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Ambivalence in Alignment: The Politics of Malaysia–U.S. Relations

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes the enduring ambivalence in Malaysia's asymmetrical alignment with the United States. It argues that the ambivalent elements in Malaysia's alignment behavior are attributable to historical, domestic, and structural factors. These elements are not new as they can be traced to the earlier decades of Malaysia-U.S. relations, and they are likely to continue throughout the current Anwar Ibrahim's "Unity Government", and beyond. Washington may not like the ambivalence in Malaysian policy, but it must realize that the uncertainties and inconsistencies in its own foreign policy are partially responsible. A sound and sustainable U.S. policy toward Malaysia and Southeast Asia more broadly must acknowledge and address the roots of such ambivalence.

Keywords: Alignment, Malaysia-U.S. relations, Southeast Asia, small-state foreign policy, hedging, legitimation

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Introduction

Relations with the United States have been one of the most salient but occasionally sensitive aspects of Malaysia's foreign policy. Since Malaya's independence from Britain in 1957 and the formation of Malaysia in 1963, the United States has been viewed as a vital partner, most notably in the economic and diplomatic domains, but increasingly, since the 1980s, also in the defense and security realms. By the 2000s and 2010s, the bilateral partnership constituted an unannounced but de facto "alignment", according to the key attributes discussed below. However, as a smaller state, Malaysia's alignment with the superpower has been persistently marked by ambivalence, with its policy being low-key, ambiguous, and seemingly contradictory on selected issues throughout the post-Cold War era. Some of these ambivalent outlooks and approaches have deepened in recent years in the face of accelerating U.S.-China rivalry and wider power uncertainties across the Indo-Pacific region.

This paper unpacks the enduring ambivalence in Malaysia's asymmetrical alignment with the United States. Conceptually and theoretically, the paper identifies ambivalence as a fundamental feature of state alignments under conditions of uncertainty, an aspect most reflective of the interplay of internal and external factors in shaping a militarily weaker state's policy choices. Empirically, the paper provides important examples of ambivalence and paradoxes in Malaysian foreign policy, such as maintaining its longstanding defense ties with the United States while developing a new security partnership with China, the very source of Malaysian security apprehensions in the South China Sea. From the policy perspective, the paper enriches the ongoing debates about the prospects for Southeast Asian states' evolving alignment approaches in adapting to fast changing geopolitical realities, as the administration of President Joseph Biden seeks to revitalize U.S. alliances and partnerships around Asia to push back against China's growing influence at regional and global levels.

This paper argues that the ambivalent elements in Malaysia's alignment behavior are attributable to historical, domestic, and structural factors. These elements are not new as they can be traced to the earlier decades of Malaysia-U.S. relations, and they are likely to continue throughout the current Anwar Ibrahim's "Unity Government", and beyond. Washington may not like the ambivalence in Malaysian policy, but it must realize that the uncertainties, inconsistencies, and insensitivities in its own foreign

policy are partially responsible. From Malaysia's perspective, these inconsistencies and flaws include the following issues. First, Washington's fluctuating attention and commitment to bilateral relations and regional affairs in Southeast Asia. Second, its values-based foreign policy can challenge the domestic authority and political legitimacy of ruling elites. Third, Washington's tendency to view Southeast Asian states as objects or tools for its own strategic agenda, such as anti-communist containment during the Cold War, the global war on terror after September 2001, and now, preserving U.S. primacy and pushing back China, and at times pressuring them to adopt a more pro-U.S. stance. Finally, Washington's over-emphasis on the use of military approaches to advance its agenda, such as the recently announced Australia-United Kingdom-United States [AUKUS] alliance and the nuclear-powered submarine deal, which is perceived to be increasing the risks of escalation, entrapment and instability in Southeast Asia. A sound and sustainable U.S. policy toward Malaysia and Southeast Asia more broadly must acknowledge and address the roots of such ambivalence.

The paper proceeds in four parts. The first provides a brief conceptual distinction between "alignment" and "alliance" in international relations, before tracing Malaysia's evolving partnership with the United States, illuminating the ways in which the partnership is a resilient alignment. The second identifies the ambivalence in the Malaysia-U.S. alignment. The third explains such ambivalence by analyzing the historical roots, domestic determinants, and structural sources driving and limiting Malaysia's contemporary policy towards the United States. The final part concludes by assessing Malaysia's broader foreign policy dilemmas amid the growing great power rivalries and uncertainties in the Indo-Pacific.

The Malaysia-U.S. Partnership: A Resilient Alignment

International Relations scholars have for decades used the terms "alliance" and "alignment" interchangeably,[1] which reflected pre-Cold War and Cold War realities when the majority of state alignments were forged primarily through military alliances. More recent scholarship, however, has noted that in the post-Cold War period, alignments should be distinguished from alliances, as states can and often align *without* entering into an alliance.[2] Alliance is defined here as military cooperation between two or more sovereign states that involve mutual defense obligations, whereas alignment is

conceived of as a wider phenomenon. An alignment is a state's institutionalized (as opposed to ad hoc) partnerships with individual power(s) in defense, development, and/or diplomatic domains, which involve regularized strategic mechanisms, high-level consultative processes, and expandable collaboration across domains. Alliances manifest in military partnerships, while alignments involve both military and non-military cooperation. Alliances are bound by common threat perceptions and adversaries; alignments are grounded in broader shared interests and outlooks but not necessarily common threats. While alliances bind countries to a specific big-power patron militarily, alignments leave room for states to cooperate simultaneously and selectively across domains with *multiple* partners, sometimes even with competing powers. The scale, scope, and sustainability of an alignment between two states depend on their convergence of interests and risk outlooks. The greater the convergence, the stronger the alignment.

