

# Intellectual Discourse

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**Religion, Culture and Governance**



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# *Intellectual Discourse*

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Volume 27

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2019

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**Intellectual Discourse**  
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*Theme*  
***Religion, Culture and Governance***

*Guest Editor*  
***M. Moniruzzaman***

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# Malaysia's Political Orientation in Diplomatic Neutrality

**Kazi Fahmida Farzana\***  
**Md. Zahurul Haq\*\***

**Abstract:** In practical terms, the word “neutrality” means a policy of avoiding interactions with nations that are engaged in armed conflict, or of trying to cure war while avoiding their contamination. In Malaysia, politicians and government officials often use expressions such as that Malaysia will continue its stance of neutrality, or that it wants to remain neutral and friendly to everyone. This study critically examines Malaysia’s stance on diplomatic neutrality, with particular focus on its past and present. It argues that neutrality is used as a political concept to avoid conflict with major powers. Malaysia will remain effectively neutral so long as there is no major outbreak of any war in the region. It exercises its rights through endurance and avoidance.

**Keywords:** Malaysia, Sovereignty, Diplomatic neutrality, China, ASEAN.

**Abstrak:** Secara praktikal, perkataan “berkecuali” bermaksud satu dasar untuk mengelakkan berinteraksi dengan negara-negara yang terlibat dalam konflik bersenjata, atau cuba mendamaikan peperangan di samping mengelakkan kekusutan antara mereka. Di Malaysia, ahli-ahli politik dan pegawai-pegawai kerajaan sering menggunakan ungkapa seperti Malaysia akan meneruskan pendirian berkecuali, atau bahawa ia mahu untuk kekal berkecuali dan bersikap mesra kepada semua orang. Kajian ini secara kritikal meneliti pendirian Malaysia terhadap sikap berkecuali secara diplomatik, dengan tumpuan khusus kepada masa lalu dan akan datang. Ia menjelaskan bahawa prinsip berkecuali

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\* Kazi Fahmida Farzana, Visiting Senior Lecturer, Department of International Affairs and Research Fellow at the Asian Institute of International Affairs and Diplomacy in University Utara Malaysia. Email: fahmida@uum.edu.my.

\*\*Visiting Faculty Member, School of Law and Head of International Law Research Unit, University Utara Malaysia. Email: md.zahurul@uum.edu.my.

adalah digunakan sebagai konsep politik untuk mengelak konflik dengan kuasa-kuasa besar. Malaysia akan kekal berkecuali secara berkesan selagi tidak meletusnya sebarang peperangan yang besar di rantau ini. Ia melaksanakan haknya melalui ketahanan dan penghindaran.

**Kata Kunci:** Malaysia, Kedaulatan, Berkecuali secara diplomatik, China, ASEAN.

## Introduction

Neutrality could be a permanent status independent of any armed conflict (Kolb & Hyde, 2008). This status may arise from a treaty, as in the case of Switzerland; could originate from a unilateral act; or possibly in executing an operative international agreement, as was the situation in Turkmenistan, Costa Rica and Malta (Ronzitti, 2011). Permanent neutrality requires that the state carry out duties which applied prior to the armed conflict. For example, a state that is permanently neutral is obliged not to participate in any armed conflict when it breaks out. Also, it must not undertake any military obligations and must abstain from acts which could make its neutrality obligations impossible in the event of an armed conflict, such as if it were to join a military alliance (Bothe, 2013). However, the general law of neutrality applies strictly only in international matters. In general, in non-international armed conflicts, third states may not intervene on behalf of any of the insurgents, based on the principle against intervening in the internal affairs of other states.

The word “neutrality” can also apply so as to avoid the contagion of the pre-war madness. It can reasonably mean “the relation of non-participants toward hostilities, which they view as permissible trials of right or clashes of policy between equals” (Wright, 1930, p. 85). The policy to avoid ensnaring economic and similar interactions with belligerents, or to try to cure angry combatants while avoiding their contagion, is frequently termed neutrality, or “neo-neutrality” (Cohn, 1939, p. 62). In reality, such dogmas ought to be called war avoidance policies (Wilson, 1940).

