



How to cite this article:

Ridzuan, I., & Ma'dan, M. (2023). Abdullah Badawi's foreign policy towards China: Three-level analysis of a pragmatic and idealistic diplomacy strategy in a two-way cooperation. *Journal of International Studies*, 19(1), 145-168. <https://doi.org/10.32890/jis2023.19.1.6>

## **ABDULLAH BADAWI'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS CHINA: THREE-LEVEL ANALYSIS OF A PRAGMATIC AND IDEALISTIC DIPLOMACY STRATEGY IN A TWO-WAY COOPERATION**

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Received: 20/5/2022   Revised: 27/7/2022   Accepted: 3/1/2023   Published: 17/4/2023

### **ABSTRACT**

During his administration from 2003 to 2009, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi chose to continue the foreign policy of Mahathir Mohamad. However, he also applied a more 'middle-ground' approach that was neither provocative nor aggressive. This had on occasion portrayed him as a weak leader, contributing to the loss of majority seats for Barisan Nasional (BN) in the 12th general election. Nonetheless, during his tenure, there was an increase in cooperation between Malaysia and China in the educational and sociocultural fields, as well as cooperation

with government-linked companies (GLCs), which had not happened before. How far did the moderate personality of Abdullah provide a significant impact on the structuring of Malaysia's foreign policy towards China? This research will look at a three-level analysis that was conducted in assessing the foreign policy of Malaysia towards China during the period. The three levels that were analysed were international, national, and personality factors. A neoclassical realist approach was applied to look at the changing international political landscape and its impact on Malaysian foreign policy towards China. This research applied a qualitative method of obtaining primary data through structured interviews with key informants and an analytical method based on chronology—unsupported by empirical evidence from secondary data. In conclusion, the research revealed that Malaysia's foreign policy towards China during Abdullah Badawi's administration was a combination of ongoing maturing of relations and an increase in bilateral cooperation which had not been explored before. The research also found that although Abdullah Badawi was seen as a relatively weak leader in domestic politics, he made a significant impact on the continuity of Malaysia's national interest, particularly in the soft power competition between the USA and China in Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** Malaysia, China, foreign policy, bilateral cooperation, three-level analysis, diplomacy strategy.

## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's foreign policy towards China from the era of prevention until the post-Cold War era reflected significant changes, from conflict management to conflict research and conflict resolution, which eventually led to conflict settlement in the foreign policy space. The situation refers to the initial hostile relations to the era of diplomacy and pragmatics as well as finally, the era of maturity that led to mutual trust between the two countries. Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad was the first Malaysian Prime Minister to work closely with China since the 1980s. Under Mahathir's administration, Malaysia and China had established various forms of collaboration which were not limited to economic aspects, but also sensitive areas like sociocultural and educational aspects. He was also consistent with his stance in

rejecting China's threat theory and never considered Beijing a threat to the country, region, or the world.

When Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, or better known as Pak Lah, took over the reins of leadership from Mahathir in 2003 until 2009, he had chosen to continue the policies left by Mahathir. Due to these factors, Abdullah is seen to have not left any significant impact, especially on Malaysia's foreign policy towards China, similar to Tun Hussein Onn who continued Tun Razak's delegation. Despite this, there have been coherent changes and improvements in bilateral relations and cooperation in terms of diplomatic, economic, political, and sociocultural synergies that were unprecedented during previous eras. In the international political arena, he subscribed to the policy of multilateral binding to the major powers that were competing, namely, the United States and China. Economic cooperation comprising 26 MoUs and six MoAs were signed between the two countries. The event has made Malaysia, China's main trading partner, for the first time replacing Singapore. Abdullah's modest personality and emphasis on the concept of deliberation have given a new lease of life to Wisma Putra in jointly shaping Malaysia's foreign policy. (Interview: I3).

Based on the above argument, the main question of the study is the extent to which Abdullah's leadership, which is considered weak, has had on Malaysia's foreign policy towards China. In order to obtain the results of a comprehensive study, this research was conducted to analyse Malaysia's foreign policy governance structure towards China during the Abdullah era through three stages of analysis, which involved international, domestic and individual variables.

