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CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE PROGRESS TOWARDS MALAYSIA'S DEVELOPMENT: WHERE ARE WE HEADING AFTER THE FIRST DECADE?

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia-China cooperation since normalization in 1974 has proceeded relatively well for the benefit of both countries. The prior role of Malaysia in offering the “hand of friendship” to China has reflected diplomatic co-existence in mutual trade, regional development and people-to-people relations. However, the close relationship between Malaysia and China has also impacted the position of Malaysia in joining China in the “One Belt One Road” (OBOR), which then changed to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The agenda through the BRI, launched in 2013 under the leadership of Xi Jinping, has mapped out new promising relations in various dimensions (economic, financial, technical, etc.) with Malaysia and other countries in Southeast Asia through the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road or commonly known as the Maritime Silk Road (MSR). The BRI in Malaysia has created different patterns of mutual trust on the developmental scape although there has been little discussion

since it was introduced. Therefore, this article intends to fill the gap by providing an analysis on its ongoing cooperation with China since Malaysia signed on to the BRI in 2013. This analysis is placed within the context of the Malaysia-China cooperation before and ongoing projects in BRI, the people-to-people and government-to-government relations in managing the COVID-19 pandemic and the geopolitics of China's manoeuvres in the South China Sea. Much needs to be done to strengthen cooperation through the BRI between China and Malaysia particularly as 2023 marks the first decade of this mega project, given the emerging trust deficit in the ASEAN region with regard to China's strategic goals in her competition with the US for power and influence.

Keywords: Maritime Silk Road, COVID-19, cooperation, government-to-government relations, South China Sea.

INTRODUCTION

Many China watchers and commentators have pushed the view that China's BRI, launched in 2013, is a tool for China to expand its geopolitics and economic interest in the region and the world (Vltchek, 2020). According to Lee and Zukefli (2021), the rise of China is seen to threaten the United States (US) preponderance of power, which has eventually led to the US-China trade war. How far this is true has to be assessed based on hard facts, given that there are so many geopolitical rivalries and conflicts between the US and rising China. For ASEAN member states, including Malaysia, the stand has to be active neutrality and not to be drawn into conflict between the superpowers. As specifically stated in the doctrine of the ASEAN Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality, ASEAN countries have agreed to respect sovereignty and territorial integrity, and avoid activities that threaten the security of the region (Mohamad Pero & Ahmad Apandi, 2018).

China has made a clear assertion or claim in the South China Sea that comes into conflict with littoral states like Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Brunei. Regardless of the framework of cooperation and friendship, there are strains and misunderstandings in the relationship. This happens especially when China makes what is seen as excessive claims over the South China Sea (the 9-dotted line map) and the flying

of its aeroplanes into neighbouring airspace, including its patrol ships into the waters of neighbouring countries. The US has also reacted against the BRI since its establishment, particularly in territorial disputes. On top of that, the US has established the Department of Justice's China Initiative to counter China's BRI (United States Department of Justice [USDJ], 2020). Nevertheless, ASEAN still hopes that China's BRI will continue to facilitate Southeast Asian states for genuine joint development. However, trust deficit issues keep emerging, and if prolonged, it could impact the regional developmental scape of the ASEAN region.

This article attempts to assess developmental scape in Malaysia since its BRI cooperation with China in 2013 as it will mark the first decade by next year, 2023. First it looks into trade and economic relations between Malaysia and China before the BRI. This is followed by a discussion on BRI projects and agreements with Malaysia. Then a discussion on COVID-19 and vaccine diplomacy, as well as the disputes in the South China Sea that has affected sentiments in Malaysia and the region. Following this, the conclusion will examine the question of where we are going from here in terms of the MSR cooperation.

Nevertheless, the trust and pattern of benefiting from historical linkages and memories also pose huge challenges to Malaysia and China in the recent cooperation of the MSR. The charms of the Silk Road history and memories give BRI an advantage in Southeast Asia, namely Malaysia, especially the latter's engagement with China's MSR (Embong, 2018). However, history and memories are not a magic wand; presently more needs to be done to forge closer cooperation in the future between the two countries.

METHODOLOGY

This article adopted a full desk research approach. Desk research refers to secondary data or information that is obtained without the need for fieldwork (Lune & Berg, 2017). According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), secondary data can only be embedded as a supportive method to the mixed methods core design, either primary quantitative or qualitative design. However, unlike Creswell and Creswell, this article illustrates a distinctive way using secondary or

desk research design to present substantive analysis and results. This desk research design covers a comprehensive literature review by examining books, articles, official government reports, media reports, and opinion pieces, especially credible online and highly significant sources. In addition, these sources consulted past theories, selecting and synthesizing the most significant and relevant in assembling the intellectual puzzle (Yin, 2018; Tracy, 2020) related to the BRI in Malaysia.

This kind of data collection method is also suitable for scrutinizing international development studies and distrust issues addressed in the problem statement. With regard to its premise, the whole discussion and analysis of this article will apply the regional development framework to investigate the direction forward of China's New Silk Road in Malaysia.

CHINESE NEW SILK ROAD AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

The Classical Silk Road was coined by Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen, the German explorer and geographer in 1877 (Evers, 2017). The Classical Silk Road consisted of a trade route which served to expand diplomatic relations. The route that was historically initiated by China has not only expanded encompassing the maritime trade route and diplomatic relations but also include the sociocultural, scientific-technical, transportation, tourism and various other forms of cooperation with countries from other continents. This relationship has also made the silk commodity a symbolic tie that began 2000 years ago by land and sea. This glorious historical memory has propelled China to strategize its global partnership through this ancient route into new forms of cooperation.

