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Looking East Again? Malaysia-Japan Relations in the 21St Century

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Abstract *This article analyses the trends and developments in Malaysia-Japan relations since its inception in 1957. It begins with a brief historical overview of their bilateral interactions, followed by a scrutiny of the developments and shifting trends, from the early decade of the establishment of official diplomatic relations between independent Malaya and Japan that coincided with the Cold War to the introduction of Malaysia's Look East Policy (LEP) in the early 1980's that saw Malaysia-Japan ties taking-off to new and unprecedented heights. In doing so, the article reveals the major impetuses/drivers of their 'special relationship', which among others include complementarities in their national economies, perceived sociocultural affinities underpinned by the so-called 'Asian values' and idiosyncrasies of key leaders like Mahathir Mohamad, as well as the given regional strategic environment, which contributed to a congruence of strategic thought and mutual interests between the major actors from both countries that led to Malaysia's admirable relations with Japan before the turn of the 21st century. This article also assesses the contemporary trends in and prospects for their bilateral ties, by identifying the changing dynamics that have brought a qualitative shift in the Malaysia-Japan bilateral relationship which is moving towards strategic partnership and beyond.*

Keywords*: Malaysia-Japan relations, Look East Policy, special relationship, strategic partnership, security cooperation, Official Development Assistance (ODA).*

Abstrak *Makalah ini menganalisis trend dan perkembangan dalam hubungan Malaysia-Jepun sejak permulaannya pada tahun 1957. Ia bermula dengan latar belakang sejarah ringkas mengenai interaksi dua hala kedua-dua negara tersebut, sebelum disusuli oleh penelusuran perkembangan dan perubahan trend hubungan, sejak dari dekad awalan pembentukan hubungan diplomatik di antara Persekutuan Tanah Melayu yang merdeka dengan Jepun yang bertembung dengan era Perang Dingin, sehingga ke pengenalan Dasar Pandang ke Timur oleh Malaysia pada awal dekad 1980-an yang memperlihatkan peningkatan mendadak dalam hubungan Malaysia-Jepun. Sehubungan itu, makalah ini mendedahkan faktor pemangkin/penggerak kepada "hubungan istimewa" tersebut yang antaranya termasuklah elemen komplementariti dalam ekonomi nasional masing-masing, persamaan sosiobudaya yang ditunjangi oleh "nilai-nilai Asia" dan idiosinkrasi pemimpin utama seperti Mahathir Mohamed, serta persekitaran strategik serantau yang sedia ada. Kesemua dinamika tersebut menyumbang kepada pertemuan dalam pemikiran strategik dan kepentingan bersama di antara pelaku-pelaku utama dari kedua-dua negara yang membawa kepada hubungan yang cukup memberangsangkan menjelang permulaan abad ke-21. Makalah ini turut menilai trend semasa serta prospek hubungan dua hala mereka, dengan mengenal pasti dinamika yang telah membawa perubahan kualitatif dalam hubungan Malaysia-Jepun yang sedang rancak menuju ke tahap "kerjasama strategik".*

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia and Japan have generally enjoyed a cordial relationship since the establishment of formal diplomatic ties six decades ago, with the last three being commonly heralded by scholars and observers alike as a 'special relationship' (Shaharuddin Md. Som, 2012; Furuoka, 2007) based on 'economic' and more recently, 'strategic' partnership (Parameswaran, 2015; *Malay Mail Online*, 2015). The special bond between the two countries has been essentially anchored on Malaysia's Look East Policy (LEP), which forms the basis of their relatively productive and meaningful bilateral interactions, especially in the socioeconomic and cultural, as well as politico-diplomatic and security dimensions over the decades. However, changing trends in their respective domestic political economy compounded by shifting power dynamics that are currently altering the regional strategic and economic landscape have triggered a gradual and qualitative, albeit subtle shift in their bilateral ties. Specifically, contemporary Malaysia-Japan relations have been affected by what some scholars deemed as "the lack of strategic congruence" (Suzuki, 2014), due to changing domestic perceptions of and expectations from the bilateral relationship and perhaps, most significantly, by the emergence of China as a global economic and military powerhouse. Indeed, China's economic wherewithal and its replacement of Japan as Asia's preponderant power has not only impacted on Malaysia's external behaviour, preferences and orientations, but also most, if not all state actors in the region. As Malaysia becomes increasingly tied to and dependent on China in the economic realm, questions have arisen regarding the possible implications of such developments on the future direction of Malaysia-Japan relations, given the escalating power competition and rivalry between Beijing and Tokyo for regional predominance. How will their bilateral relations develop, given such changes? Will the so-called 'special relationship' be reinvigorated and continue to progress, or otherwise?

This article addresses these questions by analysing the trends and developments in Malaysia-Japan relations during the last five and a half decades. It begins with a brief historical overview of their bilateral ties, which started from as early as the 15th century right until the official establishment of diplomatic relations between the newly independent Malaya and Japan in 1957. This is followed by a scrutiny of the developments and shifting trends in the newly-minted bilateral relationship, from the early decades that coincided with Cold War to the introduction of Malaysia's Look East Policy (LEP) in the early 1980's that saw Malaysia-Japan ties taking-off to new and unprecedented heights. In doing so, the article also reveals the major impetuses/drivers of their 'special relationship', which among others include complementarities in their national economies, perceived sociocultural affinities underpinned by the so-called 'Asian values' and idiosyncrasies of key leaders like Mahathir Mohamad, as well as the given regional strategic environment, which contributed to a congruence of strategic thought and mutual interests between the major actors from both countries that led to Malaysia's admirable relations with Japan before the turn of the 21st century.

This article also assesses the contemporary trends in and prospects for their bilateral ties by identifying the changing dynamics that have brought a qualitative shift in the Malaysia-Japan bilateral relationship which is moving towards strategic partnership and beyond.