This three-level analysis model was retrieved from the theory of neoclassical realism because it is relevant in synthesizing the direction of a country as well as the impact of the outcome of its policy. This study is divided into four parts. Firstly, to debate Malaysia's stance in facing competition from the United States and China in the Southeast Asian region. Next, to analyse the strengthening process and development of bilateral relations through the cooperation of government-linked companies (GLCs). Then, to examine Abdullah's personality and background in shaping Malaysia's foreign policy towards China. Lastly, part of this study is to assess the impact of Malaysia's foreign policy on China during the Abdullah era from 2003 to 2009.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study obtained primary data through face-to-face interviews with selected informants consisting of individuals directly involved in: contributing ideas, commenting, proposing and analysing the formation of Malaysia's foreign policy. The selected informants included researchers and experts, former elite leaders, former senior government officials and academicians. Among the informants involved were a former Director of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia as well as former Member of the National Operations Council (MAGERAN), who represented the first informant (I1) in this study. The second informant (I2) was a Former Commander of the Malaysian Armed Forces (1987–1992), The third informant (I3) was a Former Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1996–2001), and the fourth informant (I4) was the Prime Minister's advisor to Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (2004–2009). The Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia (1999–2008) was the fifth informant (I5); the sixth informant was the Director at the Centre for Regional Security Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China (I6) and the seventh informant was a professor and specialist in South China Sea issues at the University of Western Australia (I7). The eighth informant was the representative of the Leadership Council of the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network (I8) and the ninth informant was the Director of Research Chinese Institute (I9). In addition, this study also used secondary data from the literature review to strengthen the data of the study. Among the secondary sources used were printed documents such as books, articles and journals related to international relations that contained critical arguments and debates such as the issue of Malaysia's diplomatic relations with China, the rise of China, Malaysia and China's foreign policy, and China's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia.

### **Neoclassical Theory of Realism**

Neoclassical realism is a theory that combines external factors and internal factors to analyse the formation of a country's foreign policy on the international political stage (Rose, 1998). The anarchic nature of international politics causes a country to always be wary of all its actions because it is driven by credibility and suspicion towards other

countries. Every country sees other countries as a threat, thus creating a prison dilemma and eventually leading to war.

The situation shows that each country has different resources, powers and national interests. As a result, every country is constantly looking for opportunities to increase its influence and resources through the expansion of power, alliances, and the improvement of science and technology against the weak (Mearsheimer, 2001). Based on the arguments of scholars, the study found that strong and powerful countries will continue to monopolize the international political system and weak countries will fall victim and must conform to strong countries. Even so, in the 21st century, the international political landscape is changing from unilateral to multilateral. This phenomenon illustrates that those countries with strong powers, as well as weak countries, play a significant role in maximizing national interest in controlling limited resources. Competition between one country and another is due to international structural factors (Waltz, 1954) but Morgenthau (1978) insists that competition occurs due to leadership factors.

Based on the arguments of the scholars mentioned, this study found that the two factors influence each other because they balance each other, and that the anarchic political system is different from domestic politics. The government has the power to force the people according to every directive and policy implemented. but at the systemic level, no country can force another country. The domestic factor consists of the relationship between leaders and domestic actors such as entrepreneurs, non-governmental organizations and the general public. In general, Malaysia is made up of various ethnicities and religions. Usually, the local citizen relationship is assessed and measured through economic benefits. Based on these factors, the leaders are always looking for and seizing opportunities with any country in enhancing economic synergies. The action is not only for the good of the country, but also to ensure the survival of the ruling party.

However, Huntington (1991) and Bahgaf (1984) argue that the structuring of a country's foreign policy, especially in the third world, is dominated by leadership factors. This is because most third-world leaders are dominant in implementing decisions and implementing policies. However, the study found that no matter how big a power or

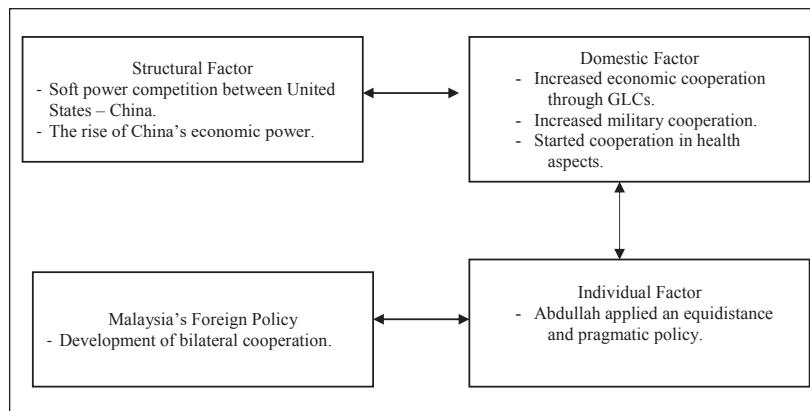
small a country, the foreign policy structure cannot be assessed through leader factors alone because international and domestic structural factors also have a significant impact. Both factors will determine the implications, either in the form of opportunities or threats to the country and the survival of the ruling party. Smith (2019) argues that:

