

A Recommendation of Malaysia Maritime Policy in Response to China's New Maritime Silk Road

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ABSTRACT

'One Belt One Road' and currently known as Belt and Road Initiative which mooted by Xi Jinping in 2013 has attracted many interests from others region in the world to participate. Malaysia and Indonesia are the part of Southeast Asia states that welcome this grand strategy. This is due to social infrastructure has built over hundred years ago through the classical silk road and also the benefits of technology, infrastructure, financial assistance, ports and others from this cooperation for the connectivity. Therefore, this article argues that the flux of China's financial and investment that penetrate through this grand strategy has given a red alert of Malaysia internally to preserve of the state autonomy by implementing affirmative maritime policy. Methodologically, this explanatory article uses both primary and secondary data. Primary data consists of an in-depth semi-formal interview with selected informants. While, accessing secondary data from a recent government report, current policies, book, journal, and relevant online sources. This article finds that the neighbor ASEAN country which is Indonesia has more proactive and innovative in terms of policy which is Global Maritime Fulcrum compares to Malaysia despite has a strong tie of relationship with China. Surprisingly, Malaysia does not have any single strong maritime policy such practice in Indonesia to counter any future challenges and impact from this cooperation and fragmented. Therefore, the proposition of this article is to encourage Malaysia in the formation of integrated maritime policy which takes into account from Indonesia experience in its Global Maritime Fulcrum policy.

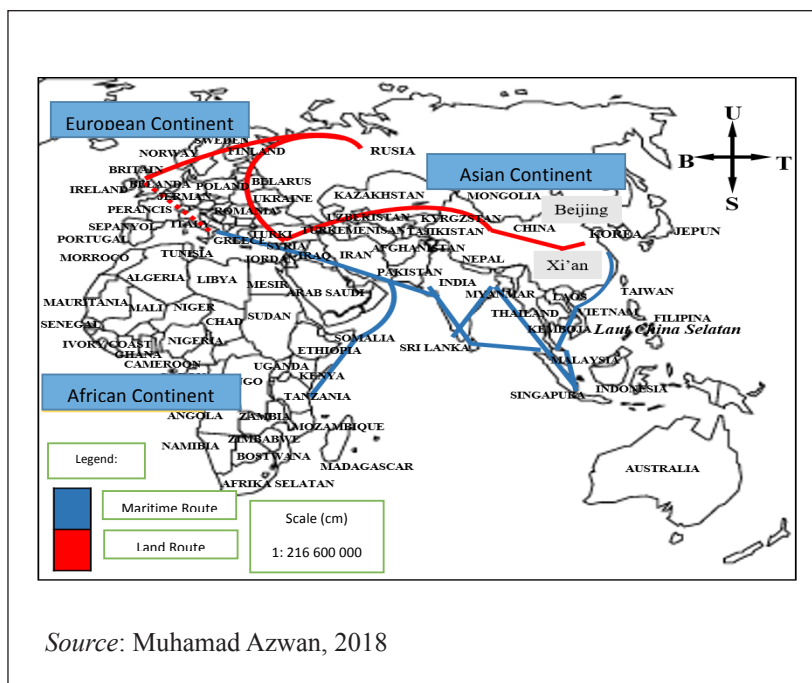
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INTRODUCTION

The cooperation between China has been shown its determination by ASEAN dominance country which is Malaysia and Indonesia. There are two reasons these two countries need this connectivity and gain benefits from China. Firstly both countries have the respective agenda to strengthen the good networking to overcome existing issues (Muhamad Azwan, 2018). Secondly, to warm welcome the revival of oriental globalization by China in other to make an adhesive social infrastructure which has been built between the Malay Kingdom and China since 600 years ago for a good projection in a partnership (Muhamad Azwan, Sity Daud & Abdul Rahman Embong, 2018). Nederveen Pieterse (2014) also argued that New Maritime Silk Road is one of effort to bringing back east globalization which has initiated originally by China to align-with the rising as a world economic house power. This move is also symbolic of Malaysia and Indonesia in order to reminiscence the historic cooperation in maritime which has been connected during the glory of Nusantara and China to form a new layer of social infrastructure ties. However, this form of social infrastructure created a different situation which also testing the wisdom of respective leader in the country in terms of the policy to be facing this new big power like China.