In international relations, Malaysia as a state strives to maintain a ‘neutral’ position in its cooperation with other nations. This is attested by repeated claims from politicians and government officials that Malaysia’s

intention is to remain neutral—and friendly—to all countries, with neutrality being a political shield, indicating that it does not take sides. Thus, the question arises as to how Malaysia can be effectively neutral in the absence of an outbreak of war. Legally, Malaysia is not bound by any international treaty or agreement to maintain a permanently neutral status. Muhammad Muda, a former Malaysian diplomat and currently director of Institute of Asian Studies and Diplomacy at Universiti Utara Malaysia, noted that:

Neutrality has legal implications; it requires a country to sign treaties and abide by the rule, whereas Malaysia adopts a policy of non-alignment, which allows flexibility; on the one hand, you may express your right by taking sides for a particular purpose to suit the circumstances. On the other hand, you may not side with anybody, nor give preference to any particular country, because the consequence would be greater. Diplomatically, we are friendly to all.<sup>1</sup>

This study examines what diplomatic neutrality means for Malaysia, with particular focus on its past and present. It argues that neutrality is used as a political concept to avoid conflict with major powers. Malaysia will remain effectively neutral, so long as there is no major outbreak of war in the region. It exercises its rights through endurance and avoidance.

### **Historical Background**

Except during the immediate post-independence period between 1957 and 1969, when Malaysia signed the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement (AMDA) with the United Kingdom, and Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) with Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Singapore (Saravanamuttu, 2011) and adopted a pro-West and an anti-communist foreign policy, Malaysia's approach has always been to maintain political neutrality and avoid conflicts with all external powers. This is not surprising, given the country's colonial experiences and its abandonment by the United Kingdom at a time when the region

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<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Muda served in the diplomatic service for 28 years, representing Malaysia in Russia, South Korea, and several African countries. He is currently teaching in the Department of International Affairs at Universiti Utara Malaysia in Malaysia. The points and quotations in this paper are from an interview the author conducted with Mr. Muhammad on June 10, 2018.

was rife with Cold War conflicts (Shuib, Keling, & Ajis, 2009). In the mid-1960s, under its first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia gradually began to tilt towards a neutral foreign policy when it established diplomatic relations with communist countries in the Soviet bloc<sup>2</sup> based largely on the aim of strengthening trade ties (Mitsuomi, 2015; Saravanamuttu, 2010). Since then, Malaysian leaders have taken numerous initiatives to achieve regional stability. In 1967, it helped found the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) so that the region could chart its own course. In 1970, Malaysia joined the Non-alignment Movement (NAM), expressing its solidarity to ensure sovereignty, territorial integrity and security of non-aligned countries in their “struggle against imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, and all forms of foreign aggression, occupation, domination, interference or hegemony as well as against great power and bloc politics” (Fidel Castro’s speech, 1979) (The Havana Declaration, 1979). A year later, in 1971, Malaysia signed a declaration “Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN)” with the Foreign Ministers of ASEAN member states in Kuala Lumpur, indicating its wish to ensure that the Southeast Asian region becomes “a zone of peace and neutrality” amidst rivalry among larger powers. Thus, Malaysia’s ‘neutrality’ can best be interpreted as continuation of a political, as well as diplomatic, neutrality as this was the most suited option for many third world countries during the Cold War when they found themselves on the frontlines between the United States and Soviet allies (Wyss, Hanhimaki, Bott, & Schaufelbuehl, 2016).

This approach of ‘collaboration and cooperation’ to achieve regional stability was again reflected in ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia in 1976, though there have been limitations. Felix Chang argued that ASEAN countries restrained “themselves from using either political coercion or military force. The way they ultimately chose to do so was to adopt a very strict form of national sovereignty that brooked no interference in the internal affairs of other countries” (Chang, 2014). This may also explain why, when ASEAN, as a community, chose to remain neutral in regards to genocide in Cambodia in the 1970s and, more recently, in Myanmar against the

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<sup>2</sup> This included communist countries Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, Romania and Bulgaria, which was a bold attempt indicating a political shift from a pro-Western (meaning pro-British) policy, to a neutral foreign policy.



Rohingya Muslim minority. One may also question the effectiveness of ZOPFAN, given that it is just a declaration, which generally does not create binding legal obligation, but only indicates certain aspirations; and, secondly, for ZOPFAN to survive, ASEAN states must have the support of the “big powers.” Ideally, there must be in effect an agreement with the big powers to respect national sovereignty; that they subscribe to it, and will not venture into the area. This may be highly unlikely, given that neither China, Japan nor the United States of America subscribe to ZOPFAN. So, political neutrality later became subject to tacit alignment with the ‘big powers,’ at least partially, signifying limits in the roles of big power, and the capability of small or middle powers.

