

MALAYSIA’S NATIONAL ROLE CONCEPTIONS AND TRANSITIONS OF FOREIGN POLICY FROM TUNKU TO MAHATHIR

Johan Saravanamuttu*, Eugene Mark and Nawaljeet Singh Rayar

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University,
SINGAPORE

*Corresponding author: jsaravanamuttu@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Reviewing the history and trajectory of Malaysia’s foreign policy, this article highlights national role conceptions (NRCs) during Tunku’s premiership between 1957 and 1968 and the first and second Mahathir tenures of 1981–2003 and 2018–2020, respectively. Malaysia’s foreign policy and its fundamentals have remained reasonably stable over prolonged periods but NRCs, which define foreign policy, have witnessed shifting nuances and noticeable changes under different premierships. Foreign policy under succeeding Malaysian governments has seen major shifts occurring in the transition of foreign policy in tandem with changing NRCs. Malaysian foreign policy is articulated within the constraints posed by the global and regional environments and that of a highly politicised, often divided domestic landscape. In the Tunku era, Malaysia was decidedly a Western ally, symbolised by NRCs of being “pro-West” and “anti-communist”. Since then, Malaysia’s relations with major powers and regional countries have shown a stable, neutral and non-aligned stance and it emerged as a “regional neutral strategist” under the premiership of Tun Abdul Razak. This article argues that the shifts and revisions in Malaysia’s NRCs under Mahathir as a “global champion of the South”, exemplar of “Looking East” and “champion of moderate Islam” were not all just outcomes of elite preferences but reflected political agendas of elites and political agents within the domestic political game. Drawing on some examples of domestic contestations over NRCs and foreign policy, the

article points to the re-definition and even the abandonment of policy directions which were not consonant with the imperatives of the domestic political game.

Keywords: Malaysia's foreign policy, national role conceptions, Tunku period, Mahathir tenures, identity politics, domestic political game

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia entered an unprecedented political landscape when the previous Pakatan Harapan (PH) government fell apart after Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) and 11 former Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) members left the PH coalition to join the opposition to form a new government. Muhyiddin Yassin emerged as Malaysia's 8th Prime Minister (PM). Considerable political uncertainty was expected under the new Perikatan Nasional (PN) government until a general election, legally due in 2023, is called. More broadly, questions about the extent to which foreign policy will change under a new government remain. Reviewing Malaysia's foreign policy's history and trajectory, this article attempts to understand the shifts and nuances of the second Mahathir tenure between May 2018 and February 2020. It suggests that Malaysia's foreign policy fundamentals have remained reasonably stable under the new government of PN or the National Alliance. Most broad dimensions of foreign policy have remained in place since the major changes in foreign policy direction post Tunku era. The article is divided into four sections. The first section introduces the role theory framework to examine the state's conception of its various roles in international politics. In the second section, the article briefly charts the historical transitions in role conceptions from the time of Tunku Abdul Rahman to Tun Abdul Razak before Mahathir's first tenure as the PM. In the third section, the article highlights the key themes of the PH government's foreign policy and the noticeable changes in approach in Mahathir's second tenure. Finally, the article posits that the NRC framework helps depict shifts and nuances in the transitions in elite conceptions of foreign policy to reflect political contestations and transitions and the use of foreign policy for domestic political objectives. Often, well-established NRCs remain unaltered but could be re-interpreted and new role conceptions could be conceived or debunked by political leaders because of global developments and the evolving domestic political game (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012).

ROLE THEORY FRAMEWORK

Role theory examines a state's role in international politics and assesses how national role conceptions (NRCs) lead to foreign policy outcomes. This approach to international politics was first introduced into foreign policy analysis by K. J. Holsti in 1970. Foreign policy as a field of study tended to be weak in defining its dependent and independent variables and it was this theoretical vagueness that may have prompted Holsti to advance his notion. NRCs could thus be seen, in the dependent variables (or "output") side of foreign policy, as definitive markers of the foreign policy of states and, on the independent variables (or "input") side, as the national leanings that would drive certain state policies. To cite Holsti:

[W]hat are the sources of role conceptions held by policymakers? Are there gradations in the specificity and structure of policymakers' national role conceptions? If so, what are the likely consequences for foreign policy decisions and actions? Under what conditions will knowledge of national role conceptions permit us to explain or predict typical forms of diplomatic behaviour? Moving from descriptive questions of this type to more theoretical concerns, we may inquire into the relevance of national role conceptions, both as independent and dependent variables, in foreign policy analysis. (Holsti 1970, 236)

Thus, Holsti defines NRCs as the policymakers' definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules, and actions suitable to their state in the international or regional systems. National roles shape and orient foreign policy behaviour of governments, either to be active or inactive in the external environment. Holsti argues that "values, perceptions, and attitudes" of national leaders are essential and placed more emphasis on domestic sources of NRCs (Holsti 1970, 245–246). National leaders conduct foreign policy based on their ideas about the roles of their states in the world and which roles would be acceptable to their people (Adigbuo 2007, 89).