By this definition, Malaysia's partnership with the United States is clearly not an alliance, but an "alignment." It is an inter-state partnership driven by a considerable degree of converged strategic interests, continuously developed by institutionalized cooperative mechanisms, high-level consultative processes (as opposed to low-level, ceremonial exchanges), and extensive collaboration with aggregated benefits spilling into multiple domains (as opposed to single-domain interactions). These attributes make the partnership an alignment, qualitatively distinguishable from other less institutionalized, less strategic, and less extensive cooperative relations. The Malaysia-U.S. partnership is broad-based, covering not only sustained defense and security collaboration but also sizeable economic ties and people-to-people exchanges in education, technology, sociocultural and other areas.[3]

Defense and security have been central pillars of the Malaysia-U.S. alignment. Malaysia's defense cooperation with the United States is longstanding, but it was not developed right after the country's independence. For the first 14 years of its nationhood, Malaysia relied on the United Kingdom—not the United States—as its ally and principal patron. The country's first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman (1957-1970), chose to enter the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement (AMDA) alliance, but stayed away from the U.S.-led Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO). In the aftermath of the British withdrawal of troops from its bases east of Suez and the eventual replacement of the AMDA

alliance with the Five Power Defense Arrangement (FPDA) in 1971, prime minister Tun Razak (1970-1976) supplanted the Tunku's pro-West policy with a "non-alignment" posture and regionalism, approaches continued by Tun Hussein Onn (1976-1981) and all subsequent Malaysian leaders.

In the decades that followed, Malaysia gradually and quietly developed an increasingly substantive defense partnership with the United States as *a* security hedge. This move was driven by prevailing strategic needs as geopolitical circumstances evolved, which included the threat of communist expansion after the Soviet-backed Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia in the late 1970s, the strategic uncertainty in Asia following the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, and the tensions surrounding the multi-nation territorial disputes in the South China Sea, especially since the 2010s.[4] Perceived security threats—even if not expressed explicitly—have been the drivers for Malaysia's closer defense alignment with the United States.

Malaysia's gradual and quiet alignment with the United States, in other words, has developed despite the smaller state's public posture and pronouncement of "non-alignment." The architect of such paradoxical pragmatism was none other than Mahathir Mohamad, the longest serving prime minister of Malaysia.[5] Under Mahathir's first premiership (1981-2003), despite the occasional diplomatic feuds between the two countries, Malaysia signed and institutionalized bilateral defense ties with the United States, not once but twice. First, the Bilateral Training and Consultative Group (BITACG) was agreed to during Mahathir's first official visit to the United States in 1984 against the backdrop of the Cold War. Second, the Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA) was signed in 1994, even at a time when Mahathir was criticizing Washington's foreign policies, while promoting ASEAN-based and East Asian-wide cooperation in the immediate post-Cold War era.[6]

Mahathir's successor, Abdullah Badawi (2003-2009), strengthened the BITACG and signed the 2005 ACSA, a bilateral logistics agreement that remains in force until 2025.[7] Abdullah further developed the Malaysia-U.S. security partnership in such areas of common interest as counterterrorism and maritime security, while consolidating the already well-established cooperation, including defense consultative engagement, military education and training (most notably through the U.S.-sponsored International Military Education and training [IMET] program), as well as bilateral and multilateral

military exercises.[8] For instance, since 1995, Malaysia has joined the United States in the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT), an annual bilateral naval exercise. Malaysia has also participated in the Pacific Partnership, the U.S. Pacific Fleet's annual multilateral humanitarian and disaster response-focused mission established following the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. Since 2010, Malaysia has upgraded its participation in the U.S.-led Cobra Gold exercises from an observer to a participant. Moreover, Malaysia is one of the countries eligible for the U.S. Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program. In May 2002, when then Malaysian Defense Minister Najib Razak spoke at a Washington, D.C. think tank, he described Malaysia-U.S. defense cooperation as an untold but "solid success story."[9] Bilateral defense ties were steadily developed after Najib became the country's sixth prime minister (2009-2018), when overall bilateral relations transformed into a close and cordial partnership.[10] The two countries elevated their bilateral ties to a Comprehensive Partnership in April 2014 during U.S. President Barack Obama's historic visit to Malaysia.

In its inaugural *Defense White Paper*, commenced and completed during Mahathir's second premiership from May 2018 to February 2020, Malaysia describes its military-to-military partnership with the United States as "long-standing and comprehensive."[11] Indeed, the bilateral defense and security partnership has steadily grown more comprehensive in scope and mutually beneficial in substance. Over the decades, the partnership has expanded to cover such areas as: a strategic consultation forum (the Malaysia-U.S. Strategic Talks, MUSST), counterterrorism, maritime security, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), cyber security, sharing and exchange of information, defense capability-building and defense industry. Under the Building Partner Capacity (BPC) Program, which involves the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) and other security agencies, the United States has, since 2008, provided Malaysia with some US$217.6 million for maritime domain awareness (MDA), counterterrorism and other areas of common concern bilaterally and regionally.[12] The U.S. Maritime Security Initiatives (MSI) has supported the installation of MDA radars in eastern Sabah as well as other activities aimed at enhancing Malaysia's capability (assets) and capacity (training), including the delivery of 18 ScanEagle unmanned aerial vehicles for maritime surveillance between 2019 and 2022.[13]

The benefits from the progressively expanding cooperation are mutual. In addition to providing valuable training and exercises opportunities to the MAF and other agencies, the expanding

partnership has also granted the United States access to Malaysian airfields and ports, provided venues for the U.S. military to engage in jungle-warfare training, and supported the U.S. counterterrorism and other strategic priorities at both bilateral and regional levels. In a document titled *Integrated Country Strategy: Malaysia*, the U.S. Embassy in Kuala Lumpur notes: "Malaysia's geographic location makes it strategically significant for U.S. commercial and security interests," well positioned to play an important role in promoting regional stability, peaceful resolution of territorial disputes, free movement of commerce, freedom of navigation and overflight, goals that are "critical for global economic prosperity and security."[14] The same document also highlights the importance of partnering with Malaysia on issues ranging from the South China Sea, maritime security and the rules-based international order, to counterterrorism, counter-radicalization and transnational crime prevention efforts, to HADR preparedness, peacekeeping operations, supply-chain cooperation, and democratic resilience.[15] The Indo-Pacific priority actions, as outlined in the 2017 U.S. *National Security Strategy,* mentions Malaysia as one of the nations in Southeast Asia with which the United States seeks to "build growing economic and security partnerships."[16]