The New Silk Road concept is focused on two main ideas which are overland and the 21st Century MSR. The Overland Silk Road is a form of cooperation that illustrates the strength of China's economic connections with Europe and the Middle East in efforts to trade, and the concept includes railway train corridor, agro-industry activities, power supply, and significant trade infrastructure (Billington et al., 2014, p. 28). Meanwhile, the MSR is a genuine attempt by China to fix relations between South Asia and Southeast Asia. The difference

between the old and new version of the Chinese Silk Road is that the new version is not merely focused on economic and diplomatic pursuits but involve more complex and comprehensive goals which include technology, socio-economy, politics, finance, security, infrastructure, sociocultural and various other forms of cooperation prospects.

According to Keohane (1984, pp. 6–11), cooperation is the most basic form for any country in this world system. They need each other even though the ‘cooperation’ often fails despite common interests. Thus, cooperation between countries has a definite impact whether it occurs directly or indirectly. The cooperation in this study is examined in terms of the direct impact received by the cooperating countries, be they small, medium-sized powers or superpowers. However, such cooperation has its challenges. Cooperation in China’s MSR consists of regional development incorporating five BRI principles that will be discussed in the next section.

The current New Silk Road initiative has become a bone of contention in the regional geopolitics of ASEAN. The term ‘geopolitics’ has long been used to study the geographical representations, rhetoric, and practices that underpin world politics (Agnew, 2003). The term also evolves with the development of political change and paradigm that consist of territorial disputes, partnerships between developing and advanced states in 21st-century world capitalism, and the influence of people-to-people relations in local politics. Geopolitics essentially refers to the complexities of the politics of international relations but contextualized within a particular geographical space or region. It has an international and even global dimension when superpowers are involved. The latter often try to involve regional partners and reorient the situation to their advantage. Therefore, the geopolitical debate also exemplifies not just a global but also a regional response, particularly by a small state like Malaysia to China’s New Silk Road. The US has criticized the idea as an act of geopolitical domination by China in strategic regions such as Southeast Asia. Hence, the US and its allies have adopted a pivot strategy to Asia, similar to Mackinder’s framework in ‘The Pivot to History’ to counter China’s BRI (Abd Rahman, 2018). This strategy has also been continuously amplified by the US through its pact with Australia, United Kingdom, and Canada (AUKUS) to contain China’s regionalism influence in the South China Sea.

Regionalism is a collaboration process between countries and other actors who cooperate for political interests (Beeson, 2007). In other words, any national actor should hold direct regional cooperation as removing obstacles could facilitate cooperation in designated areas. In addition, regional cooperation is also one of the key concepts in international political relations and economics as the world is facing a tangible multipolar form. Besides, in analyzing the interaction of international theory, regional analysis is often ruled out on the grounds of nationalism even though regional development is of utmost significance (Hurrell, 2005).

The Silk Road Fund has also led to the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2014. In 2015 the bank received a capital injection by China which holds the most significant share among the founding members, around US\$100 billion, and the investment is expected to increase around US\$1.4 trillion (Zhiquan Zhu, 2015). Approval fund projects of mega infrastructures linked to AIIB as financial assistance has gradually increased from 12 projects in 2018 to 29 projects in 2019 and 45 projects in 2020 (AIIB, 2021). However, as of August 2021, it had decreased to 15 projects due to the global pandemic, with an overall total of \$US24.66 billion (AIIB, 2021). In addition, there are two more institutions which have also become financial support providers in this initiative. First is the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) New Development Bank worth US\$100 billion in paid up capital with China committing US\$10 billion (Shang, 2019). Another one is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Development Bank that provides SCO member states to fund demonstrative projects in energy, transport, modern information technology, and to strengthen the local currencies of settlements so as to promote regional economic exchanges (Shang, 2019). However, China's reserves went up to nearly \$US 1 trillion due to colossal money depletions even though AIIB has approved investments worth US\$1.7 billion in 2016, US\$2.5 billion in 2017, and US\$3.3 billion in 2018 (Lasak & Linden, 2019).

The mega projects involve road and railway infrastructure that link Asia and Europe. The starting point is Wuhan to London via Duisburg, and the final stop of the initiative is in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. China has set up the major industrial infrastructure, power plants, oil and gas pipelines, and integrated dry ports along the overland and maritime route; for example, in Khorgos (Kazakhstan) and

Karakoram (Pakistan). It has also linked Yunnan to Singapore through Laos, Thailand and Malaysia, which will eventually link Kunming in Yunnan to the port of Kyaukphyu in Myanmar on the Gulf of Bengal and more (Aubrey, 2020). In addition, a railway is to be added to the oil and gas pipelines, capable of bringing 22 million barrels of oil and 12 billion cubic metres of gas to China each year (Aubrey, 2020).

Overall, the conceptual framework is relevant in this debate as to the idea of the BRI requiring support from other regions, chiefly Southeast Asia. This region is the most significant for China to reconnect its cooperation in maritime trade based on geographical or historical factors and gain political approval (Gungwu, 2019). China's MSR creates dealings across the globe by connecting different places with their specific economic and political attributes (site) that are an essential part of the web of relations because of the importance of their relative geographic locations (situation) in the grand scheme of the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) project (Blanchard & Flint, 2017).