The NRCs are often contested and shaped by the domestic environment (Brummer and Thies, 2015). While domestic or external factors influence NRCs, roles are filtered by national leaders as they are the final authority in determining foreign policy for their countries. This article posits that Malaysia's NRCs are conceived primarily by its PMs but they are never static and allow for different interpretations by different national leaders; for instance, NRCs under the premiership of Tunku Abdul Rahman were quite different from those conceived by Mahathir Mohamad. The more active or involved a state is in international or regional affairs, the more NRCs its leaders will conceive. These role conceptions, in turn, help to determine

appropriate foreign policy postures, objectives, strategies, and actions. A schema for locating NRCs in foreign policy formulation is shown in Figure 1.

Thus far, only one study related to Malaysian foreign policy has used the concept of NRC. This study of Malaysia-Singapore bilateral relations from the first Mahathir period through to the Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Najib Abdul Razak tenures by Han (2017) suggests that Malaysia’s role conception towards Singapore was laden with a “senior-junior” distinction which signals some specific role expectations on the part of Singapore that the city-state should adopt an obligatory and deferential posture in its relations toward Malaysia” (Han 2017, 290). An important insight of Han’s study was that states could adhere to the same national roles even after power transitions, but role behaviours could differ with the new national leaders who would have varying notions of how these role conceptions were to be enacted. Accordingly, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Najib Abdul Razak re-enacted the “senior-junior” role conception by augmenting this with two new role conceptions, namely, “important and symbiotic partner” and “historical and significant other” (Han 2017, 305–306).

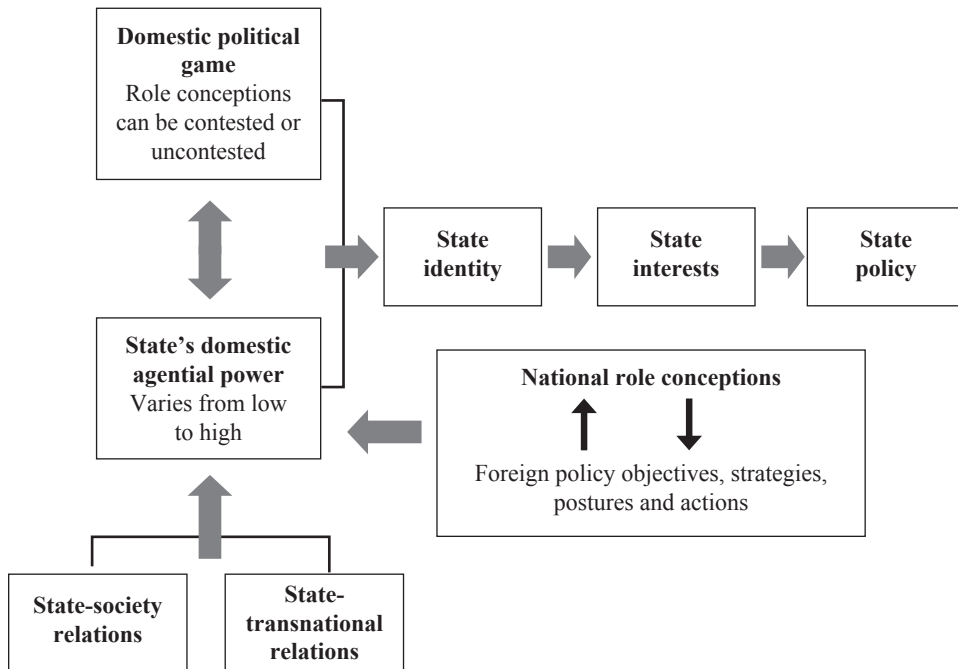


Figure 1: A schema for analysis of NRCs in foreign policy.

Source: Saravanamuttu (2010, 17).

A study on Turkish foreign policy (Gürzel 2014) and another examining middle power role conceptions of South Korea and Indonesia (Karim 2018) also looked at the role of NRCs. Gürzel examined various role conceptions of Turkey, such as “natural leader”, “regional power” and “big brother” and “protector” of Muslim minorities. He concluded that Turkey’s international image, after the coming to power of Justice and Development Party (AKP), could be compared to that of Brazil in South America, which is viewed as an intermediate power, with the ability to deploy soft power to assume a mediation role as a regional power. Malaysia sees itself as a “regional neutral strategist”, which dovetails with its domestic goals and its ambition to become a developed country and this is discussed further below. The study comparing South Korea and Indonesia delves into the role conception of these two states as “middle powers”, suggesting that:

In the case of Indonesia, middle-power status is pursued through the enactment of four main national role conceptions—namely, a voice for developing countries, a regional leader, an advocate of democracy, and a bridge-builder. In the case of South Korea, middle-power status is achieved through the enactment of the roles of a regional balancer, an advocate of development, and a bridge-builder. (Karim 2018, 359)

Karim further elucidated that such role conceptions are not fixed in time and would change because of “challenges from domestic audiences and negative international expectations”. This insight is similar to Han’s findings as mentioned above. In studying Malaysia’s role conceptions, this article argues that while the past and present leaders have not officially adopted a middle power posture or role conception, some of its strategies and foreign policy actions could fall under the rubric of middle power statecraft or “middlepowership” (Nossal and Stubbs 1997; Ping 2005; Saravanamuttu 2010).

NRCs AND TRANSITIONS OF FOREIGN POLICY

Emerging as a small independent state in its early years, Malaysia has had to function within the constraints posed by the global and regional environment. This reality was especially true during the nascent stages of statehood. Insofar as Malaysian foreign policy was concerned, it has always been decided by the elites at the highest level. However, as noted earlier, this is not to say that foreign policy matters were never contested. It can be shown that from the time of Tunku until the second Mahathir tenure, certain aspects of its foreign policy were challenged by internal political forces.