### **Neutrality under International Law**

In international law, ‘neutrality’ means the legal status of a country which does not partake in a war waged by other countries, in that the country in question neither supports nor opposes any of the sovereign countries involved in the armed conflict and, in the case of civil war, the rebels, who had been recognized as belligerents. The existence of a war is, therefore, a precondition here. This means that under both customary and treaty-based international law, a neutral country maintains the right not to be adversely affected by the conflicts; in the same way, they are also obliged to ensure non-participation if they wish to maintain their position of neutrality. However, in general, states have no obligation to remain neutral under international law, and any non-participating state is always entitled to use their right of self-defence against direct intervention (Bindschedler, 1982s).

The major sources of international law of neutrality are the Paris Declaration Respecting Maritime Law 1856, which allow for the capture of enemy ships and cargo as a prize of war and to regulate the relationship between belligerent and neutral vessels; the 1907 Hague Convention No. V Respecting the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers and Persons in Case of War on Land, which laid down more clearly the rights and duties of neutral powers in case of war on land, and regulating the position of the belligerents who have taken refuge in neutral territory; the 1907 Hague Convention No. XIII concerning the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers in Naval War; the four 1949 Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol I of 1977; this body of

international law contains provisions regarding neutrality and regulates the conduct of armed conflict and seeks to limit its effects.

Law of neutrality in armed conflict (initially for sea warfare) began to develop in the late Middle Ages, although such provisions were unable to prevent interference in neutral shipping in many cases. Gradually, those provisions grew into customary law on neutrality and became solidified under the 1856 declaration. Later, neutrality was viewed as a symbol of peace, as this would assist in keeping war within its locality by preventing its spread on several fronts involving third countries. This also helped strengthen the concept of 'respect for territorial integrity' and 'sovereignty' of neutral state. However, there were as yet no restrictions on waging war by any state; this became possible only when the League of Nations was founded and the concept of 'collective security' was introduced under Article 16 of its Covenant (Bindschedler, 1982, pp 10-11).

Legal provisions contained in Article 16 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, along with Article 2 (5) of the UN Charter post-World War II, were actually parts of the movement toward the prohibition of war on the international plane, as both refer to ending international disputes without resorting to violence. This may further be noted here that the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928 sponsored by the USA and France (and signed subsequently by most other European powers) also sought to place limitations upon the traditional liberty of states to wage war (Tucker, 2006). However, what is important to note here is the concept of 'collective security' contained in the core of these treaties. These provisions limited the status of neutrality of state to some extent, by modifying the existing international legal provisions on neutrality, as mentioned earlier. Virtually, either they counterbalanced the choices of neutrality of a state, or proposed a new dimension in the idea of neutrality in international relations.

The purpose of Article 16 was to indicate military and economic measures as part of 'collective security' against a covenant-breaking state, in that such a state had failed to exhaust the mechanisms laid down under Articles 12, 13 and 15 of the Covenant for peaceful settlement of dispute before resorting to war. Similar provisions were also found in Article 2(5) of the UN Charter:

[a]ll Members shall give the United Nations every assistance in any action it takes in accordance with the present Charter, and shall refrain from giving assistance to any state against which the United Nations is taking preventive or enforcement action.

The adoption of this provision perhaps, as many scholars believe, 'superseded neutrality by imposing the framework of collective security' (Lanovoy, 2016, p. 30), and as we just observed, Article 2 (5) actually obliges members to provide direct assistance to the UN-led action initiated under Chapter VII of the Charter and also to abstain from rendering any support to the country against which such preventive or enforcement action is being planned or taken. This provision, therefore, indicates the binding UN Security Council resolutions (not mere declarations or recommendations) passed under Chapter VII of the Charter, which members must comply with, by opting to remain neutral in case of UN-led military action against a jurisdiction.