Therefore, there will be different perceptions among countries in Southeast Asia through their cooperation with China, particularly Malaysia. On the one hand, regional cooperation's primary goal in the MSR idea can be addressed with the following question. Why does China expect participating countries to achieve initiatives and be optimistic and pragmatic on historical values in achieving regional partnerships, regional interests, regional risk burdens and regional awareness? Nevertheless, this process also requires emphasis on reassessing national interest – for our purposes, Malaysia.

RESULTS

Before and Ongoing BRI in Malaysia: Development Pattern on Trade and Investment

Before Malaysia entered into a number of agreements under BRI in 2013 and after, investment between the two countries has been quite balanced with China unveiling its openness towards Malaysia's export and trade. Malaysia and China have already established trade relations even before normalizing diplomatic relations with China in 1974 and China's 'open door' policy in 1979. Table 1 illustrates the export and import of China with Malaysia from 1957 to 1971.

Table 1

China's Trade with Malaysia from 1957–1971(Value in US\$10 000)
(#including Singapore)

Year	Import	Export	Total
1957	#3,107	# 2, 887	5, 994
1958	386	1, 384	1, 770
1959	79	595	674
1960	62	696	758
1961	60	856	916
1962	12	513	525
1963	1	1, 296	1, 297
1964	6	1, 916	1, 922
1965	40	2, 158	2, 198
1966	41	2, 321	2, 362
1967	38	2, 821	2, 859
1968	93	2, 982	3, 075
1969	64	3, 166	3, 230
1970	22	3, 262	3, 284
1971	108	2, 672	2, 780

Source: Dening (1999, p. 96).

After the normalization in 1974, trade had increased gradually. However, in 2001, with China being a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), Malaysia-China trade grew rapidly. From 2001 until 2013, as shown in Table 2, while Malaysia continued to trade with its traditional partners—the US, Japan and South Korea, Malaysia-China trade showed a tremendous achievement. Nevertheless, as shown in Table 3, there was an imbalance in the trade relations which favoured China (Blanchard, 2019).

Table 2

Malaysia Trade According to the Destination of Selected Countries (2001–2011) (RM million)

State/Year	China	US	Japan	South Korea
2001	14, 683	67, 618	44, 393	11, 107
2002	20, 008	74, 131	39, 707	11, 866
2003	25, 791	77, 872	42, 507	11, 555
2004	32, 286	90, 254	48, 499	16, 948
2005	35, 153	105, 238	50, 509	18, 329
2006	42, 620	110, 135	52, 475	21, 388
2007	53, 038	94, 485	55, 648	23, 165
2008	63, 435	82, 700	70, 688	26, 956
2009	67, 359	60, 811	53, 345	20, 318
2010	80, 105	60, 951	66, 763	24, 300
2011	91, 551	57, 653	81, 368	26, 252
2012	88, 793	60, 791	83, 401	25, 368
2013	97, 043	58, 055	79, 197	26, 199

Source: Economic Planning Unit Malaysia, 2017.

Table 3

Malaysia-China Trade, 2010–2017 (amount in US\$ billion)

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Exports (FOB) to China	24.91	29.95	28.78	30.71	28.20	25.99	23.72	29.40
Imports (CIF) from China	20.68	24.75	29.76	33.74	35.33	33.16	34.29	38.31
China Trade balance	4.23	5.21	-.98	-3.03	-7.12	-7.17	-10.57	-8.91

Source: Blanchard (2019).

Before the BRI launch in 2013, Malaysia's export to China had expanded rapidly. For example, export from Malaysia in 2010 recorded US\$24.91 billion compared to China, US\$20.68 billion. In the past decades, China's increasing demand had enabled Malaysia to expand its export of manufactured goods to this enormous market at an impressive rate (Hong et al., 2019). Malaysia also increased

its investments in China. However, the situation changed once China shifted to its grand strategy policy under the BRI in 2013. Since then, trade balance between Malaysia-China has also affected Malaysia's export value, with the balance of trade in favour of China. Nevertheless, Malaysia's annual export to China had increased from 2018 to 2021 at around 8.1 percent, as of November 2021 (Kana, 2022). The total trade volume between Malaysia-China had reached US\$176.8 billion in 2021 with a year-on-year growth of 34.5 percent amid the battle against Covid-19 (Ouyang, 2022). Growth is also expected to increase in 2022 and 2023 due to three key agreements signed for 2019–2023 between the Malaysian government and China state-owned companies on palm oil, and revived projects, the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) and Bandar Malaysia.

BRI Projects and Developmental Perception in Malaysia

The Malaysia-China cooperation through BRI under the MSR agenda involves mega projects such as railway links, ports, energy, advanced technology, trade and financial assistance. On 4th October 2013, Xi Jinping visited Malaysia to attend the Malaysia-China Economic Conference Summit at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre. In his speech, Xi Jinping stressed the mutual relations between the two countries, social infrastructure and human relations. Xi Jinping emphasized a win-win cooperation in expanding and deepening friendly and beneficial Malaysia-China relations. In the same year, Malaysia under the then Prime Minister Mohd Najib Abdul Razak, was convinced that the MSRI would enhance economic development and provide employment. Malaysia also welcomed the idea of the Regional Cooperation and Economic Partnership (RCEP) by Xi Jinping during his visit to Malaysia in 2013 which would be a part of the BRI development in Malaysia. This cooperation including RCEP commenced in 2013 to support mega projects on connectivity. RCEP involves 10 Southeast Asian countries including Malaysia and six free trade agreement (FTA) partners: China, India, Japan, Korea, Australia, and New Zealand (RCEP, 2021). The building of the mega projects for connectivity, as well as property development, would attract investors. Furthermore, Malaysia needs technological support and scientific expertise from China in creating a hub for socio-cultural exchanges between both countries in the development of BRI.