Under Tunku, Malaya (independent federation from 1957) and later, Malaysia (formed in 1963), stood out as a Western ally with NRCs displaying explicit “pro-Western” and “anti-communist” orientations (Milne and Mauzy 1980, 295). In the early years of independence, Malaya’s foreign policy related to its defence and security showed a distinct pro-Western and anti-communist posture, perhaps with an ineffectual attempt towards neutrality (Saravanamuttu 2010, 54). The approach adopted by Tunku showed its allegiance to the Western bloc, from which Malaya sought support for its internal struggle against Communism (Allès and Perrodin 2019, 121). Indonesia’s *Konfrontasi* arising from Malaysia’s formation subsequently dominated Malaysia’s foreign policy in the latter part of Tunku’s era. The immediate effect was a reinforcement of Malaysia’s ties to the Western bloc and the hardening of its anti-communist orientation. At that time, the Malaysian policymakers regarded *Konfrontasi* as a Parti Komunis Indonesia (PKI)-inspired project, pointing to a Jakarta-Peking-Hanoi-Pyongyang axis, with Malaysia as the target of China’s expansionism (Saravanamuttu 2010, 88).

However, throughout *Konfrontasi*, Malaysia’s hard-line anti-communist policy softened suggesting that Tunku’s policies were contested explicitly and implicitly by opposition parties and even policymakers within his government. There was a growing number of Malaysian politicians who were clearly opposed to some of the government’s views on foreign policy (Jeshurun 2008, 81). According to Tunku, due to the US opposition to the 1954 Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), he opted not to join the organisation, but he insisted amidst objections from the youth wing of his own party that the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement with Britain had to be signed.¹ Nevertheless, it was not until *Konfrontasi* ended that the rethinking in foreign policy took a more definite shape. Although Malaysia still held fast to its Western orientation, by the end of *Konfrontasi*, it had discarded its previously anti-communist posture for one of peaceful coexistence. The 1968 Ismail Peace Plan and the admissions by Tunku and Tun Abdul Razak on the slight shifts in foreign policy were indications of the new change taking place (Saravanamuttu 2010, 103). The ascension of Tun Abdul Razak to power set the stage for a more systemic change in Malaysian foreign policy. Dr. Ismail’s role was also crucial in charting a new direction.

Tun Abdul Razak’s and Dr. Ismail’s role conception for Malaysia can be characterised as that of a “regional and neutral player.” Malaysia began to cultivate allies outside the Commonwealth countries, particularly with China (Ooi 2006, 247). Malaysia formalised its relations with China in May 1974 along with the emergence of détente, a period of improved relations with communist countries globally (Jeshurun 2008, 132). A foreign policy based on Southeast Asian

neutrality necessitated rejecting the notion that common enemies existed. In this period, Malaysia began to profess its non-aligned status and promote its idea of Southeast Asian neutrality. The strategy of promoting a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) in Southeast Asia became a critical part of Malaysia's foreign policy. In driving to establish neutrality in Southeast Asia, Malaysia was acting as a "regional player." Nevertheless, there was no clear sign of abandoning the close relations with the Western bloc in this new direction.

It has been argued that during Tunku's time, Malayan foreign policy "owed more to the personality of its Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, than is usual" (Silcock 1963, 42) or that it was "the virtual prerogative of a small stable elite comprising four or five men" (Ott 1972, 225). However, a more nuanced perspective may be suggested that the idiosyncratic dimension or elite predilections in Malayan foreign policy may best be appreciated as intervening variables in the policy-formulation process in the sense that they do represent a final filter, to the inscrutable "black box", as depicted by traditional IR specialists, through which policy is formulated. In fact, these idiosyncratic factors could be subsumed under a construct, such as a dominant elite ideology with the assumption that it is the more general political beliefs and attitudes of leaders and policy-makers rather than the peculiar, quirky, personality traits that are more important in the analysis of overall foreign policy (Saravanamuttu 2010, 70–73). The notion of a dominant elite ideology suggests that a convergence of ideational and political perspectives at the uppermost level of decision-making. In constructivist parlance, it could well be the enabling factor in the state's agential power. It could also be partially embedded in the domestic political culture of a state if one considers elites to be also connected to society. Put differently, the agential power of this elite ideology, which drives the foreign policy outputs, is ultimately constrained by societal forces which constitute a political culture under which various political actors play out their preferences or can be referred to as the domestic political game as suggested earlier. Viewed schematically (Figure 1), state identity and state interests could perhaps be best appreciated as the summation of such preferences mediated by an elite ideology to generate state policies. Seen in this light, the state's agential power personified in PMs and foreign ministers and other agents of foreign policy is clearly circumscribed or curtailed by societal factors and internal contestations and a domestic political culture in which such a state is embedded as shown in the schema presented above. In spite of Tunku's strong hand, NRCs which determined the direction of foreign policy were embedded in the domestic political game prevailing at that time. A counter-elite within Tunku's own political party emerged after 1969 under the leadership of Tun Abdul Razak, and the nation's foreign policy palpably shifted due to changing external factors and also the changing nature of a new domestic political game. The argument presented here draws from

Cantir and Kaarbo (2012, 19) on the conscious use of NRCs by political actors to achieve particular policies, viz.:

How agents respond to structure and employ roles vis-à-vis other agents highlights the fact that structures do not deterministically impose behaviours but rather become part of the domestic political ‘game.’ It also allows for a fluid conceptualization of the agent–structure ‘problem’ since actors’ attempts to strategically use roles for various purposes may not always be successful.

