards America. This often manifests in an ambivalent policy that is characterized by the coexistence of opposing attitudes and mixed feelings, namely, on the one hand, a strong desire to pursue a close economic and security cooperation, but on the other hand, a cautious attitude to keep the bilateral relations deliberately distant and low-key in certain aspects. While the degree and form of these opposing facets – e.g. a cordial but distant relationship, cooperation amid tensions – have varied under different leaderships, the ambivalent nature of the bilateral relations has largely persisted over time.

Empirical Cases

Two empirical cases, which involve, respectively, Malaysia's first premier Tunku Abdul Rahman (1957-1970) and fourth premier Mahathir, are briefly discussed here to illustrate different leaders' attempts to protect their party's political base as well as to balance between multiple pathways of domestic legitimation – along with certain external factors – had shaped their policy choices towards the United States. These cases are: (a) the Tunku's decision not to join the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in the 1950s; and (b) the continuing contradictions in Mahathir's U.S. policy during the post-Cold War era.

The Tunku's decision not to join SEATO

During the first decade of its independence, Malaya (after 1963, Malaysia) under Tunku's leadership pursued a pro-Western and anti-communist foreign policy. It entered into the Anglo-Malayan Defense Agreement (AMDA), a military alliance with its former colonial power, and maintained close economic ties with the West, including the United States. On the part of America, driven by its larger goal of containing communism during the Cold War, it had made a greater effort to enhance its economic and military ties with the Southeast Asian nation. Nevertheless, despite the close bilateral ties, despite the Tunku government's distinct pro-Western outlook, and despite the fact that the small state was facing by growing communist threats, the Tunku had refused to join SEATO, a multilateral alliance led by America.

The leader's decision was motivated by both external and internal considerations. Externally, SEATO was not popular among many countries in the region. The majority of Malaya's neighbors, namely Indonesia, Burma, Cambodia, and Laos decided not to join the alliance.¹⁰

But the more important reasons were rooted in domestic politics. The Tunku was well aware that, in spite of the clear security and economic benefits that could be gained from a membership in SEATO, there would be a huge political price to pay. Already, his government's AMDA decision was heavily criticized at home, from both the left and the right. According to Johan Saravanamuttu, the AMDA decision was opposed not only by the opposition parties and various trade union leaders, but also by back-benchers and nationalist elements within his own party UMNO, with some attacking the military pact as being "harmful to independent Malaya", and some criticizing it as compromising the new nation's sovereignty and potentially inviting military threats from communist powers.¹¹

¹⁰ Sodhy, *The U.S.-Malaysia Nexus*, p. 215.

¹¹ Saravanamuttu, *The Dilemma of Independence*, p. 23.

Saravanamuttu therefore writes, “In the light of the UMNO and other opposition to AMDA, it is perhaps not at all surprising that Malaya had not joined SEATO.”¹² The British Commissioner-General’s Office observed in May 1957 that “there could be no expectation of Malaya ever joining SEATO” because the Tunku would “encounter stiff opposition from Malay nationalists, the left-wing fringe and even from some of his own followers, many of whom would doubtless be influenced by the attitude of Indonesia and India, who can be expected to try to push Malaya towards the Afro-Asian bloc and away from too close an alignment with the West.”¹³

This observation was shared by U.S. officials. In a telegram to the secretary of state in September 1961, Charles Baldwin, the then U.S. ambassador to Malaya, wrote:

Tunku has repeatedly stated he would offer no objection continuance bases from purposes Commonwealth defense but *could not risk domestic political consequences* involved in identification bases with SEATO. He is convinced such identification *would furnish effective ammunition to opposition elements* which are potentially very dangerous [emphasis added].¹⁴

Pamela Sodhy, a long-time observer of U.S.-Malaysia relations, thus notes that: “Precisely because Malaya wished to avoid appearing to be formally aligning itself with the United States, it refused to join SEATO.”¹⁵ Robert Tilman’s study on the subject reveals that, in 1959, when asked about his refusal to join SEATO, the Tunku replied: “*As the representative of my people, I have to do as they want*, and SEATO is rather unpopular among my people. I don’t know for what reason [italic added].”¹⁶

The leader’s remarks characteristically reflect *the logic of domestic legitimation*. That is, no matter how elitist and how centralized the policy process is, a leader’s decision on key foreign policy issues, more often than not, tends to be a product of the state elites’ attempts to respond – although not necessarily to concede completely – to the prevailing sentiments and demands of the major segments of the society, in order to justify their moral authority, enhance their political relevance, and consolidate their power base to rule.

To Tunku, the decision of not joining SEATO but staying in AMDA was an optimal policy choice for his government, as it served to reduce political risks without creating security problems to the new nation. As AMDA was deemed a sufficient pathway for safeguarding the nation’s security, the leader judged that although non-participation in SEATO would prevent the country from establishing direct defense links with United States,

¹² Johan Saravanamuttu, *Malaysia’s Foreign Policy, The First Fifty Years: Alignment, Neutralism, Islamism* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2010), p. 51.

¹³ Cited in Jeshurun, *Malaysia: Fifty Years of Diplomacy*, pp. 37-38.

¹⁴ Quoted in Sodhy, *The U.S.-Malaysia Nexus*, p. 214.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Cited in Saravanamuttu, *The Dilemma of Independence*, p. 24.

it would nonetheless serve to avoid domestic political backlash, thereby preserving the ruling coalition's domestic authority.

The contradictions in Mahathir's U.S. policy

Throughout Mahathir's 22 years in office, Malaysia's U.S. policy – particularly during the post-Cold War era – had been marked by an enduring contradiction. Some observers have described the policy as “a combination of criticism and cooperation”,¹⁷ while others, like Helen Nesadurai, choose to call it “dualism in relations”.¹⁸ Such policy was characterized on the one hand by a pragmatic desire to cooperate with the superpower on matters related to economy and security, and on the other hand, an inclination to adopt a rhetorically confrontational stance on the political front, which was evidenced by the premier's “blunt and intemperate public remarks” critical of the United States and its policies on a range of bilateral and international issues.¹⁹

Many analysts have attributed such contradiction to Mahathir's idiosyncrasies and his personal dislike of the West, particularly the United States. While leadership is certainly an important variable here, one could argue that the dualistic nature of Mahathir's U.S. policy had its roots in both structural and domestic factors.

Structurally, the realities of power asymmetry compelled Mahathir (and successive leaders of Malaysia) to view relations with the United States as an issue of high-stakes, for the giant could help and harm the country – and its ruling class – much more than any other actors. In this regard, Mahathir's assessments of U.S. roles had never been clear-cut but always mixed, especially during the post-Cold War era when American unipolarity and economic globalization became the most salient feature of the international system. Mahathir's concern was less about the security implications of American preponderance, but more about *the economic and political consequences of U.S. actions that might affect Malaysia, or rather, the ruling elites' authority and power base at home.*

This is where domestic politics must be taken into account in order to make sense of the contradictions in Mahathir's U.S. policy. Viewed from the perspective of the Malaysian leader, the roles of the United States to Malaysia were rather mixed across the three aspects of elite interests, i.e. security, economic, and political realms. In the security domain, the superpower had played a positive role in the smaller state's defense, by virtue of the close

¹⁷ Richard W. Baker, “U.S.-Southeast Asia Relations: Pausing for Politics,” *Comparative Connections* 6:2 (2004), pp. 67-77.

