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Transliteration Table: Consonants

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
ب	b		ط	ṭ
ت	t		ظ	ẓ
ث	th		ع	‘
ج	j		غ	gh
ح	ḥ		ف	f
خ	kh		ق	q
د	d		ك	k
ذ	dh		ل	l
ر	r		م	m
ز	z		ن	n
س	s		ه	h
ش	sh		و	w
ص	ṣ		ء	’
ض	ḍ		ي	y

Transliteration Table: Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
اَ	a		اَ، اِ، اِي	an
اُ	u		اُو	un
اِ	i		اِي	in
اَ، اِ، اِي، اِيْ	ā		اَو	aw
اُو	ū		اِيْ	ay
اِيْ	ī		اَوْ	uww, ū (in final position)
			اِيْ	iyy, ī (in final position)

Source: ROTAS Transliteration Kit: <http://rotas.iium.edu.my>

Perceptions of Three U.S. Presidents (Obama, Trump, and Biden) – A Malaysian Perspective

Syed Arabi Idid*

Rizwanah Souket Ali**

Abstract: This article presents findings from an extensive longitudinal study which examined how Malaysians perceived the performance of three U.S. presidents as global leaders. The investigation initiated six nationwide surveys aimed at assessing Malaysians' opinions regarding the performance of U.S. presidents during their respective terms. The initial surveys, executed in August 2010 and October 2013, collected responses from 1,367 and 1,439 participants, respectively, focusing on Barack Obama. Throughout Donald Trump's presidency, follow-up surveys were administered in April 2017 and March 2018, with 1,326 and 2,061 respondents, respectively. The current study extends this analysis to President Joe Biden, thereby continuing the longitudinal investigation into Malaysian perspectives on U.S. leadership. The issue was how Malaysians perceived these three presidents' ability to solve the global economic problem, the Palestinian-Israeli Issue, and the U.S.-China dispute.

Keywords: Obama, Trump, Biden, Gallup, Pew, Malaysia

Abstrak: Makalah ini membentangkan penemuan daripada kajian longitudinal yang mengkaji bagaimana rakyat Malaysia melihat prestasi tiga presiden A.S. sebagai pemimpin global. Kajian ini melibatkan enam tinjauan di seluruh negara yang bertujuan menilai pendapat rakyat Malaysia terhadap prestasi

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presiden A.S. sepanjang tempoh penggal mereka. Tinjauan telah dilaksanakan pada Ogos 2010 dan Oktober 2013, masing-masing mengumpul maklum balas daripada 1,367 dan 1,439 peserta yang memfokuskan Barack Obama. Tinjauan susulan telah dijalankan pada April 2017 dan Mac 2018, masing-masing dengan 1,326 dan 2,061 responden semasa penggal Presiden Donald Trump. Kajian terkini dilanjutkan dengan analisis terhadap Presiden Joe Biden, dengan itu meneruskan kajian longitudinal perspektif Malaysia ke atas kepimpinan A.S. Isunya ialah bagaimana rakyat Malaysia menganggap ketiga-tiga presiden ini mampu menyelesaikan masalah ekonomi global, Isu Palestin-Israel dan pertikaian AS-China.

Kata kunci: Obama, Trump, Biden, Gallup, Pew, Malaysia

Introduction

Individuals generally rely on the media for information about events occurring in foreign countries. Such coverage inevitably influences the perspectives of readers from other countries, considering their personal experiences are somewhat limited, thereby engendering the disparity between “real reality” and “media reality” (Kunck, 1993), or what is experienced directly versus what is perceived as the truth. Excluding media portrayals of other nations, what then influences the perceptions of readers towards foreign countries? Various studies on the flow of international news have identified that the coverage of developing nations has been predominantly negative, whereas the reporting on developed nations has been favourable. International news agencies have often opted to focus on adverse news concerning poverty, coups, and other issues as part of the narrative surrounding developing countries.

The knowledge and concepts of other nations derive from a multitude of sources, including personal knowledge and media portrayal. National leaders play a crucial role in shaping a nation’s identity, which is often depicted, whether intentionally or unintentionally (Maylie, 2015). The public perception of contemporary presidents and prime ministers has a profound impact on global evaluations of countries, much like the portrayal of leaders’ images by the news media. These dynamics are particularly evident in the divergent perspectives of the world’s leaders as revealed by opinion polls. The survey, which involved 26,000 respondents across five continents, asked citizens from 30 states for their views on 10 influential national leaders with power on a global

scale. Key leaders mentioned included U.S. President Barack Obama, Russia's President Vladimir Putin, and China's President Xi Jinping. Saich (2014) notes that the data reveal two key trends: firstly, responses are heavily influenced by geopolitics and existing conflicts as well as interactions between states.

Research about perception has been acknowledged as a substitute for reality. Although analyses of media reports regarding other nations have been conducted, there have been few studies that focused on the perception of leaders in developed countries. There exist studies exploring how two distinct countries perceive one another, taking into account matters related to trade, the economy, defence, and leadership. Camilleri (2001) structured her study around the attitudes and perceptions between Australia and Malaysia by examining the media coverage provided.