On 21st August 2015, Malaysia became the 51st signatory of the AIIB Article Agreement among 57 countries, with US\$109.5 million

total shares (AIIB, 2015). The established network from the business-to-business dimension has blossomed people-to-people relations through fundamental support by way of the close friendship between government-to-government. Eventually, in 2016, Malaysia and China signed a total of 14 agreements. According to Abd Rahman (2018) and Cassey (2016), the agreements are as follows:

1. Engineering acquisition, construction and operation agreement between Malaysia Rail Link Sdn Bhd and *China Communications Construction Company Limited* (CCCC) and China Communications Construction Company (M) Sdn Bhd (CCCCM).
2. Memorandum of agreement for investment, development and construction of the *Melaka Gateway* Project between KAJ Development and Power *China*.
3. Master policy agreement between Bandar Malaysia Sdn Bhd and *Greenland Holdings Group Overseas Investment Company Limited* for proposed land purchase and development in Bandar Malaysia.
4. Master policy agreement between Selat PD Sdn Bhd and CCCC *Dredging (Group)* Co Ltd.
5. Framework cooperation agreement between the Sarawak State Government, *Hebei Xinwuan Steel Group* and MCC Overseas *Limited* for proposed steel mill development in Sarawak.
6. Memorandum of agreement between KAJ Development Sdn Bhd, Power *China*, *Shenzhen Yantian Port* and *Rizhao Port* for partnership cooperation port development of Melaka Gateway.
7. Master policy agreement for the financial scheme of *Bandar Malaysia* between IWH CREC Sdn Bhd and ICBC.
8. Memorandum of understanding between ECERDC and *Wuxi Suntech Power Co. Ltd* for the production of crystal silicon solar cells and modules at Kuantan Malaysia-China Industrial Park.
9. Memorandum of agreement between BHS *Industries Berhad* and *China Nuclear Huaxing*

- Construction Co. Ltd.* for green technology park in Pekan, Pahang, Malaysia.
10. *China Construction Bank* (Malaysia) Berhad has been granted a banking license by the Minister of Finance under the Financial Services Act 2013. With an initial paid-up capital of US\$200 million, *China Construction Bank* will be able to provide financing to support Malaysia's infrastructure development.
 11. Memorandum of understanding between *Yanming Resources Sdn Bhd* and *Fuzhou Xin Zibu Culture Communication Co. Ltd* for the growth and development of the bird's nest market in China.
 12. Memorandum of understanding between Malaysia Foreign Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE) and Alibaba.com
 13. Research and development cooperation agreement between *Royal Bird's Nest, Walet Company International Private Limited Company* and *Peking University* for standardization of edible bird's nest extracts and medical substances for pharmaceutical drug discovery.
 14. Memorandum of understanding between *Aladdin Group Sdn Bhd* and *Suzhou Lian Cheng Yihao Information Technology Co. Ltd.*

Therefore, the positive position exhibited by Malaysia to sign the aforementioned agreements was also influenced by the reality of China's rapid economic growth and expansion of its GDP. The warm welcome and appreciation by the Malaysian people of the Malaysia-China relationship was evident in a 2016 survey. 70 percent of the respondents had a favourable impression of China, and only 22 percent were unfavourable (Yeoh, 2018). Meanwhile, 67% of the respondents claimed that Malaysia-China relations held a bright future. However, 22 percent felt there was quiet friction developing in the relationship between the two countries (Yeoh, 2018). Conversely, there is still concern on the Malaysian side regarding the trade and investment imbalance that has continued since 2013. The balance of trade was in favour of China throughout 2014 (-US\$7.12 billion), 2015 (-US\$7.17 billion), 2016 (-US\$10.57 billion), and 2017 (-US\$8.91 billion) (Blanchard, 2019).

China's GDP in 2019 was 74.7 times bigger than her GDP 40 years ago i.e., in 1980 (World Bank, 2021). With such bountiful wealth accumulated through her rapid economic growth, China is in a strong position to invest overseas and work more closely with small states, like Malaysia, through the MSR to facilitate regional development. However, the cooperation in 2017 also impacted negatively on the development of Malaysia which involved issues in negotiation on controversial projects with China resulting in public disapproval due to the lack of autonomy exercised by the Malaysian government in dealing with China.

Based on the above analysis, three things can be seen in Malaysia and China's efforts to remain positive but selective in this cooperation. For a start, the financial infrastructure involving financial assistance from AIIB and China Bank for investment in technical infrastructure. Besides, the social infrastructure which includes the relationship between the people of the two countries in terms of culture, history, moral values, geography, migration, education, and others. Furthermore, the technical, infrastructural cluster strategies combining ports, railways, technology expertise assistance, gas pipelines, industrial estates, and condominiums (Evers & Menkhoff, 2018). However, in more recent developments, China faces a difficult mission to gain trust predominantly from Malaysia for reasons specifically related to the changing political landscape, scandals like 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), disproportionate geopolitical and regional developments in territorial waters and China's stance on humanitarian and health issues. Moreover, it is observed that Xi Jinping has not indicated any change of policy position on the disputes in the South China Sea (Ahmad & Mohd Sani, 2017; Ngeow, 2019).