¹⁸ Helen E. S. Nesadurai, *Malaysia and the United States: Rejecting Dominance, Embracing Engagement*, IDSS Working Paper Series no. 72 (Singapore: Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies, 2004), pp. 1-2.

¹⁹ Michael F. Martin, *U.S.-Malaysia Relations: Implications of the 2008 Elections*, CRS Report for Congress (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2008), pp. 24-25; Nesadurai, *Malaysia and the United States*, pp. 1-2.

and long-standing military cooperation between the two countries.²⁰ It had also played a critical role in developing Malaysia's economy, as was evidenced by the robust bilateral trade and investment links. It was during the Mahathir years that the U.S.-Malaysia bilateral trade had grown in leaps and bounds. U.S. became the largest source of investment during this period. Table 1 shows the growth of the bilateral trade from 1990-2003, in terms of export, import, total trade, and balance of payment.

The economic implications of U.S. role, however, were not all positive. Some of the U.S. actions, either intentional or unintentional, were viewed by Malaysian leader as detrimental to the small country's vulnerable economy. For instance, the U.S. subsidies to its textile and apparel industries, as well as its decision to curtail the import of Malaysian palm oil to protect the American soybean industry, had badly affected the Malaysian economy.²¹ Then there was a fear of U.S. unilateralism and "managed trade", following the emergence of the trading blocs in the West.²² For Mahathir's Malaysia, these were not purely economic issues, but a political problem as well. According to the late historian Chandran Jeshurun, Mahathir's own domestic power base was severely threatened in 1987 because of a political crisis that was sparked by the prolonged recession of the mid-1980s, and this "was one of the major factors that motivated much of his new thinking on national economic strategy and how to deal with the emerging realities of a new international economic order."²³ Mahathir's thinking on the subject was vividly articulated in his "Vision 2020" speech in 1991:

Small though we may be we must strive to influence the course of international trade. To grow we have to export. Our domestic market is far too small. It is important to us that free trade is maintained. The trend towards the formation of trading blocs will damage our progress and we must oppose it. We must therefore play our part and not passively accept the dictates of those powerful nations who may not even notice what their decision have done to us. A country without adequate economic defence capabilities and the ability to marshal influence and create coalitions in the international economic arena is an economically defenceless nation and an economically powerless state. This Malaysia cannot afford to be.²⁴

Mahathir's concerns about the West's protectionist and inward-looking policies deepened in the wake of the emerging trading blocs in North America and Europe. At the same time, Australia was also pushing for a larger cooperation framework among the Asia Pacific economies with the United States in it, which eventually took the form of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). In the light of these developments – along with the

²⁰ J.N. Mak, "Malaysian Defense and Security Cooperation," in *Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation: National Interests and Regional Order*, edited by See Seng Tan and Amitav Acharya (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2004).

²¹ Sodhy, "Malaysia and the United States in the 1980s," p. 1075 and p. 1087.

²² Jeshurun, *Malaysia: Fifty Years of Diplomacy*, pp. 219-220.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 164-165.

²⁴ Mahathir Mohamad, "The Way Forward", a working paper presented at the inaugural meeting of the Malaysian Business Council, Kuala Lumpur, February 28, 1991, pp. 2-3.

lack of progress on the Uruguay Round of the GATT (General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs) negotiations – Mahathir resolved that there was a need “to have some type of format whereby the Asian economies would be able to obtain a better deal in whatever ‘new economic order’ the powerful nations of the West constructed.”²⁵

It was against this backdrop that Mahathir mooted the East Asian Economic Group (EAEG) proposal in December 1990, advocating a grouping among the East Asian countries (namely the ASEAN states, China, Japan, and South Korea) in order to better protect these regional economies’ collective interests in the face of rising protectionism in the West. In an interview in April 2010, the Malaysian leader explained: “I felt that there was a need to balance the overwhelming influence of the Western countries, particularly the United States. And I think if the East Asian countries were to work together, then we will be able to balance the influence of the United States. That’s why I suggested the East Asian Economic Group.”²⁶

Mahathir’s EAEG initiative, not surprisingly, was opposed by Washington. The initiative, which was later renamed the East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC), not only excluded the United States, but also posed a challenge to the U.S.-backed APEC as a regional economic grouping. U.S. Secretary of State James Baker III warned that the EAEC idea “would draw a line down the Pacific”,²⁷ while Mahathir criticized the United States for applying double standards. Mahathir said that the United States was involved in creating its own trade bloc, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which, “is clearly a protectionist group unlike the EAEC. NAFTA by definition will favour its members against those who are not. EAEC will leave its members quite free to trade with anyone. Yet the U.S. is against it. It is really a case of double standards, a case of telling East Asia to do what the U.S. tells them and not what the U.S. does.”²⁸

The discord that ensued between Kuala Lumpur and Washington over the EAEC – along with other political issues such as the “Asian values” versus “Western values” debate – coloured the bilateral relations for much of the 1990s. Compounding the matter was the U.S. push for a neoliberal agenda, which was seen by Malaysian elites as a source of challenge to their domestic rule. As observed by Nesadurai, “Malaysia’s tense relations with the U.S. under Clinton were largely due to the latter’s ‘liberal internationalist’ grand strategy when the

²⁵ Jeshurun, *Malaysia: Fifty Years of Diplomacy*, pp. 231-232.

²⁶ Author’s interview with Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, 29 April 2010.

²⁷ Cited in Akiko Fukushima, “Japan’s Perspective on Asian Regionalism,” in *Asia’s New Multilateralism: Cooperation, Competition and the Search for Community*, edited by Michael J. Green and Bates Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 107.

²⁸ Dato’ Seri Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad, Speech at the Foreign Correspondents Club, Hong Kong, 14 October 1992. Available at: <http://www.pmo.gov.my/ucapan/?m=p&p=mahathir&id=1132>

spread of liberal democracy, human rights and open markets was a stated foreign policy goal”, and this directly threatened Malaysia’s developmentalist/ interventionist economic policies and authoritarian political model.²⁹ These were among the pathways through which the UMNO-led government has strived to retain its domestic authority and dominance. While the developmentalist policies allow the ruling elites to deliver economic growth and “to selectively allocate economic opportunities in ways that help meet ethnic equity goals and cement elite coalition”,³⁰ the authoritarianism, populism, and nationalism entailed in the Mahathirist model enabled the ruling elite to ensure political control over the multi-ethnic society.³¹ The Mahathir government thus viewed any external encroachments into these spheres as a threat to its domestic rule.