China's transition in its strategy via 'One Belt One Road' and currently Belt and Road Initiative which mooted by Xi Jinping in 2013 has attracted many interests from others region in the world to participate. Malaysia and Indonesia are the part of Southeast Asia states that welcome this grand strategy. This is due to social infrastructure which has built over hundred years ago through the classical silk road and also the benefits of technology, infrastructure, financial assistance, ports and others from this cooperation for the connectivity and prosperity. Therefore, this article argues that the flux of China's financial and investment that penetrate through this grand strategy has given a red alert to Malaysia internally to preserve of the state autonomy by implementing affirmative maritime policy. This article finds that Indonesia has more proactive and innovative in terms of policy cycle which include agenda setting, formulation, output, implementation, and evaluation compared to Malaysia despite has a strong tie of relationship with China. Surprisingly, Malaysia does not have any single strong maritime policy such as practice in Indonesia to counter any future challenges and impact from this cooperation. Therefore, the proposition of this article is to encourage Malaysia in the formation of integrated maritime policy which takes into account from Indonesia experience in its Global Maritime Fulcrum policy.

Meanwhile, there are other reactions that impose by other big power countries such as the US and its alliance. China's strategy has to stir debate by global actors towards Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) before this One Belt One Road (OBOR) specifically the hidden agenda of New Maritime Silk Road. Align with the revival of China global economy with the new grand strategy through BRI, the US with Japan since Obama (*pivot to Asia*) and now under Trump administration give a variance pressure. For example, the begin of the trade war¹ by US has squeezed the relationship between alliance which has signed an agreement in Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) which not just Australia but Britain, Canada, and others. This trade war also impacted the Southeast Asia countries which have to "breath with an elephant in the room" specifically Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, and Vietnam. In addition, China growing faster even the hood had prevailed that Russia also the biggest partnership in terms of political support. However it is, Shen Dingli (2015) argues that the idea of China's New Maritime Silk Road is a misconception from the rival to construct a skeptical per se as one of *China Marshall Plan* to justify the ends of this vision.



Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) also known as OBOR, is a global development strategy that involves infrastructure development via land and maritime networks throughout the South-East Asia especially regions involved in New Maritime Silk Road (Zhao Hong, 2015; Fallon, 2015; Bambang Irawan, 2016; Pieterse, 2016; Evers, 2017; Abdul Rahman, 2017). The BRI programme had received well acceptance from other ASEAN countries in order to enhance networking and infrastructure development throughout the Asia regions and beyond, however, this programme facing some challenges internally and externally (Bambang Irawan, 2016). This includes Malaysia under new leadership demands political and economic challenges especially after the 2018 General Election, which still does not have any comprehensive maritime policy such as Indonesia in respect of cooperation with China. Also, this complicates the situation as the economist and former Majlis Penasihat Kerajaan, Jomo Kwame Sundaram advised the Government that the collaboration with China especially the ECRL project is not completely transparent and should be suspended (Tan Xue Ying & Nazuin Zulaikha Kamarulzaman, 2019). Thus, based on the situation beforementioned, the enhancement in coordination strength among the authorities through consultation follows the comprehensive policy framework (Rashila Ramli & Nik Adi Sukiman, 2019). This is because the existing Malaysia Maritime policy is still fragmented and need to be integrated in order to forms synergy among the shareholders.

METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, this explanatory article uses both primary and secondary data. Primary data consists of in-depth semi-formal interviews with selected informants from both unit analysis. Below is the selected informants from Malaysia that had to provide useful information and critical view about the cooperation with China and the policy analysis in terms of the New Maritime Silk Road:

1. Tun Dr. Mahathir Bin Mohamad (previously interview as an Ex-Prime Minister of Malaysia)
2. Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah (Missionary of Tun Abdul Razak, Pioneer of Malaysia-China Relations the early 1970s)
3. Tan Kai Hee (Founder of Malaysia-China Friendship Association; Managing Director, Hai-O Company).
4. Dato' Abdul Majid Ahmad Khan (Ex-Ambassador of Malaysia to China 1998-2005; President of Malaysia-China Friendship Association)

5. Dr. Bambang Irawan (Former Secretariat Assistant Director in Jakarta; Research Fellow at the CIMB Research Institute (ASEAN))

Next, secondary data consists of a combination of historical macro and contemporary macro data. Historical macro data provides history-based information, so, literature research or secondary sources are used to obtain data through books, articles, journals, and government policies. As for contemporary macro data, the data related to New Maritime Silk Road and new policies from China are obtained through speeches, government documents, media reports, and mainstream or online media. The same methodology had been applied to the Malaysian attitudes and all the analysis on this issue will be obtained from selected media and also from the group of thinkers for each government. For the analysis of the historical and contemporary macro data can be divided into two different ways which are; firstly, China transition strategy era, and secondly, New Maritime Silk Road project in Malaysia and Indonesia. As for primary data, these obtained data will be analyzed into three processes. Firstly, the obtained interviews will be transcribed into text and divided into appropriate sections. Secondly, the arguments and use of sentences by the primer informant will be recorded and reviewed thoroughly. Thirdly, the main arguments which are in line with discussion content will be identified and recorded. Primary micro data is significant in this research as the arguments from the informant will be quoted and used as primary reference.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article also uses an eclectic approach which combining two theories which are a social network and developmentalist state. Thus, a combination of these two theories purposely to analyze the complexity of the issue which highlighted in early discussion. An eclectic approach requires choosing an appropriate theory to combine into an in-depth analysis. Through the selected theories, it really helps especially analyzing the collected data with a fine-tune relating to the objectives.

A developmental state is defined as a polity possessing the autonomy to formulate its public policies including the objective of creating a market economy, as well as the legitimacy to bring about progress through efficient development that provides inclusive and profound societal transformations (Muhamad Azwan 2019: 108). Social network theory, on the other hand, focuses on the existing social infrastructure and the main sources of this

type of interaction. In this context, strategic groups bolster the role of the state specifically to do with the provision of policy coordination, effective communication at the domestic level and good negotiating skills (Evers and Gerke 2009; Muhamad Azwan 2019: 108).

The combination of these theories seeks to guide and provides a further understanding of the developed purpose, particularly in strategic thinking in policy-making. The ability of eclectic approach developed from combined theories is acknowledged to found intellectual solution raised in this research argument. As explained before, this research is quite complex and the combination of two theories is necessary and well suited to the level and unit of analysis. For example, in debating the theory of a country in its development, the level and unit of analysis are the countries that are macroeconomic with taking into account the historical and contemporary perspectives. Whereas, the social infrastructure, the unit of analysis is at meso and micro-level and it is linked to national analysis unit and agencies that comprising individuals, group of business and non-government organizations. In summary, the combination of these theories involving national theory of development and social network theory is the most appropriate theoretical framework applied in guiding this research argument on the cooperation in China's New Maritime Silk Road. This approach also can be applied by other countries that have similar cooperation characteristics as Malaysia and China.

RESULT

As a result, there were four important findings that can be concluded in this research. Firstly, Malaysia's response toward China's New Maritime Silk Road. Secondly, the importance of social infrastructure in Malaysia. Thirdly, China's investment pattern in Malaysia. Fourth, the dynamic of Malaysia and Indonesia's policies and institutions toward China's New Maritime Silk Road project.