Do all these mean that no states are eventually allowed to hold its neutral position in international relations? During the Iraq-Kuwait conflict of 1990, the UNSC adopted resolutions 666 and 669, among others, reaffirming international sanctions on Iraq; however, India, Pakistan and the Philippines were allowed to provide humanitarian assistance to their citizens. Earlier, in 1966, when UNSC resolution 232 was adopted, imposing some mandatory economic sanction on Rhodesia (formerly Zimbabwe), Zambia was exempted from implementing this resolution (Lanovoy, 2016) on grounds that the UN Resolutions 'involved great economic cost to Zambia since Rhodesia was the country's biggest lowest-cost supplier' (Libby, 2014, p. 230). Because of special economic considerations, a state may be excused from carrying out a specific obligation in this regard, as laid down under Article 50 of the UN Charter, although such state's obligation not to provide any support to belligerent still remains (Lanovoy, 2016). Besides, the UN Security Council, as mentioned in Article 48 (1), may call upon only some countries under special agreement (Article 43) between UNSC and the country concerned to carry out any decision in regards to taking military action against a state. However, the question still remains as to whether a state can assume a permanent neutral position in international relations.

When a state accepts a legally binding obligation under international law to remain permanently neutral and other states also recognize this obligation, then the state is considered a 'permanently neutral' state, regarded as a special international status. According to the Swiss interpretation, there are three principal obligations of a permanently neutral state "in time of peace: to abstain from starting a war, to defend its neutrality, and to avoid policies and actions that might on some future occasion involve it in hostilities" (Black & Falk, 2015, pp. 22-23). Unless such permanently neutral state becomes the victim of any act of aggression, they cannot abandon their permanently neutral status on short notice without consulting the powers recognized its neutrality. Then again, a non-signatory of any such legal instrument may also be considered 'permanently neutral' based on a state's unilateral act or long practice of neutrality recognized by others, for example, neutrality of Sweden, Ireland and Finland (Bindschedler, 1982). The most commonly cited example of permanent neutrality is Switzerland, which is a combination of both unilateral declaration and a guarantee provided by five great powers in 1815 (Black & Falk, 2015).

### **Post-Cold-war period and Malaysian Neutrality in 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

For Malaysian leaders, the best way for their country and other countries in the region to achieve regional stability is by avoiding conflicts, and creating an international environment in which all countries are interested in good relations with one another. This was echoed, for instance, when the International Court of Justice (ICJ) rendered its judgment on May 23, 2008 in regards to a disputed island between Malaysia and Singapore. Malaysia, as a law abiding and responsible member of the international community, followed the international rule of peace and stability and ended the Pedra Branca/Pulau Batu Putih dispute with Singapore. This indicates the extent to which Malaysia is prepared to go to achieve solutions with its neighbors over land and maritime boundaries.

Following this, Malaysia continues to pursue its bilateral relations, maintaining neutrality with others, such as the Middle-Eastern countries. During the Qatar Gulf Crisis (during which the Arab nations suspended political, economic and diplomatic ties with Qatar over an accusation of support for extremist groups), Malaysia emphasized its 'policy of neutrality' by not taking sides with any party, choosing instead to take a

constructive role by maintaining constant contact with all of the countries involved, and communicating with their counterparts across the Muslim world, an action which *Wisma Putra* (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) defined as “active neutrality” (Ram, 2017). However, it supported and respected the decision reached by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), mediated by the Emir of Kuwait, to resolve their difficulties within their regional framework.

Though some Arab nations maintained economic sanctions on Qatar, Malaysia bucked the trend by continuing to maintain its generally good bilateral relations with Qatar and other GCC countries. In another recent event (June 2018), Malaysia manifested its wish to preserve its ambit of neutrality when it decided to withdraw its soldiers from Saudi Arabia, where troops were on standby to evacuate Malaysians in Yemen. The Defence Minister Mohamad Sabu expressed clearly: “We (Malaysians) do not want to be drawn into any conflict in the Middle East. We want to make friends with all nations ...” (*The Star*, June 29, 2018, p. 11). Subsequently, he also added that “the Malaysian government will only heed requests from United Nations (UN) for peacekeepers and security forces, and will not aid any nation in its war with another country” (*Malay Mail*, April 20, 2019). These examples iterate that Malaysia has long advocated and adopted good relations with other countries beyond Asia.