NRCs UNDER MAHATHIR

In a departure from his predecessors, Mahathir displayed an unequivocal “anti-West” stance. Mahathir capitalised on the North-South divide and actively promoted South-South cooperation to intensify solidarity against the Western bloc. Mahathir proposed the idea of a South-South Commission when he chaired the steering committee of the Second South-South Dialogue in Kuala Lumpur in 1985 and moved for the setting up of this commission in the Harare Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit in 1986 (Saravanamuttu 2010, 193). The South-South Commission was formally established in 1987. Additionally, Mahathir used the NAM as a forum to denounce the unjust world order and took a strong view of the environmental question (Allès and Perrodin 2019, 125). He claimed that developed countries were bent on blaming the earth’s dismal state on the less developed South. At the Rio Summit in 1992, Mahathir accused the Global North of being responsible for the environmental problems. It is clear that Mahathir’s “anti-West” role conception underpinned this strong rhetoric on environmental issues.

The regional engagement continued to be an aspect of Malaysian foreign policy in which Mahathir arguably played a more active regional role than his predecessors. First, his government capitalised on the Cambodian conflict to set up the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), which held on to Cambodia’s United Nations (UN) seat for the majority of the 1982–1990 period (Saravanamuttu 2010, 198). The CGDK was established on 22 June 1982 in Kuala Lumpur, with Prince Sihanouk as president, Khieu Samphan as vice-president, and Son Sann as PM. Second, Malaysia participated actively in what is known as the Jakarta Informal Meetings (JIM), which is a series of talks for all regional parties in the Cambodian conflict. Security, however, was not the emphasis of the Mahathir government. Instead, Malaysia’s main aim was to push for the eventual inclusion of the Indochina states into ASEAN after the conflict ended. At the ASEAN Summit in January 1992, Malaysia openly declared support for Vietnam and Laos to join the regional body.

Third, Mahathir elevated Malaysia's NRC from a "regional player" to a "regional strategist" to achieve the nation's domestic goals and national needs as defined by Mahathir's own developmental or ideational perspectives. Put differently, he sought agency internationally to turn Malaysia into a high-growth developmental state. Malaysian foreign policy in the first Mahathir period was bold and aggressive foreign economic policies geared towards turning the country into a Newly Industrialising Country (NIC). His foreign economic policy postures were iconoclastic and counter-hegemonic vis-à-vis the West, exemplified by such policies as "Buy British Last" and "Look East", which represented an approach to industrialise the Malaysian economy rapidly and drive its *bumiputera* population into becoming economic achievers. Behind the Look East policy was the message that the industrial successes of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan were what Malaysia sought to emulate. In particular, Mahathir perceived Japan as an Asian exemplar of excellence.

In the early 1990s, Mahathir propagated a vision to turn Malaysia into a developed country by 2020. Among the goals of Vision 2020 was to achieve an average GDP growth rate of 7% between 1990 and 2020 translating into RM920 billion GDP in real terms. Vision 2020 required a global and regional environment that could propel Malaysia towards economic excellence. In the post-Cold War world, Mahathir could be seen as harbouring fears of a global struggle for economic influence where the powerful sought to dominate the weak (Nathan 1995, 231). Mahathir thus introduced the East Asia Economic Group (EAEG) to collectivise negotiating strength vis-à-vis other economic groupings. Due to American concerns that it was to be a trading bloc and the misgivings of ASEAN countries, such as Indonesia and Singapore, the group was renamed East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC). The EAEC continued to be an issue for discussion in future years. Nevertheless, the subsequent formation of ASEAN Plus Three and the East Asian Summit were testaments of Mahathir's lasting impact on ASEAN.

Mahathir promoted the role conception of being "champion of moderate Islam" partly to capture the support of the Malay electorate at home (Nair 1997). Malaysia's active engagement with Muslim-world issues began in the first Mahathir period. First, the Palestine problem which has been a concern of Malaysian foreign policy. Thus, an anti-Zionist posture of the government was profiled continuously by Mahathir at the UN (Nair 1997, 194). Mahathir chastised Western powers for supporting the Israeli state and not putting enough pressure on Israel to abide by UN resolutions 238 and 242, which mandated Israel's vacation of occupied Arab territories. Second, other issues relating to the Arab world and Islam came to a head for Malaysia during the First Gulf War of 1991. Third, at the tail-end of Mahathir's first tenure, the Bosnia issue took centre stage in Malaysian foreign

policy. Mahathir believed that the West practised double standards in relation to the Bosnian crisis, and he lambasted the UN for dancing to the tune of the major powers (Milne and Mauzy 1999, 125).