A revisit of Malaysia-China relations under Mahathir Mohamad during his first premiership (1982–2003) showed a more East-leaning attitude towards foreign policy whereby the West was placed as the last option. During the period, China received particularly harsh criticism from the West. Mahathir Mohamad took a stand by explaining that the real threat was from the West rather than China (Yuanzhi, 2015, p. 46). This positive outlook prevailed when Abdullah Ahmad Badawi assumed leadership (2003–2009) and went to China on an official visit to celebrate 30 years of diplomatic friendship between both countries (Hua, 2015, p. 23). This visit was symbolic of the continuation of normalizing relations that was established and had remained close

until Mohd Najib Abd Razak took over the helm (2009–2018). The latter's approach appeared different in terms of political and economic cooperation compared to his predecessors. In the Malaysia-China relationship during Mohd Najib Abdul Razak's tenure, the two countries were willing to promote intense intergovernmental, business, and people-to-people relations.

The close relationship with China had also attracted criticism from various parties over Mohd Najib Abdul Razak's foreign policy strategy, which was regarded as influenced by political and personal interests, particularly in relation to the 1MDB scandal (Malhi, 2018). However, Pakatan Harapan (PH) succeeded in overthrowing Barisan Nasional in the 14th general election on 9 May 2018. Fortunately, the direction in diplomacy with China continued under the PH government and was maintained when the Perikatan Nasional (PN) government took over.

Under PH, several deals made during Najib's period were reviewed, namely the ECRL. However, Mahathir Mohamad reciprocated China's friendship and cooperation in the initiative through renegotiation. This was realized when Mahathir Mohamad assigned Daim Zainuddin, former Chairman of the Council of Eminent Persons during the administration under PH, to renegotiate with China. Daim using his strong connections with key personalities in China and Hong Kong successfully revived the ECRL (operated by Malaysia Rail Link Sdn. Bhd. – MRL) phase 1 and phase 2 deal under a new agreement that cost RM44 billion compared to RM65.5 billion (Loheswar, 2019). In the renegotiation, another crucial project related to the Malaysia-China bilateral cooperation i.e., the Multi-Product Pipeline (MPP) and Trans-Sabah Gas Pipeline (TSGP) was granted to wholly-owned subsidiaries of the Ministry of Finance (MoF), Suria Strategic Energy Resources Sdn. Bhd. (SSER).

During the Covid-19 pandemic and economic crisis, Malaysia looked to China for assistance. Despite another change of government in Malaysia on August 21, 2021, mutual relations between Malaysia and China under the new administration in terms of trade and existing cooperation has been deemed unchanged. Indeed, the rapid spread of the Covid-19 cases in Malaysia had increased Malaysia's dependence on China, which quickly stepped in to provide medical and economic aid (Abuza, 2020). This was articulated by Muhyiddin Yassin during his premiership on 28 May 2021, that Malaysia-China relations

was as positive and even closer during the economic crisis and the pandemic. It is hoped that relations between the two countries will follow a similar path under the premiership of Ismail Sabri Yaakob.

Malaysia continues to receive assistance from China in terms of investments as well as to fight the Covid-19 pandemic in Malaysia. According to Bernama (2021), existing US-China tensions and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic had increased Malaysia's export and investments to China by around RM60 billion between 2016 and 2020. In 2020, Malaysia approved RM164 billion consisting of 4,599 manufacturing, services and primary sector projects, with China's top investors as compared to before the pandemic which was 5,287 projects in 2019 (Azanis Shahila, 2021). Besides, in principle, Malaysia and China has agreed on post-pandemic cooperation, which include recognizing each other's digital vaccination certificates and facilitating cross border travel between the two countries. Malaysia has also procured Sinovac and CanSino vaccines from China (Povera, 2021).

Previously during the PH government, Malaysia encountered difficulties when China decided to commit to purchasing agricultural products from the US. This situation resulted in a dwindling demand in the palm oil industry in Malaysia. Nonetheless through negotiations and existing good relations, the China government agreed to continue purchasing palm oil through barter deals. Hence, Malaysia agreed to export 200,000 tons of palm oil equivalent to 1 billion yuan. In return, Malaysia received construction services, natural resources products, and civilian and defense equipment from China ("China in barter deal," 2019). After the PN government took over PH, negotiations were still ongoing, and China agreed to purchase 1.7 million tonnes of palm oil until 2023 (Malaysian Palm Oil Council [MPOC], 2020). Therefore, trade relations in this form is essential for Malaysia and China which in turn reflects the strong diplomatic ties and people-to-people relations between the two countries. This also determines the firm direction of Malaysia-China in the future which needs to be emphasized in the BRI.

Covid-19 and Development of Vaccine Diplomacy

The discussion between former Prime Minister, Muhyiddin Yassin and China's Premier Li Keqiang on the adverse effects of the pandemic

was consistent and resulted in a collaboration. The collaboration involved the formulation of Covid-19 vaccine through “fill and finish” in Malaysia, digital trade cooperation, advanced technology, digital economy, agriculture, and agro food, development of food security and poverty eradication programs (The Star, 2021). The statement by Muhyiddin reiterated Malaysia’s unwavering foreign policy objective to maximize cooperation between Malaysia and China through diplomacy and peaceful co-existence. However, it requires definite and faithful upholding of togetherness in any issue for perennial and in-depth cooperation, which is sometimes erratic between both countries given the unstable political scene in Malaysia.