MALAYSIA-JAPAN RELATIONS: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Relations between Malaysia and Japan are believed to have dated back to as early as the 15th century, during the period of the Malacca Sultanate and the Ryukyu Kingdom. According to the *Rekidai Hoan*, the official records of diplomatic relations compiled by the Ryukyu Kingdom, maritime trade relations were held between the Ryukyuans and other kingdoms in Southeast Asia, where as many as 150 voyages on Ryukyuan ships had taken place between 1424 and 1630's (Sakamaki, 1964: 383–389). Serving as a key entreport for the Sino-Indian maritime trade route in Southeast Asia, it is inevitable that the Malacca Sultanate became one of the preferred destinations, chronicling as many as ten trade voyages from the mediaeval Japanese kingdom during the stipulated period (see Sakamaki, 1964). To be sure, these nascent interactions were intermittent as they were insignificant, and pale into comparison with that of the diplomatic and trade relations between the Chinese empire and the Malacca Sultanate, and the subsequent Sino-Malayan engagements during the reign of the British empire, which saw the arrival of a large number of Chinese migrants to the shores of British Malaya.

Nonetheless, the rise of Japan as a modern state and subsequently an imperialist power had inexorably resurrected the Japanese interest on resource-rich Malaya, which was deemed as vital for the realisation of Imperial Japan's grand strategy of dominating Asia. As a consequence, Japan expanded its Pacific War campaign by launching offensives throughout Southeast Asia, including a swift invasion and occupation of British Malaya (see Duus, Myers & Peattie, 1996). Indeed, the Malayan Campaign which began on December 8, 1941, saw the Imperial Japanese Army overwhelming British and Commonwealth troops in less than two-and-a-half months, culminating in the British surrender of Malaya on 15 February 1942 (see Kratoska, 1997).

The Japanese Occupation of Malaya lasted three-and-a-half years, during which the Japanese administration implemented a 'divide-and-rule' policy that favoured the indigenous Malays and migrant Indian population over the ethnic Chinese community. For Imperial Japan, winning the 'hearts and minds' and securing the cooperation of the indigenous people were critical to sustaining Japanese control in the occupied territories. Thus Japan's self-portrayal as the 'liberator' of Asia from the yoke of Western imperialism and the Japanese propaganda of 'Asia for Asians' as well as the idea of a 'Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere' did find support from among the Malay left-wing and nationalists such as the *Kesatuan Melayu Muda* (KMM), whose leadership and members initially worked with the Japanese authorities in hope of securing independence for Malaya (Soh, 1998). Meanwhile, the migrant Indian community in Malaya was also influenced, albeit negligibly, by the Japanese propaganda and support for the Indian independence movement led by Subhas Chandra Bose to liberate the Indian sub-continent. On the other hand, the Japanese authorities' treated the Chinese community in Malaya with contempt due to the salient overseas Chinese support for the Chinese resistance movement during the Second Sino-Japanese war (1937–1945). Indeed, many Chinese were persecuted and became victims of alleged Japanese wartime atrocities during the Occupation, fuelling anti-Japanese fervour which eventually led to the establishment of the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA), and the sowing of the seeds of a predominantly Chinese-dominated Communist influence in Malaya. The Japanese authorities' lopsidedness and biased treatment of the different ethnic communities in Malaya was undeniably responsible for fuelling ethnic tensions in an already plural and divided Malayan society which manifested from the British's very own 'divide-and-rule' policy in Malaya (see Cheah, 2012).

Nevertheless, indigenous Malay support for the Japanese occupation eventually waned and transformed into opposition and resistance upon their realisation of the Japanese authorities' reluctance to entertain their request for independence. Together with the British and the MPAJA, the local Malay population formed the bulwark of anti-Japanese resistance throughout the remaining of the Pacific War. The Japanese did however make an effort to unite the so-called archipelagic Malays and give independence to both Malaya and neighbouring Dutch East Indies under the auspices of *Indonesia Raya* or *Melayu Raya* during the final days of war. Yet, despite the formation of the Japanese-sponsored *Kesatuan Rakyat Indonesia Semenanjung* (KRIS), hatched following consultations between the Malay left-wing nationalist leadership of Ibrahim Yaacob and Burhanuddin el-Helmy and Indonesia's Sukarno and Hatta, the 'eleventh-hour' independence effort failed to materialise due to Emperor Hirohito's abrupt declaration of the surrender of the Japanese Empire on 15 August 1945. The Indonesian republic unilaterally declared its independence two days later without Malaya in its ambit, leaving the Malay Peninsula to be returned to British rule until 1957. Although Malaya failed to gain independence from the Japanese, it is not farfetched to claim that Japan did contribute to inculcating and strengthening Malay nationalism during the Occupation, which served as a key impetus to the subsequent Malayan independence movement (Roff, 1967; Liow, 2005; Soh, 1998).

ESTABLISHMENT OF FORMAL DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS AND BEYOND

There was a 12-year hiatus in Malayan-Japanese relations following Imperial Japan's war surrender in 1945 and its subsequent loss of sovereignty after being placed under American occupation for its rehabilitation during the post-war years. Nonetheless, bilateral ties were officially resumed on 31 August 1957, when the newly independent Federation of Malaya established formal diplomatic relations with Japan on the very day of the former's promulgation as an independent nation-state. This was followed by the establishment of the Japanese Embassy in Malaya's capital city of Kuala Lumpur on 9 September 1957, heralding the dawn of what was to become a friendly, harmonious and mutually beneficial bilateral relationship.

