STRATEGIC INSIGHTS

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Malaysia's two-step hedging strategy:
Bilateral and regional activism

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by John Lee

Malaysia's regional strategy has swung between criticism of and cooperation with the US and praise and suspicion of China, and has often included a self-assigned role as spokesperson for developing countries. These variations have made Malaysia's strategic aims hard to read.

However, despite the various faces of its diplomacy, Malaysia's strategic aim has been consistent: to hedge against domination. Malaysia is ultimately uncertain about future US direction and wary of future Chinese intentions.

In this ASPI ***Strategic Insight***, I examine Malaysia's strategic objectives and positioning vis-a-vis the great powers in its region, and its attempts to finesse bilateral and multilateral relations with those powers.

Anti-government demonstrators shouting 'Reformasi' or 'reform' in the Malaysian language, braved the threat of arrest to gather for an anti-government protest demanding political reforms and the release of dissident Anwar Ibrahim in the capital, Kuala Lumpur, 24 October 1998. AAP/Vincent Thian © 1998 AAP

'Comprehensive security' in action—keeping the US in its place

Emerging from the Cold War strategic straitjacket, Malaysia grasped the opportunity to rethink its place in the international system and its policies towards great powers, and—crucially—to align foreign security strategy with internal and domestic priorities. Understanding the logic and direction of Kuala Lumpur's current and future foreign strategy requires an understanding of the mix of specifically Malaysian factors among those domestic priorities.

... past insurgencies and race riots convinced Malaysian leaders that internal threats should be taken as seriously as external ones.

Internal strife and social break-up are significant national security threats for multi-ethnic, developing countries, and past insurgencies and race riots convinced Malaysian leaders that internal threats should be taken as seriously as external ones. The ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) supported economic progress and open markets, eschewed religious fundamentalism, and put itself forward as the natural keeper of this vision. The UMNO regime came to see itself as synonymous with 'government', and equated weakness in its rule with weakness in the state. UMNO viewed internal elements that threatened to destabilise the regime and its vision as genuine security threats that should be dealt with ruthlessly, usually through the Internal Security Act. Given these objectives, the keys to preserving social cohesion, avoiding instability and maintaining support for UMNO are economic development and prosperity—the so-called 'development as security' approach.

Although many dismiss the government's talk of 'comprehensive security' as propaganda, Malaysian policy towards the US underscores the link between internal and external security priorities.

After the Cold War, a unipolar world ruled by a dominant, hegemonic US posed a new threat. Malaysia sought to become a developed country on her own terms—the 'Asian way' of then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. This meant extremely close cooperation between government and business (untenable by Western standards), a capitalist economy underwritten by limited labour rights and backed by the coercive instruments of the state, a widespread system of economic and social discrimination in favour of the indigenous *bumiputras*, and continued suppression of political opponents in the name of stability and progress. After only a few decades of the Asian way, Malaysia could point to remarkable economic progress.

Malaysia became concerned ... about the increasing US tendency to link trade opportunities with the improvement of human and workers' rights ...

However, in the absence of immediate hard security challenges, the US under President Bill Clinton became more eager to pursue 'soft' objectives in its foreign policy. Malaysia became concerned, as a matter of national security, about the increasing US tendency to link trade opportunities with the improvement of human and workers' rights in Southeast Asia.

The 1997 financial crisis temporarily dampened Malaysian hubris about the superiority of the Asian way, but the 'comprehensive security' outlook persisted. In

reassessing its place in the world and aligning foreign with domestic security priorities, Malaysia pushed hard with its claim to be a model nation and spokesperson for the developing world and the (moderate) Islamic world. Mahathir wanted this role for the prestige of Malaysia and to entrench his own internal position.

The economy sputtered, contracting by 7.6% at the peak of the crisis and shaking the belief that UMNO was infallible and had a natural 'right to govern'.

After the financial crisis, Malaysia (quite successfully) went against US and International Monetary Fund opinion by imposing exchange controls to avoid a flight of capital. The economy sputtered, contracting by 7.6% at the peak of the crisis and shaking the belief that UMNO was infallible and had a natural 'right to govern'. Mahathir, in the name of guarding the 'Asian way', used every available political instrument to protect his regime.

