

U.S.-Malaysia Relations on the Security Front

BY *Pamela Sodhy*

The U.S.-Malaysia bilateral relationship dates back to Malaysia's independence in 1957 and has undergone remarkable transformations in recent years. Since September 11, Malaysia has evolved into a strong security partner, adopting numerous U.S. antiterrorism measures. It is also involved in the United States' "rebalancing" policy through engagement in high-level security meetings and in the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus. Connected to this policy are the U.S.-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations, which Malaysia joined in 2010.

President Barack Obama's historic April 2014 visit to Malaysia, the first by a U.S. president after nearly half a century, buttressed these ties and led to a comprehensive partnership. An important dimension of this partnership is security cooperation, including antiterrorism efforts, military-to-military ties, facilities for U.S. forces, U.S. support for Southeast Asian claimants in the South China Sea disputes, and U.S. humanitarian aid. As the 2015 ASEAN chair, Malaysia faces momentous challenges, such as terrorism and escalating territorial disputes in the South China Sea. This brief considers how the country might attempt to address these challenges and what steps the United States can take to support Malaysia's efforts to achieve goals that are in both nations' interests.

SECURITY CHALLENGES CONFRONTING MALAYSIA AS ASEAN CHAIR

Malaysia joined ASEAN as a founding member in 1967 and gained prominence through chairing the organization in 1977, 1997, and 2005. Two important

regional security challenges that Malaysia must work to address as the 2015 ASEAN chair are the territorial disputes in the South China Sea and the growing threat posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and other terrorist groups.

Territorial disputes. Regarding the South China Sea disputes, Malaysia will manage them diplomatically to safeguard its economic relationship with China and its own interests as a claimant state. As China is its largest trading partner and offers economic incentives, like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Maritime Silk Road, Malaysia will use moderation and mediation, policies it espouses in ASEAN and the UN Security Council (to which the country was elected as a nonpermanent member in 2015 and 2016). Despite some Chinese anger over Malaysian Airlines Flight 370, the two countries' relationship remains cordial, in part due to Malaysia being the first ASEAN nation to normalize relations with China in 1974.

Although Malaysia is less adversely affected than other claimants by China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, as its claims are in the southernmost part of China's nine-dash line, like the United States, Malaysia wants to see tangible steps toward a Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea. Unlike the United States, however, it is against using ASEAN patrols there. While Malaysia has not stated an explicit South China Sea policy, it has declared that its foreign policy is based on pragmatism. As ASEAN chair, it will likely practice quiet diplomacy, working behind the scenes to remind claimants to honor ASEAN's 1971 ZOPFAN policy of Southeast Asia as a "zone of peace, freedom, and neutrality" and to preserve global norms and international law through a legally binding COC.

Terrorism. At the March 2015 ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting, the defense ministers signed a joint declaration to strengthen regional security, especially against threats posed by the ISIS terrorist organization and other militant groups. With over

one hundred militants in Syria, Malaysia is very concerned about the growing threat of regional terrorism, particularly as its militants are mainly youth, including females who go as “comfort women.” As ASEAN chair, Malaysia will call for more cooperation on intelligence, new laws against terrorism, tools to track down returned militants to prevent instability through extremist ideology, and the shutting down of websites recruiting for ISIS.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S.-MALAYSIA COOPERATIVE PARTNERSHIP

U.S.-Malaysia security goals are largely aligned in fighting terrorism and resolving disputes in the South China Sea. Both nations are also united in promoting ASEAN integration, with the United States having a vital stake in the organization’s success as it is the largest investor in ASEAN. Important differences exist, however, that the United States will need to consider.

First, on the South China Sea issue, the United States has a more confrontational approach, with one U.S. Navy official recently suggesting cooperative ASEAN patrols. Malaysia prefers a more amicable approach in order to resolve the disputes peacefully while maintaining friendly ties with both the United States and China. Washington can support Malaysia on this issue by letting it handle the disputes the “ASEAN way” through low-key diplomacy, a method that has helped prevent war between member states for over 48 years. Well aware that it must manage China skillfully, Malaysia will encourage China to honor their 2013 comprehensive strategic partnership and their 2014 joint communiqué on ensuring steady progress of consultations for the conclusion of the COC on the basis of consensus. Malaysia will also monitor China’s actions, especially on land reclamation, appealing to its goodwill against violating the ZOPFAN policy.

Second, it is important to note that Malaysia wants a full partnership, which includes access to its Guantanamo inmates, and that an inbuilt challenge in bilateral ties is religion. Islam is Malaysia’s official religion, which has an impact on the country’s foreign policy (e.g., on issues like the Israel-Palestine conflict). However, cooperation on counterterrorism is unaffected by these differences, as the United States and Malaysia share a common enemy: terrorist groups such as ISIS and offshoots of the former Kumpulan Militan Malaysia. Concrete steps that the United States can take to work with Malaysia include introducing new strategies against cybercrime, uncovering money-laundering activities, and continuing to assist with marine police training.

Finally, the TPP is an important issue in the U.S.-Malaysia relationship because of its connection to the Obama administration’s rebalance toward Asia as an economic pillar of a policy not confined to political goals. Malaysia’s premier, Najib Abdul Razak, favors the TPP, which would foster economic growth and trade, but Malaysian critics are against its secretive negotiations, the power given to multinationals, and the loss of special rights privileges for government firms. The TPP issue has since become more complex and controversial as President Obama has yet to secure congressional approval for the agreement. ♦

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