Mahathir's NRCs were neatly locked into the domestic political game. His anti-Western rhetoric and pro-Islam postures sat well with the predominant Malay-Muslim political constituency. The primacy of economics in Mahathir's foreign policy also served a domestic purpose and he used the "Asian values" discourse as a counter-hegemonic trope to reject both Westernism in the larger sense and neo-liberalism in the global order so as "to ideologically delegitimize American or Western models and practices of human rights and liberal democracy, while helping to legitimise the interventionist approach to economic development based on communitarian end-goals rather than the maximisation of individual self-interest" (Nesadurai 2004, 12). The next section fast forwards to the shorter second Mahathir tenure where role conceptions remained highly consistent with Mahathir 1.0 but where there were noticeable interesting shifts and nuances.

LATE MAHATHIRIAN NRCs

In Mahathir's speech made in Tokyo in June 2018, he stated that Malaysia would remain friendly to all countries in order to facilitate trade, development and economic progress (Mahathir 2018). Mahathir's "anti-West" stance remained firmly embedded in his role conceptions, as evidenced by his address to the 74th UN General Assembly (UNGA) on 27 September 2019. Mahathir criticised the veto power of the five UN permanent members: China, France, Russia, the UK and the US, asking for this exceptionalism to be modified or removed altogether as "each one of them can negate the wishes of the nearly 200 other members." Mahathir also singled out Israel as the origin of terrorism. He claimed that "the creation of the state of Israel by seizing Palestinian land and expelling its 90% Arab population" had led to acts of terrorism "when there was none before or at least none on the present scale" (*New Straits Times* 2019).

Champion of Moderate Islam

Besides the "anti-West" stance, the "champion of a moderate Islam" inclination remained in Mahathir's NRC. In a distinct shift from the past, the PH government under Mahathir was more committed to pushing its agenda and interests beyond that of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) as suggested by his hosting of the Kuala Lumpur (KL) Summit in December 2019. Mahathir initiated the proposal of a KL Summit when he met Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan

and Pakistani PM Imran Khan at the side-lines of the 74th UNGA (Mahathir 2018). Mahathir suggested that this conference could grow into a grander initiative down the road, which observers saw as a potential challenge to the influence of the OIC in the Muslim world. As Chair of the OIC, Saudi Arabia was not pleased with Malaysia's organisation of the KL Summit. Behind closed doors, Malaysia had to explain to Saudi Arabia that it was not competing for influence in the Muslim world and that as a small state, there was no practicality in initiating new ideas.² The KL Summit was not aimed at revitalising Muslim issues for the domestic audience and many Muslim nations were appreciative of Malaysia's interest and proactiveness on the Palestinian conflict and the Rohingya issue despite Saudi Arabia's displeasure.

In the face of accusations of anti-Semitism, Malaysia was unyielding on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) barred Malaysia from hosting the 2019 World Para Swimming Championships after the government banned Israeli athletes from participating. Malaysia stood by its decision with former Minister of Youth and Sports Syed Saddiq Abdul Rahman claiming that it was a decision based on humanity and compassion for the Palestinian plight (NST Sports 2019). At the policy level, Malaysia was looking at the Palestinian issue holistically from the perspective of trade cooperation and humanitarian support. The Parliamentary Select Committee on International Relations and Trade was formed in November 2019 as an independent committee to provide checks and balances. The committee's first task was to look into improving trade level with the Palestinians according to parliamentarian Wong Chen who served on it.³ Trade with Palestine can be challenging due to the restriction of the movement of goods and the Israeli blockade imposed on Gaza. Separately, the committee was reviewing some of the past promises Malaysia had made to Palestine; for example, Najib Abdul Razak visited Gaza in 2013 and promised to set up a school there. However, Malaysia's failure to fulfil the promise highlights a disjuncture between rhetoric and what Malaysia has provided tangibly for Palestine. Besides past promises, the committee was considering a grant of RM10 million to the Palestinians.⁴ Whether the new PN government will proceed ahead with the Parliamentary Select Committee is moot but the focus on Palestine would remain in Malaysian foreign policy.

A new issue for Mahathir as PM was the persecution against the Rohingya people. In his address to the 74th UNGA, Mahathir criticised the lack of will in the UN and its inability to intervene in the Rohingya crisis (Ainaa 2019). He criticised Aung San Suu Kyi for staying silent on the actions of the *Tatmadaw* against the Rohingya people. These criticisms against the persecution of the Rohingya people is a sign of continuity in Malaysian foreign policy. Malaysia had called for international

attention to the persecution of the Rohingya through ASEAN and OIC, even before the PH government came to power in May 2018. By contrast, Malaysia was less vocal on China's treatment of the Uighurs. Publicly, Mahathir said that Malaysia did not want to take a confrontational stance towards Beijing's alleged mistreatment of its minority Uighur Muslims (*Reuters* 2019). Nevertheless, Malaysia did release 11 Uighur Muslims from detention and sent them to Turkey disregarding China's request to hand them back to Beijing (*Reuters* 2018). According to former Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah, Malaysia has been candid about its disapproval of ill treatment of Muslims in closed door meetings with China, but the nation will not call on China publicly to address the Uighur issue.⁵ Malaysia stated it will not blindly endorse nor openly criticise Beijing on its treatment of the Uighurs. The Malaysian government nevertheless tasked the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC) to look into conducting a study on the alleged atrocities committed by the Chinese government against the Uighurs (Alagesh 2019).