The US went on the diplomatic offensive after the arrest of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, and openly supported the *reformasi* movement's demands for more civil liberty, government transparency and accountability. Malaysia, doing what was unthinkable during the Cold War, repeatedly scolded the US for 'interference' and 'imperialism'. To provide alternative leadership as a counterpoint to the West, and to placate Muslim sentiments internally, Malaysia also began to loudly rally support for far-off causes like Palestinian statehood, condemn US actions in Afghanistan and Iraq as 'against Muslims', and become a Muslim spokesperson against perceived 'Zionist conspiracies'.

...the US had lost strategic interest in the region after the Cold War.

Malaysia could take this course of diplomatic adventurism because it faced no immediate great power threat, and because the US had lost strategic interest in the region after the Cold War. The Malaysian Government's desire to escape from American 'soft power' hegemony (such as demands for human rights and liberal democracy) resulted in Kuala Lumpur trying to maintain the freedom to steer a course that was multi-ethnic, Islamic and pro-development. This was the basis of the Malaysian pitch of Asian versus Western values, and Mahathir's first championing of an exclusive form of East Asian regionalism, distinct from that of the US-dominated APEC.

A secret liaison—security cooperation

By successfully forging its image as a renegade leader against Western 'cultural imperialism', Malaysia found admirers in developing and Islamic countries. However, what former Defence Minister (and now Deputy Prime Minster) Najib Tun Razak in 2002 called the 'unsung story' reveals much about Malaysia's hedging strategy with the US, even during the diplomatic lows from late 1998 to 2001.

While publicly criticising the US on the diplomatic front, Malaysia quietly remained a security partner, of sorts, with the US.

During that period, Malaysia's defence cooperation with the US stayed strong. The US had access to Malaysian airfields, airspace and ports, US naval ships visited often, and

training exercises continued between the navies, armies and air forces of the two countries. Malaysia remained one of the few bases outside the US for jungle-warfare training, and Malaysian military personnel continued to benefit from US-sponsored training programs in America. While publicly criticising the US on the diplomatic front, Malaysia quietly remained a security partner, of sorts, with the US.

Malaysia applied this double standard because of conflicting priorities. On the one hand, Mahathir did not want greater Western powers to interfere in his 'Asian way' of defining and pursuing security, and being an international agitator and statesman was a particularly aggressive and idiosyncratic strategy to ward off interference and gain support at home. On the other hand, old rivalries between ASEAN states re-emerged after the Soviet Union collapsed, and for Malaysia the US remained the ultimate arbitrator and force for regional stability.

For example, various territorial disputes in the South China Sea (the 'zone of anarchy') between Malaysia, China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei remained unresolved. Even though Malaysia increased her defence spending significantly during the 1990s in anticipation of an increasing security burden, Kuala Lumpur had to maintain relations with Washington for fear that such disputes would take a nasty turn. Moreover, the effects of China's growth were already being felt, and severing security links with the US (or total American disengagement from the region) would have been perilous. China's heavy-handed tactics in the 1995 Mischief Reef incident were an early glimpse of a possible future Chinese menace.

Enter the wildcard—September 11

September 11 changed Washington's outlook; it now saw Southeast Asia as a second front in the War on Terror and wanted to re-engage with the region. Strategically, this was an unexpected boon for Malaysia, as renewed US interest significantly increased Malaysia's leverage with the US and offered a wider range of options for dealing with China.

President Bush immediately prioritised security over human rights—a position Mahathir was much more comfortable with. Paradoxically, Malaysia's positioning as an Islamic voice, which was once a source of irritation for the US, became a valued asset. By enthusiastically buying into the War on Terror, Mahathir was well placed to achieve several objectives.

September 11 thus allowed Mahathir to strike a critical blow against the opposition, entrench UMNO as the moderate, viable party in Malaysian politics, and combat growing scepticism about the necessity of Malaysia's heavy-handed treatment of dissidents.

First, the danger of diplomatic spats permanently damaging relations with the sole superpower could be averted. The investment in maintaining defence cooperation even during the earlier troubled period now bore fruit, and the US considered Malaysia an important security partner in the new war. Endorsing the War on Terror, Mahathir jumped at the chance to accept an invitation to the US in May 2002, and Malaysia was now held up as an exemplar of a modern, moderate Muslim country.

Second, Malaysia's leverage with the US grew. For example, in 2004, acquiescing to Malaysian disapproval, the US backtracked on the issue of US patrols in the Malacca Strait. This demonstrated Malaysian bargaining power.