Indeed, the speedy establishment of diplomatic relations was due in part to the congruence of strategic thought, interests and expectations formed by their respective alignment to the Western bloc in the Cold War's global/regional security architecture and calculus. Both Malaya and Japan were, by design, part of the Western bloc; the former previously a colony of Britain that had been hitherto fighting a war of attrition against communist insurgency prior to independence, while the latter was conveniently incorporated into the Cold War alliance setup and balance of power via its role as 'junior partner' to the Americans under the auspices of the US-Japan security alliance (Lai, 2014: 45; see also Hook et al., 2005: ch.4). The speedy establishment of bilateral ties was thus expected, given their mutual interest forged by the overarching strategic environment and their being part of the Western bloc to counter the spread of the communist Chinese-led regional sphere-of-influence in both Northeast and Southeast Asia (Lai, 2014: 45). Conversely, the absence of unresolved territorial and maritime dispute as well as limited political tensions between Malaya/Malaysia and Japan over the conflicting interpretation of the war history equally contributed to the relatively unencumbered rekindling and smooth development of Malaysian-Japanese ties.

Throughout the first two decades, bilateral relations were primarily centred on economic interactions. Postwar Japan's rapid economic development and re-emergence as an economic power drew many Southeast Asian states including Malaysia, to a lesser extent, to seek closer economic ties as a means to capitalise on the renewed Japanese economic wherewithal, especially in terms of trade and investments, as well as Japanese foreign aid (Shiraishi, 1997: 179–86). This was especially so from the late 1970's onward, where successive Japanese governments continued attaching high priority to economic engagement with the ASEAN. The importance placed by postwar Japan on building economic ties with and providing aid to former 'victim-states' of Japanese imperialism in Southeast Asia as a form of *de facto* war compensation, saw a massive surge in trade, investment and Official Development Assistance (ODA) from Japan to ASEAN member states, including Malaysia. To be sure, the huge inflow of Japanese capital was due as much to the practical need to establish a regional production chain/network for Japan's post-fordist industries, under the auspices of the so-called Japanese "flying geese" strategy (Hatch & Yamamura, 1996: ch.2; Hook et al., 2005: 235).

THE LOOK EAST POLICY AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF MALAYSIA-JAPAN TIES

Malaysia-Japan relations received a major and transformative boost beginning from the early 1980's, following the introduction of Malaysia's Look East Policy (LEP) in 1982 by the then Malaysian prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad. The LEP was launched by the Mahathir administration as a response to several external and domestic impetuses, including the proposal by the Japan-Malaysia Economic Association and Malaysia-Japan Economic Association to promote robust bilateral economic relations between the two countries, with a view of transforming what were initially cordial ties to becoming a 'special relationship'. From the Malaysian viewpoint, the LEP was multi-purpose; namely to reduce Malaysia's economic dependency on the West, notably its former colonial master, Great Britain; to emulate Japan's 'developmental state' model as well as Japanese work culture and ethics; to attract Japanese investments, and to facilitate Malaysia's drive towards heavy industrialisation, among others (see Jomo, 1994; Lim, 1994; Saravanamuttu, 2010: 186–87). Conversely, the Japanese viewed the LEP as an avenue to recalibrate their Oriental identity and expand their reach to the Asia Pacific, following decades of pro-West external orientation and dependency. In this regard, the LEP provided Japan the opportunity to reduce its economic over-dependence on the US, by divesting trade and investments to a new Asian market with potentials like Malaysia. This shift would certainly help alleviate Japan's protracted trade conflict vis-à-vis the US, by reducing its annual trade surpluses with its 'senior partner', while simultaneously helping to lower production cost of Japanese corporations (Suzuki, 2014).

The congruence of mutual strategic and economic interests notwithstanding, the LEP, which led to flourishing Malaysia-Japan relations, was very much the brainchild and vision of the then Malaysian prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad. This is a view commonly shared by both Malaysian and Japanese scholars/observers alike, who see the LEP as unmistakably a product of Mahathir's foreign policy idiosyncrasies, specifically his nationalistic predisposition and somewhat 'anti-Western' or more precisely anti-colonial policy stance (see Khoo, 1995; Hilley, 2001;

Saravanamuttu, 2010; Dhillon, 2009). Indeed, it was arguably Mahathir's nationalistic sentiments that led to Malaysia's tit-for-tat response against the British government's decision to raise tuition fees of British universities, which negatively affected Malaysian students studying in Britain. Malaysia's infamous 'dawn raid' of the London Metal Exchange and the nationalisation of British-owned corporations like Dunlop, Guthrie and Sime Darby, as well as the launching of the 'Buy British Last' campaign, were among Mahathir's assertive-nationalist foreign policy responses that antagonised Britain, which necessitated the Malaysian premier to look for an alternative foreign partner and model of development in Japan, as a means to reduce Malaysia's dependency towards its former colonial master (Saravanamuttu, 2010: 186–87). The Japan-focused LEP was thus a pragmatic and necessary panacea/remedy to offset the impending shift in Malaysia's external orientation under Mahathir. Furthermore, Mahathir's decision to turn his sight from the West and look eastwards to enhance relations with affluent Asian countries was as much driven by his 'orientalist' worldview and the perceived sociocultural affinities of the Eastern societies underpinned by the so-called 'Asian values', as with his advocacy of Asian solidarity, leadership and supremacy in the existing international order. Mahathir's 'Asianist' and 'nationalist' outlook and his penchant towards Japan and anything Japanese has been vividly expressed in his co-authored book with the like-minded, popular Japanese ultranationalist, Ishihara Shintaro, titled "The Asia That Can Say No: A Policy to Combat Europe and America" ("*No*" *to ieru Ajia*" in Japanese language). The English version of the book appeared a year later in 1995, albeit with a more diplomatic sounding title "The Voice of Asia: Two Leaders Discuss the Coming Century" (see Mahathir & Ishihara, 1995). The book was basically an extension of the Ishihara's earlier 'America-bashing' work called "The Japan That Can Say No", which called for Japan to recalibrate its policy vision towards Asia (Berger, 1997: 274).