It was on these grounds that a new – and more intense – round of tensions emerged between Malaysia and the United States in the second half of the 1990s, this time over Mahathir’s use of capital controls during the Asian financial crisis of 1997/98, and his treatment of Anwar Ibrahim, who was Mahathir’s deputy from 1993-1998. Anwar, sacked in September 1998, was later arrested, charged, and imprisoned for sodomy and corruption, charges that Anwar denied. Bilateral ties sank to a new low in November 1998, after U.S. Vice President Al Gore, who stood in for Clinton at the APEC Summit in Kuala Lumpur, openly praised the *Reformasi* protesters as the “brave people of Malaysia” and walked out of a dinner hosted by Mahathir.³² After George W. Bush replaced Clinton as the American president, the Anwar affair had continued to be a factor in U.S.-Malaysia relations. In July 2001, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell reportedly told Malaysian officials that any effort at improving the bilateral ties and arranging a meeting between the two leaders would depend on Malaysian government’s treatment of Anwar and its handling of the opposition.³³

The terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001 provided an opportunity for the improvement of Malaysia-U.S. ties. Mahathir not only quickly moved to condemn the terrorist attacks and send a condolence message to Bush, but he also collaborated with America in the latter’s declared war against terrorism. Analysts like Marvin Ott and Osman Bakar observe that, by staking out a position of common causes with Washington in the global war on terrorism, and by clamping down on religious militants domestically, Mahathir’s political position “rebounded strongly” in the aftermath of

²⁹ Nesadurai, *Malaysia and the United States*, p. 3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³¹ Khoo Boo Teik, *Paradoxes of Mahathirism: An Intellectual Biography of Mahathir Mohamad* (Shah Alam: Oxford University Press, 1995/2001); John Hilley, *Malaysia: Mahathirism, Hegemony and the New Opposition* (London & New York: Zed Books, 2001).

³² Laura Eggertson, “Leaders split by discord at APEC forum: Critical speech by Al Gore sets off diplomatic furor in Malaysia,” *The Toronto Star*, 18 November 1998, p. A14.

³³ Brendan Pereira, “Bush to meet Mahathir on APEC sidelines,” *The Straits Times*, 3 October 2001.

September 11.³⁴ In May 2002, Mahathir made a visit to the White House. In July 2002, during his visit to Kuala Lumpur, Secretary Powell proposed to establish a joint counter-terrorism training center in Malaysia.

The convergence of interests between the two sides, however, proved to be limited and short-lived. The bilateral relations were soon shadowed by U.S. strikes against Afghanistan, and later, its war on Iraq. In October 2001, when queried by Abdul Hadi Awang, the Deputy President of the opposition PAS (The Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party), at the *Dewan Rakyat* (House of Representatives) about Malaysia's stand on Bush's statement that countries not siding with U.S. would be deemed as being with the terrorists, Mahathir responded that "Malaysia could not accept such a statement as it opposed terrorism" and he believed "attacking Afghanistan was not the solution to the problem", before adding that "by opposing terrorism and not siding with the terrorists did not necessarily mean that Malaysia is an American ally for the U.S. strikes against Afghanistan."³⁵

Like the overall pattern of the bilateral relations, Malaysia's cooperation with and participation in the U.S. "war on terror" had similarly appeared to be characterized by contradictions. On the one hand, while Mahathir had come out strongly and early to support America in the wake of the terrorist attacks, and had chosen to collaborate closely on various aspects of U.S. counter-terrorism efforts (such as intelligence sharing and joint operations), he had, on the other hand, openly opposed and criticized U.S. military actions in Afghanistan, and increasingly taken a hostile position towards Washington as the Iraq war loomed.

These seemingly contradictory moves were driven primarily by the leader's calculations to capitalize on his country's ambivalent relations with the superpower for domestic political exigencies. In the immediate aftermath of September 11 attacks, the widespread sympathy for America made it easier for Mahathir to move closer to Washington, in order to benefit from a more productive relationship with the giant that would serve to reverse his political fortune from a low point in the late 1990s. Once this goal was attained, and once the domestic sentiments about U.S. shifted, an adjustment was expected. Osman Bakar's study on the impact of the U.S. war on terror on Malaysian Islam revealed that, the majority of Malaysian Muslims had become more critical of U.S. since the launching of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Citing a survey by the *New Straits Times*, a mainstream local English-medium daily, the study highlighted three major issues that had caused the shift of sentiments from sympathy to hostility among the Muslims. They were: the U.S. backing of

³⁴ Marvin Ott, "U.S.-Southeast Asia Relations: Building for the Long Term," *Comparative Connections* 4:2 (July 2002); Osman Bakar, "The Impact of the American War on Terror on Malaysian Islam," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 16:2 (April 2005), pp. 107-127.

³⁵ "Malaysia will not support U.S. strikes against Afghanistan," *Bernama*, 9 October 2001.

Israel in the latter's continued occupation of Palestine, its invasion of Afghanistan, and its attacks on Iraq. The survey also revealed that in spite of U.S. repeated assurances to the contrary, the global war on terrorism continued "to be seen as a war against Islam and Muslim."³⁶ The study concluded, among other things, that:

... domestic politics was without doubt an important factor influencing Mahathir's decision to oppose the U.S. military operation. *No Malay-Muslim leader concerned about political support from his community could afford to be seen taking even a "neutral" stand in the conflict.* Mahathir was concerned about possible militant reactions from Muslims in his country and the sectarian exploitation of the issue by opposition parties, particularly PAS, that could adversely affect Muslim support for his own party [emphasis added].³⁷

This domestic imperative clearly has endured beyond Mahathir. This was evidenced by his successor Abdullah Badawi's U.S. policy from 2003 until 2009, which was characterized by a continuing ambivalence, albeit in a much softer and gentler tone.³⁸

MALAYSIA'S U.S. POLICY UNDER NAJIB

The earlier section discussed how Malaysia's U.S. policy under different leaderships had been characterized by some degree of ambivalence, and why this enduring feature owed its roots to structural and domestic conditions. This understanding forms the basis for assessing Malaysia's U.S. policy under Prime Minister Najib Razak.

Malaysia's policy towards America has undergone considerable changes since Najib came to power in April 2009. Unlike Mahathir who often adopted a rhetorically confrontational and politically controversial approach towards Washington, Najib's policy has appeared to be more cooperative in tone and more pragmatic in posture.³⁹ Substance wise, Najib's policy has also been implemented in a more comprehensive and balanced way, with marked improvement in the bilateral relations in all the key domains.