The present study adopts an alternative approach by examining Malaysians' perceptions of the leaders of a developed nation, specifically the United States, on three principal issues. This research conducts an extensive longitudinal analysis to explore how Malaysians assess the performance of three recent U.S. presidents as global leaders in addressing three significant global challenges.

The United States has long been acknowledged as a global superpower, distinguished by unparalleled military capabilities and a substantial lead in power projection. Economically, it persists as the largest economy worldwide; however, China has been progressively narrowing this gap over the years. Notwithstanding its global pre-eminence, perceptions of the United States as a declining power have surfaced, attributed to a variety of domestic and international challenges. Extended military engagements, shifting global alliances, and challenges to the liberal international order have collectively contributed to this decline (Inbar & Rynhold, 2016). More recently, the crisis in Gaza has illuminated the limitations of the United States' influence in addressing intricate geopolitical issues. These developments underscore the evolving and contested nature of U.S. global power amidst a swiftly transforming international landscape.

Southeast Asia holds significant importance for the United States due to its strategic location, which includes the Straits of Malacca, a critical global trade route, as well as its status as the home of the

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a prominent economic and cultural bloc. Economically, Southeast Asia constitutes one of the most dynamic regions in the world, boasting a collective Gross Domestic Product (GDP) exceeding \$3 trillion and a rapidly expanding middle class. The United States has served as a notable trade and investment partner for ASEAN, facilitating initiatives such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and, more recently, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). Such endeavours highlight the United States' interest in enhancing economic integration and countering China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In terms of security, Southeast Asia assumes a critical role in the United States' efforts to maintain a rules-based international order. The region's strategic positioning and proximity to flashpoints such as the South China Sea render it a focal point for the United States' military presence, partnerships, and operations aimed at ensuring freedom of navigation.

U.S.-China Relations: The Defining Bilateral Relationship

The relationship between the United States and China is arguably the most fragile bilateral relationship of the 21st century. Although trade and diplomatic ties between the two nations have expanded over the decades, the relations remain fragile and volatile (Inbar & Rynhold, 2016). Public perceptions of this relationship are shaped by official actions, media portrayals, and the geopolitical narrative surrounding these two global powers. As observed by Tellis (2012), "managing the rise of China remains the central geopolitical challenge facing the United States" (p. 75). Tellis contends that China's rapid economic and military growth poses significant challenges to U.S. interests in Asia and globally. Nowhere are these dynamics more evident than in the differing perspectives of the world's two leading economic powers, and the relationship between the leaders of the United States and China, as suggested by Pew Research Center data (2022).

With the increasing competition between the United States and China, Southeast Asia has emerged as a battleground for influence. For the United States, establishing strong ties with ASEAN countries is crucial to counterbalancing China's dominance while fostering a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific region. The goal of the United States is to maintain its status as a key partner in the region through ongoing diplomatic, economic, and military engagement efforts.

Malaysia's Position in the U.S.-China Relationship

Strategically situated in Southeast Asia, Malaysia occupies a distinctive position within the U.S.-China rivalry. Historically, Malaysia has maintained robust bilateral trade and investment relations with China. Existing literature underscores that China has been Malaysia's predominant trading partner since the latter part of 2017, while Malaysian enterprises have been proactive investors in China since the implementation of its "Reform and Open" policy in 1979 (The Edge Markets, 2017). Recent polling data conducted by Malaysia's Merdeka Centre and the Institute of China Studies at the University of Malaya reveals a favourable enhancement in public perceptions of China since 2016. Nevertheless, these perceptions remain polarised along ethnic lines and are contingent on economic and geopolitical factors.

The United States has endeavoured to cultivate stronger ties with Malaysia, partly as a strategic counterbalance to China's escalating influence in Southeast Asia. Diplomatic relations between the two nations were established in 1957, and the partnership has since been strengthened through trade, education, and strategic cooperation. From 2010 to 2013, bilateral trade averaged \$35 billion annually, with the United States being Malaysia's largest source of foreign investment, contributing \$1.9 billion in 2013 (The Edge Markets, 2017).

The Palestinian Cause

The relationship between the United States and the Muslim World is characterised by complexity and frequent tension, particularly in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001. U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, notably its military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, along with its robust support for Israel, has contributed to widespread mistrust and resentment in numerous Muslim-majority countries. Throughout the years, the United States has faced challenges in rehabilitating its image, encountering accusations of bias, imperialism, and a deficiency in understanding Muslim culture and concerns. This unfavourable perception has hindered the United States' capacity to develop strong alliances within the Muslim World, thereby making it imperative for the U.S. to identify essential partners that can assist in enhancing its image and fostering goodwill. Among these partners is Malaysia, a predominantly Muslim nation with considerable influence in both Southeast Asia and the global Muslim community.

Malaysia's steadfast commitment to the Palestinian cause serves as a fundamental aspect of its foreign policy, grounded in international law, humanitarian law, and principles of human rights. Mustafa, Ahmad, and Nordin (2008) observed that a substantial majority of Malaysians perceive U.S. foreign policy as biased against the Muslim community, frequently linking Islam with terrorism. These views are influenced by U.S. policies that are perceived as discriminatory, which include its unwavering support for Israel in the Israel-Palestine conflict and its stringent stance on Iran's nuclear program. Such sentiments contribute to a broader mistrust of American foreign policy within Malaysia, raising doubts regarding the United States' capacity to lead impartially on matters relating to the Muslim world.