Undoubtedly, the LEP became the catalyst to a dynamic and mutually beneficial economic relationship, which not only saw Malaysia receiving preferential treatment from the Japanese state and businesses, but also becoming an important trade partner and preferred destination of Japanese foreign direct investments in Southeast Asia. Japan, reciprocally, emerged as one of Malaysia's largest trading partners, and continued remaining so throughout the 1990's until the dawn of the new millennium, when its share of trade was gradually eroded by China's entry into the list of Malaysia's elite trading partners. Having said that, Japan managed to consistently maintain its position as the third largest trading partner of Malaysia between 2002 and 2007 (Rahman, Molla & Murad, 2008), and has remained so annually till present day. Indeed, bilateral trade between Malaysia and Japan gained tremendous momentum following the LEP, increasing almost two-and-a-half fold from an annual average value of USD8.08 billion during 1986–1990 to USD18.79 billion during 1991–1995, and then surging to USD24.26 billion in the next five years (Rahman, Molla & Murad, 2008).

The exponential growth in bilateral trade was undeniably facilitated by a corresponding surge in the inflow of Japanese foreign direct investments (FDIs), which experienced a massive increase under the auspices of the LEP. Since the overriding goal of the LEP was to transform Malaysia into an industrial nation with the assistance of Japan, one of the key strategies was to encourage renowned Japanese multinational corporations to form joint-ventures with their Malaysian counterparts, such as the joint-ventures between Nippon Steel Corporation and the Malaysian state-owned Heavy Industries Corporation of Malaysia (HICOM) to establish the ill-conceived Perwaja Steel, and between the Mitsubishi Motors Corporation and the HICOM to kick-start Malaysia's very own national automobile project via the setting up of Malaysia's national automobile company, Perusahaan Otomobil Nasional (PROTON) (Furuoka, 2007: 511). On the part of Japan, developments such as the appreciation of the Japanese Yen vis-à-vis the American greenback following the signing of the Plaza Accord (1985), rising domestic wages, serious competition with other 'Asian dragons' (especially South Korea and Taiwan) and the introduction of the Promotion of Investments Act (1986), among others, encouraged the massive inflow of Japanese investment into Southeast Asia in search of lower production cost venues (Linden, 2000: 199; Hatch & Yamamura, 1996). Malaysia inevitably became a preferred destination in view of its conducive, 'pro-Japanese' investment environment cultivated by the LEP. The subsequent signing of a bilateral investment agreement in 1996 added further momentum to their already flourishing trade and investment ties (Bernama, 2008). The number of Japanese corporations investing and establishing joint-ventures in Malaysia increased exponentially, with as many as 1,400 Japanese companies operating in the whole of Malaysia by 2002, including the likes of Japanese household names, such as Sony, Matsushita-Panasonic, Sanyo, Sharp, Hitachi, Mitsubishi Electric and Mitsui, which have long-term commitments in Malaysia. The mushrooming of Japanese manufacturing platforms, especially in the electronics sector, inevitably turned Malaysia into one of the world's top exporters of semiconductor and consumer electronic goods, such as home-use air-conditioners, colour televisions, and video cassette recorders (VCRs) (Linden, 2000).

However, it has to be said that not all Japanese-Malaysian joint-ventures were successful, or came to fruition. A notable example was the high-profile Nippon Steel-Perwaja Steel project, which failed miserably. Plagued by mismanagement, huge financial losses and negative publicity, the Perwaja 'scandal' (Hilley, 2001: 107; Furuoka, 2007: 514–15) was somewhat reminiscent to the infamous 'Baoshan shock', another failed joint-venture steel mill project involving the Japanese industrial giant with China's Baoshan Steel Company that took-off during so-called 'Japan-China friendship' boom period (Kokubun, 2003: 33; Lai, 2014: 47–48). Other examples included the PROTON, which experienced moderate or mixed results in terms of success (till today), and the Asian Rare Earth (ARE) project that courted controversy due to alleged environmental issues, which ultimately saw it ceasing operation in 1994 (Furouka, Lo & Kato, 2007). The lack of success in the abovementioned examples, however, did not overshadow the overall benefits of Japanese FDI to both Malaysia and Japan, and Japanese capital inflow continued throughout the 1990s, with Malaysia receiving a total of USD3.314 billion from 1995 to 2000 (Furuoka, Lo & Kato, 2007).

Likewise, the LEP paved the way for a sizeable inflow of Japanese ODA, with Malaysia emerging as one of the biggest recipients in Asia, especially in the form of bilateral loans. For instance, Malaysia received a total of JPY827.4 million in bilateral loans from 1969 to 2001, which is the highest among Southeast Asian states (Ruhanie, 2001; Furouka, Lo & Kato, 2007). The cumulative amount of Japanese bilateral loans provided to Malaysia up to 2004 was JPY916 billion (USD8.32 billion). Malaysia also received other forms of Japanese ODA such as bilateral grants (aid without repayment) and technical cooperation. From 1995 to 2000, the Japanese government provided bilateral grants to Malaysia amounting to USD426.21 million. Meanwhile, a total of USD45 million in aid funds were given to Malaysia in the form of technical cooperation in 2004 (Furouka, Lo & Kato, 2007).

To be sure, Malaysia not only benefitted from the periodic ODA but was also a major recipient of the alternative rescue package and financial assistance put up by Japan to alleviate the crisis-stricken Southeast Asian economies under the so-called “New Miyazawa Initiative”, in response to the Asian financial meltdown of 1997–1998. Specifically, Malaysia avoided the IMF bailout programme but instead depended on a combination of selective capital controls and financial aid from Japan mounting to USD2 billion under the New Miyazawa Initiative to ride through the financial storm (Furuoka, Lo & Kato, 2007). It is noteworthy that a sizeable portion of the aid given to Malaysia to weather the financial and economic storm was directed towards sustaining human capital development such as the rescuing of the LEP’s ‘education-oriented’ programmes in the shape of scholarship provision (e.g. the Malaysian Higher Education Loan Fund II) to enable Malaysian students to study and/or receive their training in Japan (Embassy of Japan, Malaysia, 1999).