Before this, China Global Television Network (CGTN) had widely recognized Dr Noor Hisham’s capability in tackling Covid-19 in mid-July 2020 (Wissgott, 2020). China’s credit had restored the popular momentum under the PN government to use this opportunity to strengthen the relationship with China. In addition, the state of democracy in the United States, the withdrawal of contributions to the World Health Organization (WHO), and the measures of financial infrastructure from China to combat Covid-19 were among the reasons that contributed to restoring the trust of Malaysians in China. This situation had led to the development of a forward strategy at the government level under PN before the establishment of The Special Committee on Covid-19 Vaccine Supply (JKJAV). They included a list of vaccines from China, Sinovac and CanSino, that Malaysians would receive. This strategy had also tested the new administration under Ismail Sabri in handling the crisis.

China has shown success in its Covid-19 crisis management. China has been ever willing and ready to help the world with vaccines and medical expertise. At one point, Covid-19 cases in Malaysia had increased, from the beginning of 2021, with daily positive cases at the end of August 2021 numbering over 20,000 for several days, with over 200 daily deaths, an exponential increase never seen before.

The Malaysian government under Muhyiddin Yassin had appointed Khairy Jamaluddin as a Coordinator Ministry to lead The Special Committee on COVID-19 Vaccine Supply on 14 October 2020 to acquire Pfizer, Astra Zeneca and Sinovac, and execute an immunization program for the Malaysian people starting late February 2021. Nevertheless, there were many criticisms levelled against

the Malaysian government in the handling of its standard operating procedures.

Meanwhile, China had announced to help Malaysia in the vaccination cooperation which witnessed Pharmaniaga Sdn. Bhd. signing an agreement with China's Sinovac Lifescience Ltd. to obtain a supply of 12 million doses of CoronaVac for Malaysia (Ping, 2021). Other than Sinovac, CanSino was also another vaccine procured by the Malaysian government with China through vaccine diplomacy. The former Minister of Foreign Affairs under the PN government, Hishammuddin Hussein, indicated appreciation to Wang Yi on the country's preparation for post Covid-19 strategy. It also included the two vital vaccines to Malaysia under the immunization program to extend trade and investment. For trade and investment purposes, it involves commodities such as palm oil, food security, science and technology, innovation, travel easing and BRI projects (Bernama, 2021). Consequently, due to Covid-19 and vaccine diplomacy, Malaysia-China relations has been perceived to be tangibly closer for any mutual partnership in the future. Common risks on social and health matters in the region also underpins the ties between these countries.

Eventually, the zero-Covid policy executed by China will indirectly contribute to Malaysia's trade deficit in export and import which is something of concern in its cooperation in the BRI. Nevertheless, the trade volume in 2021 between both countries netted US\$176.8 billion which indicated a stunning achievement despite battling the Covid-19 pandemic. This showed that China for the next decade in the BRI is still an important trading partner for Malaysia despite risks like Covid-19. Thus, even though the trade volume does not reflect at all the definition of holistic development. However, the vaccine diplomacy under the Health Silk Road agenda to counter the adverse effects of the pandemic has strengthened people-to-people relations between Malaysia and China to forge ahead.

Bumpy on Land, Standoff at Sea

For particular advantage, Malaysia wants close cooperation with China, primarily through the MSRI projects. Evers and Menkhoff (2018) have clarified that the issue in the South China Sea is in contrast to Malaysia's requirements in maritime cooperation. However, the

perception of these two wishes is mutually intertwined as it will affect Malaysia's economic interests and security. The perception, including the issue of the South China Sea and values related to Malaysia's position, was discussed earlier. Kuik (2014) acknowledged that there are challenges such as the domestic perspective, especially voices from the public and top government officials who urged both countries to revise the policy between China and Malaysia, and to include an addendum that Malaysia's stance on relations with China is still positive.

Through bilateral and government-to-government consensus on the MSR agenda, both Malaysia and China have made an attempt to strengthen defense aspects to increase understanding, enhance perception, and reputation of their bilateral relations. On 22 December 2014, Malaysia and China officially initiated the first joint military exercise between the Malaysian Armed Forces and the People's Liberation Army, Republic of China which effected the Bilateral Defense Cooperation that was signed in 2005 (Ngeow, 2021). Implementation proceeded incrementally after both Defense Ministries met formally in security and defense negotiations later in late September 2012. Two years following the disappearance of the MH370 incident, in June 2014 Aerospace Long March International owned by China signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Malaysian firm, Aneka Bekal. The MoU was signed in order to offer a LY-80 Medium-Range-Air-Defense Missile Weapon System (LY-80 MRSAM) and to boost Sino-Malaysia relations in the South China Sea (Parameswaran, 2014).

Subsequently, 2015 and 2016 marked robust relations between Malaysia and China through the ECRL, Bandar Malaysia, Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Port (MCKIP), Forest City, Melaka Gateway and pipeline projects under the SSER agreement akin to the mega projects of BRI and the MSR cooperation. In addition, MCKIP is another massive project which is located in Kuantan port area involving US\$8 trillion in investment in order to upgrade the port's infrastructure that connects 21 main cities along the MSR (Abd Rahman, 2018). Kuantan Port which is owned by IGB Construction Sdn. Bhd., Jurutama Sdn. Bhd., Mudajaya Sdn. Bhd. (IJM) and China's Beibu Gulf Port Group (CBGPG) is spending RM1.2 billion for 40 hectares of sea reclamation facilitated by the Malaysian government with RM1.08 billion to build a breakwater system to protect the port

from huge wave impact (Lopez, 2016). These strategic mega projects under the MSR in Malaysia i.e., the ECRL, Bandar Malaysia, MCKIP, and pipeline projects are planned to be connected to each other for trade and business stretching from Port Klang, Kuantan Port to Pengkalan Kubor in Kelantan.