Malaysia's response toward China's New Maritime Silk Road

The Government of Malaysia showed positive and committed response toward China's New Maritime Silk Road during the visit of Xi Jinping at the Malaysia-China Economic Summit in October 2013 (Chen Song, 2014; Najib Razak.com, 2016; Mahathir Mohamad, interviewed, 10 January 2017). Malaysia at the national level and most of business communities along with social and business organizations showed positive attitudes with China's New Maritime Silk Road.

However, some of the domestic parties were skeptical about China's investment management by Malaysia. This is because of the relation with the issue of public funds being leaked by 1MDB as revealed by US Department of Justice. This situation had increased domestic anxiety as our country faced financial burdens and currency downturns, as well as the rising cost of living. The implication is the strategic projects with China seems to be beneficial for economic growth. However, at one aspect, it is a burden for the previous government and now, under new leadership, Pakatan Harapan had to deal with the people's trust deficit, recognizing the possible impact of China's reliance on this cooperation despite the efforts to recover from the negotiations.

The importance of social infrastructure in Malaysia

The social infrastructure between Malaysia and China which was initiated by Prime Minister Abdul Razak during normalization era at 1974 has been taken advantage of by the next prime minister. Abdul Razak's confidence in Tengku Razaleigh's leadership of PETRONAS was heavily influenced by his credibility in negotiations with China. This had been acknowledged by Tengku Razaleigh during an interview:

“... I was appointed by Abdul Razak as the Head of Delegation to open trade with China in May 1971....”

(Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, interviewed, February 16, 2017)

Mahathir also said that the success Malaysia gained since Abdul Razak's era inspired China to cooperate more closely

“...At the domestic level, Abdul Razak's leadership had also achieved some success in development and economic growth and this attracted China's attention....”

(Mahathir Mohamad, interviewed, January 20, 2017)

In the context of Malaysia-China relations during the leadership of the Mahathir Mohamad era, there were an important non-governmental people in the relationship between the two countries, which was, Wee Boon Ping. This evidence was explained by Tan Kai Hee, one of the early founders of the Malaysia-China Friendship Association:

“... Tan Sri Wee Boon Ping was the former President of the China Chamber of Commerce and Industry Coalition in Malaysia, and

was appointed in 1978 to be recognized as a prominent figure in Malaysia-China relations and has been named the Malaysia-China Relationship Settler. He was one of the key figures at that time with a delegation suggested by Mahathir Mohamad to resolve trade issues between the two countries. With great skill and hopelessness, and the treaty almost found its way to failure, he was among those who saved the last moment, and on the 9th of October 1985, a draft of a trade agreement was signed between the two countries. The Malaysia-China Trade Cooperation Agreement was signed on 31st March 1988 between the Minister of Trade and Industry with China marked the successful conclusion of Mahathir Mohamad's 1993 visit to Beijing resulting in a more open and encouraging diplomatic relationship, not only between the government but between the peoples themselves... “

(Tan Kai Hee, interviewed, February 13, 2017)

Although the relationship between Malaysia reached the normalization process in 1974, there was issue that prevented close cooperation between the two countries, as explained by Abdul Majid:

“... Although, the diplomatic relationship Malaysia-China had been achieved under the leadership of Abdul Razak, but the relationship between the two countries remain cautious until Mahathir Mohamad's era in which Malaysia-China reached a very close form of relations ... ”.

(Abdul Majid, Interviewed, November 22, 2017)

This benefit has helped to secure close economic and social cooperation with China at the national, business and people level. The continuation of this form of Malaysia-China cooperation was also continued under the Najib Razak's leadership. The relationship looks even stronger in the post-Budget period of 2017 compared to the year 2016 as well as in previous years for the purpose of capturing the benefits of China's New Maritime Silk Road project.

After 14th General Election, in terms of social infrastructure relationship, Malaysia continued its legacy and led by Mahathir Mohamad as 7th Prime Minister, Robert Kuok, Daim Zainuddin and Anwar Ibrahim made a visit to China for the purpose of maintaining national autonomy while restoring

China's confidence toward the importance of the country's investment in Malaysia.