Mahathir's role conception as a champion of moderate Islam during his second iteration as PM also made sense in the context of its domestic politics. It has been suggested that domestic politics should end at the "water's edge." This was certainly not the case in Malaysia where identity politics, and ethnic polarisation made it convenient to pander to the sentiments of the majority Malay-Muslims in its foreign policy approaches. The PH government had been repeatedly painted by UMNO and PAS as being a "Chinese Government." At the peak of it, massive protests were planned against the Malaysian government's decision to ratify the United Nations International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). Even after the government reversed its earlier decision and announced that it will not ratify the convention, rallies with thousands of ethnic Malays in attendance continued, sending a signal that the PH government had failed to woo Malay voters after its elections. Given the ruling coalition's lack of strong support throughout its administration from Malay-Muslim voters, one could see how championing a moderate Muslim agenda externally could potentially shore up support domestically.

The Muslim role conception was also re-enacted by Mahathir under the South-South cooperation. In his first tenure, Mahathir capitalised on Third World issues and took a strong view on the environmental question to intensify South-South cooperation against the Western bloc. This time around, there was a new emphasis on Muslim countries and economic diplomacy. Accordingly, Malaysia was looking at cooperation with countries along the Caspian Sea, such as Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan.⁶ These Caspian Sea countries possess one of the world's largest inland bodies of water as well as oil and gas reserves.

Hence, Malaysia's interest in engaging with them. It also wanted to cooperate with Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (Turkic Council), comprising Turkiye, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.⁷ Malaysia's willingness to participate in finding new ways to facilitate trade and sustainable development in Central Asia and the Eurasia region was made clear in the Fourth Meeting of Speakers of Eurasian Countries' Parliaments (Nur Aqidah 2019).

Mahathir's Muslim-world NRC of championing "co-religionist" Islamic causes is consonant with its domestic political game. Islam has always been a major factor in Malaysian politics and its foreign policy orientation. As articulated by Shanti Nair, Islam has always provided definitive direction to Malaysian foreign policy. Mahathir had a binary perspective of Islam: "right" (moderate) Islam in contrast to "wrong" (extreme) Islam, which was attributed to the government's external and internal opponents, which included the Islamic party PAS (and its allies) at various points of time (Nair 1997). Locked into this role conception was Mahathir's persistent and aggressive pro-Palestinian and anti-Zionist policy orientations and novel attempts to elevate global Muslim "soft power." This NRC naturally sat well with Malaysia's predominantly domestic Muslim constituency.

Maritime Nation

Another shift was Malaysia's new role conception as a "maritime nation," which was not as prominent in Mahathir's first tenure. The country straddles two oceans, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. This geographical centrality provides Malaysia with more trade opportunities, but at the same time, it brings to the fore its security vulnerabilities. The 2020 Defence White Paper painted Malaysia as a maritime nation with various security threats (Ministry of Defence 2020). The PN Defence Minister Ismail Sabri affirmed his commitment to following this trajectory, as laid out by the Defence White Paper tabled by his predecessor (Azdee 2020). According to former Deputy Defence Minister Liew Chin Tong, the Ministry of Defence directed the Armed Forces (MAF) to start focusing on the maritime domain.⁸ Previously, the MAF had focused more on land and jungle warfare.

The nation's Foreign Policy Framework promoted the "non-militarisation of the South China Sea" and acknowledged that use of force would result in dire consequences for all parties. As Liew pointed out, Malaysia did not want to see the South China Sea (SCS) turn into a "theatre of conflict or war".⁹ Mahathir had called for a "no warships" policy or a warship-free zone in the waters proximate to Malaysia in the South China Sea. Foreign Minister Saifuddin clarified that it meant warships are not allowed to harbour at its territorial waters.¹⁰ On the legal

front, Malaysia submitted a unilateral claim to the UN on extending its continental shelf beyond the 200 nautical miles in the northern area of SCS (Thao 2019). Malaysia remained committed to ASEAN's centrality and in communicating with China and pushed for the completion of the Code of Conduct (COC) based on ASEAN's 2002 Declaration of Conduct (DOC) for a single text of the COC to be completed by end 2021.¹¹ However, the bigger question was the actual feasibility of implementing such a COC. Maintaining its policy of equidistance to major powers, Malaysia reminded both the US and China to "avoid any activity that would raise concern" and keep SCS non-militarised.¹² A major incident occurred in April 2020 when the Petronas-contracted drillship West Capella was in a standoff with a Chinese survey vessel Haiyang Dizhi 8 resulting in the despatching of warships to US and Australia. On 14 July 2020, the Auditor-General's office in a report said that there were 89 incursions by China into Malaysian claimed waters. The report stated that the China Coast Guard (CCG) had intruded into Malaysian waters 72 times while the remaining were by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). The report added that five diplomatic protest notes had been issued to China for trespassing into Malaysian waters following 29 reports lodged by Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN) from 2018 to 2019 (*Malay Mail* 2020). Foreign Minister Hishammuddin Hussein has maintained that "any dispute should be resolved amicably through peaceful means, diplomacy and mutual trust by all the concerned parties" (Ngeow 2020).