A key determinant of international political outcomes is because the international (and regional) environments a state finds itself in creates incentives and disincentives for action. However, perceptions are important to gauge because it is only the cognition of flesh and blood officials that structure(s) can have an impact on foreign policymaking.

In this regard, Ripsman et al. (2016) also stressed that a country's foreign policy should consist of three levels of analysis, namely, international, domestic and individual variables. Scholars also argue that the impact of anomalies influences actions beyond a country's expectations in policy implementation. For example, China has consistently been a threat to Malaysia, but Kuala Lumpur has consistently enhanced diplomatic relations with Beijing. The situation has proven that every country is free to take significant action despite having differences in ideology, political and administrative systems. Ripsman et al. (2016) also analysed the definition of the concept of a threat more objectively through the uncertainty of the international political system. Threats occur when major powers show the nature of dominating other countries, using the economy and military in creating destruction, and maximizing resources to strike a balance against other regions and countries. However, each threat has the potential to create cooperation in economic aspects, diplomacy, and settlement mechanisms for conflicts that occur due to common interest. It is undeniable that throughout the history of Chinese civilization, such superpowers have never colonized any country, but history has also proved China's aggressive actions in the Indochina conflict, the South China Sea, and the Tiananmen Square events. Due to these factors, Malaysia has always made the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Organization of Third World Countries as mediums of communication in resolving any conflict, especially with the major powers. Based on these literature reviews, the framework of Malaysia's foreign policy study on the Abdullah era with China is synthesized and analyzed as shown in Figure 1 as follows.

**Figure 1**

*Characteristics of Malaysia's Foreign Policy towards China 2003–2009*



Source: Synthesised by researchers

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### International Order Competition of the United States and China in the Southeast Asian region

In the era of the 2000s, there were two important events that have restructured the international political system, namely, the United States War on Terror policy and China's participation in the World Trade Organization (WTO). Both phenomena caused the Southeast Asian region to become a battleground of great powers once again, this time during the Cold War era. Informant seven (I7) stated that, "Yet it should be noted that Southeast Asia has always been held hostage to the power politics of major powers." (Interview: I7)

Based on the interviews, it has been proven that during the Cold War era, the Southeast Asian region was not a priority of the United States compared to Europe and the Middle East. At the time, there were two major wars that took place, namely, the Korean War (1950–1953) and the Vietnam War (1965–1975). These events resulted in the United States failing to formulate any strategy to improve relations with countries in the Southeast Asian region after the end of the Cold War. However, after the attack on the World Trade Centre on September 11,

2001, the interests of the Southeast Asian region shifted from benign neglect to the second front. In this regard, there were three factors that influenced the actions of the United States in the Southeast Asian region. The first was curbing the spread of Al-Qaeda's influence. If the terrorist group succeeds in penetrating Indonesia, the largest Islamic country in the world, and allies with Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), it would make the international terrorist threat unstoppable. Second, the terrorist attacks on the Straits of Malacca created a negative impact on the interests of hegemonic power and its allies. Third, to enhance the role of the United States and balance China's influence. This is because countries in the Southeast Asian region prefer to establish multilateral cooperation with rising countries such as China, Brazil and India than the United States, which applies unilateral policies (Alden & Vieira, 2005). From a different perspective, China's economic overflow and active involvement through "mulin youhao zhengce (good neighbour policy) have rapidly filled the superpower void in the Southeast Asian region long left by the United States.