Nevertheless, there may be limits to staying neutral; in 2016, for instance, Malaysia broke its traditional neutrality stance within the ASEAN framework and voiced out strongly against Myanmar’s genocide towards the Rohingya ethnic minority (Ng, 2016). Malaysia’s position on this particular issue places ASEAN in a diplomatic debacle, since ASEAN leaders could not come up with a joint statement, and yet, the organization remained a silent bystander in the face of genocide. On a more practical note, Malaysia could not be expected to remain silent, as Myanmar’s refugee population continues to increase, many of whom Malaysia is hosting,<sup>3</sup> which has led to heightened concern within

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<sup>3</sup>Malaysia is currently hosting 175,760 refugees and asylum seekers (as of June 30, 2019), majority of whom are from Myanmar, with others from Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine. Among Myanmar refugees, Rohingya comprise 95,110 registered with the UNHCR, while another estimated 30,000-40,000 remain undocumented.

over national security. In this case, Malaysia's diplomatic neutrality has fluctuated between universal standards of values and rights, and economic interests. ASEAN as a group maintained its neutrality, but for Malaysia, that neutrality has meant a balancing act between humanity and national security.

Similarly, on another occasion, Malaysia could not remain neutral in the face of a diplomatic rupture with North Korea over Kim Jong-nam's assassination at Kuala Lumpur airport on February 13, 2017. The fallout between the two countries came about when Malaysia wanted to launch an investigation on the killing by carrying out an autopsy, while North Korea merely wanted the body to be returned. Later, Malaysia rejected North Korea's suggestion for a joint investigation. The dispute further escalated when the North Korean ambassador to Malaysia, Kang Chol, accused Malaysia of acting with "hostile forces" to bring harm to Pyongyang (Izzuddin, 2017). Afterwards, Kang was expelled and declared *persona non grata*, as his action disregarded diplomatic norms and he disrespected Malaysia's sovereignty by failing to show up when summoned by *Wisma Putra* (New Vision, 2017). Before his expulsion, Malaysia also recalled its diplomat to North Korea for fear of his safety. These moves were necessary, as North Korea prevented Malaysians from leaving the country, and Malaysia also faced domestic pressure when Malaysians protested outside the North Korean embassy (New Straits Times, February 23, 2017). Subsequently, with China's intervention, a reciprocal arrangement was reached: Malaysia deposited the corpse of Kim Jong-nam in Beijing for North Korea to collect (The Guardian, 2017); Malaysians in North Korea were then allowed to return home safely. This marked a serious but not permanent rupture in the Malaysia-North Korea diplomatic relations. After the April 2018 inter-Korean summit and June 2018 North Korea-United States summit in Singapore (Loh, 2018), and following a sign of commitment by North Korea that they were moving towards peace, Malaysia responded by allowing North Korea's embassy to reopen and relations between the two countries resumed (Menon & Schuettler, 2018). What this incident indicates is that neutrality does not mean ineffectiveness. When it comes to matters of 'national interest,' Malaysia does not hesitate to exercise its rights over sovereignty, territorial integrity, and security.

### **Maintaining Neutrality with Major Powers**

In its relations with major powers, Malaysia maintains its traditional cooperative and friendly foreign policy approach that enables it to avoid conflicts with all major powers. It wants to keep its strategic options open. It has numerous economic and military cooperation activities with big powers, such as the United States, the European Union, Australia, China and Japan. All of these countries are sources of investment for Malaysia; therefore, they are important economic partners. However, defense and military cooperation are mostly on an ad hoc basis, rather than occurring as part of a highly official arrangement, because Malaysian leaders are reluctant to exhibit long-term involvement with major powers.

Over the last several decades, Malaysia has maintained cordial ties with China, and avoided conflict. For instance, when the Philippines filed suit with the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on its growing concern over China's build-up of military infrastructure in the South China Sea (Corr & Tacujan, 2013), Laos and Cambodia (the client state of China) understandably remained silent on the issue, as did Malaysia. There were many reasons as to why Malaysia chose not to be vocal against China at this point. *Firstly*, Malaysia desires to resolve things peacefully in accordance with international law. As a claimant state, it indicates its clear position on the South China Sea issue, that all claims must be based and resolved in accordance with international law; in particular, the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), upon which China and ASEAN seek to advance a 2002 Declaration of Conduct (DoC) of Parties in the South China Sea, which commits to follow the UNCLOS. Now as China continues to aggressively pursue its sphere of influence in the South China Sea,<sup>4</sup> Malaysia wants to focus on collective security and have close relations with countries including Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States, who have common cause in countering growing Chinese influence in the region.