However, all these projects had received heavy criticism from the opposition led by Mahathir Mohamad. In May 2017, the agreement on Bandar Malaysia was suspended apparently due to the failure of the Iskandar Waterfront Holdings (IWH)-China Railway Engineering Cooperation (CREC) to comply 60 percent of its equity share to the Malaysian Ministry of Finance. Criticism was also levelled at the acquiescent Najib administration in handling the ECRL negotiation which encountered a similar fate in 2018. Criticism directed at China's investment penetration and domination had led local politicians to use this issue in their political campaign of the flourishing Malaysia-China relations in 2016–2017 under the Najib administration.

A year after Barisan National was defeated in the 2018 General Election, the ECRL controversial project was renegotiated and reinstated in 2019. Following that event, three key agreements were also signed with China under the Mahathir administration. An MoU between Malaysian Palm Oil Board and the China Chamber of Commerce Import and Export of Food Stuff, Native Products and Animal By-Products for 2019 to 2023. Followed by an MoU between Malaysia Investment Development Authority (MIDA) and China Communication Construction Company (CCCC) to revive the ECRL and lastly, the reinstatement of Bandar Malaysia framework agreement IWH and CREC (Fook, 2019). Therefore, Mahathir's stand on foreign policy placed Malaysia in a feasible position to establish trust on the developmental scape with other superpowers specifically, China in addressing the issue particularly on Malaysia's claim in the South China Sea.

Despite China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea and its uneasy signal to Malaysia, relations between the two countries is still ongoing with MoU ties linked to the MSR cooperation. Rahmat (2021) stated that the Royal Malaysian Navy had taken delivery of its second Keris-Class littoral mission ship based on the Malaysian government and China Shipbuilding Industry Corporation agreement in 2017 worth RM1.17 billion. It was also Malaysia's first-ever naval ship contract with the China government under the MSR agenda.

Nevertheless, Bentley (2015) asserted that the relationship between China and Malaysia is not as unique as it used to be due to the South China Sea dispute issue as well as the expansion of claims activities in the area by China. Bentley (2015) also outlined measures that Malaysia should declare publicly to defend its international law. According to Ahmad and Mohd Sani (2017), Malaysia has laid claim to the Spratly features in the Spratly Islands which are occupied by military forces such as Mariveles Reef (Terumbu Mantanani), Ardasier Reef (Terumbu Ubi), Swallow Reef (Terumbu Layang-Layang), Dallas Reef (Terumbu Laya), Erica Reef (Terumbu Siput), and Investigator Reef (Terumbu Peninjau).

At the same time, five features are unoccupied but allegedly under Malaysia's domination which include: Royal Charlotte Reef (Terumbu Semarang Barat Besar), North Lucoina Shoal (Gugusan Beting Jarum), Louisa Reef (Terumbu Semarang Barat Kecil), South Luconia Shoal (Gugusan Beting Patinggi Ali), and James Shoal (Beting Serupai) (Ahmad & Mohd Sani, 2017). Alatas (2021) reiterated that Malaysia is cautious of China but does not consider her an immediate security threat. Nevertheless, Malaysia does not have any consolidated maritime policy to effect autonomy for Malaysia to propose a decent joint development authority (JDA) through legal approach with a huge state like China in the maritime dispute. This circumstance has given China the space to expand and assert its authority over the assured area (Ramli & Sukiman, 2019). Previously, China had proposed a JDA in an effort to resolve the issue of overlap in the Spratly archipelago since 1980 (Qi, 2019). However, the initiative found a dead end for three reasons. First, the lingering Cold War atmosphere and memories of the communist movement and ideological export. Then there is the question of national autonomy that could undermine the sovereignty of the claimant states including Malaysia. Apart from that, the intervention by other external rival powers mainly the US in the region which creates more discord and triggers China's assertiveness. This stance is reflected in a statement by China's President Xi in 2017 which emphasized the role of territorial integrity in a meeting with the Communist Party's Politburo that there should be no flexibility in the South China Sea issue (Lai, 2017). Xi said:

“...No foreign country should expect us to make a deal on our core interests and hope we will swallow the bitter pill that will damage our sovereignty, security and development interests...”

As mentioned earlier by Evers and Menkhoff that even though the MSR and the South China Sea are different issues, these will be intertwined once it involves security on the sea. Recently, there were two incidents in the South China Sea involving China. On 17 April 2020, China's survey vessels Haiyang Dizhi 8 moved in formation with four Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) ships and nine militia vessels and entered Malaysia's maritime exclusive economic zone and continental shelf, illegally (Perumal, 2020).

On another occasion, 16 aircrafts from the People's Liberation Army – Air Force, China, had flown in-trail tactical formation entering the Malaysian Maritime Zone, Kota Kinabalu Flight Information Region. Then, changed course close to Beting Patinggi Ali illegally on 31st May 2021. However, the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) succeeded in intercepting and made visual identification of the Ilyushin II-76 and Xian Y-20, which are capable of executing any military mission (RMAF, 2021). Despite Malaysia's good relationship with China, these actions were regarded as intolerable and disconcerting to the country's sovereignty (Tan, 2021). In response, Hishammuddin Hussein sent a diplomatic note to China regarding its intrusive behaviour in the South China Sea. These two incidents had created uneasy feelings among Malaysians regarding China at a time when Malaysia was fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and negotiating with China by way of vaccine diplomacy to procure Sinovac and Sinopharm through the Health Silk Road.