Converging interests, in short, have led Malaysia and the United Stated to continuously expand their security cooperation, with a particular focus on enhancing Malaysia's capacity and capability in the maritime domain. All in all, this collaboration serves to enhance Malaysia's overall ability to monitor and respond to traditional and non-traditional security challenges, including those around the maritime areas facing the South China Sea, the Sulu Sea, and the Straits of Malacca.

The expanding security cooperation has grown side-by-side with increasing bilateral economic and people-to-people ties.[17] The United States has been one of Malaysia's top trading partners and top investors.[18] Table 1 shows Malaysia-U.S. bilateral trade during the period 1990–2022. Tables 2-4, respectively, show Malaysia's top five export destinations, top five import sources, and top five foreign direct investment (FDI) sources for the period 2010–2022. This data indicates the longstanding and continuing economic importance of the United States to Malaysia. In the four-year period from 2017-2020, the United States ranked as Malaysia's third largest export market and source of imports. Malaysia was the U.S.'s 11th largest trading partner by total trade from 2003-2005, despite its relatively smaller economy.[19] Economic and other interests led the Najib government to negotiate and join the

Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and to maintain its membership after TPP was replaced by the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) in December 2018. Malaysia has welcomed and participated in the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) since its launch in May 2022 by the Biden administration. Beyond the economic realm, the two countries have enjoyed cordial and close ties in educational, sociocultural, and tourism exchanges.

Table 1: Malaysia-US Trade, 1990-2022 (in USD Millions)

Year	Export	Import	Total Trade Volume	Balance of Payments
1990	4,989,496	4,914,128	9,903,624	75,367
1995	15,278,556	12,546,288	27,824,844	2,732,269
2000	20,159,485	13,636,641	33,796,126	6,522,844
2005	27,815,727	14,776,362	42,592,089	13,039,366
2010	18,981,095	17,551,425	36,532,519	1,429,670
2011	18,850,437	18,106,865	36,957,302	743,572
2012	19,718,957	15,884,979	35,603,936	3,833,981
2013	18,440,580	16,087,775	34,528,355	2,352,805
2014	19,702,600	16,009,272	35,711,872	3,693,327
2015	18,928,949	14,226,544	33,155,493	4,702,405
2016	19,353,879	13,418,638	32,772,517	5,935,241
2017	20,706,831	15,209,250	35,916,081	5,497,581
2018	22,525,315	16,093,851	38,619,166	6,431,464
2019	23,149,658	16,575,608	39,725,266	6,574,051
2020	26,233,855	16,763,994	42,997,849	9,469,861
2021	34,325,217	18,032,597	52,357,814	16,292,620
2022	38,001,818	22,822,954	60,824,772	15,178,864

(Sources: WITS World Bank, Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), and US Census Bureau)

Table 2: Malaysia's Top Five Export Destinations, 2010-2022 (in USD Millions)

Year	1	2	3	4	5
2010	Singapore 26,552,830	China 25,057,169	Japan 20,611,236	**United States 18,981,095**	Thailand 10,628,483
2011	China 29,821,382	Singapore 28,812,577	Japan 26,134,473	**United States 18,850,437**	Thailand 11,674,034
2012	Singapore 30,931,146	China 28,742,900	Japan 26,997,638	**United States 19,718,960**	Thailand 12,182,165
2013	Singapore 31,778,866	China 30,775,462	Japan 25,115,837	**United States 18,440,580**	Thailand 12,660,984
2014	Singapore 33,262,666	China 28,222,683	Japan 25,276,973	**United States 19,702,560**	Thailand 12,307,657
2015	Singapore 27,842,989	China 26,062,954	Japan 18,947,306	**United States 18,928,949**	Thailand 11,403,388
2016	Singapore 27,581,069	China 23,753,270	**United States 19,353,879**	Japan 15,250,309	Thailand 10,628,237
2017	Singapore 31,195,409	China 29,332,532	**United States 20,706,831**	Japan 17,580,965	Thailand 11,762,132
2018	Singapore 34,471,038	China 34,413,745	**United States 22,525,315**	Hong Kong 18,482,718	Japan 17,109,997
2019	China 33,690,412	Singapore 33,035,654	**United States 23,149,658**	Hong Kong 16,063,269	Japan 15,755,422
2020	China 38,179,190	Singapore 34,223,100	**United States 26,233,855**	Hong Kong 16,399,690	Japan 14,850,220
2021	China 46,446,572	Singapore 41,982,107	**United States 34,325,217**	Hong Kong 18,510,174	Japan 18,295,472
2022	Singapore 52,837,272	China 47,853,181	**United States 38,001,818**	Japan 22,422,272	Hong Kong 21,743,409

(Sources: WITS World Bank and Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM)

Table 3: Malaysia's Top Five Sources of Imports, 2010-2022 (in USD Millions)