U.S. Presidents and Malaysia

Different administrations of the United States have ascribed varying levels of importance to Malaysia and the wider Asia-Pacific region. President Lyndon B. Johnson's engagement with Malaysia six decades ago was largely influenced by Cold War dynamics, particularly the necessity to unify Asian nations against communist Vietnam. However, diplomatic relations became strained during the tenure of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed (1981–2003), as his pronounced anti-Western stance cultivated a perception of the United States as an overbearing power that intervened in Malaysia's domestic affairs. This sentiment was further intensified by Mahathir's critiques of U.S. foreign policy, his commitment to promoting an independent Malaysian identity, and his alignment with non-Western nations, which frequently positioned Malaysia in opposition to American interests on the international stage. The rapport with American presidents improved during the administrations of Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak and President Barack Obama, particularly during the latter's visit to Malaysia in 2014. Conversely, President Trump adopted a different approach regarding Southeast Asia, focusing more on developments in the Middle East and Europe, while also being determined to curb the rise of China.

Obama's Pivot to Asia

President Barack Obama endeavoured to repair relations with Malaysia and Southeast Asia as part of his administration's "return to Asia" policy. Obama also brought back a favourable image of the American presidency globally after the tenure of President Bush. (Pew Research

Centre, 2014). The presidency of George W. Bush was marked by several calamities that significantly impacted the United States' image.

Obama's visit to Malaysia in 2014 was significant as it marked the first visit by a U.S. president to Malaysia in six decades, underscoring Malaysia's importance as a prominent member of ASEAN and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). During this visit, Malaysia and the United States reached an agreement to elevate their relationship to a "comprehensive partnership," with Obama highlighting the significance of cooperation through the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA) — a trade pact involving 12 Pacific Rim nations aimed at reducing tariffs and establishing common standards on labour, intellectual property, and environmental matters. However, numerous Malaysians opposed the TPPA, citing apprehensions regarding sovereignty and economic repercussions (The Malaysian Insider, 2016). In January 2016, a notable anti-TPPA rally took place in Kuala Lumpur, organised by a coalition of non-governmental organisations and political parties, including *Parti Amanah Negara* (National Trust Party) and *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (People's Justice Party). The rally attracted thousands of participants who articulated their dissent against the agreement.

With respect to the Palestinian cause, Obama assumed office with a pledge to address negative stereotypes of Islam as a central tenet of his presidential agenda. His widely cited speech at Cairo University early in his term raised hopes that, following over 50 years of conflict, the United States might act as a genuinely neutral mediator in facilitating statehood for the Palestinians and resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. This speech was perceived as a potential turning point, indicating a shift in U. S. policy towards a more balanced approach in the Middle East. Nevertheless, despite these initial commitments, many critics contend that Obama's endeavours did not fully fulfil the expectations established during his Cairo address, particularly as the United States continued to uphold its strong support for Israel, thereby further complicating the Palestinian issue.

During the presidency of Barack Obama (2009–2017), a series of significant events related to the Palestinian cause unfolded, highlighting the complexities of the United States' involvement in the conflict. One notable event was Obama's endorsement of additional funding for

Israel's military, specifically for the Iron Dome missile defence system, amid the 2014 Gaza conflict. This decision was met with widespread condemnation from organisations such as the National Association of Malaysian Muslim Students (PKPIM), which interpreted it as indicative of partiality in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and a shortcoming of a global leader purporting to champion justice. Consequently, PKPIM articulated strong objections to Obama's visit to Malaysia for the ASEAN Summit in November 2015, citing his perceived lack of equity regarding the Palestinian issue as a primary motive for their disapproval.

Trump's "America First" Policy

In contrast, President Donald Trump's "America First" approach significantly disrupted the relations between the United States and Malaysia. In January 2017, President Trump withdrew the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA) and initiated a trade war with China, resulting in considerable uncertainties in Malaysia's export markets and complicating its trade and diplomatic ties. President Trump's frequent absences from ASEAN-related summits, coupled with his failure to appoint a U.S. ambassador to ASEAN, undermined confidence in the United States as a reliable strategic partner.

Under President Donald Trump, the colonisation of Palestinian land accelerated markedly, particularly following his recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the subsequent relocation of the U. S. Embassy there. Trump proclaimed himself the "deal-maker" (Dekkhakhena, 2021, p. 172), yet his policies often exacerbated the divide between the United States and the Palestinians. From the perspective of Malaysians, Trump's actions were perceived as further undermining the prospects for a just resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. His administration's support for Israel extended to cutting aid to Palestinian refugees and endorsing Israel's control of disputed territories, actions that were widely criticised for neglecting Palestinian rights. In response, Malaysian leaders, including then-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, openly condemned Israel's actions and the U.S. policies that supported them. Addressing the issue, Mahathir articulated that Malaysia maintains amicable relations with nearly all nations, except for Israel due to its occupation of Palestinian land. "You can't seize others' lands and form a state. It's like a state of robbers," he remarked, denouncing Israel's policies (Al Jazeera, 2019). His comments

were in response to Trump's call for the recognition of Israel's control over the Golan Heights, a decision that further emphasised the Trump administration's strong alignment with Israeli interests. These policies contributed to heightened negative perceptions of U.S. foreign policy among Malaysians, who viewed the Trump administration as actively facilitating Israeli expansionism while neglecting Palestinian rights.