Nevertheless, Beijing's close ties with countries in the Southeast Asian region have never undermined U.S. influence over geopolitics. For example, a Member of Parliament for the Philippines stated that, "When we must choose between Western hegemony and Beijing hegemony, we still choose to be under the umbrella of the United States." (Interview: I8)

Based on the interviews, it has been proven that countries in the Southeast Asian region are still dependent on the United States in terms of security because the hegemonic power is the only superpower capable of balancing China in the South China Sea. Even so, in terms of economic relations, they are more inclined towards the Chinese market and investment. China began to be the engine of regional economic growth in 2004 under the leadership of Hu Jintao, the 6th President of China. According to World Bank statistics, China's rapid economic development has contributed 13 percent to world economic growth.

There is no doubt that China's economic growth has had a positive impact, but at the same time, it has also created concern among neighbouring countries. The competition for foreign direct investment (FDI) flows has also had a negative impact on small countries in the Southeast Asian region. FDI flows have undergone significant changes

since China rose to become an economic power in 2004. The proof is that 70 percent of FDI has flowed to China whereas previously, it was concentrated in countries in the Southeast Asian region. In addition, other countries are also worried that China's economic growth will cause the superpower to increase its military spending, which could eventually create an imbalance in the region and the world. Due to these factors, Hu Jintao asserted that China's foreign policy is based on the concept of "heping fazhan" (peaceful development) (Yi, 2005). The policy also expanded in terms of national security when China signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DoC) to reduce tensions over issues in the South China Sea in 2004. The study found that prior to the existence of the *heping fazhan* policy, China had never agreed to sign any agreement nor indicated any commitment to confidence building measures (CBM) involving issues in the South China Sea. The study also found that such changes in attitude and actions reflected China's seriousness and were not just mere rhetoric. According to Informant six (I6), "The rise of China as a responsible regional power is conducive to ASEAN driven regionalism." Through statements from various scholars and interviews, this study found that after 10 years of China and ASEAN holding talks to manage sensitive issues in the South China Sea, Beijing finally agreed to sign the two agreements. The event indirectly indicated that compared to the Cold War era, China was beginning to compromise its territorial sovereignty.

Besides that, there is still a shift occurring among claimant countries in the South China Sea.. In May 2003, Philippine's Defense Secretary, Angelo Reyes, accused China of disrespecting the DoC agreement because it had put up border markers and sent its navy to disputed small islands. However, the concerns of countries in the Southeast Asian region have been neutralized by the country's economic growth. China's vast domestic market and the ability of its industry to compete with Western powers such as the United States, Britain and the European Union have given China great bargaining power over any country in the Southeast Asian region. Over the past 30 years, China has received \$600 billion in FDI inflows. Further, China's gross domestic product (GDP) has grown rapidly from \$362.4 billion in 1978 to \$13.7 trillion in 2004, and has continued to increase to \$24.7 trillion in 2007. It is the largest development in the international economic system (Jin Zhesong & Li Jun, 2011). Therefore, China has

the potential to restructure the region's economic policies such as raising tariff rates and import taxes, just as the Western countries have done. Despite all these issues happening, China has not raised tariff rates and import taxes as a value of responsibility to the international community. During the Chinese Communist Party's 17th National People's Congress in October 2007, China had decreed no change in foreign economic policy; even in 2008 during the 11th National People's Congress, in Beijing when China once again reiterated the same point (Chun, 2010). China's actions towards the Southeast Asian region had gone from a hard policy to a friendly diplomacy and a sense of responsibility towards the region.

The actions of the United States through the War on Terror and China's *heping fazhan* policy in the Southeast Asian region have led to great power politics, thus causing geopolitical instability. This phenomenon shows that the United States does not like any country that tries to challenge its hegemony in the international political arena. From a different perspective, the United States has restructured its policy towards the Southeast Asian region not only to increase its influence and prestige, but also to signal to China not to challenge the world order of such hegemonic power.

Through this study, it is notable that competition between the major powers in the Southeast Asian region is not a new thing. For example, the Indochina conflict that began in the 1940s era had seen strategic competition between the United States, France, Russia and China in the Southeast Asian region. However, today the competition is no longer through the military but instead involves trade, investment and socio-culture, which creates a higher impact on small countries whether in the form of risks, threats or opportunities. Malaysia acted pragmatically and idealistically toward these superpowers because Malaysia needed the Chinese market and the United States to balance Chinese influence in the waters of the South China Sea. Based on these factors, Abdullah applied a multilateral binding policy through the establishment of the East Asia Summit (EAS) to bind China and the United States to ASEAN using the ASEAN Way.