The cavalier attitude shown in the two incidents had led to diplomatic sensitivity and friction. However, as mentioned, Malaysia and China relations still holds good prospects in post-Covid-19 cooperation. Nevertheless, Malaysia will continue to remain vigilant due to China's firm stance in the South China Sea that has impacted people-to-people relations. According to Seah et al. (2021), Malaysia hopes that ASEAN will be finalizing the Code of Conduct for the South China Sea with China in the near future. In the survey report by Seah et al. (2021), 83.8 percent agreed that ASEAN must take a principled stand that upholds international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and respect the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling. Nevertheless, ASEAN has not made any significant transition in institutionalism in the last two decades in particular to resolve the South China Sea issue. This problem is due to intense national interest and continuous disconcerting tension between China and the US. This

position has allowed China and the US under Biden via AUKUS to construct and impose their ideologies and in turn prolonging current issues.

This issue is related to the incursion in the South China Sea by China. Although Malaysia opposes China on disputes in the South China Sea, bilateral agreements are still binding between the two countries. Nevertheless, there is still reluctance for maritime freedom through legal action particularly to establish joint development authority. This position is also influenced by current local and international politics and the role of the state of respective countries. Therefore, new hope for joint development authority for Malaysia and China can be realized by pursuing a committed role of the big government between both countries on this resolution. The big government means the government's role to involve or intervene in public and private policy for common prosperity (Levi-Faur, 2012). However, to quench the big government's role also comes with huge governance responsibility. For instance, details on joint development authority mechanism needs to be scrutinized by Malaysia and China in moving forward to sustain the BRI cooperation in the upcoming decade.

CONCLUSION

Historical memories between China and Malaysia through the charms of the classical silk road will lose its appeal if China maintains its geopolitical posturing in the South China Sea. Economically, Malaysia is a trading country. Therefore, Malaysia needs to maintain good relations with all countries, including China. Therefore, the source of tension needs to be addressed and resolved as close friends and neighbours. One of the issues that must be strengthened is mutual trust on the developmental scape between government-to-government, and people-to-people. The development pattern of trade and investment between Malaysia and China has also indicated a cause for concern with regard to the former's trade deficit showing even though the business scape between both countries was stunning during the pandemic. This is also an opportunity for Malaysia to think strategically by re-examining the MoUs and agreements signed with China.

Malaysia still leans towards positive cooperation with China with regard to the BRI. The strained relations in the BRI between Malaysia

and China is influenced by the confluence of domestic politics especially the controversial ECRL and Bandar Malaysia projects. However, the strategic partnership based on existing MoUs under the BRI is still ongoing in Malaysia even though the government has changed hands several times. It is difficult for Malaysian politicians in power to distance themselves from China for developmental scape progress due to her ranking in the world economy and massive financial assistance. Besides, China always plays a supportive role in Malaysia's development in adverse conditions such as providing social infrastructure to reconnect people-to-people in vaccine diplomacy. Furthermore, China is the one of the superpowers that Malaysia needs to be friendly to in order to contain US attempts to dominate in the South China Sea.

Therefore, Malaysia-China cooperation has remained on a solid and positive footing on the economic front and in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic but is rather delicate in terms of regional development, particularly involving the South China Sea. Therefore, it is liable to the risk of distrust. In addition, it would be much easier and instantaneous to propagate cynicism on various social media platforms. These factors could influence people-to-people relations in efforts by both countries to build new relations and benefit from historical memories of their cooperation. Moreover, diplomatic friction in the relationship is detrimental to both countries in developing socio-cultural exchanges if not handled well by Malaysia and China.

Besides, Malaysia has made an effort to strike a balance in its friendship and peaceful co-existence with China through joint military exercises and purchasing billions in contracts to build military industrial complexes besides focusing on the economy scape. This kind of defense consultation involves huge investments and paves the way to influence public policy in accepting the BRI projects to be implemented and renegotiated in Malaysia either on land or maritime developmental scape.

Recently, China's ambassador to Malaysia stated that the South China Sea is a "sea of friendship". Therefore, this statement should be translated quickly into friendly actions in the South China Sea when Malaysia-China's BRI cooperation reaches a decade in 2023. Although this strategy has implications for any legal action, means and settlement, Malaysia still needs to maintain its key foreign policy

position and strengthen its cooperation in various fields such as politics, education, economy, tourism, defense and military exercises with China. In addition, Malaysia needs to continue maintaining its special relationship with China to balance U.S. dominance in Asia particularly with the introduction of AUKUS. Given BRI's positive message by Xi Jinping, it should be applied to the South China Sea dispute. Some forms of cooperation can be considered for certain cases. For example, the Malaysia-Thailand Joint Authority (MTJA) with the theme "brothers drinking from the same well". Its functions to jointly coordinate and manage the development area, heritage and profit from the seabed and overlapping offshore area according to a mutual consensus agreement signed on 21 February 1979. Similarly, the Malaysia-Vietnam joint development authority has commemorated 30 years of shared prosperity.

Therefore, in heading towards the next decade of BRI cooperation, both sides could consider intensive joint development area akin to what Malaysia has achieved with Thailand and Vietnam under the principles of peaceful co-existence. With this approach, the Malaysia-China bilateral strategy, could propose this solution mainly to translate risks and tension to opportunities in the South China Sea in realizing the core of the MSR. This joint development resolution in the disputed area would not only contribute to economic partnership but strengthen people-to-people relations in all dimensions of future cooperation for the next decade of BRI.

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