Biden's Indo-Pacific Engagement

The election of Joe Biden instilled renewed optimism for the enhancement of U.S.-Malaysia relations. The Biden administration has indicated a commitment to multilateralism and a deeper engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In May 2022, the Biden administration introduced the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), an initiative designed to counterbalance China's economic sway. Malaysia, along with other ASEAN member states, has joined the IPEF, thereby expressing its endorsement for increased U. S. engagement in the region (The Edge Malaysia, 2022).

Biden's foreign policy also incorporates elements of President Obama's strategy, focusing on the restoration of trust among Southeast Asian nations. The United States continues to be a prestigious academic destination for Malaysian students, with a steady influx pursuing higher education in the U. S. (Thomas, 2021). However, Biden's presidency has confronted significant challenges, particularly in relation to the management of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He has publicly endorsed a two-state solution, advocating for peace and security for both Israelis and Palestinians. Nevertheless, the conflict that erupted in May 2021 between Israel and Hamas in Gaza posed a substantial challenge for his administration. Although the United States successfully facilitated a ceasefire following 11 days of intense hostilities, Biden faced criticism for a perceived lack of prompt action in urging Israel to halt airstrikes, which resulted in extensive destruction and considerable Palestinian casualties (The Guardian, 2021).

From the perspective of Malaysia, Biden's policies are viewed with cautious scepticism. While his attempts to restore aid to the Palestinians and promote peace have been recognised, there exists a notable lack of trust in the United States' capacity to mediate the conflict impartially. Malaysian leaders have consistently criticised U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East for its ongoing bias in favour of Israel, often at the

expense of Palestinian rights. Such scepticism has endured under Biden's administration, further entrenching doubts regarding the United States' impartiality in addressing the conflict. With the military actions undertaken by Israel against the Palestinians often referred to as the Palestinian Genocide, the Malaysian perception of Biden is less favourable in comparison to that of other presidents, primarily due to his perceived indifference to the situation.

Methodology on the Perceptions of U.S. Presidents Among Malaysians

A state's image holds substantial significance in the relationships between nations. Images manifest in various forms. As states engage with one another, citizens develop perceptions of the other nation; however, media representations of events significantly enhance these perceptions (Camilleri, 2001). Additionally, the leadership of nations plays a critical role in shaping these images. This article examines how Malaysians perceive three Presidents of the United States during distinct periods, specifically Donald Trump and his predecessor Barack Obama, as part of the image that Malaysians maintain of the United States. Moreover, Joe Biden, the most recent President in this study, is not well known to the Malaysian populace.

Malaysian perceptions were formed based on how they believed these presidents addressed the Palestinian issue and their ability to resolve global economic problems. This study examines how Malaysians' perceptions of U.S. presidents have evolved through a comparative analysis of Joe Biden's performance and his predecessors, Donald Trump and Barack Obama.

A nationwide study was conducted to gauge the perspectives of Malaysian voters on various issues, including the performance of three American presidents. Utilising quota sampling, in-person interviews were conducted with Malaysian voters aged 21 and above. The interviews encompassed inquiries into the demographic profiles of the respondents, as well as their concerns regarding current issues spanning economics, finance, and politics. However, for the purposes of this report, only the inquiries regarding the American Presidents will be addressed.

The surveys conducted in 2010 and 2013 assessed the perspectives of Malaysians regarding Barack Obama’s management of global economic issues as well as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, with sample sizes comprising 1,367 and 1,439 respondents, respectively. Similarly, surveys conducted in 2017 and 2018 evaluated the presidency of Donald Trump, featuring 1,326 and 2,061 respondents. Most recently, a survey conducted in June 2022, encompassing 1,000 respondents, analysed Joe Biden’s approach to three critical issues: the global economic crisis, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and U.S.-China relations.

Findings

1. Solving the Global Economic Crisis

The study aimed to evaluate Malaysians’ perceptions of the leadership qualities of three U.S. presidents—Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden—specifically in relation to their capabilities in addressing global economic challenges. The underlying premise of this inquiry posits that Malaysians believe that, as global leaders, these American presidents possess the potential to provide the necessary leadership to resolve the global economic issues.

Table 1 provides a detailed analysis of the perceptions regarding these issues among various ethnic groups in Malaysia over the years. Each president was monitored on two separate occasions: Obama in 2010 and 2013, Trump in 2017 and 2018, and Biden in 2021 and 2022.