The most visible changes and progress are on the political and diplomatic front. The new prime minister – whose assumption of the leadership roughly coincided with that of President Obama – expressed his intent to enhance Malaysia-U.S. relations at the very beginning of his premiership. In June 2009, about two months after taking office, Najib took the opportunity to send the signal when he responded favorably to Obama's speech in Cairo, where the new president spoke of "new beginnings" between America and Muslims worldwide. Acknowledging the U.S. leader's reference to Malaysia as among the

³⁶ Bakar, "The Impact of the American War on Terror on Malaysian Islam," p. 114.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 114-115.

³⁸ See Ruhanie bin Ahmad, *Dasar Luar Malaysia terhadap Amerika Syarikat 1957-2010: Perspektif Realisme Neoklasikal*, M.A. Thesis (Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2011). See also Nesadurai, *Malaysia and the United States*.

³⁹ For a comparison between Malaysia's foreign policy under Najib and Mahathir, see Khadijah Md. Khalid, "Malaysia's Foreign Policy under Najib: A Comparison with Mahathir," *Asian Survey* 51:3 (2011), pp. 429-452.

“progressive and developed Muslim nations”, Najib commended Obama for reaching out to Muslims and offered to help Washington to build better ties with the Muslim world.⁴⁰ Later that month, Najib received a phone call from Obama. The two leaders engaged in a twenty-minute conversation, discussing the global financial crisis, North Korea, Iran, and nuclear non-proliferation.⁴¹

The period that followed saw the Malaysian leader taking steps to establish closer bilateral ties with the United States, largely by collaborating with the superpower on issues of key concern to Washington. In July 2009, Malaysian officials cooperated with U.S. officials to cut off the transfer payments for weapons transactions to Pyongyang. The Najib government also stepped up efforts to combat human trafficking and nuclear non-proliferation. In March 2010, the government launched a five-year National Action Plan against Human Trafficking to curb the problem. The following month, prior to Najib’s trip to America to attend the first Nuclear Security Summit hosted by Obama, the Malaysian Parliament passed the Strategic Trade Bill designed to thwart illicit arms transaction and trafficking of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction.

During the week-long working visit in April 2010, Najib had his first ever meeting with Obama on the sidelines of the nuclear summit. He also engaged key officials of the administration in Washington, and met American business leaders in New York to promote his newly-launched New Economic Model (NEM).⁴² At the bilateral meeting, the premier stated Malaysia’s readiness to assist in medical and reconstruction programs in Afghanistan.⁴³ Najib wrote on his 1Malaysia blog that, during the discussion he agreed to work with the President to strengthen the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and both of them “agreed to strongly emphasise to Iran that it does not have the right to develop nuclear weapons capability and that any nuclear programme should be used for peaceful purposes only.”⁴⁴ The discussion also covered matters of bilateral trade and investment.

Economic consideration clearly was one of the key goals of the premier’s trips. At a briefing for Malaysian journalists after his meeting with Obama, Najib said: “Economic and

⁴⁰ “Offer to help US in building ties with Muslim world,” *New Straits Times*, 12 June 2009, p. 2.

⁴¹ Najib Razak’s 1Malaysia Blog, “An update from Washington, DC,” 13 April 2010. Available at: <http://1malaysia.com.my/zh/blog/an-update-from-washington-dc-2/>

⁴² Nuraina Samad, “Najib set for talks with Obama,” *New Straits Times*, 11 April 2010, p. 12; “Najib arrives in New York on last leg of U.S. visit,” *The Star*, 16 April 2010. Available at: <http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?sec=nation&file=/2010/4/16/nation/20100416102642>

⁴³ Murray Hiebert, Elina Noor, Gregory Poling, and Tham Siew Yean, *From Strength to Empowerment: The Next Generation of U.S.-Malaysia Relations*, A Reprint of the CSIS Southeast Asia Program and ISIS Malaysia (Washington, DC and Kuala Lumpur: Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Institute of Strategic and International Studies, 2012), p. vii; Sheldon Simon, “U.S.-Southeast Asia Relations: Thai Turmoil, President Postpones Indonesia Trip Again,” *Comparative Connections* 12:2 (July 2010), pp. 62-63.

⁴⁴ Najib Razak’s 1Malaysia Blog, “An update from Washington, DC,” 13 April 2010. Available at: <http://1malaysia.com.my/zh/blog/an-update-from-washington-dc-2/>

trade investment will be a key component of our bilateral ties as we move forward because the U.S. is a big source, not only in terms of export market for our manufacturing industry but also a source for new technology such as ICT and biotechnology.” He added that since most fund managers and venture capitalists were based in America, there were “a host of economic opportunities that we can leverage on if we have good bilateral ties with the U.S.”⁴⁵

A week after the Najib-Obama talks, on 20 April 2010, Malaysian Defence Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi told reporters after meeting the U.S. Under Secretary of Defence for Policy Michele Flournoy during a regional defence conference in Kuala Lumpur that, Malaysia was considering sending a military medical team to Afghanistan. The minister said: “This is to show our commitment to achieving a peaceful situation in Afghanistan”, before adding that the plan would be further discussed when he traveled to Washington the following month.⁴⁶ In July 2010, Malaysia started to send non-combatant medical military personnel to Afghanistan.

The closer political ties have brought about more regular visits by leaders and key officials of the two countries. In September 2010, five months after their first meeting, Najib and Obama met again at the second ASEAN-U.S. meeting during the United Nations General Assembly in New York. On 2 November that year, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made a three-day official visit to Malaysia. The visit was the first by a U.S. secretary of state to the country since Warren Christopher in 1995. Clinton’s maiden trip was followed almost immediately by the visit of U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who arrived in Kuala Lumpur on 9 November 2010 after an annual U.S.-Australia meeting in Melbourne.

The momentum of frequent high-level exchanges and meetings was kept up by the two sides the following year. In January 2011, Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Mohyiddin Yassin made a 5-day working visit to Boston and Washington. At the top of his agenda was Malaysia’s proposal for an American-sponsored Peace Corps program to raise the level of English proficiency among Malaysian schoolchildren, an idea first mooted by Najib during his September 2010 meeting with Obama.⁴⁷ The Malaysian and American leaders had face-to-face meetings twice in November 2011, first at the APEC meeting in Honolulu, and then at the East Asia Summit (EAS) in Bali. The same year also witnessed a flow of visits by U.S. senior officials to Malaysia, including the Commander of the U.S. Pacific Command Admiral Robert Willard in June, and the Deputy Secretary of State William Burns in December. At a

⁴⁵ Lim Ai Lee, “Obama congratulates Najib on his stance on weapons of mass destruction,” *The Star*, 13 April 2010. Available at: <http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2010/4/13/nation/20100413152409&sec=nation>

⁴⁶ “Malaysia could send military medics to Afghanistan,” 20 April 2010. Available at: <http://paktribune.com/news/%E2%80%98Malaysia-could-send-military-medics-to-Afghanistan%E2%80%99-226667.html>

⁴⁷ Fauziah Ismail, “Peace Corps idea tops the agenda,” *New Straits Times*, 13 January 2011, p. 4.