Apart from catapulting their economic ties to new heights, the LEP also expedited other forms of bilateral interactions, especially in the socio-cultural, and to a lesser extent, politico-security realm. For instance, both countries have worked closely in terms of promoting education, human resource development and capacity building, with the Japanese government providing generous funding under the ambits of the LEP to support the financing of a sizeable number of Malaysian students pursuing their education and training in Japan. Such arrangements have expectedly led to approximately 15,000 Malaysian students obtaining either their tertiary education from Japanese universities, or a variety of advanced trainings from Japanese training academies and facilities, to date (Shaharuddin, 2012: 5). Another milestone of the LEP was the 2011 agreement between Malaysia and Japan to establish and jointly finance the development of the Malaysia-

Japan International Institute of Technology (MJIIT) in Kuala Lumpur, which was as much "a fitting testament to the successes achieved" between the two countries as "a monument or symbol" of their strong bilateral ties and cooperation, particularly in the area of education, training and capacity building (Shaharuddin, 2012: 5). Tokyo was also actively asserting Japan's soft power via the promotion of Japanese language and culture, as well as other forms of social, cultural, scientific and technological exchanges vis-à-vis Malaysia. Tourism has similarly taken off, with a steady stream of Japanese tourists visiting Malaysia, and vice versa, Malaysians traveling to Japan, annually.

Meanwhile, in the politico-security realm, Prime Minister Mahathir had consistently advocated for Japan's increased international profile and presence, which included urging Japan to undertake a greater role and responsibility in regional and global security by way of loosening its legal constraint on the use of force, as stipulated in the Article 9 of the Japanese 'pacifist' constitution. Similarly, the Mahathir administration was at the forefront promoting Japan's leadership in the then Malaysian premier's ill-proposed East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC), an exclusively 'Asian' regional economic grouping, which ultimately never saw the light of day, following Tokyo's reluctance to furnish support to such a 'closed' regional integration scheme.

Overall, scholars and observers unanimously agree that the launching of the LEP signaled "Malaysia's newfound 'love affair' with Japan" (Khadijah Md. Khalid, 2003: 325) and very quickly became the "cornerstone" of the comprehensive and special relationship between the two nations that lasted till present day (Furuoka, 2007; Saravanamuttu, 2003). From Malaysia's perspective, the LEP had certainly benefitted the country especially in its quest to position itself among the world's fastest growing economies, and towards becoming a developed nation as envisioned by Mahathir's Vision 2020 agenda. The rewards of an enhanced relationship between Malaysia and Japan via the LEP were vividly spelt out by the Malaysian ambassador to Japan, in his contributed article in the *Japan Times* commemorating the 30th anniversary of the LEP, when he wrote that the policy has "without doubt brought the desired results and has accelerated

Malaysia's development through providing the right kind of workforce for increased foreign investment, technology transfer, and in-house training" (Shaharuddin, 2012: 5). Indeed, the benefits of the LEP can be aptly summed up by current Malaysian premier Mohd Najib Tun Abdul Razak's remark that "the years in which we turned to face the rising sun were some of the most productive in our (Malaysia's) history" (*The Star*, 2015). Such positivity in the Malaysian psyche comprehensibly explains why the Najib administration has embarked on a renewal and reinvigoration of the LEP, with the launching of the "second wave" of the iconic policy in 2013.

MALAYSIA-JAPAN RELATIONS BEYOND THE MAHATHIR ERA: TOWARDS A STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP?

Malaysia-Japan ties have by and large continued to progress, even after the retirement of Prime Minister Mahathir, the 'chief protagonist' of the LEP, in 2003. Subsequent Malaysian premiers, from Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to the incumbent Mohd Najib Tun Abdul Razak, together with their Japanese counterparts, have not only continued reaffirming the 'special nature' of the bilateral relationship during their respective tenures, but also sought to elevate it to the level of "enhanced partnership" (in 2010), and lately, "strategic partnership", via the proposed revisiting or more specifically, upgrading of the LEP, popularly known as the "Second Wave of LEP" or "LEP 2.0" (Suzuki, 2014; Parameswaran, 2015).

In the diplomatic realm, both countries have maintained regular leader summits and exchange of visits at both ministerial and senior official levels, including a number of official and highly visible visits by Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak to Japan since assuming office in 2009. Meanwhile, Japanese premiers, from Koizumi Junichiro to the current Prime Minister, Abe Shinzo, reciprocated with official visits to Malaysia under the auspices of their bilateral ties and regional platforms such as the ASEAN, APEC and the East Asia Summit. The most recent high-level exchange saw Japanese foreign minister, Kishida Fumio, meeting his Malaysian counterpart, Anifah Aman in Kuala Lumpur, on the occasion of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Ministerial Meeting in August 2015 (see MOFA, 2015).

Prime Minister Najib's latest official visit to the 'Land of the Rising Sun' in May 2015 coincided with the signing of the aforementioned "new strategic partnership" between Malaysia and Japan to boost cooperation on a wide range of issues. The pronouncement of the strategic partnership heralds yet another chapter in Malaysia-Japan ties, highlighting the robustness and significance of the bilateral relationship to both countries. Specifically, the eight-page document underlining the strategic partnership, stipulated an expanded and more comprehensive scope of cooperation that covers areas such as peace and stability, maritime security, people-to-people ties, and regional/global cooperation, besides the traditional economic exchanges. What was perhaps ground-breaking regarding the upgraded partnership was their pledge to advance defence and maritime cooperation, where Malaysia and Japan agreed to initiate negotiations on a possible framework for the transfer of defense equipment and technology, a first for Japan with any ASEAN member-state (Kameda, 2015; Parameswaran, 2015). Additional areas of security cooperation spelt out include maritime safety (i.e. assistance to Malaysia's coast guard agency, the MMEA) and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) (Kameda, 2015).