Year	1	2	3	4	5
2010	Japan 20,704,520	China 20,679,866	Singapore 18,731,505	**United States** **17,551,425**	Thailand 10,265,625
2011	China 24,710,273	Singapore 23,995,387	Japan 21,346,068	**United States** **18,106,865**	Indonesia 11,469,979
2012	China 29,723,042	Singapore 25,978,492	Japan 20,181,275	**United States** **15,884,976**	Thailand 11,543,532
2013	China 33,728,561	Singapore 25,432,068	Japan 17,888,705	**United States** **16,087,775**	Thailand 12,262,004
2014	China 35,322,309	Singapore 26,200,004	Japan 16,731,372	**United States** **16,009,272**	Thailand 12,124,849
2015	China 33,242,589	Singapore 21,096,238	**United States** **14,226,544**	Japan 13,770,979	Thailand 10,729,484
2016	China 34,306,466	Singapore 17,453,453	Japan 13,733,979	**United States** **13,418,638**	Thailand 10,208,534
2017	China 38,279,307	Singapore 21,587,908	**United States** **15,209,250**	Japan 14,788,770	Taiwan 12,748,363
2018	China 43,315,860	Singapore 25,474,007	**United States** **16,093,851**	Japan 15,728,776	Taiwan 15,312,190
2019	China 42,364,569	Singapore 21,605,969	**United States** **16,575,608**	Japan 15,346,938	Taiwan 13,734,870
2020	China 41,227,580	Singapore 17,738,250	**United States** **16,763,994**	Japan 14,701,160	Taiwan 13,886,340
2021	China 55,264,464	Singapore 22,594,857	Taiwan 18,147,524	**United States** **18,032,597**	Japan 17,843,225
2022	China 62,687,727	Singapore 30,690,909	Taiwan 24,091,590	**United States** **22,922,954**	Japan 18,990,909

(Source: WITS World Bank and Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM))

Table 4: Net FDI flows in Malaysia, 2010-2022 (in USD Billions)

Year	1	2	3	4	5	Others	Others
2010	**United States 1.88**	Netherlands 1.48	South Korea 1.09	Japan 0.70	Singapore 0.40	**China -0.02**	
2011	Japan 2.37	Singapore 1.53	United Arab Emirates 1.10	Netherlands 0.85	**United States 0.80**	**China 0.01**	
2012	Japan 1.41	Singapore 1.29	Philippines 0.53	Netherlands 0.47	Germany 0.41	**China 0.02**	**United States -0.33**
2013	Japan 1.93	Singapore 1.33	Netherlands 1.14	Hong Kong 1.07	British Virgin Islands 0.61	**United States 0.14**	**China 0.08**
2014	Singapore 1.70	Netherlands 1.64	Hong Kong 0.83	Cayman Islands 0.57	Bermuda 0.56	**China 0.23**	**United States -0.42**
2015	Japan 2.28	Singapore 2.01	**United States 1.30**	United Arab Emirates 1.13	Netherlands 0.75	**China 0.31**	
2016	Hong Kong 3.62	Singapore 1.69	**China 1.43**	**United States 1.20**	Japan 0.88	**-**	
2017	Hong Kong 2.14	**China 1.66**	Singapore 1.53	Japan 1.22	United Kingdom 1.21	**United States -1.17**	
2018	**United States 1.60**	Hong Kong 1.54	Japan 1.17	United Kingdom 0.82	Netherlands 0.61	**China 0.17**	
2019	Japan 2.52	Hong Kong 2.07	Singapore 0.85	Netherlands 0.82	**United States 0.61**	**China 0.45**	
2020	Singapore 1.37	Thailand 0.77	**China 0.63**	Japan 0.53	British Virgin Islands 0.46	**United States 0.23**	
2021	Singapore 2.14	**United States 1.99**	Switzerland 1.20	Netherlands 1.15	South Korea 1.14	**China 0.49**	
2022	**United States 8.60**	Singapore 2.58	Japan 2.18	Hong Kong 1.48	**China 0.82**		

(Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM))

The Malaysia-U.S. partnership has been resilient and time-tested. Under successive governments, bilateral security and socio-economic ties have continued unabated, even when bilateral political relations stagnated or suffered setbacks. In the late 1990s, during the Asian financial crisis and the ensuing political crisis in Malaysia, Washington criticized Mahathir's currency controls as well as his sacking and imprisonment of Anwar Ibrahim, Mahathir's deputy from 1993 to 1998, and finance minister from 1991 to 1998. Mahathir viewed U.S. interference as a political threat. Politically, bilateral relations reached rock bottom. Despite such political problems, it was business-as-usual on the bilateral defense and economic fronts, an indication of the *institutionalized* nature of Malaysia-U.S. alignment. Bilateral relations between Malaysia and the United States thus reflected a "paradoxical bifurcation": politically aloof at times, but persistently strong on security, commercial, and people-to-people ties. From 1966 to 2014, no sitting U.S. president visited Malaysia—a long period of time by any standard—but it was during this period that Malaysia-U.S. security and functional cooperation took off, expanded, and matured.

The most recent indicator of the alignment's stability and maturity occurred during Mahathir's second tenure (2018-2020) as prime minister, part of which coincided with the presidency of Donald Trump. Trump's transactional "American First" agenda and Islamophobic policies alienated Malaysians. His decision to withdraw from the TPP agreement dealt a blow to Malaysian leaders who had invested political capital getting the free trade deal passed at home. Trump's controversial policies, particularly those on the environment, health, immigration and in relation to the Muslim world triggered anti-American sentiment. This was particularly true of Trump's imposition of a "Muslim travel ban" which prohibited individuals from certain countries from entering the United States. Even though Mahathir openly described Trump as "unpredictable", criticized the Trump administration's Middle East policy and urged President Trump to resign "to save America," Malaysia-U.S. cooperation remained intact.