roundtable organized by the Institute for Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) in Kuala Lumpur, Deputy Secretary Burns described America's partnership with Malaysia as an important part of U.S. strategy to engage the Asia-Pacific. He remarked: "For decades, this relationship did not realize its potential. We all too often found ourselves on different sides of geopolitical fault lines, and at times, in the past, have struggled to rise above mistrust. And yet today, this relationship has become one of America's most promising in all of Southeast Asia."⁴⁸

In November 2011, just ahead of Najib's departure for APEC and EAS meetings, the heads of two leading think tanks from Kuala Lumpur and Washington, Mahani Zainal Abidin, Chief Executive of ISIS Malaysia, and Ernest Bower, Senior Advisor and Director of the Southeast Asia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), presented policy recommendations to Najib at Malaysia's administrative capital Putrajaya. The think tank representatives described the bilateral relations as "at an all-time high". CSIS' Bower remarked: "These recommendations are timely and designed to help the leaders of our countries seize this historic opportunity to deepen and institutionalize our bilateral ties. We haven't witnessed an opportunity like this for substantial and comprehensive alignment – so we are compelled to act now."⁴⁹

Under Najib, the bilateral relation has developed into a more comprehensive partnership, covering not only a closer political and diplomatic cooperation as discussed, but also deepening economic and security ties.

In the economic realm, the Najib government has worked to increase bilateral trade and investment flows. After his first trip to New York as prime minister in April 2010, Najib was in the city again on 17 May 2011 to attend the "New York Invest Malaysia 2011" held at the New York Stock Exchange, and then on 20 May 2012 to meet with business leaders of various Fortune 500 companies at the prestigious Harvard Club of New York.⁵⁰ For decades, the United States has consistently been Malaysia's largest foreign direct investor. In 2011, even though America was experiencing slower growth, it was still the top foreign investor in Malaysia.⁵¹ Bilateral trade was robust. As indicated in Table 1, total trade between the two

⁴⁸ "The United States, Malaysia, and the Asia-Pacific," Remarks by William J. Burns, the U.S. Deputy Secretary of State, at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, December 15, 2011. Available at:

<http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/texttrans/2011/12/20111215111225su0.7890393.html#axzz25xvpdcp8>

⁴⁹ US, M'sia think tanks give recommendations to Najib," 11 November 2011. Available at:

<http://www.thesundaily.my/news/205090>

⁵⁰ Speech by YAB Dato' Sri Mohd Najib bin Tun Haji Abdul Razak, Prime Minister of Malaysia, at the "New York Invest Malaysia 2011", New York, 17 May 2011. Available at: <http://1malaysia.com.my/speeches/new-york-invest-malaysia-2011/>; "Malaysia on U.S. investors' radar," *New Straits Times*, 21 May 2012.

⁵¹ Rupa Damodaran, "U.S. investment trend in Malaysia to remain strong," *New Straits Times*, 23 August 2011, p. B4.

countries in 2009 was US\$33.68 billion. This figure climbed to US\$39.98 billion and US\$39.99 billion in 2010 and 2011, respectively.

**Table 1: Malaysia-U.S. Trade, 1990-2011
(USD million)**

	Export	Import	Total Trade	Balance of Payment
1990	5,272.0	3,425.1	8,697.1	1,846.9
1991	6,101.5	3,899.8	10,001.3	2,201.7
1992	8,294.1	4,362.8	12,656.9	3,931.3
1993	10,563.0	6,064.4	16,627.4	4,498.6
1994	13,981.6	6,969.1	20,950.7	7,012.5
1995	17,454.9	8,816.1	26,271.0	8,638.8
1996	17,828.8	8,546.3	26,375.1	9,282.5
1997	18,026.8	10,779.9	28,806.7	7,246.9
1998	19,000.0	8,957.0	27,957.0	10,043.0
1999	21,424.5	9,060.0	30,484.5	12,364.5
2000	25,568.3	10,937.4	36,505.7	14,630.9
2001	22,340.3	9,357.7	31,698.0	12,982.6
2002	24,008.9	10,343.6	34,352.5	13,665.3
2003	25,440.2	10,914.1	36,354.3	14,526.1
2004	28,178.9	10,850.2	39,029.1	17,328.7
2005	33,685.2	10,460.8	44,146.0	23,224.3
2006	36,533.1	12,444.0	48,977.1	24,089.1
2007	32,628.5	11,680.2	44,308.7	20,948.3
2008	30,736.1	12,949.5	43,685.6	17,786.6
2009	23,282.6	10,403.3	33,685.9	12,879.3
2010	25,900.3	14,079.8	39,980.1	11,820.5
2011	25,771.8	14,217.9	39,989.7	11,553.9

Sources: *The Statistical Abstract of the United States*, various years from 1990-2011 (Washington D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau).

The negotiations for the proposed Malaysia-U.S. bilateral free trade agreement were put on hold in late 2009, when it became clear that the Obama administration's trade policy had shifted to a regional approach. On 29 July 2010, U.S. Deputy Trade Representative Demetrios Marantis visited Kuala Lumpur to brief Malaysian ministers on the progress of talks for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a U.S.-back regional trade pact.⁵² In October 2010, after more than a year of high-level consultations with the original eight TPP members including the United States, Malaysia announced that it would join the TPP negotiations.⁵³ On 30 May 2012, Prime Minister Najib announced that Malaysia was committed to conclude the TPP negotiations, despite facing tough negotiations over outstanding issues. He added: "There are some tough negotiations that we need to undertake because we do need to take

⁵² Rupa Damodaran, "U.S. eyes spot in Malaysia's top 10 trade partners list," *New Straits Times*, 29 July 2010, p. B10.

⁵³ <http://www.ustr.gov/countries-regions/southeast-asia-pacific/malaysia>

into account our domestic requirements. So does the U.S.”⁵⁴

On the defense and security domains, the Najib government has sought to deepen Malaysia’s long-standing military partnership with the United States. In addition to continuing the existing military cooperation like the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT), Malaysia has moved to upgrade its participation in the “Cobra Gold” multilateral military exercises from an observer to a participant. Defense Minister Zahid Hamidi said in June 2010: “As a participant of the exercise, Malaysia can obtain valuable experience on defence strategy, technology, training and operating sophisticated equipment.”⁵⁵ While it remains a matter of conjecture whether Malaysia’s decision represents a strategic adjustment to the growing tensions in the South China Sea, it is clear that a full participant status in the U.S.-led military endeavor is a strategically high-yield and politically low-cost move for the smaller state. In February 2011, Malaysia took part in the Cobra Gold for the first time as a participant in the command post exercise. More recently, the Malaysian government entered into the renewal negotiation for the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA).