Regional Strategist

Malaysian foreign policy under Mahathir's second tenure expanded on its NRC of regional strategist in a "multipolar world." According to its former Foreign Minister, a peaceful world for Malaysia would be a multipolar one.¹³ Malaysia wanted the best possible relationship with the US, China, Australia, South Korea and with India that is now considered an integral part of an expanded Asia-Pacific. China, together with India, could bring balance to the region. Malaysia was also looking at the potential role of other countries in Europe, such as France, Germany and even Britain. The most probable future of Asia-Pacific architecture would be one of multiple overlapping economic and security frameworks. Malaysia viewed its relations with China in this context and it acknowledged the latter as its biggest trading partner, but it did not want to align explicitly with China except to remain true to its stance of being an exemplar of non-alignment, arguably a significant NRC since the time of Tun Abdul Razak. Malaysia's measured approach towards China meant it had to maintain ties with the US and its major allies in the region.¹⁴

This non-alignment stance is also reflected by Malaysia's endorsement of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific announced on 23 June 2019, as a response

to the US' Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy. ASEAN took the view that the Asia Pacific and the Indian Ocean were closely integrated and emphasised the importance of the evolving norms, principles and rules-based security and economic architectures put in place by ASEAN (Saravanamuttu 2020). The FOIP, on the other hand, reflected the Trump Administration shift of attention to the Indian Ocean, with an implicit premise to exclude China (Chen 2018). Malaysia was in step with ASEAN in emphasising that cooperation in the Indo-Pacific should include all countries of the region.

Exemplar of Looking East

Malaysian foreign policy in the first Mahathir period tapped into foreign economic policies to rapidly industrialise the country. Mahathir came up with the Look East policy to achieve that goal. The PM's inspiration stemmed from the economic and industrial successes of East Asian countries, most notably Japan. It was no surprise then that Mahathir's first overseas trip since returning to power in 2018 was to Japan, given his long-standing admiration for the country and its work ethics (Waikar 2018). However, the difference was that the PH government's Look East policy could also include China, given the latter's economic and geopolitical importance. There had been initial concerns that Malaysia would dramatically alter its relationship with China when the PH government first took office because Mahathir had publicly criticised Chinese investments during his campaigns at the 14th General Election (GE14) in 2018. However, the resumption of the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) was one of the first signs of the PH government's pragmatic approach towards China.

Following renegotiations by PH and China, the project resumed with Malaysia Rail Link (MRL) and China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) signing a renegotiated supplementary agreement on 12 April 2019. The agreement reduced production costs from RM65.5 billion to RM44 billion (Sipalan 2019). Despite the reduction in production costs, Malaysian economist Jomo Kwame Sundaram had urged the Malaysian government to investigate why the project should not be cancelled (Tan and Nazuin 2019). Jomo suggested that the original costing of the ECRL was around RM27 billion according to engineering estimates. Although the reduced production cost amounted to RM44 billion, the cost was still more than the original costing.¹⁵

There are three levels of Chinese investments in Malaysia: (1) Infrastructure with loans involved; (2) Property sector; and (3) Manufacturing sector. As PH lawmaker Wong Chen pointed out, Malaysia benefits the most in the long run from investments in the manufacturing sector.¹⁶ Manufacturing investments help

to boost productivity and move Malaysia up the value chain through technological upgrading. Nevertheless, Chinese investments in Malaysia's manufacturing sector have traditionally been minimal, due to its general decline in attractiveness as a host economy for manufacturing investments, especially in labour intensive manufacturing. Additionally, Malaysia does not possess the capability to perform high value-added activities in the manufacturing sector. China's entry into manufacturing is primarily motivated by its desire to access other markets via Malaysia's regional trade agreements (Tham 2018).

Overall, it appeared that the NRCs of the second Mahathir tenure remained fairly consistent with his earlier ideas and foreign policy was driven by its similar counter-hegemonic role conceptions, such as the "anti-West" and Muslim-World orientation. However, in the increasingly more multipolar world, Mahathir became more pragmatic towards China after assuming the reins of power in 2018. The Look East policy of Japan was an important hedge against dependence on China. Looking East in the new context could also mean engaging with China. Being a "maritime nation", whether stated explicitly or not, is a form of middlepowerism, namely, a strategy by smaller states to maximise their agency (or effectiveness) in dealings especially with major powers (Saravanamuttu 2010, 329–349). Such a strategy was aimed at disrupting or hybridising an international system predicated on the hegemony of major powers. The strategy is consistent with the overall Mahathirian drive of persistently challenging Western domination in international relations. The second Mahathir tenure witnessed certain novel approaches and tweaks in role conceptions of championing moderate Muslim-world causes, maintaining its role as a regional neutral strategist in the face of an increasingly multipolar world in which hedge diplomacy was practised to maintain its long-held non-aligned approach to international relations. Internal contestations to such policies hardly surfaced as they sat well with domestic predilections, but this was certainly not the case with respect to the distinct shift in human rights policy as will be discussed in the next section.

