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President Obama in Malaysia: The Substance of Symbolism

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Elina Noor, Assistant Director, Foreign Policy and Security Studies at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia, explains that “The elevation of US-Malaysia bilateral relations to a Comprehensive Partnership during Obama’s visit basically serves to underscore the solid, operational ties currently extant between both countries.”

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President Barack Obama finally made it to Malaysia as part of his April 2014 four-nation Asian tour that also included Japan, South Korea and the Philippines. The visit occurred nearly half a century after the last visit of a sitting US president, a false start late last year, and amid concerns of even this trip being scuttled because of Malaysian domestic politics. Despite the three-day duration and the anticipation that had been built up around it, this trip was always destined to be more symbolic than substantive in impact.

While in Malaysia, President Obama attended a state dinner in his honor, held talks with Prime Minister Najib Razak, delivered remarks at the Malaysian Global Innovation and Creativity Center (MAGIC), hosted a town hall meeting with young Southeast Asian leaders, met with civil society leaders, and witnessed the signing of commercial agreements worth about US\$2 billion. Even Malaysia’s endorsement of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) Statement of Interdiction Principles was in effect a formalization of many of the compliance procedures that had already been in place and are already being observed.

The elevation of US-Malaysia bilateral relations to a Comprehensive Partnership during Obama’s visit basically serves to underscore the solid, operational ties currently extant between both countries. In the traditional areas of long-standing cooperation—defense, security, trade, and investment—the focus will continue to be on deepening ties by qualitatively enriching existing arrangements. By contrast, the freshly formalized Comprehensive Partnership will seek to broaden cooperation in underexplored areas by increasing the number of initiatives, flows, and people-to-people exchanges in science and technology, education, and socio-cultural programming.

The symbolism of Obama’s Malaysia trip, however, is in and of itself significant for five reasons. First, as elsewhere in Asia, symbolism matters in highlighting the value of relationships. In Malaysia’s case, Obama’s visit signaled maturation in the bilateral relationship, largely seen in the warming of political ties at the leadership level particularly during his and Najib’s tenure in office. The “selfie” photograph that both leaders took of themselves together is perhaps a flippant example of this personal connection but like the visit, it is symbolic of how far political relations have come between both countries.

Second, at the working level, Obama’s visit emphasized the steadfast friendship that both countries have cultivated in blood, sweat, tears, and dollars since the birth of Malaya and later, Malaysia, as an independent nation. The fealty of this friendship has been further proven in crises—during the Battle of Bakara market in Mogadishu in 1993 and more recently, the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370. Usually considered brash and obtrusive, the United States has played a crucial, yet muted role in the multinational search and recovery efforts for missing flight MH370. Typically dominant in a leadership role, this

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time round the United States has proved itself a steady and reliable partner by taking a backseat role and concentrating solely on the task at hand.

Third, the upgrading of bilateral ties to a partnership implies a relationship approaching a more equal footing. There is no doubt that America remains the dominant partner in many areas. However, where the relationship has been more firmly grounded over time—such as in defense and security—genuine two-way exchanges of information and expertise are increasingly taking place. The annual military exercise Keris Strike, sponsored by the US Army Pacific (USARPAC) and hosted by the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF), is a good example of joint training in theater security that both countries benefit from equally. In previous exercises, participants have traded expertise and insights into countering improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and conducting jungle warfare.

As the Malaysia–US Senior Officials Dialogue, Malaysia-US Strategic Talks, and Bilateral Training and Consultative Group (BiTACG) are reinvigorated under the Comprehensive Partnership, it is expected that joint exercises like Keris Strike and Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) will evolve in complexity to further integrate US-Malaysian interoperability in increasingly challenging scenarios. Additionally, both countries look set to partner more in maritime security domain awareness given recent challenges to Malaysia’s territorial sovereignty in Sabah state, as well as shared interests in preserving recognized principles of international law in the South China Sea.

Fourth, it has to be noted that Malaysia was the only non-treaty ally stop in Obama’s Asia trip covering Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines. Far from any indication that Malaysia is headed towards a formal alliance with the United States, what the aberration does suggest is US recognition of Malaysia as a strategic pivot point in the US rebalance towards Asia. Apart from Malaysia’s geostrategic position, the country is also an important partner in the ongoing Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations.

Due to exceptionally strong domestic public resistance to TPP, however, it has been decided that Malaysia’s participation in any finalized treaty will be determined by parliamentary debate once an agreement has been concluded. This means that Malaysia may exit the TPP if terms are ultimately deemed unfavorable by elected representatives of the country in Parliament. Having halted bilateral free trade agreement negotiations with the United States in 2009, Malaysia’s withdrawal from a finalized TPP agreement might well further stall already flagging trade ties between the two countries.

Fifth, Obama’s focus on youth empowerment, through his appearances at MAGIC and the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) town hall meeting, underline the fact that an enduring partnership needs to be institutionalized beyond his and Najib’s respective terms in office. Obama’s popularity in Southeast Asia has largely been carried by his persona rather than his office and policies. His personality, charisma, and background have uniquely endeared him to many in this region and it is doubtful whether the screams of “We love you, Obama” that greeted him as he strode across the stage at the YSEALI town hall meeting will be repeated for other future visiting US presidents.

Ironically, because of its strength and stability at the working level, the US-Malaysia relationship is sometimes accused of being staid and saturated. However, as Obama said himself at the end of his Asian trip, this kind of foreign policy “may not always be sexy” nor does it make for dramatic commentary on the general state of US-Malaysia ties. With two years left in office for the Obama administration, along with the domestic challenges facing the Najib government, the symbolism of this trip may well be the best opportunity to lay an innovative yet enduring framework for the future development of the Malaysia-US relationship.

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