Malaysian leaders and the broader public have welcomed the election of Joe Biden as the 46th President of the United States.[20] On November 8, 2020, prime minister Muhyiddin Yassin congratulated Biden on his electoral victory, describing it as "historic". Muhyiddin—whose Perikatan Nasional (PN)-Plus coalition replaced the Mahathir-led Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition as the government in March 2020—stated that the U.S.-Malaysia Comprehensive Partnership "continues to be an overarching

framework for pro-active, multifaceted and mutually beneficial collaboration between [the] two countries," and that "Malaysia looks forward to strengthening further its partnership with the U.S. under Biden's leadership."[21]

The excitement among some members of Malaysian elites about the Biden administration is in part rooted in shared political values: a belief in the resilience of democracy and its capacity to respond to and address problems. The then opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim hailed Biden's victory as "a win over racism and one for human rights."[22] In multi-ethnic, middle-income Malaysia, enthusiasm for the Biden-Harris victory is also about supporting multiculturalism and women empowerment. As observed by Mustafa Anuar of *Aliran*, Kamala Harris' success "in breaking the glass ceiling in American politics was celebrated the world over, especially by people who cherish the remarkable advancement of women and minorities in important areas of life."[23] This observation is shared among ethnic minorities and women advocates in Malaysia.

The major reason for Malaysian elites' enthusiasm for Biden, however, was the prospect of policy change after four years of Trump's unpredictability.[24] Many welcomed his pledges to re-emphasize multilateralism and partnerships after Trump's unilateralism. These pledges became reality after Biden took office and America re-joined the Paris Climate Accord and the World Health Organization and sought to reset its relations with allies, partners, and the rest of the world. Biden's lifting of the Trump administration's "Muslim travel ban" on his first day in office was symbolically important and lauded by Malaysians, in particular the Malay Muslim majority. Biden's intention to restore the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action Agreement on Iran's nuclear program, resume contact with Palestinian leaders, and restore aid to Palestinians are seen as important steps in restoring trust between America and Muslim countries, which had been diminished by the Islamophobic rhetoric and actions of the Trump administration. CIMB ASEAN Research Institute chairman Munir Majid, for instance, opines that "Biden would bring a more civilized style and a less strident tone in the conduct of foreign policy", and is likely to engage better with Malaysia and ASEAN in contrast to Trump's protectionist, neo-isolationist approach.[25]

While Malaysia welcomed the new Biden Administration, there was also a sense that his administration had a lot of ground to make up after the Trump years. At the same time, domestic politics in Malaysia also poses challenges for the bilateral relationship. Malaysian politics presently continues an already prolonged period of uncertainty and instability. The Muhyiddin's PN-plus coalition was replaced by the even more fragile coalition government led by Ismail Sabri Yaakob in August 2021, amid the deteriorating pandemic crisis and economic difficulties. Consequently, the Malaysia-U.S. partnership endured but showed signs of mutual neglect. The appointment of Anwar Ibrahim as the country's tenth prime minister after the November 2022 general elections has raised the prospect that the Malaysia-U.S. relationship would be strengthened. (Anwar held visiting fellowships at Johns Hopkins and Georgetown University in Washington, DC in 2005-2006.) The prospect, however, is likely to be constrained by several recurring imperatives (elaborated below), which will continue to make the partnership an ambivalent one.

Ambivalence in Malaysia-U.S. Alignment: A Paradoxical Partnership

Persistent resilience notwithstanding, the Malaysia-U.S. alignment has also been ambivalent from the very beginning. The ambivalence—manifested in the deliberately low-profile posture*, mixed* outlook, and selective, even contradictory*,* policy actions—has deepened in recent decades. The ambivalence in Malaysia's alignment with the United States is quintessentially a "hedging" approach to offset multiple risks at both structural and domestic levels (discussed in the subsequent section).[26]

From day one, Malaysia has opted to keep its strategic cooperation with the United States under the radar. Mahathir's forging and institutionalizing the bilateral defense ties by signing the BITACG in 1984 was not publicized in the Malaysian media.[27] Ditto his decision to enter the ACSA in 1994. At his speech at the Heritage Foundation in May 2002, Najib revealed that he considered titling his talk, "Malaysia-U.S. Defense Cooperation: The Untold Story," admitting that, in spite of a wide range of cooperation, "our bilateral defense relationship seems to be an all too well-kept secret," with "virtually no fanfare or public acknowledge."[28] Successive ruling elites in Putrajaya have avoided publicity about the Malaysia-U.S. defense alignment, choosing to keep it low-key in the eyes of Malaysian populace.

The bilateral partnership has also been tinged and constrained by an ambivalent outlook.[29] Malaysia's perception of Washington as a partner has been mixed and never clear-cut. Successive Malaysian leaders—even before Mahathir—have viewed the United States as a vital security and economic partner, but at times also an annoyance and even a problem. From the 1950s through the 1970s, when the newly-independent state relied heavily on rubber and tin as its main sources of national income, Malaysian leaders were often frustrated with U.S. actions (e.g., in releasing the U.S. rubber stockpile) and lack of support for Kuala Lumpur's efforts to stabilize the prices of the two commodities, fueling grievances and the perception among the Malaysian elite that the United States was sabotaging the small country's economy.[30] Bilateral irritation increased during the Mahathir years, with the leader publicly criticizing Washington on an array of bilateral and international issues, ranging from the Asian values debate, to U.S. policy on the Palestine issue and Muslim world, and U.S. protectionist policy. Mahathir accused the United States of double standards on economic regionalism, advocating the North American Free Trade Agreement [NAFTA] and supporting the EU, but opposing Malaysia's East Asian Economic Group [EAEG] proposal. Bilateral political relations dropped to the lowest point in the wake of U.S. interference during the economic and political crisis in the late 1990s, as noted earlier, when Washington criticized Mahathir's currency controls and actions against his former deputy Anwar Ibrahim. These political tensions took place at the same time when the bilateral ties made steady progress on defense, trade, investment, education, and other areas.