Table 1: Malaysian Perceptions of U.S. Presidents’ Ability to Solve the Global Economic Problem (2010-2022)

Global Economic Crisis Under President Obama (2010-2013):								
Respondents	2010 Malay	2010 Chinese	2010 Indian	2010 Total	2013 Malay	2013 Chinese	2013 Indian	2013 Total
No Confidence	54%	49%	45%	52%	74%	54%	47%	63%
Confidence	42%	48%	54%	45%	23%	44%	53%	34%
Global Economic Crisis Under President Trump (2017-2018):								
Respondents	2017 Malay	2017 Chinese	2017 Indian	2017 Total	2018 Malay	2018 Chinese	2018 Indian	2018 Total
No Confidence	77%	54%	63%	67%	82%	64%	66%	74%
Confidence	21%	44%	36%	31%	14%	32%	32%	23%

Global Economic Crisis Under President Biden (2021-2022):								
Respondents	2021 Malay	2021 Chinese	2021 Indian	2021 Total	2022 Malay	2022 Chinese	2022 Indian	2022 Total
No Confidence	66%	64%	65%	64%	78%	75%	82%	77%
Confidence	34%	35%	35%	35%	22%	23%	17%	22%

Malaysians perceived that President Obama possessed the capacity to provide a solution, or some solutions, to the economic challenges. In 2010, 45% of Malaysians expressed confidence that President Obama could effectively address global economic issues. However, by 2013, this figure had declined to 34%. This change in perception was most pronounced among individuals of varying ethnic backgrounds. While the Indian and Chinese communities demonstrated a relatively higher level of optimism (Chinese – 48%, Indian - 54%), confidence in President Obama’s leadership diminished, particularly among Malays, with 54% expressing no confidence. By 2013, the percentage of Malaysians indicating “no confidence” had increased significantly, from 52% in 2010 to 63% in 2013.

The Malaysian perception of President Trump’s capability to address global economic issues was notably lower compared to the other two presidents. Throughout his presidency, President Donald Trump experienced diminished levels of confidence. Upon assuming office in 2017, merely 31% of Malaysians believed he would effectively confront global economic challenges. By 2018, this figure had further decreased to 23%. This decline in confidence was apparent across all ethnic demographics, with Malays reporting 82%, Chinese at 64%, and Indian respondents at 66%, indicating a general scepticism among Malaysians regarding Trump’s economic leadership. Although a degree of initial optimism existed within the Chinese community, as evidenced by 44% in 2017, support for Trump’s management of global economic matters progressively waned over time.

Malaysians acknowledged that the global economic problem had worsened since President Biden assumed office. President Biden’s confidence ratings reflected this trend. In March 2021, 35% of Malaysians expressed confidence in his capacity to address global economic issues; however, by June 2022, this figure had diminished to a mere 22%.

The proportion of Malaysians indicating “no confidence” in Biden’s leadership escalated significantly, rising from 64% in 2021 to 77% in 2022. This trend highlights a growing frustration with U.S. leadership regarding the management of the global economy. This overall decline in confidence was noted across all ethnic groups, although the decrease was particularly pronounced among Malaysians of Indian descent, with only 17% expressing confidence in 2022. Confidence among Malaysians of Chinese descent decreased from 35% to 23%, while it fell among Malays from 34% to 22%, and among Indians, it plummeted from 35% to 17%. The proportion of Malaysians expressing “no confidence” in Biden’s leadership increased substantially, from 64% in 2021 to 77% in 2022. This surge in scepticism was most pronounced among Indian respondents, where “no confidence” surged from 65% to 82%. Among Malays, the increase was from 66% to 78%; for the Chinese, it escalated from 64% to 74%. These statistics illustrate a growing frustration with U.S. leadership across ethnic groups in Malaysia, particularly as Biden’s management of the global economy faced heightened scrutiny. In summary, the data underscores that confidence in U.S. economic leadership has consistently been low across all ethnic groups, with significant declines observed over time. From President Obama’s tenure through those of Presidents Trump and Biden, public trust in the U.S. leadership’s ability to address global economic challenges has steadily waned.

The study further explored the impact of age on perceptions regarding the economic leadership of U.S. Presidents. Younger Malaysians, specifically those aged 21 to 35, exhibited a heightened optimism towards President Biden, with 40% expressing confidence in his ability to address global economic challenges. Conversely, confidence significantly decreased among older Malaysians, particularly within the 36 to 50 age group and among seniors. A similar pattern was evident during President Obama’s administration, wherein younger Malaysians initially demonstrated greater assurance; however, this confidence waned over time. Regarding President Trump, scepticism was prevalent across all age demographics, with a notable decline in confidence among middle-aged individuals. Throughout various ethnic and age categories, a discernible trend of diminishing faith in U.S. economic leadership emerged, reflecting a growing discontent with U.S. foreign policy and its role in global economic affairs.

2. *Finding a Solution to the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*

Another matter of significant concern to Malaysians pertains to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which has persisted for several decades. Malaysians recognise that the United States is positioned to assume a leadership role in proposing a resolution to this conflict. Regarding perceptions of the U.S. President’s capability to address the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the observed trends are similarly discouraging (Table 2). Confidence in all three presidents to effectively resolve the issue has declined over time, with a substantial majority of Malaysians indicating “no confidence” in their leadership concerning this matter. The data delineates three principal categories for each ethnic group: No Confidence and Confidence, illustrating the perceptions of these communities regarding the situation surrounding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Table 2).