The enhancement of Malaysia-Japan relations in the realm of defence and security augurs well with both countries' contemporary national and regional security outlook, with the 'China factor' serving as the major impetus behind such a recalibration of their bilateral interests and engagements. The emphasis given to enhancing security cooperation in the strategic partnership comes as no surprise insofar as there has been growing concerns about China's rise and increasing military preponderance, not to mention, a perceived shift in Chinese strategic behaviour in recent years. From the Japanese perspective, there is a need for a concerted regional effort to 'check' and 'balance' China's emergence as a military power, especially with regard to Beijing's recent assertiveness and allegedly belligerent behaviour in managing the maritime-territorial disputes in both East and South China seas. Prime Minister Abe's official visit to Malaysia in 2013, for instance, was a part of his tour of Southeast Asia to cement Japan's ties with ASEAN states in various areas including regional security. The tour was, in fact, as much official visits as *de facto* Japanese lobby to seek regional support to ensure China's peaceful rise and development in the region. Indeed, the 'highly visible' outcome of Abe's 2013 visit was that the Japanese premier and his Malaysian counterpart, Najib Razak agreed to strengthen cooperation on maritime security and revitalising their defence exchanges, with a view of having a defence memorandum prepared in the near future to establish the areas of cooperation (*The Star*, 2014).

To be sure, Malaysia had initially demonstrated a certain degree of reluctance to proceed with the Japanese proposed defence memorandum, with the Malaysian defence Minister, Hishammuddin Hussein citing in mid-2014 that the memo would take some time to realise in view of "regional sensitivities" (*The Star*, 2014). Undoubtedly, these "sensitivities" include regional apprehension, especially from China and South Korea, concerning Japan's expanded security role via such defence cooperation, and even more so, from Malaysia's own pragmatic calculation, where consideration of China's position as Malaysia's largest trading partner would necessitate Putrajaya to not antagonise Beijing and jeopardise Sino-Malaysian ties, by partaking in what could be perceived as subtle/implicit power balancing against the Chinese. The fact that Malaysia has never labelled China as a 'threat', and that it has thus far maintained 'strategic ambiguity' and a comparatively more passive stance than some other ASEAN states involved in the overlapping maritime-territorial dispute vis-à-vis the Chinese in the South China Sea, suggests the pragmatism demonstrated by Putrajaya when dealing with the 'China' factor in its overall foreign and security policy calculus. Hence, Prime Minister Najib's "rather indifferent attitude towards Abe's expressed concern on China's aggressive actions in the disputed waters" (Suzuki, 2014), such as the unilateral Chinese declaration of the Aerial Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea airspace, and extensive land reclamation in the South China Sea, during a number of meetings, highlights what Suzuki (2014) deemed as a possible "dissonance" in contemporary Malaysia-Japan ties, where strategic congruence in the realm of security has yet to be realised between the two countries.

However, it would be myopic to accuse Malaysia of passively adopting a policy of deference, when it comes to dealing with the Chinese over the South China Sea dispute. This is especially so, since Malaysia not only has contending maritime-territorial claims vis-à-vis China in the Spratly archipelago, but has also been at the receiving end of China's maritime 'encroachment' in the South China Sea justified by Beijing's infamous/controversial 'nine-dash-line' maritime boundary. Indeed, despite their so-called 'special relationship', Malaysia was not spared from China's creeping assertiveness in the disputed seas, insofar as there were sightings of Chinese naval presence and activities at the James Shoal, located off Malaysia's territorial waters in 2003, and again in 2014 (see Lai, 2015). Unlike the frequency in other parts of the South China Sea, these Chinese maritime 'incursions' were deemed to be the 'first-ever' involving Malaysian maritime-territorial interests. To be certain, China has always been an important factor in Malaysia's contemporary security considerations. Engaging in either a casual chat or serious discussion with Malaysian defence/security planners would definitely reveal, albeit discreetly, the extent to which China's external behaviour has become an imminent source of security concern. In fact, the Malaysian government has been subtly "hedging" against China's rise and unpredictable behaviour by steadily deepening security cooperation with the US throughout the last few years (see Kuik, 2013; Lai, 2015), notably under the ambit of the so-called "US pivot to Asia" policy. It can therefore be said that regional developments and growing strategic uncertainties in the past year leading to the 2015 bilateral summit in Tokyo, have somewhat altered to a certain extent, Malaysia's position, which ultimately led to the 'first step' in establishing bilateral defence cooperation with the Japanese, as part of their strategic partnership agenda, and also possibly as an extension of Malaysia's "hedging" strategy. Expectedly, maritime security has been identified as a key area for enhanced Malaysia-Japan cooperation, since both countries not only have the familiarity of having previously worked together in this area, such as in combating piracy and other maritime-related transnational security threats, but also mutual interest in ensuring the peace and stability of the regional maritime domain. That maritime security cooperation is given significant emphasis in the Malaysia-Japan strategic partnership has been made obvious by the fact that it is "the only specific issue" that receives its own section in the 2015 document, titled "Achieving Free, Open and Stable Sea" (Parameswaran, 2015). Mutual concerns over the South China Sea situation have had both Malaysia and Japan emphasising in this section of the document the importance of ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight, and a quick conclusion of the Code of Conduct (CoC), as well as self-restraint in accordance to international laws (Parameswaran, 2015), in a veiled criticism of China's recent (mis) demeanours in the South China Sea.

The 'strategic partnership' also encompasses other dimension of Malaysia-Japan relations, most of which have already been relatively developed during the last few decades, following the foundation laid by the LEP. For example, the section of the 2015 document on economic cooperation deals primarily with the various aspects and platforms in which both countries can strengthen the second phase of the LEP, or the LEP 2.0, which was launched by Prime Minister Najib in 2013. Among the areas identified and agreed upon by both states where cooperation was to be expedited under the LEP 2.0 include advanced industrial technologies, services, managerial skills, and "quality" infrastructure development, among others (Parameswaran, 2015). In addition, Prime Minister Abe also promised to initiate a new training programme based on cost-sharing between the two 'strategic partners', which will see 500 trainees from Malaysia receiving their vocational training in Japan over the next five years to help lay "the foundation for future bilateral relations" (Kameda, 2015).