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<sup>4</sup> When the Philippines brought the South China Sea case to ICJ, the advisory opinion of ICJ was completely ignored by China on the ground that it is not bound by any international binding. China wants to keep its sphere of influence in the South China Sea passage and has established infrastructures in many of those islands.-

*Secondly*, China's fastest economic growth was of interest to Malaysia. China is currently Malaysia's largest trading partner. According to Malaysia's Department of Statistics report for May 2018, Malaysia's bilateral trade with China increased, with exports totaling RM 795.3 million (nearly US\$196.5 million), and imports RM 1.13 billion (nearly US\$278.8 million).<sup>5</sup> This indicates that Malaysia wants to put its immediate economic and diplomatic interests ahead of potential security concerns. *Thirdly*, as Malaysia maintains a certain distance from the West, relations with China would provide a strategic balance. *Fourthly*, Malaysia wants to avoid any potential ethnic riots, as experienced in 1969 when its Chinese community took offense over the government's affirmative policies favoring the majority Malay community over Chinese-Malaysians. Maintaining a good relationship with China may be an imperative for Malaysia to tackle local discontents.

We see the same approach toward India concerning recent Jammu and Kashmir, a northern Indian state, which has been the subject of dispute between India, Pakistan and China since 1947. In August 2019, India revoked the special status of Kashmir through a decree abolishing Article 370 of the Indian Constitution. This action resulted in the people of India-controlled Kashmir no longer able to have their flag, constitution and a certain degree of autonomy over state administration (BBC, 2019). During a bilateral meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the Eastern Economic Forum on September 7 2019, Tun Mahathir avoided pledging support to any party and mentioned that both India and Pakistan should adhere to the UN resolutions on the issue (*The Star Online*, 2019).

However, in regards to issues involving 'national interest' and 'territorial sovereignty,' Malaysia will not hesitate to state its position. For instance, when the Philippines-based terrorist group attacked Malaysia's Lahad Datu District of Sabah in February 2013, Malaysia strongly suppressed the militants and took control of its territory a month later. In another incident, when Chinese and American warships came into the Straits of Melaka in June 2018 (*The Straits Times*, June 12, 2018), the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) expressed its concern. Prime Minister Tun Mahathir made his position clear when he stated: "No restriction on movement of ships, except for

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<sup>5</sup> For details see Department of Statistics press release (July 05, 2018).



warships” (Tan & Nakano, 2018). Defence Minister Mohamad Sabu further clarified: “We do not want to place warships there. But we need patrol boats to maintain security, especially from pirates as we want the shipping lanes in the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea kept safe” (*The Straits Times*, June 12, 2018). These incidents indicate that Malaysia will not hesitate to make clear its position vis-à-vis other countries, particularly when it affects Malaysian interests.

Malaysia's neutrality, however, has been overwhelmed by its economic concerns recently. Under its previous regime, the country seemed to tilt more than favorably towards China on economic issues. During this time, many state-related contracts were given to China, and Japanese investment in Malaysia fell. This was substantiated by economic agreements between China and Malaysia, such as joint petrol projects, the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL), and a large new China-styled city in Johor (Mahrotri & Choong, 2016). One example is the extent to which the previous regime allowed China to dictate where it wants its ports located in Malaysia under the One Belt & One Road Initiative (OBOR), which created suspicion and anxiety in terms of maritime safety. Many of these projects are now subject to review by the current Mahathir government (Anis & Kaos, 2018). The new government wants to bring the country to its original position: that Malaysia is friendly to all, and not giving preferential treatment to any particular country. However, the apparent neutrality position vis-à-vis China is perhaps tainted by Malaysia's tilt towards Japan, as it revives the Look East Policy (LEP). It appears that on economic issues, Malaysia follows a different standard with regard to neutrality. Arguably, favoring Japan over China is likely to put Malaysia's diplomacy in a more challenging frontier.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Malaysia's stated desire to maintain political neutrality and avoid conflict with other countries is admirable. Recent events, such as the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, has evoked in Malaysia a tendency to be vocal, even if it requires overlooking political neutrality in favor of universal human rights. In this regard, both its current and immediate past leaderships maintain the same standing on this: that it will remain effectively neutral, so long as there is no major outbreak of war in the region. As the Dean of the Australian Diplomatic Corps in

Canberra observed: “Malaysia can maintain neutrality only as far as it is not being touched... At this point, it is a pure leadership judgment for the highest level of government.”

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