China's Investment Pattern and its impact in Malaysia

Every benefit comes with challenges that become benchmarks of success or weakness of a partnership. Mahathir Mohamad also said:

“... the leadership under Najib Razak and his cabinet were very committed and unified in the cooperation of the New Maritime Silk Road but there were some implications that need to be addressed in terms of the country's economic holdings, inter-ethnic tension - especially when it comes to the presence of labor from China, and most importantly, in terms of political power ... “.

(Mahathir Mohamad, Interviewed, January 10, 2017)

Most of China's strategic projects in Malaysia were previously non-investment but in the form of loans that involved government guarantees, as well as some selling off strategic assets by the Malaysian government to China. In addition, the cooperation also entailed granting certain privileges to Chinese or local companies without open bidding. This situation took place in Malaysia in strategic projects with China such as East Coast Railway (ECRL), Kuantan Malaysia-China Industrial Area (MCKIP), Edra Energy sale, Melaka Gateway, Forest City in Iskandar Region and Malaysia City development (Muhamad Azwan, 2018).

The investment and the transparency issue of strategic projects between Malaysia and China also raised concerns among some local businesses and leaders. On the part of local companies, they considered lack of economic opportunity for domestic companies as a result of the overflooding of Chinese state-owned companies in cooperation with the project. For local leaders, national interests may be affected due to weak of national leadership in negotiations and cooperation agreements for the New Maritime Silk Road.

This view is in line with Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah who explains:

“... The need for megaprojects provided by China with huge capital to Malaysia is not for the benefit for the people, and

the advantage is for the foreigners that have higher purchasing power, even though an economic relationship with China was generally tight. ... ”

(Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, Interview, February 16, 2017)

Thus, these criticisms were clear describing Malaysia's reaction to the agenda of the New Maritime Silk Road in Southeast Asia was an exaggeration from the original diplomatic norms. However, Abdul Majid was optimistic about this cooperation and said:

“... with China's investments, social interactions between the people and the culture and expertise of the country to enhance the country's economic growth through this cooperation ...”

(Abdul Majid, Interview, November 22, 2017)

Abdul Majid (Interview, November 22, 2017) also suggested that Malaysia should not compete with other countries to have special maritime policies such as Indonesia in order to obtain benefit from China's capital but agreed that Malaysia would face difficulties if there were no guidelines (policy framework) for protecting the national interests and this allowed widen the gap for Malaysia to achieve the ambition of a win-win situation with a power like China.

However, until now, the issue was still mounting among citizens and political economists under the new government's leadership following the transition of power, whereas alternative measures, in order to reduce the deficit through cooperation with China, was still at stake. The opportunity and ability to defend the national interest of Malaysia in the long term period against China overflowing the national economy with China's massive investment and loans to the extent of the new government still pose serious concerns for various levels of society. This is evident as many criticisms by various local leaders and researchers such as Jomo Kwame Sundaram that the agreement between the two parties was in the best interests of China. However, the criticisms expressed do not indicate that these groups rejected the benefits of huge development and investment offered by China. In short, cooperation with China required the country's role in ensuring a strong and flexible policy and strategy opportunity, not only focusing on economic benefits but also considering the political and social opportunity as well as the country's autonomy in order to defend the national interests.

The dynamics of the agency's role in Malaysia in addressing China's New Maritime Silk Road project

For Malaysia, the initial preparation for dealing with and benefiting from cooperation with China was not as integrated and comprehensive as Indonesia's. The Malaysian government even under the new administration has not yet established a clear framework in the policy and establishment of special institutions of maritime economic cooperation for the Chinese megaproject. The absence of these special policies does not only cause problems in terms of negotiations and policy compliance but also affects the integrated management in the future with China. The lack of a comprehensive and proactive special policy framework is also one of the reasons for concern over the country's interest which might be affected.