The ambivalence in the Malaysia-U.S. alignment is most obvious in the smaller state's selective and seemingly contradictory actions in the defense domain. On one hand, Malaysia has taken an enthusiastic, adaptive, and active approach in enhancing its security partnership with the United States. Putrajaya has collaborated with Washington on its "global war on terrorism", took the initiative to establish MUSST in 2008 as a higher-level bilateral strategic consultative meeting, upgraded its status in the U.S.-led Cobra Gold exercises from an observer to a participant, and forged cooperation on maritime security and maritime domain awareness. On the other, Malaysia has limited the bilateral defense cooperation to activities related to training and capacity-building, exercises, asset acquisition, and information sharing, while keeping its distance from areas deemed sensitive to sovereignty and other concerns.

Malaysia is not alone in taking these prudently selective and seemingly contradictory actions. In 2004, Malaysia and Indonesia opposed the U.S. plan to deploy counterterrorism forces to the Straits of Malacca, out of concern that an extra-regional power patrolling in the straits would infringe their national sovereignty. The rejection of the U.S. proposal occurred even while Malaysia was collaborating with Washington on counterterrorism, non-proliferation, and other security issues. This pattern recurred in September 2021, when both Malaysia and Indonesia expressed concerns over AUKUS, warning that the new security pact could trigger a nuclear arms race and escalate tension in Asia. Prime Minister Ismail cautioned that the pact could "provoke other powers to act aggressively in the region, especially in the South China Sea."[31] His defense minister, Hishammuddin Hussein, stressed that "Malaysia does not want to be dragged into the geopolitics of the considerations of huge powers," and he emphasized that other states must respect ASEAN's principle on neutrality and "Malaysia's stance on nuclear-powered submarines operating in its waters, including under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and the Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty."[32]

The ambivalence in Malaysian alignment behavior also takes the form of seemingly contradictory acts vis-à-vis *both* powers. For example, Malaysia has allowed U.S. navy aircrafts to land on Malaysian airstrips and dock vessels at Malaysian ports. In October 2015, Malaysia permitted the U.S. naval ship USS Lassen to moor at its Sepanggar Naval Base in Kota Kinabalu for a three-day port visit before the U.S. guided-missile destroyer carried out a freedom-of-navigation operation (FONOP) near the artificial islands China has been building in the South China Sea.[33] In a seemingly counter-intuitive move, Malaysia has also granted China similar permission. A month after the USS Lassen's visit, Malaysia allowed Chinese ships to dock at the same port. These actions underscore Malaysia's "equidistance" approach which seeks to avoid the impression it is siding with any power, especially as big-power rivalry intensifies. The approach also serves to keep options open. Malaysia has long taken a middle position and mutually counteracting actions vis-à-vis the U.S. and China, preferring to hedge to mitigate multiple risks.[34] In line with its equidistance policy, Malaysia has been diversifying its defense ties by simultaneously developing defense and strategic partnerships with other powers, including China.[35]

More recently, Malaysia's equidistance and non-taking-sides policy was illustrated in its response to the West Capella incident. In April 2022, a Chinese seismic survey ship Haiyang Dizhi 8 was spotted tagging the Malaysian Petronas-contracted West Capella drill ship engaging in exploration activities near the outer edge of Malaysia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the South China Sea. Soon after, U.S. and Australian warships were conducting military exercises near the site of the West Capella's operation, purportedly in support of Malaysia.[36] The Malaysian government reacted in its typically low-key manner: denying any confrontation or standoff between the Chinese and Malaysian ships, calling for peaceful means to resolve the situation, and expressing concern about potential miscalculation. Then Foreign Minister Hishammuddin Hussein stated: "While international law guarantees the freedom of navigation, the presence of warships and vessels in the South China Sea has the potential to increase tensions that in turn may result in miscalculations which may affect peace, security and stability in the region," before adding that Malaysia maintains "open and continuous communication' with all relevant parties, including China and the United States."[37] The minister's remarks—by mentioning both China and the United States while highlighting the possibility of increased tensions and miscalculations—clearly indicated that the Malaysian authorities were more concerned about the dangers of being entrapped in big-power conflict than the encroachment of foreign vessels into its EEZ per se.[38] Considering Malaysia's status as a claimant country in the South China Sea disputes and considering Malaysia's long held defense ties with the United States (and Australia), such prioritization of interests reflects a prudent "riskification" process: some risks are being downplayed while others being emphasized based on elite's domestic political considerations.[39] The Foreign Minister's statement on the West Capella incident echoes apprehensions expressed explicitly in Malaysia's DWP: "Tensions have sparked in the South China Sea with the arrival of warships from outside the region. The growing rivalry and action-reaction between the powerful nations have raised the risk of regional polarization."[40]

Explaining the Ambivalence

What explains the enduring ambivalence, despite the resilience in Malaysia-U.S. alignment? What risks does Malaysia seek to hedge and mitigate? The three most important factors are: (a) historical experiences and the risk of abandonment; (b) domestic politics and the risk of elite authority erosion;

and (c) structural concerns about power asymmetries and the risk of conflict entrapment. These factors combine to explain why Malaysia's bilateral alignment with the United States has been low-profile, ambivalent, and selectively contradictory.

History matters. Malaysia's past experiences with military alliances have shaped its outlook not only on the role but also the limits of alignment. Malaysia's alliance with Britain—the AMDA from 1957 to 1971—proved crucial in providing security for the newly independent nation, especially in defending against internal and external communist threats, as well as Indonesian aggression during *Konfrontasi*, a low-intensity military campaign against Malaysia, from 1963 to 1966. Malaysia, however, like other Western-aligned states in the region also viewed the British East of Suez policy and the U.S. Nixon Doctrine as demonstrating the risk of abandonment. In retrospect, these two events were watershed moments for Malaysia's defense policy as they convinced Malaysian leaders that Malaysia could no longer rely on their Western allies and partners for security. This realization compelled Malaysia to stress self-reliance and regionalism more in their security planning.[41] The reduced Western presence and growing uncertainty about the Western partners' long-term commitments eventually pushed Malaysia to change its pro-West and alliance-based policies to "non-alignment" in the 1970s. Military partnerships with the Western powers are still regarded as significant components of the state's external policies, as evidenced in Malaysia's persistent efforts to maintain and enhance them since the 1980s. Defence partnerships, however, are perceived as an essential but insufficient tool; military measures are a contingency and not a principal instrument. In the absence of direct and imminent threats, military partnerships are developed in the background, not forefront.