Third, Islam had become politicised within Malaysia, and Mahathir's UMNO and the fundamentalist opposition Pan Malaysian Islamic (PAS) party were in a struggle to entrench their versions and interpretations of Islam. Crucially, UMNO had lost some support to PAS after the 1997 financial crisis, amid concern over official corruption under Mahathir and public cynicism about government crackdowns on extreme Islamic groups. The government invoked the legitimacy of the global War on Terror, using the Internal Security Act against the alleged terrorist organisation Kumpulan Mujahideen Malaysia in 2001; those detained had links with PAS. September 11 thus allowed Mahathir to strike a critical blow against the opposition, entrench UMNO as the moderate, viable party in Malaysian politics, and combat growing scepticism about the necessity of Malaysia's heavy-handed treatment of dissidents. UMNO's renewed ascendancy was demonstrated by Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's landslide victory in 2004—the UMNO-led coalition won 198 out of 219 seats; PAS, which had run on a platform of establishing an Islamic state, lost 20 of its 27 seats.

... renewed engagement with the US offered Malaysia several new possibilities to manage and hedge against the rise of China.

President Bush, right, listens to Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, left, address members of the press during their meeting in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, 19 July, 2004. AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais © 2004 AAP

Finally, as we'll see, renewed engagement with the US offered Malaysia several new possibilities to manage and hedge against the rise of China.

Counter-dominance hedging—playing the field

The recent history of Malaysian core security strategy has been one of counter-dominance by great powers and counter-interference by regional neighbours. Although Kuala Lumpur has used classical strategies of bandwagoning and balancing at various times, its ultimate guide has been the perceived nationalistic right of a developing country to chart an independent course in its relations with other powers and in its internal governance.

Malaysia's membership and current chairmanship of the Non-aligned Movement is highly symbolic of her strategic positioning. Despite its significant military and intelligence cooperation with the US, Malaysia carefully cultivates a non-aligned image by avoiding a high-profile bilateral military alliance.

Malaysia's non-aligned approach is also expressed in decisions about its force structure. For example, in the mid-1990s Malaysia acquired both MiG-29 fighters from Russia and F/A-18 strike aircraft from the US.

Watching the rise of China

The anticipated rise of China has caused consternation among ASEAN countries for decades. China's size and proximity, the greatness and longevity of Chinese civilisation, the history of tributary relationships with Southeast Asia, the strength of Chinese nationalism, and the diaspora of disproportionately affluent ethnic Chinese minorities (such as in Malaysia) were all grounds for wariness. More recently, China's continued development and military modernisation show irrefutably that her presence and influence will grow.

Concrete concerns that a modern China would flex her muscles began in the 1990s, with a show of force aimed at Taiwan in 1995–96 and the Mischief Reef incident in 1995. In 2001, China formally claimed that all the South China Sea was China's 'historic waters', and that full navigation and airspace rights should follow. Moreover, China remains in dispute with various ASEAN members over ownership of several islands rich in energy resources and fish. Although China has avoided further provocation of ASEAN members by signing the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in 2002 (agreeing to settle disputes through negotiation and not force), and signed the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2003, the various Chinese claims haven't been abandoned. Nor has China agreed to sign the multilateral and comprehensive 'code of conduct' that was intended to follow the 2002 declaration, preferring to negotiate case by case.

Beijing's recent regional 'charm offensive' is both a proactive and a defensive strategy.

China's charm offensive

China has tried hard, with some success, to remodel its diplomatic image into that of a country satisfied with the status quo, willing to work within existing structures, and seeking win–win economic relationships with the region. Beijing's recent regional 'charm offensive' is both a proactive and a defensive strategy. It is defensive because China, aware that the US is uneasily watching her rise, is in no position to challenge the US and isn't keen to give the Americans strong reasons to 'contain' her rise. Moreover, alarmed by the unified ASEAN response to her heavy-handed

tactics in the 1990s, China has no desire to drive ASEAN states further towards the US.

The charm offensive is also proactive—China is actively trying to woo the region away from the US. Signing the 2002 South China Sea declaration and acceding to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation were part of a concerted goodwill campaign aimed at the region. Holding out the prospect of an ASEAN–China Free Trade Agreement is also an act of economic seduction.

Trying to sell the 'New Security Concept' at the 1997 ASEAN meeting was one of Beijing's more ambitious and far-reaching initiatives. The concept set out a vision emphasising cooperative security, multilateral dialogue, confidence-building measures, and the peaceful resolution of disputes. Specifically tailored for ASEAN, the concept advocates principles that mirror those of ASEAN, and implies the move away from alliances (with the US) towards a regional, multilateral security 'community' or structure.