Although the Belt and Road Initiative National Secretariat (BRINS) was established and placed under the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) in response to the New Maritime Silk Road initiative, its establishment in May 2017 was seen as a late response compared to Indonesia (Muhamad Azwan, 2018). Hans-Dieter Evers (2019: 115-116), argued that Malaysia has yet to implement any specific maritime policy such as Indonesia's Global Maritime Fulcrum despite being geographically more strategic in connecting oceans, having a strong economic and powerful influence over cross-oceanic relations and its acceptance of China's cooperative initiative. But whether it will lead to a new dependency on China is too early to conclude as these strategic projects are in progress and monitored by the Ministry of Economic Affairs, which also caught the attention of Mahathir Mohamad. At least, initially after his return to power, a social infrastructure strategy was used by Mahathir to appoint Robert Kuok, a Malaysian tycoon based in Hong Kong, to a so-called council of eminent persons and Kuok is highly influential with both the government and business community in China (Muhamad Azwan 2019: 122). However, these findings are important to note as they provide policymakers with an urgent need to consider the policymaking aspect of maintaining the policy space as well as the country's autonomy and to prevent this dependency in the future. The advantages of these special policies and institutions are also expected to re-inject confidence at national and domestic levels on foreign investment management such as China by the Malaysian government.

DISCUSSION

The above findings indicate that details on the cooperation and impact of China's New Maritime Silk Road onto Malaysia are important. Through a

discussion of the findings, the policymakers in Malaysia need to take into account the country's policy space to be defended. It is important to formulate a clear framework for maritime economic cooperation policy with China to safeguard the country's autonomy and national interests. The principles are clearly aimed at preserving the interests and well-being of nations, the environment of local economic opportunities, regional development and the long-term prosperity of the people. The approach can be called 'taking advantage of economic cooperation and the role of social infrastructure for the advancement of communities for the Asian century'. The point is to leverage the economic strength and the wealth of social and cultural values together towards the success of the Asian century, where the line of thought is close and in line with the aim of this study.

Regarding this matter, it is recommended that Malaysia would set up a special policy of maritime economic cooperation. This is because the country's proactive role is necessary to ensure the country's autonomy while the investment received from China for this project is also crucial to Malaysia's economic development. In line with policymaking, the establishment of a national institution with sufficient authority is appropriate and needs to be developed and expanded to handle large investments and coordination between the two parties. It is important to set up this institution immediately so that any problems in cooperation can be resolved in unison. For Malaysia, the special policy of Malaysia can be called the Malaysia-China Maritime Economic Cooperation Policy. This policy is clearly a response to the BRI policy proposed by China. The strategy of this policy also plays a role in safeguarding not only Malaysia but also China in the joint economic cooperation conducted.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATION

Overall, Malaysia welcomed China's New Maritime Silk Road project but there were significant differences in domestic responses regarding the cooperation with China. Malaysia's domestic response is shaped by the current state of internal and external political economy. For Malaysia, cooperation with China is facilitated by the existence of strong social infrastructure. However, Malaysia is seen as quite passive in maintaining a win-win situation with China in the long run if it does not take into account the comprehensive policy interests of the New Maritime Silk Road cooperation. The experience of neighboring countries such as Indonesia should be taken by Malaysia as a guide to move further in terms of policy and institutions to ensure a more

secure policy space and autonomy of the country in cooperation with the New Maritime Silk Road project offered by China.

In terms of the policy, the role of the country needs to be flexible and proactive (rather than reactive) to respond to new developments. The country also needs to be more proactive in terms of policy preparation and institutional development, and move together with the mega-investment flows introduced by China and other major countries. It is clear that Malaysia has been quite late in terms of policy and institutions despite showing the same positive response as neighboring Indonesia. Therefore, policies and institutions are important as these partnerships involve the foreign and the sovereign nations of China. This situation also requires the country to maintain autonomy so that it has the freedom to make decisions and actions against those who violate the agreed policies. This is important to meet the aspirations of the country seeking developmental progress for the prosperity of the people, the nation, and at the regional level.

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