The considerable progress in political, economic and security domains has taken place in tandem with developments in other areas as well. The two governments, for instance, have broadened cooperation in science, technology, entrepreneurship, and education. In November 2010, the U.S. and Malaysia signed a bilateral Memorandum of Understanding on Science and Technology Cooperation.⁵⁶ Prime Minister Najib and President Obama have also made efforts to expand people-to-people exchange programs between Malaysia and the United States. The most notable example of this is the Fulbright English Teaching Assistants (ETA) program, which revived the spirit of the Peace Corps program. Under the program, young American university graduates were assigned to Johor, Pahang and Terengganu for a 10-month teaching stint, following in the footsteps of the American Peace Corps volunteers who were in Malaysia during the 1962-1983 period.⁵⁷ The first group of 50 ETAs arrived in Malaysia in January 2012.

ANALYSIS: A POLICY SHIFT?

The marked progress in Malaysia-U.S. relations under Najib as discussed above has raised an

⁵⁴ “Malaysia wants to be a TPP member,” *New Straits Times*, 31 May 2012. Available at:

http://www.btimes.com.my/Current_News/BTIMES/articles/pmtpp/Article/#ixzz1zT9N2JE1

⁵⁵ Adrian David, “Lifeline for our Nuri copters,” *New Straits Times*, 4 June 2010, p. 15.

⁵⁶ <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2777.htm>

⁵⁷ Paul W. Jones, “Celebrating 50 years of friendship,” *New Straits Times*, 12 January 2012. Paul Jones has been the U.S. Ambassador to Malaysia since September 2010.

important question, i.e. whether, and to what extent, the current leader's U.S. policy represents a shift or departure from his predecessors' policy towards Washington. On one important ground, I contend that Najib's U.S. policy is more a tactical adjustment than a fundamental change in the smaller state's policy towards the superpower.

If there is a policy shift, one would expect to see a change in the *direction* of the country's policy choices on certain core issues, which may take the form of reversing a current policy position, and/or transforming the relationship from one kind to another. Such a change necessarily involves a change in the *perceptions* as well, at least among the key policy elites, if not also among the general public. The empirical facts, however, suggest that Najib's U.S. policy – notwithstanding the positive signals and visible progress in various domains as noted – has thus far denoted only partial and minimal changes on these two aspects (policy direction and elite perceptions).

Specifically, while Najib government's various efforts have indeed contributed to a more balanced relation with Washington (chiefly by significantly improving the bilateral political ties that had long remained a problematic area in the otherwise strong relations), those moves do not represent any reversal of the smaller state's overall policy position. In fact, on a number of *key issues in which a change of policy may incur a cost to the ruling elites (in terms of their authority and capacity to rule at home)*, Najib's position is hardly different from that of his predecessors. Such cost includes both domestic political cost (alienating certain internal audience) and/or foreign policy cost (alienating certain external actors). Two cases can be used to illustrate this: (a) *the manner in which* the Najib government has presented Malaysia's involvement in Afghanistan; and (b) *the extent to which* the Malaysian government has responded to U.S. "re-engagement" with Southeast Asia and its larger pivot to Asia, against the backdrop of the more assertive China.

In the first case, although Najib's decision to deploy 40 military personnel to Afghanistan has been viewed by some as a departure from his predecessors' stance on the issue, this, in fact, does not indicate that Putrajaya has shifted its earlier position of opposing the U.S.-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The decision was merely an adjustment on the part of Malaysia, which was aimed at grasping the opportunity of the "new beginning" to improve its relations with the superpower. It was designed to gain foreign policy benefits, with the bottom line being not incurring political cost to the ruling elites, and hence the manner in which the decision has been presented to domestic audience. From the very beginning, the Malaysian government has categorically emphasized that the deployment was made bilaterally at the invitation of the Afghanistan government (not at the request of other parties), and that the mission is for humanitarian aid and not for combat purposes. While

these facts are true, what the representation does not convey is that there was ever a U.S. factor in the deployment decision.

This should not be a surprise, because doing otherwise will only invite criticism from a big segment of the Malaysian population, who have been critical of the American invasion and occupation of Muslim lands. Hence, omitting the U.S. factor but emphasizing that the purpose of the Malaysian mission is to assist in Afghanistan's reconstruction will not only avoid domestic controversies, but it will also allow the BN government to enhance its moral authority by underscoring its active role in helping out a fellow Muslim country, while making foreign policy gains of improving relations with America and raising the country's international profile. When asked about his rationale for sending the Malaysian troops and whether the decision means that Malaysia recognizes American and its allies' invasion of the country, the Malaysian leader responded: "The move of dispatching the Malaysian Armed Forces medical contingent to Afghanistan does not mean that Malaysia recognize the invasion of Afghanistan by the United States and its allies. To the contrary, the deployment is to help the Afghan people who are the true victims of the war, and to assist our Muslim friends to rebuild their country."⁵⁸

The second case – the extent to which Malaysia has reacted to U.S. pivot to Asia – must not be viewed through just the bilateral prism of Malaysia-U.S. ties, but also through the structural dynamics of how the smaller state chooses to position itself between the great powers. Some analysts have been quick to assert that because of the unresolved territorial disputes in the Spratlys (which involve China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei, and Taiwan), and because of the problematic past between Malaysia and China during the Cold War, Malaysia as the smaller state would have all the reasons to welcome U.S. pivot, and to utilize it as a leverage to check on China. Some opine that it is a matter of time for Putrajaya to do what Manila and Hanoi have been doing in recent years, i.e. moving closer to America militarily in order to counter-balance Beijing.

This is a common but simplistic view. It only tells us part of the story. While it is true that Malaysia – like many if not all of the ASEAN members – has welcomed U.S. renewed engagement with Asia, and has indeed upgraded its security cooperation with Washington, it would be misleading to suggest that Malaysia's warming relations with America is motivated mainly by the China factor. Although the Obama administration's enhanced commitment to engage Malaysia (and other ASEAN states) may have a lot to do with China, the opposite is

⁵⁸ Cited in "Lampiran A (Appendix A): Teks Soalan Jawab dalam Wawancara dengan Dato' Sri Mohd Najib Razak mengenai Dasar Luar Malaysia," in Ruhanie, *Dasar Luar Malaysia terhadap Amerika Syarikat 1957-2010*, p. 140.

not true.⁵⁹ In fact, as shall be explained, there are other more important *domestic* grounds that have driven the Najib government to develop closer and more comprehensive relations with Washington; and this determination does *not* mean that Malaysia is now ready to go so far as to completely align with the superpower for protection and other interests, at the expense of its relations with China. This policy of “balancing” (in the strict sense of the term) is possible only under one scenario, that is, if and when China poses an immediate threat to Malaysia, which leaves the weaker state little choice but to ally with a powerful patron for security protection. This was roughly the situation faced by Malay(si)an leaders in the 1950s and 1960s, but it is no longer the case in the subsequent decades, at least not after 1989.⁶⁰

