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## The U.S.-Malaysia Security Connection

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**Marvin Ott and Derek Maseloff, Senior Scholar and Research Assistant, respectively, at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, explain that “There is little doubt that [Malaysian Prime Minister] Najib understands the implications of Chinese ambitions and methods. He also understands the critical importance of the U.S. as a counterweight to China.”**

President Obama’s invitation to ASEAN leaders to join him in California was the latest initiative in a strategic contest between the U.S. and China to shape the future of Southeast Asia. That contest has political and economic elements but it includes an important – even core – security dimension. Defense/security ties between the U.S. and Southeast Asian states run the gamut from minimal (Laos) to intimate (Singapore) to full treaty alliance (Philippines). These relationships have also been remarkably dynamic as U.S.-Vietnamese ties wax and those with Thailand wane. Burma/Myanmar has moved from distant and hostile toward a potential, but still uncertain, strategic entente. In all this protean complexity Malaysia stands out as particularly intriguing.

Malaya – and then Malaysia – gained independence via amicable negotiations with its former colonial overlord, Great Britain. The U.S. was a friendly, but marginal factor in Malaysia’s security equation during the first two decades of independence. The advent of the Mahathir era (1981-2003) brought a new and paradoxical tone to U.S.-Malaysia relations. Mahathir, animated by a idiosyncratic anti-colonial zeal, seemed to go out of his way to irritate Washington with invective that portrayed America as at once arrogant, a bully, and, if not anti-Muslim, something very close to it. Yet while flagellating U.S. diplomats and political leaders he allowed security relations (defense and intelligence) with Washington to grow and prosper. The same was true when it came to U.S. corporate (particularly technology) investments in Malaysia.

The force of Mahathir’s personality and the length of his tenure left a durable imprint on Malaysian perceptions of America which were reinforced by the post-9/11 invasions of two Muslim countries, Afghanistan and Iraq. The easy cordiality between Kuala Lumpur and Washington of the first two decades was replaced by a steady diet of public rancor. From a strategic perspective, Mahathir’s anti-American posturing came without serious cost because Malaysia faced no critical security threats for the three decades following the Vietnam War.

A different, almost mirror image, played out in Malaysia-China relations. During the early years of Malaysian independence China was seen as a mortal threat given Maoist support for the Malaysian communist insurgency of the 1950s and early 1960s and for Sukarno’s attempt to dismember Malaysia (1963-5). But by the 1980s Deng Xiaoping had set China on a course of normal state-to-state relations and rapid economic development. China, for Mahathir, had the additional virtue of being Asian and not America. The Malaysia that Mahathir bequeathed with his retirement, and that Najib Razak inherited upon becoming Prime Minister a few years later (2009), was overtly friendly toward China and equally overtly suspicious of the U.S. Malaysia took considerable pride in having been the first ASEAN government to normalize diplomatic relations with China in 1974. That agreement is particularly resonate because it was negotiated by the current Prime Minister’s father.

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But by 2009 the strategic landscape in Southeast Asia was changing rapidly and profoundly. The dramatic growth in China’s maritime military power coupled with Beijing’s undisguised territorial ambitions in the South China Sea rendered Kuala Lumpur’s security orientation increasingly out of sync with reality. China’s determination to enforce the 9-Dash line as a sovereign boundary meant that Malaysia would – if China’s view prevailed – have to give up its own extensive maritime claims. It was hard to have any doubt on this point when Chinese naval and paramilitary flotillas began making regular appearances at James Shoal in the extreme south of the South China Sea – where they removed Malaysian markers and challenged the right of offshore oil rigs there to operate without Beijing’s approval. All this is within 50 miles of the Malaysian coast and well within Malaysia’s Exclusive Economic Zone. About a third of the Malaysian government’s annual revenue derives from the oil and gas sector – much of it within the EEZ. In July 2014 an oil consortium announced the discovery of a major natural gas field 90 miles off the coast of Sarawak.

The Najib government has responded with a classic hedging strategy. China is Malaysia’s largest trading partner and Kuala Lumpur has gone out of its way to celebrate a “special relationship” with Beijing. Malaysia has carefully avoided public criticism or confrontation regarding China’s activities in the South China Sea. There have been no Malaysian analogs to Indonesian seizures of Chinese fishing boats or the Philippines’ legal case against China before the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea. Kuala Lumpur has earned public praise from Xi Jinping for its “quiet diplomacy approach” and the Malaysian and Chinese militaries have engaged in a growing menu of joint exercises and consultations.

But there is little doubt that Najib understands the implications of Chinese ambitions and methods. He also understands the critical importance of the U.S. as a counterweight to China. Najib once quipped that U.S.-Malaysian defense cooperation was “an all too well-kept-secret.” No longer. During Barack Obama’s 2014 visit to Kuala Lumpur (the first by an American President since Lyndon Johnson) the two governments formally characterized their relationship as a “Comprehensive Partnership.” U.S. Navy ships visit Malaysia regularly and the two militaries maintain a demanding schedule of joint exercises – both bilateral and multilateral. They include jungle training in Malaysia with U.S. Special Forces and Malaysian participation in the largest annual U.S. multilateral exercise in Asia – Cobra Gold in Thailand. Dozens of Malaysian armed forces personnel attend U.S. military educational institutions jointly funded by both governments. Credible reporting indicates that U.S. maritime surveillance aircraft are operating out of a Malaysian Air Force Base on Labuan Island on the southern edge of the South China Sea. The Malaysian Defense Minister has publicly expressed the hope that the U.S. will help train Malaysian Marines to be stationed at a new base in Sarawak. The two countries navies cooperate in counterpiracy operations in the Malacca Straits and the Gulf of Aden. U.S. expertise and equipment have been enlisted to assist Malaysia in the long agonizing effort to discover what happened to the Malaysia Airlines flight lost over the southern Pacific. Early this month Malaysia announced a deal for 6 attack helicopters – the largest purchase of U.S. military equipment in 27 years. But perhaps the most graphic evidence of the new tone in the security relationship occurred 3 months ago when news footage showed the US. Secretary of Defense, Ash Carter, standing on the deck of a U.S. aircraft carrier underway in the South China Sea – and standing next to him with a broad smile on his face was Hishammuddin Hussein, Malaysia’s Minister of Defence.

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