Domestic politics matter more. Inter-elite dynamics and political legitimation, the key determinants of Malaysia's external policies, are the primary factors driving and shaping the scope and substance of Malaysia-U.S. partnership.[42] During the Tunku years, despite the leader's pro-West stance and decision to enter the AMDA, he opted not to join the U.S.-led SEATO, as noted. His stance was in part due to domestic opposition from the left and conservative Malay nationalists.[43] During the Mahathir years, the ambivalent, bifurcated relationship between Malaysia and the United States—robust in the economic and security realms, but occasionally confrontational in political domains, as noted above—

was primarily a result of the Malaysian elite's efforts to strike a balance across multiple legitimation pathways for their targeted domestic audiences.

These pathways include: development-based performance legitimation (ensuring sustainable economic growth), identity-based particularistic legitimation (protecting Malay-Bumiputera interests, promoting Muslim causes, preserving sovereignty and territorial integrity), and democracy-based procedural legitimation (securing public support and winning elections). The performance pathway necessitates growth and external stability, hence the successive elite's persistent effort in cultivating strong economic and security ties with as many partners as possible. The particularistic pathway demands identity resonance, hence the elite's recurring attempts to mobilize Malay-Muslim sentiments on particular racial or religious matters such as the Palestinian issue and Muslim Ummah solidarity. The procedural pathway, on the other hand, requires electoral mandate and popular support to govern the multi-ethnic country of 32 million. These three pathways combine to determine Malaysia's "national" interests, security conceptions, and external outlooks of patrons and/or threats.

The United States has been both boon and bane in these pathways of legitimation. Despite the U.S.'s significant economic and security importance to Malaysia, the superpower's actions—even unintended ones—have often challenged the bases of the Malaysian elite's authority and legitimacy. For example, U.S. actions in curtailing the import of Malaysian palm oil to protect the American soybean industry threaten elite's performance legitimacy. Washington's values-based agenda of promoting liberal democracy, human rights, and open markets can directly threaten Malaysia's developmentalist/ interventionist economic policies and authoritarian political model.[44] These problems are manifested in rounds of tensions or feuds between the two countries such as the Asian values debate, differences over Mahathir's vision for pan-East Asian integration, and Washington's criticisms of successive Malaysian leaders' maltreatment of opposition leader Anwar which perpetuate Malaysia's ambivalent and contradictory actions towards the United States. Muslim voters' resentment about Washington's policies toward the Islamic world has also led the Malaysian ruling elite—including the present Anwar-led government—to be critical of U.S. policies, particularly on the Palestine-Israel conflict. In November 2023, Prime Minister Anwar declared that Malaysia would not retract its support for Gaza and the Palestinians despite the U.S. pressure and the EU's threat.

Structurally, the unpredictable nature of big-power politics has also compelled Malaysia to diversify its strategic partnerships and avoid fully aligning with a single power.[45] In fact, Malaysia's defense partnership with the United States is not its only alignment. Rather, it is one of numerous *multi-layered*, *omni-directional* alignment arrangements cultivated and continuously expanded by Malaysia. As indicated in Malaysia's 2020 *Defense White Paper*, in addition to developing military ties with the United States, Malaysia has continued to forge and enhance defense partnerships with Australia, France, the United Kingdom, and other partners.[46] These partnerships include China, the very source of Malaysia's security apprehensions in the South China Sea, especially after China's increasing intrusions in Malaysian waters since 2013.[47] In October 2013, Malaysia and China upgraded their relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. In 2015, the armed forces of Malaysia and China held their first-ever joint live-troop exercises, codenamed *Aman-Youyi* (Peace and Friendship), in the Straits of Malacca. It was the largest military exercise between China and an ASEAN country.[48] In 2016, Malaysia and China renewed their MoU on defense cooperation which was first signed in 2005. The same year, Malaysia announced its purchase of littoral mission ships from China and the two countries held their second *Aman-Youyi* exercise. The *Aman-Youyi* drill in 2018 was joined by Thailand, marking the first trilateral military exercise involving China and two Southeast Asian states. No *Aman-Youyi* exercise was held after 2018, presumably because of Malaysian elite's domestic preoccupation and the pandemic outbreak. The *Aman-Youyi* exercise was resumed in November 2023, with three additional participants: Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.

There are both structural and domestic reasons why Malaysia pursues the seemingly contradictory and even counter-intuitive acts such as enhancing Malaysia's defense ties with the United States and other Western powers, while simultaneously and inclusively developing a Malaysia-China strategic partnership. Malaysia is worried about China's intentions as Beijing turns increasingly assertive, as illustrated by the Chinese Air Force's overflight towards Malaysian airspace in May 2021.[49] However, unlike the Philippines (before Duterte) and Vietnam which openly leverage their ties to Washington to push back against China's maritime assertiveness, Malaysia has restrained from playing the U.S. military card. Instead, to protect its interests in the multi-nation disputes in the South China Sea, Malaysia has insisted that inter-state disputes must be managed through peaceful, and non-military means such as diplomatic and legal ones. While Malaysia quietly explores for oil and gas in its claimed

areas, it has adopted a non-confrontational approach vis-à-vis China. Malaysia's strategic preference for peaceful means, its power gap with China, economic interests and elite performance legitimation are all key factors to understand Malaysia's South China Sea policies.

