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Getting to Full Bloom in US-Malaysia Relations

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In early October, three US cabinet secretaries—Secretary of State John Kerry, Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker and US Trade Representative Michael Froman—paid their first visit to Malaysia in a bid to boost bilateral relations with the Southeast Asian state. Although their trips were tinged with disappointment due to the cancellation of US President Barack Obama’s much anticipated visit, the significance of the ever closer developing US-Malaysia relationship, as well as the challenges to advance ties even further in the future were highlighted.

While the United States and Malaysia have successfully cooperated on a number of issues since independence, the bilateral relationship was often turbulent amid disagreements on economic policy, human rights and American foreign policy in the Middle East. But ties have both warmed appreciably and become much more comprehensive under the tenures of President Obama and Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak, with Malaysia tightening its export control laws against non-proliferation, sending non-combat medical military personnel to Afghanistan and joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations in 2010. Indeed, at end of 2010, then-US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell was already describing the US-Malaysia relationship as the most improved in Southeast Asia.

The recent visit by the three cabinet secretaries offered a chance to once again reaffirm the importance of the burgeoning US-Malaysia relationship. Standing in for President Obama at the Global Entrepreneurship Summit on October 11, US Secretary of State John Kerry lauded Malaysia as an innovative and multi-faith model for the world. He also later attended a Fulbright Teaching Assistant Event, a program that sends English teachers from the United States to Malaysia and is lauded as one of the signature people-to-people bilateral achievements under the Obama administration. Meanwhile, Secretary Pritzker and US Trade Representative Froman met with Second Finance Minister Ahmad Husni Mohamad Hanadzlah, where they discussed Malaysia’s participation in the ongoing TPP trade negotiations.

However, if the visit was indicative of how far US-Malaysia relations have come, it also highlighted how much both sides still have left to do to overcome the challenges to forming an even stronger partnership. US diplomatic attention to Malaysia is only beginning to match the growing importance of the bilateral relationship. While the stream of US officials has increased noticeably under the Obama administration, including the three cabinet secretaries, the relationship would benefit from a further expansion and institutionalization of visits to enhance bilateral cooperation. It is also a glaring fact that no US president has visited the country since Lyndon Johnson in 1966, even though attempts were made under the Clinton and Obama administrations. It is highly anticipated that President Obama will follow through on his promise to visit at a later date.

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Secondly, fierce domestic opposition is making Malaysia’s efforts to join the TPP a lot harder than both governments would like. Prime Minister Najib recognizes that signing onto the high-standard regional agreement would help Malaysia undertake key economic reforms and stimulate private investment, particularly with the United States which is Malaysia’s fourth largest trading partner and largest foreign investor. But the TPP has come under fire from a range of advocacy groups for multiple reasons, including its alleged lack of transparency and perceived threat to the interests of small and medium enterprises, as well as affirmative action privileges for the Malay-Muslim majority. Protests were held during the latest visit by US officials, and both Prime Minister Najib and Second Finance Minister Ahmad Husni themselves raised lingering domestic concerns about the agreement to their American interlocutors in meetings. Concerns center on issues including state-owned enterprises and intellectual property rights. The Ministry of Trade and Industry (MITI) has also said in public statements that Malaysia is not wedded to the end of year deadline to complete the TPP negotiations and that the country’s entry may be contingent upon parliamentary approval.

Thirdly, the evolution of Malaysian domestic politics could reignite differences between Washington and Putrajaya—the federal administrative capital of Malaysia—on democracy, human rights, and sovereignty issues. While Secretary Kerry was full of praise for Malaysia as an innovative, multiracial democracy, in truth the country has seen some backsliding since elections in May where the ruling coalition retained power but lost the popular vote and suffered its worst performance in the nation’s history. As a result, Prime Minister Najib has had to backtrack on several of his reform-minded policies and appeal to the conservatives in his party and the Malay-Muslim majority as opposed to the broader electorate. Just over the past month or so, the government has expanded affirmative action privileges for ethnic Malays instead of rolling them back, reintroduced detention without trial, and announced that it will appeal opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim’s acquittal on sodomy charges which many believe are politically-motivated. While the United States has thus far remained relatively silent on these events, the pressure for Washington to speak out may grow if democracy and human rights are seen to be in jeopardy. Meanwhile, on the Malaysian side, allegations of US spying activities conducted in the country has stoked public opposition and pressured Putrajaya to act, with the Foreign Ministry lodging an official protest with the US embassy and politicians warning of further damage to bilateral ties due to Washington’s disregard for its partner’s sovereignty.

None of these challenges are insurmountable however. The United States and Malaysia can create annual or semi-annual institutionalized dialogues in key areas to foster cooperation and increase the number and depth of bilateral visits, including President Obama’s trip to the country which is expected to be announced in due course. Putrajaya can intensify its campaign to educate the Malaysian population and politicians about the benefits of the TPP and address their concerns head on, while Washington should give its partner the time and flexibility to work through domestic politics. Both sides should find a way to have a more open and honest conversation about human rights and democracy, as true partners should be able to discuss their differences in the context of a healthy and mature relationship. Recent domestic “victories” for both leaders could also bode well for the relationship if Prime Minister Najib’s win over conservatives in internal party polls earlier this month allows him to restart a stalled reform process in Malaysia, or the end of the government shutdown in the United States gives President Obama a little more time to focus on foreign policy issues.

In an interview with a Malaysian newspaper earlier this year, former US Ambassador to Malaysia Paul Jones said that US-Malaysia relations “are blossoming and getting closer and closer to full bloom.” If both sides can overcome these current key challenges, they can move one step closer to making that statement a reality.

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