As such, in the absence of an imminent threat, it is unlikely for any Malaysian leader – Mahathir and Abdullah, and now Najib – to opt for a pure-balancing policy. As I have argued elsewhere, this is so because such a military-based approach is unjustified, for China is merely a security concern, and it is not – at least not yet – an immediate threat that must be confronted by military means. More importantly, the approach is strategically counter-productive, as it could galvanize a potential problem into a present danger. In addition, the approach is also economically unwise, because a military confrontation will only result in the loss of vast commercial benefits that can be tapped from China. This is not merely an economic issue, but a critical political concern, given the growing salience of economic performance as a key source of domestic legitimation for the ruling elite.⁶¹

A pure-balancing approach is also likely to expose Malaysia to a host of structural risks. Like other smaller states in the region, Malaysia realizes that it will constantly be exposed to a variety of risks embedded in the uncertainty in inter-great power relations, particularly between America and the fast rising China. These risks include not only the dangers of “entrapment” (being entrapped into great power conflicts) and “abandonment” (being abandoned by one’s security patron) as long observed by international relations scholars,⁶² but also the hazards of hasty “antagonism” and “subservience”, i.e. the perils of alienating or acting submissively to a giant in a premature or unnecessary manner. Each of these risks is ever present, especially at the time of shifting power configuration and growing power rivalries. This is exactly the situation Malaysia and other smaller states have increasingly found themselves in over the past few years.

⁵⁹ Cheng-Chwee Kuik, Nor Azizan Idris, and Abd Rahim Md Nor, “The China Factor in the U.S. ‘Reengagement’ with Southeast Asia: Drivers and Limits of Converged Hedging,” *Asian Politics and Policy* 4:3 (July 2012).

⁶⁰ Kuik, *Smaller States’ Alignment Choices*, Chapters 5-6.

⁶¹ Kuik Cheng-Chwee, *Malaysia’s China Policy in the Post-Mahathir Era: A Neoclassical Realist Explanation*, RSIS Working Paper No. 244 (Singapore: Rajaratnam School of International Studies, July 2012).

⁶² Glenn H. Snyder, “The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics,” *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (July 1984): 466-468.

Mindful of these systemic risks, Malaysia, like other smaller states, would choose to maintain “equidistance” between the powers, if circumstances allow (e.g. when they are in a low or no threat environment, and when the big powers are not in an all-out conflict). If they have a choice, smaller states would typically attempt to get the best of both worlds while avoiding the dangers of completely tilting toward or away from a major power. In circumstances where they are not compelled to lean on any single side, smaller states would avoid keeping too close or too distant a relationship with *any* of the powers. This is because by fully aligning with a giant, smaller states may risk losing their independence and inviting interference. It may also pay the price of alienating the opposing power and forgoing potential benefits that could have been tapped from that power. On the other hand, keeping too far a distance from a colossus may cost the states the opportunity of securing the benefits that can be used to boost their domestic political standing. It may also arouse distrust from that giant, thus putting the smaller states in an unfavorable position if the power gains preeminence in the future. Maintaining equidistance with all the-powers-that-matter, by contrast, may enable smaller states to preserve their maneuverability and enhance their leverage vis-à-vis the more powerful actors. The term equidistance refers to a state’s effort to avoid choosing sides or completely leaning on one power at the expense of distancing others away. It does not necessarily denote keeping the exact equal distance from each of the big powers in all domains.

Najib’s policy towards the great powers is *a continuation of* – not a departure from – Malaysia’s long-standing policy of equidistance. In June 2010, at the 24th Asia-Pacific Roundtable in Kuala Lumpur, Najib remarked in his keynote speech: “Malaysia and her ASEAN neighbours have always adopted a broad vision when assessing our strategic interests. This is why we place such importance in our relations *with all the major stakeholders of the Asia Pacific region* [emphasis added]”⁶³ In June 2011, at the 10th Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, the Malaysian premier expressed his concerns about the growing possibility of the great power rivalry, and emphasized the importance of multilateralism:

Today, we cannot and we must not return to the old bipolarity of that Cold War, an era of stalemate and stand-off that crippled the world for far too long. We have no choice but to rise to these new challenges together. In the 21st century our economies are so integrated and interdependent, and production processes are so dispersed across borders, that it no longer makes sense for global powers to go to war; they simply have too much to lose. National interests are becoming more and more about collective interests, and our task now is to reflect this in a multilateralism that is both hard-headedly realistic and progressive. Because the way ahead, I have no doubt, must be built on co-operation and

⁶³ Dato’ Seri Mohd Najib bin Tun Haji Abdul Razak, Malaysian Prime Minister, Keynote Address at the 24th Asia-Pacific Roundtable, organized by the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) and the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia, the Sheraton Imperial Kuala Lumpur, 8 June 2010. Available at: http://www.pmo.gov.my/?menu=speech&page=1908&news_id=293&speech_cat=2

not on confrontation; for that, every country, every leader here today, must play their part.

Najib continued, “Today, China is our partner. The United States is also our partner. And this evening I say clearly to our friends from America, from China, Russia, India and beyond: we in ASEAN share your values and your aspirations, and we urge you to work with us. It is not about taking sides. We must replace the old bilateralism of the Cold War not with a new bilateralism, but a multilateralism that can rise to the task ahead.”⁶⁴ An insistence of not taking sides, an emphasis on inclusiveness, a preference for multilateralism, and a proclivity for developing broad-based cooperation with all the key players, together constitute Najib’s big power strategy. Each of these components is in line with the country’s equidistant position. None of them signal a change in policy direction.

In short, notwithstanding Najib’s determination to develop a closer and more comprehensive relationship with Washington, Malaysia under his leadership has not gone so far as to move into a “new” position in which it begins to ally itself with the superpower. Doing so will only expose the smaller state to a range of systemic risks. More importantly, it will also incur domestic costs to the ruling elites, because aligning too closely with Washington is bound to invite fierce domestic criticism, especially from the majority Malay-Muslims who have deep reservations about U.S. policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Moreover, it will also erode Malaysia’s “sacrosanct” independence and sovereignty, which are among the very bases of the UMNO-led coalition government’s domestic moral authority.

Besides these structural and internal factors, there is another important – but often overlooked – domestic reason why Najib’s U.S. policy is more a tactical adjustment than a policy shift. The much improved political relations notwithstanding, the fact remains that Malaysian governing elites *have continued to perceive Washington in an ambivalent light*, seeing it as a source of potential political problems – albeit simultaneously a source of multiple benefits – to their domestic rule. This enduring ambivalent perception, to a large extent, stems from and is reinforced by the U.S. tendency to comment on the UMNO government’s handling of human rights issues, especially judiciary issues related to opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim. The U.S. comments on these issues have long been regarded by Malaysian ruling elites as an interference in the country’s domestic affairs.