As the U.S.-China rivalry intensifies and uncertainty grows, Malaysia is also increasingly concerned about the dangers of being entrapped in big-power action-reaction and armed conflict. This is vividly illustrated by Hishammuddin's 2020 and 2021 statements about the West Capella incident and AUKUS announcement discussed earlier. The former statement was made when Hishammuddin was the foreign minister in Muhyiddin's PN-plus government, while the latter was made when he was the defense minister in Ismail's UMNO-led government. Despite the change in government, the policy has continued. This policy continuity can be traced to previous governments, including Mahathir's PH coalition. In May 2018, when Mahathir was asked to comment on the situation in the South China Sea, he said: "a warship attracts other warships," which reflected Malaysia's long held outlook that power projection provokes power escalation.[50] In July 2018, Mahathir's defense minister Mohamad Sabu answered a question in Parliament by stating that Malaysia is deeply worried about the presence of China *and* the United States in displaying their strengths in the South China Sea and that Malaysia continues to make active diplomatic efforts so that the region will not turn into a fighting area.[51]

After the Trump years, Malaysia, like many other Southeast Asian states, is even more concerned about the long-term U.S. commitment. In the absence of highly reliable, long-term allied support, weaker states like Malaysia hedge by avoiding single-sided alignment and by adopting mutually counteracting actions. While Malaysia is perceived by some observers as being too accommodating and deferential to China, this perception overlooks Putrajaya's low-profile acts of indirect defiance of Beijing, especially during Mahathir's second premiership. Mahathir declined Beijing's request to repatriate Uighurs already in Malaysia to China, suspended some Beijing-backed infrastructure projects, and pursued legal action to defy China over the South China Sea.

At the regional level, Putrajaya has often felt that Washington devotes more attention and resources to other ASEAN capitals. This is disappointing, especially for Malaysian policy elites committed to enhancing Malaysia's partnership with the United States, in spite of constraining factors rooted in

historical, domestic, and structural grounds as noted above. Putrajaya's sense of relative neglect was deepened under the first year of Biden administration. Leading U.S. officials visited other countries in the region, but not Malaysia. Malaysia was not included in U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's July 2021 tour and Vice President Kamala Harris' August 2021 trip. When the Secretary of Defense was in Singapore, his office scheduled a phone conversation for the Secretary to speak with his Malaysian counterpart, but the office then cancelled the arrangement, twice.[52] Thus, some Malaysian elites justifiably felt that Malaysia was being ignored or belittled by the Biden Administration, which deepened Malaysia's perception of Washington's insensitivity and unreliability as a partner. Such sentiments and perceptions, however, were eased after the visits by Blinken and other senior officials to Malaysia after December 2021. For example, United States Trade Representative Katherine Tai visited Malaysia in March 2023.

Conclusion

This paper illustrated that while Malaysia is not a treaty ally of the United States, the two countries have maintained a resilient, broad-based, and well-institutionalized strategic partnership that can be described as an alignment. The alignment, however, is an ambivalent one. Tracing Malaysia's evolving alignment with the United States and unpacking its features, this paper argued that the enduring ambivalence is products of historical, domestic, and structural factors.

Three findings can be drawn. First, ambivalence is not an intended end, but more the inevitable effects of political realities. Second, ambivalence breeds ambiguities, which often serve as necessary means to hedge multiple risks under systemic uncertainties. In addition to mitigating the *military and security* risks associated with U.S.-China rivalry, particularly the danger of being entrapped in a great power conflict, Malaysia's ambiguous and contradictory approach vis-à-vis Washington is also an effort to respond to and mitigate against the *political* risk stemming from the unpredictability, inconsistencies, and insensitivities in U.S. policy. While the United States has been a key defense and economic partner, its cyclical neglect and increasingly unpredictable commitment to bilateral relations and regional affairs create political and strategic challenges for Malaysia. So too does Washington's habitual interventionist approach on values-related issues, and its occasional tendency to adopt a with-us or against-us alliance-

centric mindset and policy. Given these structural and unequal dynamics, it is logical for smaller states like Malaysia to adopt a mixed and mutually counteracting approach to hedge and protect their interests. Third, while mitigating structural risks are a key driver motivating Malaysian foreign policy considerations, domestic factors are the more important determinants shaping its eventual policy choices. Enhancing Malaysian elites' domestic authority and optimizing their pathways of legitimation, in particular, are equally and at times more important imperatives determining the scope, scale, and style of Putrajaya's alignment position vis-à-vis Washington.

Looking ahead, Malaysia's pragmatic, inclusive, and prudent alignment behavior—a hedging policy—is likely to persist throughout and beyond the Anwar administration. Domestically, after decades of relative stability and predictability under the coalition dominated by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), three coalition governments in Malaysia have collapsed since February 2020, amid near-constant political jousting and maneuvering. Although Anwar's appointment as Prime Minister and the formation of the PH-led "unity government" in late 2022 introduced a modicum of stability to Malaysian politics, a deepening preoccupation with domestic issues is likely to take hold.

Internationally, Malaysia perceives both challenges and opportunities from the escalating great power competition as the "Indo-Pacific" construct evolves into a geopolitical reality. As power competition grows amid increasing uncertainties, smaller states like Malaysia are confronted with deep foreign policy dilemmas: how do they maintain stability and maximize cooperation, while mitigating risks and minimizing the possibility of conflicts no one wants? While hedging is not a panacea, Malaysia has sought to avoid taking sides, opting instead to diversify strategic and development ties, while pursuing ambiguous and contradictory policies to keep options open for as long as possible.

Malaysia's insistence on hedging and strategic autonomy may not be welcomed by the United States, China or other great powers. However, precisely because it is not the best scenario for any of the competing powers, it is the next-best scenario for all of them. Considering Malaysia's geographic location, diplomatic linkages, and traditional role of connecting countries across regions, civilizations and development tiers together, it is important for the United States to engage Malaysia. Neglecting

Malaysia would only push it to the other side of the power equation, undoing the strategic dividends the two sides have built for decades.

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