A proposed area of cooperation worth noting in the economic dimension is infrastructure development, where Japan, under the Abe administration, has pledged to cooperate with Malaysia's development "under a high quality infrastructure initiative" (Kameda, 2015). To demonstrate Japan's sincerity and commitment in this regard, Prime Minister Abe has pledged a USD110 billion investment over the next five years in Asia, in collaboration with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) (Kameda, 2015), of which Malaysia will be a key beneficiary under the renewed LEP spirit. The financial commitment made by Abe to promote quality infrastructure development can be seen as an affront to China's very own Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) initiative, which Beijing launched in 2014 with much fanfare. Tokyo's response in offering of a "quality" alternative to the AIIB, suggests what appears to be a heightening of Sino-Japanese competition for regional dominance and influence. In the proposed Malaysia-Japan partnership for quality infrastructure development, several areas were identified in the strategic partnership document, which included power plants, water and information and communication technology, but the 'centrepiece' was Japan's interest in pitching its world renowned *Shinkansen* technology for the proposed development of a high-speed railway system between Malaysia and Singapore, for which China and France are among the rival bidders (*The Star*, 2015). To be sure, the hype of an impending investment surge from the launching of the LEP 2.0 overshadows the fact that Japan has continuously remained as one of Malaysia's largest foreign investors, ever since the debut of the maiden phase of the LEP. For example, Japan was Malaysia's largest source of foreign investments in 2011, with approved investments of USD3.36 billion spreading across 77 projects (Shaharuddin, 2012: 5). The strategic partnership's economic agenda, nonetheless, will undoubtedly serve as a major impetus/driver of a more sizeable inflow of Japanese capital in the foreseeable future.

As with the maiden phase of the LEP, the continuous and possible surge in inflow of Japanese investments, albeit in strategic and priority areas, under the LEP 2.0, are expected to have a spillover effect on their trade ties. To be sure, bilateral trade between Malaysia and Japan has remained robust and recorded continuous annual growth throughout the last three LEP decades, with 2009 being the exception due to the global economic and financial downturn triggered by the US subprime crisis. In 2011, for instance, Malaysia's overall trade with Japan amounted to USD49.27 billion, which is approximately a 22 percent increase compared to the year before, making the latter Malaysia's third largest trading partner for consecutive years since 2002 (Shaharuddin, 2012; Rahman, Kolla & Murad, 2008). Although Malaysia may be comparatively inferior in terms of its overall rank in Japan's list of trading partners, it has been, nevertheless, one of the top exporters to Japan for 25 traditional and non-traditional products, such as wood, furniture, fruits, and other primary products (ASEAN-Japan Centre, 2007; Rahman, Kolla & Murad, 2008). Indeed, the volume of Malaysia-Japan bilateral trade, especially in terms of exports, has been "trending upward" since the signing of the Malaysia-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (MJEPA) in May 2005, and its subsequent implementation a year later (MOFA, 2006; Rahman, Molla, & Murad, 2008; Shaharuddin, 2012). The MJEPA comprises two parts, namely a free trade agreement (FTA) component, which has a 10-year realisation deadline, and an ‘economic cooperation’ component, meant to further boost trade and investment ties (see MOFA, 2006). The idea of the MJEPA was originally mooted in early 2002 by the then Japanese Prime Minister, Koizumi Junichiro, during his visit to Malaysia. A joint-working group was subsequently established in response to the proposal to deliberate on issues related to realising a comprehensive economic partnership between the two countries (MOFA, 2003; MOFA, 2005). The MJEPA was thus the outcome of several rounds of negotiation, which paved the way for a greater and more robust trade and investment relations between the two ‘old partners’ (MOFA, 2005). In fact, during the period 2006–2007 which coincided with the maiden year of the Malaysia-Japan FTA, the average annual bilateral trade value was USD33.5 billion, up from USD25.3 billion for the period between 2001–2005. In terms of average annual growth in percentage, bilateral trade recorded an impressive annual growth rate of 14.14 per cent, which was approximately three times higher than that of the period between 2001 and 2005 (Rahman, Molla & Murad, 2008; see also ASEAN Japan Centre [various years]; Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2007). The continuous double-digit annual growth in bilateral trade between the two countries clearly highlights the salience and apparent benefits of the Malaysia-Japan FTA.

Another important area of cooperation spelt out under the Malaysia-Japan strategic partnership agenda is the enhancement of grassroots, people-to-people relations and cultural ties. Needless to say, the LEP has laid a strong foundation in facilitating the promotion of social and cultural exchanges, including educational cooperation between Malaysia and Japan throughout the last three decades. As aforementioned, education was very much a primary focus of the LEP’s goal of learning from and emulating the best of what Japan has to offer, in Malaysia’s quest to transform itself into an industrial and knowledge-oriented society. More than thirty years on, education continues to be a key agenda of the so-called second wave of LEP, in line with the vision and mission of the Najib administration’s much hyped Government Transformation Programme (GTP) and by extension the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP), to produce quality human capital that could drive Malaysia towards becoming a knowledge-based, high-income economy. The aforesaid establishment of the MJIIT to turn

Malaysia into a hub of Japanese-style engineering education in the Southeast Asian region, and the Japanese government's pledge under the auspices of LEP2.0 to continue providing scholarships for Malaysians to pursue their higher education and vocational training in Japan, are among the obvious outcomes of close cooperation between Malaysia and Japan in the realm of education.