In 2005, Malaysia officially hosted the EAS conference for the first time. It was attended by the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Russia, Japan, South Korea and ASEAN member countries (Katayama, 2013). However, Informant four (I4), the former 4th Prime Minister, had slammed the EAS as the EAST Australian Summit because non-

Asian countries would control the organization. However, the study found that the establishment of the EAS was one of Abdullah's policy successes as it was able to balance the major powers and bind them to follow ASEAN's norms and values. Alaggapa (2013) argues, "... is to avoid permanent alliance and alignment and ensure Southeast Asia is not dominated by any single power." Malaysia had managed to bring together all countries that had the potential to strike a balance against each other such as China, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand and Russia. This study found that through the EAS, for the first time, these superpowers could sit at the same table and discuss sensitive issues for the good of the region. Through this study and analysis, it is notable that the EAS is one of Malaysia's great successes in diplomatic strategy because previously, Kuala Lumpur's efforts to create the EAEG and EAEC were not successful. Informant one (I1) mentioned,

The formation of the EAS was a great success and victory for Abdullah and Malaysia because it managed to unite ASEAN with major powers such as China, Japan and South Korea sitting at the same table. Also included are Western powers and of course the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Russia. (Interview: 18 December 2019)

In terms of security, Abdullah consistently rejected any action by any party that slammed China as a threat to the region or the world. In 2005, the United States and Japan asserted that China's military escalation created a threat to the Southeast Asian region and the world (Hyun-Wook, 2011). During the Asia-Pacific Roundtable Conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia once again reiterated that China never aspired to be a hegemonic power and never felt that China's military escalation was a threat or had the potential to be a threat. Abdullah Badawi (2005) asserted,

Until recently, China had never been openly declared a military threat or potential threat. Some countries may have quietly argued that view however tenuous the grounds, but none overtly described China as a potential threat. This has now changed. For the first time, the United States and Japan have issued a Joint Statement declaring Taiwan a matter of mutual security concern (Malaysian Archive, 2005).

Through the speech, this study found that Abdullah acted in such a way not only to maintain good relations with neighbouring countries but also with the major powers. At the same time, Abdullah also avoided any tensions between Malaysia, ASEAN and China, especially in the South China Sea. This is because there is no guarantee of the commitment of the United States in the short or long term to the Southeast Asian region. The situation indicates that any issues that arise should be resolved through means and conditions determined by the countries involved without the intervention of any other stakeholders. It is not to challenge the major powers, but the focus of small countries like Malaysia is to maximize national interests and avoid taking risks. The enhancement of Malaysia's bilateral relations with China at the international political level has had a significant impact on cooperation between the two countries.

### **Expansion of Economic, Sociocultural and Security Cooperation**

Malaysia's economy during the 1990s era recorded a growth of 4.5 percent to 5.5 percent per annum, but from 2001 to 2009 there was a decline of 4.3 percent (Menon, 2014). The statistics had proven that the country's rapidly growing economic needs required new markets for products and investments. China has been identified as Malaysia's main trading partner as the rise of China's economic power is a golden opportunity for the country's interests and survival.

On that factor, China was the first country outside ASEAN that Abdullah visited when he was Prime Minister (Balakrishnan, 2006a). Abdullah led a delegation consisting of cabinet members, three Chief Ministers (Ketua Menteri), two Chief Ministers (Menteri Besar) and 500 Malaysian entrepreneurs (Kuik, 2010). The two countries had also signed 26 MoUs and a total of six memoranda of agreement (MoAs), which meant that previous MoUs were realized (Li, 2006). The results of bilateral visits and agreements had increased bilateral trade, which saw \$14.1 billion in 2003 increased to \$18.8 billion in 2004. This further increased to \$20 billion in 2005 (Balakrishnan, 2006b). This consistent increase had made Malaysia, China's 4th largest trading partner.