Malaysia's bilateral response

In May 2005, Prime Minister Badawi proclaimed relations with China to be at their 'best ever'. While remaining strategically ambivalent towards China on security matters, Malaysia has used a tactic of economic engagement as part of its hedging strategy. Like most watching China's rise, Malaysia isn't sure what kind of power China will be, and strengthening bilateral economic relations and cooperation with her makes perfect sense with little political cost. With two-way trade over US$25 billion, Malaysia has become China's largest ASEAN trading partner. This is despite the fact that the Malaysian economy is in many ways in competition with China's, and despite complaints in Malaysia that manufacturing jobs are being lost because of China's greater competitiveness. Kuala Lumpur believes that this is a necessary price to pay for the sake of good bilateral relations. Moreover, suspicious of China's longer term ambitions, Malaysia is keen to jump in early to establish the parameters within which the relationship will grow.

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The new counter-dominance strategy—regionalism and multilateralism

The real innovation in Malaysian policy vis-a-vis China (and to some extent the US) has been its revival of regionalism as a counter-dominance strategy.

Although ASEAN is a critical element in Malaysia's security policy, it's important to note that ASEAN was never a genuine 'security community' or collective security organisation. Stitched together during the Cold War, it was really designed as a pact of non-interference between members. Nor can ASEAN be understood as an economic bloc, in the way that the European Union might be. Intra-ASEAN trade is comparatively small compared to trade with the US, the EU, Japan and China. Moreover, larger macro regions like 'East Asia' and the Asia–Pacific region threaten to subsume 'Southeast Asia'. So it's not surprising that many predicted the end of any real role for ASEAN after the Cold War.

In the current environment, however, Malaysia has to deal with the unknown quality of 'China growing strong' and persistent US hegemony, and has attempted to revise, reinvent and lead regionalism

to meet these challenges. Dealing only bilaterally with China would give Malaysia little leverage. Earlier, less subtle attempts to invoke a regional solution included Malaysia's strong support for Vietnam's entry into ASEAN to pool regional power against China at the peak of China's hardline diplomacy in the mid-1990s. However, Malaysia realised that ASEAN's collective military power wasn't sufficient to 'contain' China in any meaningful way. Moreover, as China turned on the charm from the late 1990s, ASEAN members began to disagree about the extent of the threat she posed. In the light of these developments, Malaysia began to devise a more sophisticated regional counter-dominance strategy.

...Malaysia sees a possible 'security dividend' from a more engaged China, in the form of common interdependent interests and even the development of common diplomatic norms.

The first pillar of the strategy is to help sell China's 'peaceful rise' to other ASEAN members. Besides improving China–Malaysia relations, it's an attempt to reassure the other ASEAN members that China's intentions are honourable. Malaysia would point to China's signing of the 2002 South China Sea declaration as backing for this approach.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard (front L) talks to Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, as Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao (front R) prepares to sign the declaration on the East Asia Summit during the 11th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur, 14 December 2005.

By bringing China in through ASEAN, China would be heavily invested in the region and more sensitive to the interests of leading ASEAN members, such as Malaysia. To aid ASEAN's reciprocal wooing of China, Malaysia has been consistently wary of perceived US attempts to pressure ASEAN into acting as a component in China's 'encirclement'. And, although there are economic costs for ASEAN members in areas of competition, Malaysia sees a possible 'security dividend' from a more engaged China, in the form of common interdependent interests and even the development of common diplomatic norms.

Since the US is still the preferred security partner, Malaysia is pushing for the ASEAN forum (in which the US remains a participant) to be the key political and security forum…

The second pillar is multilateral power-balancing through various regionalist 'security' frameworks. Although ASEAN has only a 'consultative' mandate for security matters, Malaysia has played a leading role in patching up the ASEAN Regional Forum as a way to draw in and maintain engagement of the US and other middle powers in the region. The aim is to restrain both China's strategic ambitions in Asia and intra-ASEAN rivalries. Since the US is still the preferred security partner, Malaysia is pushing for the ASEAN forum (in which the US remains a participant) to be the key political and security forum in the Asia–Pacific region—a position affirmed in November 2005 by the Joint Vision on the ASEAN–US Enhanced Partnership. Kuala Lumpur also understands that continued US involvement in any ASEAN security regime will force China to strengthen ties with ASEAN, for fear that ASEAN will move closer to the US.

