Part IV

International relations and security
Malaysia's international profile and engagements have been perhaps less actively contested or vacillating than its domestic politics and policy. Even here, though, Malaysia has changed tack with economic transformations, strategic realignments, security flash-points, leadership transitions, and fluctuating visions of what Malaysia’s place and priorities should be. While Malaysia is an active, founding member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and a trusted defence and trading partner with Asian and ‘Western’ states alike, Malaysia’s regional and global position has not been entirely consistent. Rather, Malaysian foreign policy reveals both complementary and conflicting goals for the country’s orientation vis-à-vis the region, a global ummah (Muslim community), and the international scene.

To begin, Karminder Singh Dhillon enumerates the array of challenges facing Malaysia. These present sometimes-contradictory priorities or constraints, from developing an open and competitive economy while still protecting domestic affirmative action policies, to cultivating encompassing and varied alliances without compromising the state’s Islamist identity and commitments, to asserting a middle-power role regionally and globally, to ensuring foreign policy serves the interests of domestic regime maintenance. While the Mahathir years were rocky ones for Malaysia’s ties with the US and Europe in particular, trade, security, and diplomatic relations have flourished since. Meanwhile, Malaysia has pursued closer economic and other ties with China, Singapore, Indonesia, and the wider ASEAN region, all while it aims to achieve fully developed and middle-power status.

The next chapter, by Lai Yew Meng, reiterates that economic partnerships are only part of the foreign policy picture. Malaysia faces, too, a range of traditional and, increasingly, non-traditional security threats, mandating careful foreign and domestic policy-making. Malaysia’s most pressing security challenges in the past have been internal, most notably, communist insurgency from 1948 to 1989. Regionally, while ASEAN mechanisms, norms, and institutions offer safeguards against flare-ups, these are not independently adequate — each member state also must take independent, bilateral and multilateral safeguards. Malaysia’s is a generally peaceful neighbourhood, yet subject to outbursts in the volatile South China Sea as well as intermittent territorial and maritime-territorial disputes. Radical Islam, too, presents both internal and external threat dimensions, but the state has taken strong proactive and reactive measures. ‘Security’ in the contemporary context, though, as Lai details, encompasses
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everything from maritime-territorial sovereignty, to transborder crimes, to environmental challenges, mandating similarly wide-ranging responses, including a continuing need to modernise all branches of the armed forces.

Heng Pek Koon zeroes in on the bilateral relationship that perhaps best embodies Malaysia’s balance between warm embrace and arm’s length distancing: its alliance with the United States. The US–Malaysia relationship has been strong throughout Malaysia’s independent history, primarily in economic terms, but increasingly also in terms of security and US regional strategy. That said, especially under the less-than-tactful Mahathir, and given deep disagreement with, for instance, US policy toward Palestine, ties have been battered. Prime Minister Najib in particular has not only resuscitated the relationship, building on the efforts of his predecessor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, but has brought it to new highs; Malaysia has benefited from the US’s increasing ‘pivot’ toward Asia. That said, Heng argues for a more solid, comprehensive footing for this still relatively informal, if important, bilateral alliance.

Arguably equally significant is Malaysia’s relationship with the much closer, increasingly formidable China. Kuik Cheng-Chwee argues that the asymmetrical relationship between Malaysia and China previously represented more of a threat – particularly in the throes of the Cold War – but now is largely (mutually) beneficial. By the 1980s, Malaysian leaders had set aside ideological anticommunism and concerns over Chinese support for the Malayan Communist Party, to focus on economics. Kuik argues that Malaysian elites recognise the political advantages to be gained from closer economic and strategic ties with their more powerful, much larger neighbour. Moreover, development of the Malaysia–China relationship has been in tandem with, and symbiotically linked with, expansion also of China–ASEAN ties, signalling and supporting deeper, reciprocally advantageous regional integration.

Ruhanas Harun suggests that although Malaysia’s relations with Europe generate far less scholarly or public attention than its ties with the twin giants of the US and China, in fact, these connections have remained quietly percolating and significant. The US and China clearly dominated Malaysia’s Cold War agenda, yet even then, Malaysia moved toward closer economic ties in particular, not only with Britain (though ties with Britain have been intimate from the outset), but also with the rest of Europe. Since then, Malaysia has worked to build relations with the former communist countries of Eastern Europe, as well, with ever-deeper social and cultural linkages increasingly complementing close economic and political collaboration.

Finally, Carolin Liss takes us offshore, to the continuing prevalence of piracy in Malaysian waters. Such attacks have a long history, albeit with diverse parameters, perpetrators, and targets. Contemporary maritime pirates may be either organised gangs or opportunistic sea-robbers; they attack a wide range of vessels, sometimes violently. While the nature of these crimes often mandates transnational cooperation in response, such cooperation is hampered by concerns of national sovereignty, ASEAN’s norm of non-interference, conflicting interests, and contending maritime-territorial claims. Despite fluctuations in the numbers of attacks in Malaysian waters, piracy remains a key concern for government as well as commercial interests. Yet patrols, Liss suggests, however well resourced and coordinated, are not enough; the Malaysian government needs to address root causes of poverty, radical political groups, corrupt or lax regulation, and more.