Despite the increase in economic synergies, the people began to reject Barisan Nasional (BN) as the ruling party. Proof of this was when BN obtained a slim victory in the 11th GE, which was only 51.5 percent

of the votes and 63.3 percent of the seats in Parliament when Barisan Nasional won only 140 seats in Parliament compared to the 222 seats contested (Chin, 2018). Among the factors for the failure were the intra-Malay conflict (the rise of Parti Keadilan Rakyat and Pakatan Rakyat involving a coalition of DAP, PAS and PKR, which was for the first time led by Anwar Ibrahim) and the intra-elite struggle in UMNO (the conflict involving Abdullah-Mahathir). Due to these factors, Abdullah could not rely solely on the support of the Malay community and because of that, votes from other races, especially the Chinese, were important to the survival of the BN regime. From a different perspective, despite economic growth, the people were still burdened by the rising cost of goods and soaring oil prices. Another perspective is that since economic benefits are quite important to the Chinese, the wider Malaysia's economic cooperation with China, the better Abdullah was in the eyes of the Chinese, especially those living in cities.

The negative impact of the GE results also caused Abdullah to come under pressure from UMNO's elite to resign. According to Informant One (I1), Abdullah was under great pressure from UMNO members, and among them was Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, who asked Abdullah to resign and give way to Najib, who was the then Deputy Prime Minister to replace him.

These pressures had led to the expansion of cooperation between Malaysia and China through government-owned government-linked companies (GLCs) such as Khazanah Nasional, Sime Darby and Petronas. For example, Khazanah Nasional is an early GLC and actively collaborates with China in oil and gas, education, retail and services industries. Khazanah Nasional also acquired a 9.9 percent stake in China's largest retailer, Parkson, in 2005. In terms of education, Khazanah Nasional has invested about \$44 million, representing a 10 percent stake in Oriental City University Limited. In terms of energy and environmental aspects, Khazanah Nasional cooperates with Beijing China Sciences General Energy & Environment.

Malaysia is the first country in the world to lead China in the global halal industry. Malaysia invited Beijing to the World Islamic Economic Forum (WIFE) to develop the local and international halal industry on 27 May 2007. That was China's first participation with a business group from the Muslim world. The halal industry has huge consumer

potential in China as 50 million Muslims live in the country. Meenchee Hong (2019) mentioned, “Malaysia’s halal products and the Chinese halal market are potential trade areas. Several Malaysian companies have started exporting accredited halal goods to China, from spices, frozen seafood and palm oil-based products to pharmaceuticals and cosmetics (p. 15). ”

Based on the information collected from various literature reviews, it has been proven that apart from wisely seizing opportunities and the Chinese market, Malaysia has diversified its products and is active in the halal industry because it does not want to depend on the oil and gas market, palm oil, and electricity and electronics alone.

The tourism industry saw a positive increase because in 2005 a total of 230,000 Chinese tourists came to Malaysia and the number continued to increase to 949,000 in 2009 (Kuik, 2013). In other words, there was a 75 percent increase in the number of Chinese tourists in Malaysia. The education sector also showed an increase in Chinese students in Malaysia because in 2002, the number of students increased from 4,834 students to 11,000 students in 2004 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2017). In an effort to increase the number of Chinese students in Malaysia, the Chinese government has provided scholarships to its students and promoted faculty exchanges and bilateral educational cooperation. The increasing number of Chinese students in Malaysia has also indirectly contributed to the country’s economy. Therefore, anything that benefits the Malaysian economy and enhances diplomatic relations with the superpower will be a priority in national policy. Malaysia and China have also strengthened people-to-people ties through cooperation in the field of health and epidemics. In May 2004, for the first time, the two countries signed an MoU in the face of SARS and H5N1 pandemic (Khalid, 2013).

Despite the rapid development of economic synergies in Malaysia, it was observed that various mega projects involving millions of ringgit had to be postponed. This dilemma occurred because Malaysia was no exception to the effects of the global economic slowdown in 2008. The Malaysian economy had contracted by 1.7 percent then, which was the year the global economy experienced the worst downturn in modern history (Bank Negara Report, 2008). To overcome this, the Malaysian government managed to realize one of its mega projects, namely, the construction of the second bridge in Penang. Malaysia

and China had signed a loan agreement worth \$800 million for the construction of the 23.5 km-long Penang Second Bridge in July 2007. China also charged a low-interest rate of 3 percent per annum over 20 years to Malaysia (Kuik, 2013). Malaysia was the first country in the Southeast Asian region to receive many loan facilities at that time due to its good relations with China compared to other countries (Interview: I4). From the interviews, this study found that the loan facilities with low-interest rates given by China to Malaysia compared to other countries were a gift to Malaysia. This is because of Malaysia's consistent policies and efforts to recognize China's power and promote the country's peaceful rise and modernization in the world.

