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Managing the Optics of Malaysia's Relations with the U.S.

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SYNOPSIS

Malaysia has kept its engagement with the US low-key and continues to do so as it navigates domestic and international politics.

COMMENTARY

Malaysia's foreign policy derives utility from the optics of its declared non-alignment and neutrality, shaped initially during the Cold War and its membership in the Non-Aligned Movement since 1970. This can be seen especially in the way it conducts its relations with the US and its vote against the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the UN General Assembly on 2 March 2022, which stopped short of condemning Russia's aggression.

Relations with the US

Malaysia and the US commemorate 65 years of diplomatic relations this year. While both countries share a long-standing relationship grounded in strategic and economic cooperation, relations have been kept at a relatively low profile. [Speaking in Washington](#) nearly 20 years ago, then Malaysian Defence Minister Najib Razak noted that the Malaysia-US defence relationship was an "all too well-kept secret".

Today, Malaysia's defence cooperation with the US is probably the most institutionalised bilateral military relationship for the Malaysian government. This includes training courses for Malaysian officers in US military colleges, and joint military exercises such as Exercise Keris Strike and Exercise Bersama Warrior.

Training courses under the US International Military Education and Training (IMET) programme began in 1982. IMET has provided the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) more than US\$1 million annually in recent years for military training and education courses, which benefit dozens of Malaysian officers each year.



Members of the Malaysia Armed Forces and the U.S. military pose for a photo following the opening ceremony of Exercise Bersama Warrior, March 6, 2019 in Kuala Lumpur. *The appearance of U.S Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.*

Further, the US has [provided](#) nearly US\$200 million in grants to the MAF to enhance maritime domain awareness, which includes pledging 12 units of ScanEagle unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). The [first batch of six such UAVs was received](#) by Malaysia in May 2020.

The Malaysian Air Force conducted massive joint drills alongside the USS *Theodore Roosevelt* Carrier Strike Group in the South China Sea in April 2021. Malaysia has tended to prefer a more subtle and under-the-radar approach when it comes to disputes in the South China Sea.

The series of high-profile visits from top US officials to Malaysia — including Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo, and Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Daniel Kritenbrink — at the tail end of 2021 is testament to the importance placed by the US on this relationship at a time where Washington is seeking to shore up its own engagement in the Indo-Pacific. In significant contrast, the Biden administration has made fewer such visits to US treaty allies in Southeast Asia.

Non-aligning Subtleties

Given Malaysia's declared non-alignment and avoidance of appearing too cosy with the US, its foreign policy approach is much better understood by what it does than what it says.

While Malaysia announced that it [would not impose sanctions](#) on Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, preferring instead to refer to the UN than follow the US-led opposition, it nonetheless [barred a Russian oil tanker](#) from docking at its ports, explaining the decision as a commercial one rather than that of the government's. The

vessel is among several Russian assets on Washington's blacklist. This move is consistent with Malaysia's pragmatic approach of seeking to protect its own interests (by avoiding any sanctions violations) and placate the US where possible, while seemingly not taking sides against Russia publicly.

Malaysia was quick to voice concerns when the US, the United Kingdom and Australia announced their AUKUS pact in September 2021 but close bilateral and multilateral ties with these players have continued. Just a week after the announcement of AUKUS, Malaysia proceeded with joint exercises with Australia under the Malaysian-Australian Joint Defence Programme. Malaysia also [reaffirmed its commitment](#) to the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FDPA), whose parties include the United Kingdom and Australia, and will host the FDPA countries in the annual Bersama Shield training exercise this month.

Relations between the US and Malaysia are on track. A [joint statement](#) by Secretary Blinken and Malaysian Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah in December 2021 reflects deepening cooperation across areas including defence, cybersecurity, and digital economy. This comes a month after the two countries confirmed plans to sign a [cooperation agreement](#) on supply chain improvements.

Domestic Considerations

Malaysia is deliberate in cultivating a low profile in its relationship with the US. Domestically, its policymakers take cognisance of the anti-West sentiment in Malaysian society rearing its head whenever the country appears uncritical of, or unduly convivial with the US, or its European allies. On numerous occasions, Malaysia has taken to voicing open [criticism](#) of some US foreign policy actions, most notably regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Support for the Palestinian cause is a cornerstone of Malaysia's foreign policy. The government has kept a [long-standing position calling for peace negotiations](#) and the creation of an independent state of Palestine based on the pre-1967 borders. Anti-Israel sentiment is deep and broadly held among the Malaysian public, and often espoused and reinforced by Malaysian leaders.

Conversely, the US is the most important and consistent supporter of Israel. Its continued support for Israel undercuts its standing in Muslim-majority Malaysia and plays into a larger anti-West sentiment that lumps together and portrays US actions in Iraq and Afghanistan as "[tantamount to an American war against Islam](#)".

The Malaysian government thus has to tread the thin line between publicly criticising US support for Israel and sustaining bilateral security and economic engagement.

Navigating Great Power Rivalry

Apart from expressing concern over AUKUS, Malaysia had skipped the US-led Summit for Democracy. These steps contrast well with Malaysia's warmer public embrace of relations with China. The [indication](#) by Malaysia's then foreign minister (now defence minister) that Malaysia would consult the Chinese leadership on their views of AUKUS, and his gaffe of referring to China as Malaysia's "[big brother](#)" may

be reasons to wonder whether Malaysia is moving the needle on its public posture of non-alignment.

Yet, other factors such as Malaysia's well-entrenched and institutionalised military relationship with the US, competing claims with China in the South China Sea, [a snub of Chinese 5G technology](#), and substantial economic ties with both powers suggest that Malaysia has not, as yet, made a strategic shift towards China.

Malaysia's challenges in safeguarding its own economic and security interests without alienating either of the great powers will only grow in complexity as great power rivalry intensifies.

Conclusion

Given the Malaysian government's geopolitical considerations and domestic constraints, it has sought to preserve, if not build on, the benefits from its quiet relationship with the US. Its calibration is hinged on the need to avoid arousing domestic sentiments and China's sensitivities, while maintaining Malaysia's non-alignment as far as possible.

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