Additionally, students exchange programmes in the likes of the JENESYS 2015 are part of the existing framework of sociocultural relations, which has been earmarked for further enhancement to promote mutual understanding, trust, friendship and goodwill between the two peoples. The JENESYS 2015, which is under the Japan Friendship Ties programme, saw 15 Malaysian youths who have an interest in politics, partaking in a 10-day visit of Japan to learn about Japanese politics, government, society, history and foreign policy, among others (MOFA, 2015). Another notable development in this area is the support rendered by Japan to Malaysia for the setting up of a National Centre for Disaster Management, which when ready, would serve as "a regional hub for scholarship, expertise and training" in the field of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) (Parameswaran, 2015). Indeed, Japan through its Self-Defence Force (SDF) (SDF) has both the expertise and experience to assist Malaysia in this field, insofar as it has been actively involved in a number of HA/DR operations worldwide, including the dispatch of a disaster relief team and some Maritime-SDF vessels to participate in search-and-rescue operations involving the disappearance of the ill-fated Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 back in March 2014.

Likewise, tourism is another area of socio-cultural relations targeted for expansion. Malaysia's multiculturalism and social diversity, not to mention, scenic nature and rich biodiversity, makes it a relatively popular holiday destination amongst the Japanese. In 2010, for instance, a total of 415,811 Japanese tourists made their way to various parts of Malaysia, while another 380,675 visited in 2011 (Shaharuddin, 2012: 5). Although the 2011 figure constituted a seven per cent decline in tourist arrival compared to the previous year, it should not be taken as an emerging trend but rather a one-off anomaly, due to the effects the Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami in March 2011 as well as the subsequent Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear disaster that rocked Japan. True to form, the number of Japanese visitors in Malaysia gradually increased in the following years, with as many as 470,008 in 2012, 513,076 in 2013 and 553,106 the year after. Similarly, Japan remains highly popular among Malaysian tourists with the number of Malaysians visiting Japan having also increased significantly during the last couple of years, from 176,713 in 2013 to 249,500 in 2014, a 41 per cent increase which is the highest since 2006. Malaysia, in that year, was ranked second in terms of visitor's arrivals to Japan among ASEAN countries. Another 12,300 Malaysians have travelled to Japan in January 2015 alone (*Borneo Post*, 2015).

Malaysia is indeed, popular among Japanese tourists, and has been largely recognised as the most desirable destination among Japanese. This is especially so among the Japanese elderly population, who see Malaysia as a viable alternative 'home for them to enjoy their so-called 'golden age', notably since the Malaysian government introduced the Malaysia My Second Home Programme (MM2H) in 2002, to attract pensioners and retirees from affluent countries to consider Malaysia as their destination for medium- and long-term stay (Chee, 2007; Ono, 2012: 31). Apart from retirees, there is also a rising trend in Japanese youth and families with young children opting to move to and reside in Malaysia for the purpose of pursuing education in a multicultural and multilingual environment, in what is deemed as education tourism. Indeed, Malaysia is seen as a viable destination for Japanese intending to pursue English language courses for leisure and life-long learning, as well as formal education, in view of the abundance of international schools for both primary and secondary education, and higher education institutions in the country. According to Malaysian official statistics, there were 2,410 approvals from Japanese applicants since the MM2H was introduced, with Japanese retirement and expatriate communities growing healthily in places like Kota Kinabalu, Cameron Highlands, Penang and Kuala Lumpur (Ono, 2012: 32). In fact, the aforementioned triple disaster that struck Japan in 2011 did not hamper but instead increased the mobility of Japanese adults and youth to Malaysia under the auspices of the MM2H as well the Malaysian Tourism Board's "Look Malaysia Programme" (*Rukku Mareshia Purogramu*) (Ono, 2012:

34). This can be seen by the 16.9 per cent increase in the number of Japanese MM2H approvals to 423 in 2011, from 195 a year before (Ono, 2012: 34). The active movement of international mobility between the peoples of Japan and Malaysia suggest "the emerging notion of Look Malaysia in tourism-related mobility", which serves as "a preface for the notion of "look towards each other" in the context of people-to-people interaction, a notion aptly underscored by the Director of Malaysia Tourism Board's remark that "from Look East to Look Malaysia, there are many things we can learn from each other" (MTPB, 2011: 2; Ono, 2012: 35)

Last but not least, Malaysia and Japan also pledged to enhance cooperation on the regional and global stage via various multilateral platforms such as the East Asia Summit, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the United Nations and those under the auspices of the ASEAN, namely the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN-Plus-Three, among others. The areas of cooperation stipulated in the strategic partnership document were comprehensive, but regional observers saw two focus areas standing out most visibly, namely cooperation in countering political and religious extremism, such as the imminent threat from the Islamic State (IS) and addressing the humanitarian crisis involving Rohingya refugees (Parameswaran, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Malaysia-Japan relations have generally enjoyed a sustained period of warm, cordial and mutually beneficial interaction, at both bilateral as well as multilateral stages. The recent upgrading of their special relationship to the level of strategic partnership clearly indicates the continuous importance placed by both countries on their bilateral ties, after more than five-and-a-half decades since they first established official diplomatic relations. To be sure, there were a number of domestic and external dynamics, such as the idiosyncrasies of key actors i.e. Mahathir, mutual complementarities and interests, and a congruence of strategic thought and interests between the two governments, which paved the way for the dawning of a special relationship under the ambit of the LEP. Although the LEP era has been commonly accepted as the 'golden age' of Malaysia-Japan ties, skepticism have been abound as to whether Malaysia and Japan will continue their 'love affair' in the post-LEP period, especially in the context of the changing dynamics that have somewhat created dissonance in their bilateral relations. However, the recent enhancement of the decades old relationship to include more comprehensive and substantive enhancement in both traditional and 'newer' areas of cooperation suggest the continued prevalence of strategic congruence, which augurs well for the future of Malaysia-Japan relations, in an increasingly fluid, challenging and interdependent global order.

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