DOMESTIC POLITICAL GAME AND POLICY DISRUPTION

In a significant departure from the past, the PH government under Mahathir championed human rights more explicitly than ever before. This shift represented a more progressive slant that was mostly attributable to the more reformist-minded cabinet ministers and politicians of the PKR and DAP parties. Under the Foreign Policy Framework, human rights are featured as an element of national identity guiding Malaysia's foreign policy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019, 28). It was in recognition of the evolving domestic political discourse in Malaysia. However,

within two months of Mahathir's announcement in New York, Malaysia retracted its promise to ratify the ICERD after witnessing fierce objections from its Malay-Muslim population (Boo 2018). In most of its foreign policy stances, the PH government under Mahathir faced minimal or no contestations but this was not so with the intended policy of recognising and ratifying ICERD. As mentioned, a huge protest rally was held in the heart of Kuala Lumpur on 8 December 2020, which saw some 55,000 Malay-Muslims participating even though the PH government had already rescinded its intention to ratify ICERD on 23 November 2018. Sanctioned by the PAS and UMNO opposition parties, speeches called for pledges to uphold the sanctity of Islam and Malay rights in rejecting ICERD (Syed Umar 2018). By April 2019, Malaysia similarly withdrew from the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the face of intense political and royal pressure (*The Star* 2019). The failures to ratify these treaties such as ICERD and the Rome Statute showed that internal contestations can and do disrupt foreign policy directions.

The current study argues these internal contestations were consequences of the domestic political game which had become more acrimonious and increasingly divisive and subject to the imperatives of Malay identity politics. After the multi-ethnic PH government took power in May 2018, the political opposition, on the peninsular side of Malaysia, comprised two Malay-Muslim parties, the defeated UMNO and the Islamic PAS. Politics against the PH government had been predicated on the formation of "Muafakat Nasional" (National Consensus) by these two parties, which was formalised in September 2019. This same alliance led to the collapse of the PH government in March 2020, when it opted to join the PN government formed after political defections from the PH alliance. Suffice it to say that without political defections, the new government under Muhyiddin Yassin could not have been formed on 1 March 2020. The domestic political game had thus become complex and divisive. New players who included coalition partners within the old PH government and civil society voices were clearly in favour of Malaysia signing ICERD. However, voices from the right of the political spectrum were dead set against this. The perception that human rights were against the special position of Malays (as stipulated in Article 153 of the Malaysian Constitution) was fuelled by UMNO and PAS politicians and Malay groups such as the "Red Shirts" who also saw the rejection of the human rights policy as a foil to destabilise the PH government. Playing to the new constraints of identity politics and the domestic political game meant that the government of the day could not with impunity endorse ICERD and the Rome Statute without dire political consequences.

CONCLUSION

Malaysia has entered an unprecedented political landscape with many questions on how the increasingly fractious politics can be resolved and how they would impact on NCRs. Internal contestations can disrupt any new foreign policy direction that is not in step with the internal political game. The failure to ratify treaties, such as ICERD and the Rome Statute, is an example of such disruption. Even had the PN government not championed human rights explicitly, internal contestations could still serve as obstacles to any intended policies not in consonance with the new domestic political game.

That said, one could argue that the fundamentals of Malaysia's foreign policy have remained stable and so too have NRCs that are consistent with such fundamentals in foreign policy. First, Malaysia has stated its desire to continue with its non-alignment policy and be friendly to all countries, except for Israel. These fundamentals are unlikely to change in the near future. Second, the Islamic agenda in Malaysian foreign policy has always been present, and it will not go away regardless of the changes in domestic politics and thus, its Muslim world orientation will remain in place. Third, the South China Sea will continue to be a security focus for Malaysia and so too will its maritime NRC. Fourth, Malaysia would continue to maintain its hedge diplomacy (and middlepowership) vis-à-vis the US, China, Japan, Australia, South Korea, and India under the expanded notion of Indo-Pacific. Fifth, Malaysia, under any new government, would continue to further economic diplomacy in ASEAN as a regional strategist. However, despite these fundamentals remaining in Malaysian foreign policy, the current preoccupation with the COVID-19 pandemic would mean that foreign policy will take a backseat as will the potential for new role conceptions. Moreover, internal contestations in decision-making will persist so long as the political landscape remains highly divided.

NOTES

1. The UMNO backbench revolt was mounted by one Tajuddin Ali (Saravanamuttu 2010, 50). Tunku, when asked about Malaya's decision not to join SEATO, was quoted in a meeting in Canberra in 1959 as saying: "Well, I don't count, you know. 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" (Tilman 1969, 22).
2. Interview with former Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah on 18 February 2020.

3. Interview with Member of Parliament Wong Chen on 18 February 2020.
4. Ibid.
5. Interview with former Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah on 18 February 2020.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Interview with former Deputy Defence Minister Liew Chin Tong on 20 February 2020.
9. Ibid.
10. Interview with former Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah on 18 February 2020.
11. Ibid. According to analysts, given new developments in the South China Sea and the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 deadline would not likely be met (Storey 2020).
12. Interview with former Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah on 18 February 2020.
13. Ibid.
14. Interview with the American Chamber of Commerce (AMCHAM representative) in Malaysia on 21 February 2020. According to the AMCHAM spokesperson in Malaysia, the Malaysian government understood the need to engage US companies in the digital industry apart from the Chinese ones. Given the presence a significant number of US companies in the digital industry, such as Microsoft, IBM and Google and chipmaker Micron Technology and iPhone supplier Jabil Inc. in Penang, engaging US allies, such as Japan and Australia through industrial cooperation and the Five Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA) respectively, implied that a subtle policy of hedging was imperative to maintain Malaysia's non-aligned status.
15. Interview with Jomo Kwame Sundaram on 19 February 2020.
16. Interview with Member of Parliament Wong Chen on 18 February 2020.

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