Table 2: Malaysian Perceptions of U.S. Presidents’ Ability to Solve the Palestinian-Israel Issue (2010-2022)

Palestinian-Israeli Conflict Under President Obama (2010-2013):								
Respondents	2010 Malay	2010 Chinese	2010 Indian	2010 Total	2013 Malay	2013 Chinese	2013 Indian	2013 Total
No Confidence	59%	54%	46%	56%	74%	67%	60%	70%
Confidence	38%	43%	53%	41%	23%	31%	40%	28%
Palestinian-Israeli Conflict Under President Trump (2017-2018):								
Respondents	2017 Malay	2017 Chinese	2017 Indian	2017 Total	2018 Malay	2018 Chinese	2018 Indian	2018 Total
No Confidence	82%	64%	68%	74%	85%	73%	66%	78%
Confidence	16%	34%	32%	24%	12%	23%	31%	19%
Palestinian-Israeli Conflict Under President Biden (2021-2022):								
Respondents	2021 Malay	2021 Chinese	2021 Indian	2021 Total	2022 Malay	2022 Chinese	2022 Indian	2022 Total
No Confidence	72%	77%	65%	73%	80%	73%	79%	77%
Confidence	28%	22%	34%	27%	20%	27%	20%	23%

Malaysians exhibited a greater confidence in the leadership of President Obama to identify a resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli

conflict. Initially, under President Obama, confidence levels began at 41% in 2010 but declined to 28% by 2013. Concurrently, the percentage of individuals expressing “no confidence” increased significantly, from 56% in 2010 to 70% in 2013. In 2010, perceptions of President Obama’s capability to address the conflict varied amongst Malaysia’s ethnic groups. Among the Malay community, 59% expressed “no confidence,” whereas 38% demonstrated confidence in his leadership. The Chinese demographic displayed a moderately more favourable outlook, with 54% indicating “no confidence” and 43% signifying confidence. The Indian community appeared to be the most optimistic, with 53% expressing confidence in President Obama and 46% articulating “no confidence.” Overall, 56% of Malaysians harboured doubts regarding U.S. efforts, while 41% placed their trust in President Obama’s potential for progress. By 2013, these sentiments had undergone considerable change. The ratio of Malaysians articulating “no confidence” in President Obama’s leadership concerning the Palestinian-Israeli conflict rose among all ethnic groups. Among the Malays, “no confidence” surged to 74%, with only 23% expressing confidence. The Chinese community similarly experienced a notable surge in scepticism, with “no confidence” climbing to 67% and confidence dwindling to 31%. Likewise, the Indian group expressed heightened doubt, with “no confidence” increasing to 60% and confidence dropping to 40%.

This decline in confidence underscores a mounting frustration among various ethnic groups regarding the ineffectiveness of U.S. leadership in resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Notably, the Malay and Chinese communities exhibited particularly pronounced increases in disappointment, while the Indian community similarly manifested a shift towards heightened scepticism. The data indicates a widespread and escalating discontent with the role of the U.S. as a regional mediator.

The citizens of Malaysia harboured limited expectations regarding President Trump, based on his statements concerning the conflict. Upon his assumption of office, public confidence in his capacity to address the Palestinian-Israeli issue was notably low from the beginning. In 2017, a mere 24% of Malaysians conveyed confidence in his leadership, a figure that diminished to only 19% by 2018. Concurrently, the percentage of Malaysians expressing “no confidence” increased consistently, rising from 74% to 78%. The controversial policies of the United States during

Trump's presidency, notably the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the relocation of the U.S. embassy, likely fostered a growing dissatisfaction within Malaysia. Among all ethnic groups—Malays, Chinese, and Indians—the levels of “no confidence” were markedly higher than those expressing confidence, emphasising a pervasive sense of scepticism towards U.S. leadership during Trump's administration. In 2017, 82% of the Malay population expressed “no confidence” in Trump's handling of this issue, with only 16% indicating confidence. This reflects that the Malay community exhibited the highest level of scepticism, illustrating a profound lack of trust in U.S. initiatives under the Trump administration.

The Chinese community demonstrated a slightly greater sense of optimism compared to the Malays, with 64% expressing “no confidence” and 34% exhibiting confidence regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Similarly, the Indian community presented a more balanced viewpoint, with 68% indicating “no confidence” and 32% showing confidence. Overall, in 2017, 74% of Malaysians communicated “no confidence” in Trump's capacity to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, while merely 24% expressed confidence, signifying a pervasive lack of faith in U.S. leadership. By 2018, public confidence in Trump's leadership experienced a further decline. Within the Malay community, the percentage of “no confidence” surged to 85%, while confidence diminished to a paltry 12%, highlighting an escalating sense of disillusionment. The Chinese community also exhibited increased scepticism, with “no confidence” rising to 73% and confidence decreasing slightly to 23%. Although the Indian community remained relatively more optimistic than the other two groups, similar trends were observable, with “no confidence” at 66% and confidence marginally falling to 31%.