There is no doubt that there has been an increase in bilateral cooperation between the two countries in the aspect of relations between the two countries and the people, which had never happened in the previous era. However, in terms of security, Malaysia is still wary of China's power on the issue regarding the South China Sea. A total of three officers from the US Coast Guard were sent to Malaysia to train Malaysian marine police officers in August 2004. Malaysia also renewed the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) signed in 1994 with the United States in 2005 (Adnan Abu Bakar 2013, p. 17). At the same time, Malaysia consistently provided the US military assistance in the form of foreign military sale credits for the purchase of defence assets (Sodhy, 2012). The study also found that although Malaysia forged close ties with China and rejected the Chinese threat theory, Kuala Lumpur still needed the United States in balancing China's power as a precautionary measure.

Malaysia and China also established military cooperation to strengthen their two-way cooperation. The first bilateral military cooperation took place when Najib Razak, who was the then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, signed a Bilateral Defence and Security Co-operation MoU with China. According to Informant nine (I9), among the forms of cooperation were exchanges and visits of top military officials, military training and information exchange. General Dato' Sri Abdul Aziz the then Commander-in-Chief of the Malaysian Armed Forces was the first top military officer sent by Malaysia to visit China. Despite this, cooperation was at a moderate level and there were some issues faced such as language issues and military technology. For example, the lack of English-speaking People's

Liberation Army (PLA) officers and the technological equipment used by the two countries were different. The situation made it difficult for both sides to increase cooperation in the military field (I2).

This study also found that Abdullah had applied equidistance and pragmatic policies in the military against the United States and China. This is simply because military cooperation with the two superpowers is to prevent them from being suspicious of Malaysia, which could eventually lead to Malaysia getting caught up in their competition.

### **Abdullah's Personality in Structuring Malaysia's Foreign Policy Towards China**

Pak Lah was the first Prime Minister to actively collaborate with China in the fields of socio-culture, education and non-governmental organizations. Despite this, he is considered weak in the eyes of the people and because of that his services are rarely written, discussed and highlighted (Interview: I4).

When Abdullah took over the reins of leadership from Mahathir as Prime Minister, there were concerns among the people about the future of the country. During Mahathir's 22 years as the country's leader, Malaysia's foreign policy had been proactive, bold and energetic, leading to commendable achievements on the international political stage. Abdullah, on the other hand, has a modest personality and untainted by any corruption issue and because of that, the people supported his leadership. This can be seen when BN obtained the largest victory in history during the 11th GE, which was 63.85 percent and 90.78 percent of the seats in Parliament (Chin, 2018). Among the main factors of the landslide victory during that era was the people's confidence in Abdullah's personality, who was vocal in fighting corruption and abuse of power (Interview: I4). This study also found that Abdullah's family from a religious background also contributed to BN's huge victory. Proof of this was when Kelantan, which is a stronghold of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), almost fell into the hands of BN.

There is no doubt that the second term of his rule had witnessed various events that made people begin to question his credibility as Prime Minister. Among the events were the HINDRAF issue, economic

slowdown, rising oil prices and rising cost of living that caused BN to fail to obtain majority seats in Parliament during the 12th GE (Interview: I4). Based on the above observation, Abdullah's modest personality had caused the people to feel that he was incapable of holding the number one position in the country. Moreover, Abdullah's personality, which was considered weak by the people, had a huge impact on the level of the international political structure. Amid the rivalry between the United States and China in the Southeast Asian region, Abdullah had chosen not to pursue provocative and aggressive policies as Mahathir had done. Kuik (2016, p. 159) stated, "Under Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Mahathir's immediate successor, Putrajaya's ties with Washington made progress on multiple fronts." During the Abdullah era as well, China for the first time agreed to sign the TAC and the DoC, and there were not many serious issues involving threats in those waters.

Abdullah's actions in addressing and facing competition between the United States and China in the Southeast Asian region were due to his extensive experience as a foreign minister. Abdullah led the Foreign Ministry for eight years from 1991 to 1999 (Interview: I4). From the interviews, it was found that those eight years as foreign minister were enough to indicate that Abdullah had extensive experience in foreign policy formulation such as in identifying changes in the international system and formulating sensitive diplomatic strategies with major powers such as China. According to Informant six (I6), a scholar of international relations and a leading national journalist, when Abdullah became Foreign Minister, he had met and established close ties with Chinese leaders. Based on the interviews, it has been proven that at that time, Abdullah had forged close ties with Chinese leaders which indirectly provided an advantage when he became Prime Minister.