Furthermore, the region's nations have resisted persistent Chinese calls for greater 'regional' security cooperation (which excludes the US). This explains their reluctance to buy heavily into China's 'New Security Concept', despite the similarity of its principles to ASEAN's. While groupings that include China and exclude the US (such as the ASEAN+3 and ASEAN+China) achieve more tangible agreements in 'non-traditional' security areas, Malaysia continues to back formal security pacts such as the Five Power Defence Arrangement (which involves Australia, New Zealand and the UK in the common defence of Malaysia and Singapore), and continues to nurture military links with the US. It's significant that China's proposal, at the recent ASEAN–China forum, for cooperation on maritime security in Singapore stoked Malaysian concerns and was greeted with considerable scepticism by other ASEAN members. Moreover, when ASEAN rejected China's offer to join the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (which the US rejects), it did so on the grounds that ASEAN preferred all nuclear powers to join at the same time. This clearly demonstrates ASEAN's reluctance to allow China to outmanoeuvre other powers diplomatically on hard security matters. It was also noteworthy that Malaysia did not support China's aversion to a greater political role for Japan.

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The third pillar of Kuala Lumpur's strategy is to elevate regional bodies that offer maximum leverage for Malaysia, and downplay those that do not. A recent example was Malaysia's

reluctance to include Australia in the East Asia Summit, for fear that Australia would dilute Malaysian influence. So it isn't surprising that Badawi affirmed ASEAN (in which Malaysia has a more influential role), and not the summit, as the lead regional organisation to advance regional cooperation.

The fourth and final pillar of the strategy is to safeguard Malaysia's notion of 'comprehensive security', which is linked with the 'Asian values' approach in these multilateral structures. This explains Malaysia's reluctance to allow Western countries to dominate multilateral bodies, and also explains why Malaysia, in particular, wants to emphasise ASEAN as the lead player in any security regime. The trick is to manage the Asian values focus in relation to US interests and priorities. Significantly, the idea of the ASEAN Security Community (arising from the ninth ASEAN Summit in Bali in October 2003) envisages that the guiding notion of 'comprehensive security' must include 'broad political, economic, social and cultural dimensions'.

... the long-term historical success of groupings in the region is untested, and significant rivalries between ASEAN members remain unresolved.

Future obstacles ...

Malaysia's strategy depends on:

- Southeast Asian regional structures, and particularly ASEAN, remaining robust
- Malaysia remaining influential within these structures
- the US continuing to see Southeast Asia as an important area of engagement, and ASEAN-led forums as the leading ones.

South Korea's President Roh Moo-hyun (1st from L) tries to link arms with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Australian Prime Minister John Howard, Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao and Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi as they pose for photographs after holding the inaugural East Asia Summit in Kuala Lumpur on 14 December 2005 to discuss efforts to create a pan-Asian community. AAP Image/Yonhap © 2005 AAP

All three provisos are far from assured. First, the long-term historical success of groupings in the region is untested, and significant rivalries between ASEAN members remain unresolved. Malaysia will need to jostle continuously for influence in ASEAN, particularly as Indonesia recovers. As far as genuine security cooperation is concerned, it's also unclear whether the 'Asian way' of non-interference and consensus will be a help or a hindrance in the hard security decisions that might be needed to ensure the robustness and continued relevance of the organisation.

Second, Malaysia's hedging and counter-dominance strategy depends on China continuing to allow ASEAN to avoid making defining, high-level decisions about China's place in the security system. China's patience with ASEAN—'charm offensives' notwithstanding—will run out if her counter-proposals to counteract US regional predominance are continually rebuffed.

Third, there are signs that the US and China won't tolerate the 'talk shop' of the ASEAN Regional Forum forever if concrete initiatives remain elusive. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's snubbing of the forum's July 2005 meeting must have created anxiety about how seriously the US takes it. ASEAN also faces a constant challenge to ensure that China remains committed to the forum. Without US or Chinese involvement, the forum would be dramatically less relevant.

Finally, Kuala Lumpur needs to pre-empt and even influence US intentions to stay engaged with the region after the War on Terror subsides, without which the viability of Malaysia's counter-dominance strategy against China would be threatened.

About the Author

Dr John Lee is currently the Managing Director of research and conferences company L21, which he co-founded in 2001. With particular focus on the Asia–Pacific region, past placements have included assignments with UK based organisations Oxford Analytica, the Royal United Service Defence Institute (RUSI) and the Royal Institute of International Affairs (RIIA), as well as tutoring positions at University of Oxford. His degrees include a Masters and a Doctorate in International Relations & Politics from University of Oxford whilst on a Chevening Scholarship.

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