The aforementioned trends distinctly indicate a mounting frustration at the international level pertaining to the global community, which appears to exhibit a lackadaisical commitment to the issue at hand. In 2017, 74% of Malaysians indicated “no confidence” in Trump's capacity to address the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, whereas only 24% retained confidence. By 2018, the proportion of those expressing “no confidence” escalated to 78%, while confidence diminished to a mere 19%. These findings underscore a significant disappointment among Malaysians with regard to Trump's handling of the issue. His

policies were extensively regarded as exacerbating divisions rather than fostering peace. The increasing scepticism manifesting across all ethnic groups signifies a collective erosion of trust in U.S. leadership as a just and effective mediator in the conflict.

Despite initial optimism regarding President Biden's leadership in addressing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, confidence among Malaysians has remained notably low. In 2021, only 27% of Malaysians believed that President Biden could effectively manage the issue; by 2022, this figure had decreased to 23%. The proportion of individuals expressing "no confidence" remained significantly high, increasing from 73% in 2021 to 77% in 2022. Among different ethnic groups, Indians exhibited the most optimism, with 34% expressing confidence in President Biden's leadership, compared to 28% of Malays and 22% of Chinese respondents. Within the Malay community, 72% expressed "no confidence" in President Biden's ability to address the conflict, whereas the Chinese community demonstrated an even greater level of scepticism, with 77% indicating "no confidence." By 2022, scepticism had risen among all ethnic groups, reflecting a persistent decline in confidence. Among Malays, 80% expressed "no confidence" in the U.S.'s capacity to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli issue, while only 20% expressed confidence. The Chinese community maintained a high level of scepticism, with 73% indicating "no confidence" and 27% expressing confidence. For the Indian community, the percentage of individuals feeling "no confidence" rose to 79%, while confidence decreased to 20%. Overall, in 2022, 77% of Malaysians expressed "no confidence" in U.S. leadership, with only 23% remaining confident.

This trend of diminishing confidence reflects the broader disillusionment that has been observed over time. The Malay community consistently demonstrated the highest levels of "no confidence," reaching a peak of 85% in 2018 and 80% in 2022. The Chinese community, which has historically exhibited greater scepticism, sustained its elevated levels of doubt, while the Indian community, previously more optimistic, ultimately aligned with the rising scepticism of the other two groups. This escalating disappointment underscores a regional consensus that U.S. leadership has not succeeded in achieving meaningful progress in the resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, resulting in frustration and a waning trust among all ethnic groups in Malaysia.

3. *Ability to handle the dispute with China*

China has emerged as a global power, making the United States wary of its role in the world community. Malaysians are curious to know how the United States would handle any dispute with China. Thus, the survey examined how Malaysians felt about President Biden’s ability to handle the dispute with China (Table 3). In 2021, only 36% of Malaysians believed that Biden could resolve the issue. By 2022, confidence had dropped significantly, with only 21% believing he could manage it. In 2021, most Malaysians expressed doubts: 66% of Malays, 60% of Chinese, and 62% of Indians had “no confidence” in Biden’s capacity to address the China dispute.

By the year 2022, scepticism significantly increased regarding the capability of the United States to manage the dispute with China. “No confidence” escalated to 78% among the Malay community, 75% among the Chinese community, and 82% among the Indian community. Additionally, confidence diminished across all groups, with only 22% of Malays, 23% of Chinese, and 16% of Indians expressing a positive outlook. The survey also indicated a decline in confidence among Malaysians of all ages concerning President Biden’s capacity to resolve the China dispute. In the year 2021, 63% of Malaysians reported a lack of confidence, with younger individuals (ages 21-35) displaying slightly more optimism than their older counterparts. However, by 2022, scepticism had grown markedly. “No confidence” surged to 78%, particularly among those aged 36-50, and confidence levels decreased across all age groups, with merely 25% of younger Malaysians and 19% of those aged 36-50 maintaining belief in Biden’s ability to effectively manage the dispute. A significant number of Malaysians perceived the China issue as too intricate for President Biden to address proficiently.

Table 3: Malaysian Perceptions of President Biden’s Ability to handle the dispute with China (2021-2022)

Respondents Ethnicity	2021 Malay	2021 Chinese	2021 Indian	2021 Total	2022 Malay	2022 Chinese	2022 Indian	2022 Total
No Confidence	66%	60%	62%	63%	78%	75%	82%	78%
Confidence	34%	39%	37%	36%	22%	23%	16%	21%

Respondents Age	2021 21-35	2021 36-50	2021 >51	2021 Total	2022 21-35	2022 36-50	2022 >51	2022 Total
No Confidence	61%	65%	65%	63%	73%	81%	78%	78%
Confidence	38%	35%	35%	36%	25%	19%	21%	21%

This study offers insight into how Malaysians perceive the role and capabilities of the United States as a global leader capable of providing necessary guidance in addressing pressing global issues. In conclusion, the data reveal a notable shift in public perception of U.S. leadership in Malaysia, particularly regarding its capacity to resolve global economic issues and to address the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Although President Obama initially incited a degree of optimism, this sentiment gradually waned as his presidency progressed. Likewise, Presidents Trump and Biden consistently encountered low levels of public confidence, accompanied by increasing scepticism over the years. This trend suggests a growing discontent with U.S. foreign policy, particularly in addressing complex and long-standing global challenges. Across all ethnic and age demographics, Malaysians are increasingly regarding U.S. leadership as ineffective, signifying a deepening erosion of trust in the capability of American presidents to effectively manage global issues.