Abdullah also brought about reforms in the country's administrative institutions as he often adopted a deliberative approach before a policy was implemented. For example, Abdullah made Wisma Putra and the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia as instruments for discussion and brainstorming of ideas on all Malaysian foreign policy matters before being brought to Parliament for debate. The situation was different during the Mahathir era because he preferred to make his own decisions and because of that, he was famous for the "four-eye meeting" after a decision was

made. During his tenure, it was noted that sometimes a decision was not reported to the respective minister or brought to Parliament for debate (Interview: I3).

Malaysia's growing ties with China were also influenced by Abdullah's family background. He was the only Malaysian Prime Minister who has descendants and relatives in China. His maternal grandfather was from Hainan and had migrated to Malaya in the 19th century (Interview: I4). However, Informant six (I6) stated that Abdullah's family background did not leave a significant impact on Malaysia's relations with China. Despite this, Informant three (I3) stressed that Abdullah's background in China influenced bilateral relations because Malaysia was the only country that received the highest number of loan from China compared to other countries in Southeast Asia. Through interviews with the two informants, this study found that the family background of a leader also influences and plays a significant role in the synergy of diplomatic relations between Malaysia and China.

## **Discussion and Findings of the Study**

Based on the above argument and analysis, this study found that Abdullah's personality and interpersonal values were coherent towards the improvement and development of Malaysia's relations with China. His efforts to bring China into the halal-hub market, the construction of Penang's second bridge and the establishment of the EAS are among Abdullah's foreign policy successes that drove the country's comprehensive strategy in the international political system. Abdullah's modest personality is evident in Malaysia's foreign policy during his tenure, which was not provocative against any major power and leaned more towards good relations with all countries. As recorded in 2004, the Southeast Asian region has regained its importance to the United States, 20 years after the end of the Cold War. One of the main factors in changing the policy of hegemonic power is to balance Chinese influence and Malaysia once again proved that it played a significant role by establishing the EAS to balance the competition between the two superpowers. Apart from that, Malaysia also managed to persuade China to sign various agreements to reduce tensions in the waters of the South China Sea. Abdullah's action to be a credible diplomatic partner of not only China but also the United States to ensure the survival of a small country like Malaysia in international political anarchy was significant.

Abdullah's era of leadership came with great responsibility because he took over the reins of leadership from Mahathir, a statesman who was respected and influential not only among the local people but also in the world. Abdullah chose to continue Mahathir's foreign policy to avoid any opposition and pressure because the people and UMNO elites were used to the former Prime Minister's 22 years of leadership. Despite this, in practice, he had improved diplomatic relations and expanded cooperation with China. This was evidenced by increased economic cooperation through state-owned companies, education, health and safety, which was unprecedented during the previous era. From another perspective, although Abdullah was pressured to resign, he had proven that he had his own way of shaping Malaysia's foreign policy.

On April 3, 2009, Abdullah was replaced by Dato' Seri Najib Abdul Razak as the Prime Minister of Malaysia. According to Informant one (I1), Abdullah represented the epitome of a Malay gentleman for choosing to resign with dignity when handing over the helm to his successor. The event showed Abdullah's authoritative leadership in ensuring the political stability of the country.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has found that Malaysia's foreign policy towards China during the era of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was a starting point for the continuing maturity in diplomatic relations and an unprecedented increase in bilateral cooperation. Although Abdullah's leadership was seen as weak on the domestic front, from another perspective, his leadership had made a huge impact on Malaysia's standing and sustainability in the face of soft power competition between the United States and China in the Southeast Asian region. The efforts he made in bringing China into the halal-hub market, the construction of Penang's second bridge and the establishment of the EAS were among the notable foreign policy successes that have driven Malaysia to forge a grander and more comprehensive strategy in developing the international political system, especially between Malaysia and China. In fact, his benevolent attitude towards other countries also earned the trust of powerful countries such as the United States. Therefore, the leadership practices of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as reflected in his personality and style as a leader influenced Malaysia's relationship with other countries.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency.

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