This tendency has largely continued after 2009, even though Malaysia-U.S. ties have improved remarkably under Najib. At a press conference in Kuala Lumpur in March 2010, when asked about the “Sodomy II trial” of Anwar, Kurt Campbell, the U.S. Assistant

⁶⁴ Dato’ Seri Najib Tun Razak, Malaysian Prime Minister, Keynote Address at the 10th IISS Asian Security Summit, The Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, 3 June 2011. Available at: <http://www.iiss.org/conferences/the-shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2011/speeches/keynote-address/dato-sri-najib-tun-raza/>

Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific, urged the Malaysian judiciary to pursue “an impartial application of the law.”⁶⁵ In July 2010, Senator James Webb, at a hearing of the Asian Subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, expressed concern over “some disturbing trends in Malaysia, including cases of suppressing religious freedoms, exerting control over the justice system, and quieting dissenting political voices.”⁶⁶ In November that year, visiting U.S. Secretary Hillary Clinton commented at a joint news conference with the Malaysian Foreign Minister Anifah Aman: “It is well known that the United States believes it is important for all aspects of the case to be conducted fairly and transparently and in a way that increases confidence in the rule of law in Malaysia,” before adding that American officials had been in regular contact with Anwar.⁶⁷ More recently, on 22 May 2012, after Anwar and his two party colleagues were charged with violating the Peaceful Assembly Act for their involvement in the “Bersih 3.0” election reform rally in April, U.S. State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said at a news conference in Washington: “We encourage the authorities in Malaysia to ensure that due process is protected and that any trial is conducted in a fair and transparent manner, and we will continue to monitor the case.”⁶⁸

The U.S. expressions of concerns on those issues are not new. They were voiced in a stronger tone, posing a much greater political challenge to the Malaysian government in the 1990s, as noted. But unlike Mahathir who reacted to U.S. interference in a direct and antagonistic way, the Najib government has adopted a different approach. It has attempted to reduce – and perhaps “neutralize” – the political challenge by forging closer ties and fostering deeper collaboration with Washington, particularly on issues that would enhance its value and significance to the superpower. As elaborated above, this has been done on selective issues and in a cautious manner without altering the country’s foreign policy direction, so that its endeavors to win over Washington’s political goodwill will not incur any major costs that may affect its authority to rule at home. It is in this sense that Najib’s U.S. policy represents a tactical adjustment, and not a policy shift.

Thus far, this policy adjustment seems to have yielded certain desired results to the Malaysian ruling elites. A case in point is Secretary Clinton’s November 2010 visit to Kuala Lumpur. During the visit, although the secretary did comment on the Anwar trial, she,

⁶⁵ Catharin Dalpino, “U.S.-Southeast Asia Relations: Denouement and Delay,” *Comparative Connections* 12:1 (April 2010), p. 51.

⁶⁶ Sheldon Simon, “U.S.-Southeast Asia Relations: Growing Enmeshment in Regional Affairs,” *Comparative Connections* 12:3 (October 2010), p. 54.

⁶⁷ Liz Gooch, “As Clinton visits, Malaysia promises fair trial for dissident,” *New York Times*, 3 November 2010, p. A6.

⁶⁸ Liz Gooch, “Malaysia: Opposition leader pleads not guilty in protest trial,” *New York Times*, 22 May 2012, p. A8.

however, chose not to meet personally with the opposite leader. Sheldon Simon, an expert on U.S.-Southeast Asia relations, observes that “out of deference to the sensitivity of the case and improved U.S. relations with Malaysia”, the secretary opted to speak with Anwar only by phone.⁶⁹ Clinton also did not meet Anwar’s wife, the President of Parti Keadilan Rakyat, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, at a dialogue at the International Islamic University on 2 November 2010, reportedly because she did not realize Wan Azizah’s presence at the event.⁷⁰

One caveat must be made here. The assertion that Najib’s U.S. policy has a lot to do with the ruling elite’s desire to reduce Washington’s support for Anwar is to say that domestic political calculation is *a* key motivating factor, but it is *not* to suggest that the Anwar factor is the sole reason driving Najib’s policy. As the preceding analyses demonstrate, the “shift” in Malaysia’s U.S. policy under Najib is a product of *multiple* domestic and structural factors. These range from the economic motives of gaining more U.S. investment and increasing bilateral trade deemed critical for the leader’s Economic Transformation Program, the foreign policy prestige of forging a close partnership with the superpower, and the longer-term strategic consideration of ensuring a more balanced power relationship at a time of structural change. The leader’s positive disposition towards the United States has played a big part as well. Significantly, these “push” factors *have converged with* the “pull” from Washington, where the Obama administration’s desire to improve and strengthen its relations with Malaysia – as part of its larger “re-engagement” with Southeast Asia and “pivot” to Asia strategy – has provided *a structural opening* for Najib (and for that matter, other Southeast Asian leaders) to seize and capitalize on.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Najib’s U.S. policy – despite the substantial progress in the bilateral relations since 2009 – has not departed from Malaysia’s long-held policy position, particularly on issues that may affect the ruling coalition’s domestic authority. Because of concerns about structural risks (the danger of entrapment and abandonment, as well as the hazard of hasty alienation and subservience) and concerns about domestic political consequences, *there is a limit as to how far the Najib government can go* in forging a closer relationship with Washington. Given that any major policy change on issues related to the Muslim world and

⁶⁹ Sheldon Simon, “U.S.-Southeast Asia Relations: Full Court Press,” *Comparative Connections* 12:4 (January 2011).

⁷⁰ Clara Choo, “Clinton called to express concern over Sodomy II, says Anwar,” The Malaysian Insider website, 3 November 2010. Available at: <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/litee/malaysia/article/clinton-called-to-express-concern-over-sodomy-ii-says-anwar/>

those related to Malaysia's relations with other great powers, among others, may run the risk of incurring internal and external costs to BN that outweigh any benefits that can be gained from an even closer partnership with America, the ruling elites clearly do not see it necessary to depart from the country's extant policy stance. This is particularly so at a time when the ruling elites are more preoccupied with the upcoming national elections.

Three theoretical findings can be drawn from the paper. First, while leadership is certainly an important factor that must be taken into account in analyzing a state's foreign policy choice, one should not ignore the structural and domestic variables that may come to frame, motivate, and limit a leader's policy considerations. Second, foreign policy is not just an extension of domestic politics; more specifically, it is an extension of domestic legitimation, namely a process through which state elite seek to justify and enhance their governance capacity *by acting in accordance with the very foundations of their political authority*, within a given external condition at a given time. Third, an asymmetric power relation tends to be an ambivalent relationship. Different sets of structural constraints and domestic conditions tend to prompt different state elites to pursue different combinations of diplomatic, economic, and military statecraft to cope with the consequences of power asymmetry for their own survival. More studies – especially comparative ones – should be carried out to inquire about these issues, in order to better analyze how and why a certain group of similarly-situated states have chosen to respond to the dynamics of power asymmetry the way they have.

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