The relationship between the United States and Malaysia can be examined within a broader regional perception of U.S. leadership, which underscores a persistent pattern of fluctuating confidence and scepticism. Throughout various administrations, U.S. foreign policy has been shaped by geopolitical dynamics, ranging from Cold War strategies to contemporary endeavours aimed at countering China’s influence. Despite this, American efforts to establish leadership in addressing global economic challenges and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict have often been regarded as inadequate, and at times, wanting, by Malaysians.

Confidence in the global economic leadership of the United States has consistently diminished within Malaysian society, reflecting an escalating discontent toward U.S.-led economic frameworks and trade agreements. Following a period of initial optimism during Barack Obama’s presidency, trust has waned under the administrations of

Donald Trump and Joe Biden, particularly among ethnic groups such as Malays, who exhibit pronounced criticism of U.S. policies. Concerning the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, although Obama's early diplomatic efforts inspired hopes, his unwavering support for Israel undermined confidence, and Trump's pro-Israel posture further alienated the Malaysian populace. The Biden administration has not succeeded in instilling trust, as evidenced by the fact that 77% of Malaysians in 2022 expressed "no confidence" in U.S. initiatives. Analyses of ethnic and age dynamics reveal that scepticism towards U.S. leadership encompasses all groups; however, the Malays continue to represent the most disillusioned segment. The relations between the United States and Malaysia have experienced fluctuations throughout history, shifting from the Cold War outreach to Obama's pivot towards Asia, yet scepticism persists due to historical shortcomings. The ascendance of China and economic alliances such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) underscore the prevailing shift away from U.S. influence, with Malaysia increasingly seeking economic opportunities from China, thereby indicating the necessity for the United States to recalibrate its strategies within the Asia-Pacific region.

Conclusion

Media representations and individual experiences influence perceptions of nations; however, they are further refined by various economic, political, and social factors. Due to the limitations of personal experience, Malaysians have been significantly impacted by the media's portrayal of the United States as a dominant global power. A comprehensive approach conceptualises perceptions; nevertheless, as demonstrated in this study, it is imperative to focus on specific elements of perception to attain a more profound understanding of nations. This study has examined the leadership of the United States and evaluated its role in addressing three critical global challenges. Polling agencies such as Gallup and Pew International have frequently conducted opinion research on global leadership, consistently placing the leaders of the United States, Russia, and China at the forefront. This study has focused on the leadership of three U.S. presidents and examined their approaches to specific issues. By investigating these three global challenges, one can achieve a deeper understanding of how Malaysians perceive the complexities of leadership within a global power.

The United States finds itself at a critical juncture in its engagement with Malaysia and the broader region. In order to restore trust, U.S. policymakers must confront the underlying causes of disillusionment, which include perceptions of bias in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as well as inconsistent approaches to global economic leadership. Malaysia's influence, especially concerning the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and its position on the Gaza situation, plays a crucial role in shaping regional perceptions of U.S. policy.

The increasing influence of China in Southeast Asia, coupled with the growing strength of BRICS as a counterbalance to Western dominance, indicates a potential realignment within the region. Malaysia's forthcoming policies may favour these emerging powers over its established alliances with the United States. This transition emphasises the necessity for the United States to reassess its foreign policy strategies to sustain its relevance and influence in the region. The United States has to provide leadership in handling the rise of China as a global power.

Ultimately, the future of U.S.-Malaysia relations will hinge upon the capacity of American leaders to exhibit a sincere commitment to mutual respect, impartial mediation in global conflicts, and equitable economic partnerships. Should the United States fail to address these critical concerns, it risks further alienating Malaysia as well as other nations that are increasingly gravitating towards non-Western powers for leadership.

As President Trump commences his second term in office, there are increased anticipations for a more pragmatic approach to international relations. The second presidency of Trump presents both an opportunity to repair U.S.-Malaysia relations and a challenge to prevent the escalation of existing tensions. For Malaysia and a significant portion of Southeast Asia, the United States must demonstrate its ability to balance its interests with a genuine respect for regional sovereignty, alongside a long-term commitment to resolving global conflicts fairly and sustainably. Based on the records available thus far, Malaysian expectations regarding the performance of the newly elected president are not optimistic.

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The glorious Qur'ān. Translation and commentary by A. Yusuf Ali (1977). US: American Trust Publications.

Ḥadīth

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(i) Al-Bukhārī, 88:204 (where 88 is the book number, 204 is the ḥadīth number)

(ii) Ibn Hanbal, vol. 1, p. 1

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(i) Al-Bukhārī, M. (1981). *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.

(ii) Ibn Ḥanbal, A. (1982). *Musnad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*. Istanbul: Cagri Yayinlari.

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