



# MALAYSIA'S REGIONALISM WITH HUMANITARIAN IMPERATIVES IN THE PHILIPPINES AND TIMOR LESTE: APPLYING LESSONS FROM REGIONAL HUMANITARIANISM INTO DOMESTIC IMPERATIVES

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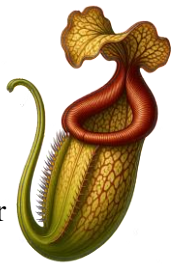
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**Abstract** *In the decades leading to Malaysia's formation the young country had to confront existential threats from domestic and external sources. These threats included diplomatic embargoes and covert incursions from Indonesia and the Philippines, compounded by complex effects from long-standing cross-border migration and economic exchange. Fortunately, these pressures were eased through counter-insurgency under the Anglo-Malaysia Defence Agreement and the restoration of diplomatic ties. However, there remains complexly intertwined problems of economic, security, and demographic dilemmas. Rather than adopt restrictive, exclusionary measures, Malaysia pursued a conciliatory statecraft that combines de-escalation diplomacy, regionalism, humanitarian assistance, and peace mediation to build trust, goodwill, and cooperative ties. This paper examines Malaysia's use of peace mediation and humanitarian diplomacy, with case studies in the Philippines and Timor-Leste, and draws thematic conclusions. First, Malaysia has leveraged sophisticated regionalism and humanitarian diplomacy to advance regional peace and shared prosperity. The outcome from such an adept statecraft includes both material gains and accumulation of sovereign intangible assets such as trust, political and reputational mileage. Second, protecting regional interests requires accumulating tangible and intangible assets through coordinated humanitarian and traditional diplomacy, involving state and non-state actors in a sustained humanitarian-driven statecraft that can turn crises into mutual benefits. Finally, lessons from regional humanitarianism should inform domestic policy. Particularly urgent, concrete responses to socioeconomic neglect, resource imbalance, and security risks in East Malaysia.*

**Keywords:** *humanitarian diplomacy, de-escalation diplomacy, peace mediation regional humanitarianism, socioeconomic imbalance, East Malaysia*

## INTRODUCTION

The significance of regional approaches to peacebuilding is often acknowledged in policy documents and public statements, however inter-state rivalries and regional incoherencies often pose a hindrance to forge successful peacebuilding efforts (de Coning, 2015). Three key factors underscore the relevance of these approaches: (1) conflicts rarely remain confined within state borders, (2) those nearest to the problem usually have a better understanding and influence over it, and (3) their proximity ensures a long-term interest in its resolution. Additionally, diplomatic, military and humanitarian activism at regional level altogether serve



as amphitheatres for soft power projection, influence building and quests to forge greater alliances (Bouie, 2012; Malaysia's Defence White Paper, 2019).

Thus, the confluence of regionalism, diplomacy and state-led humanitarian activism serves as an impetus for conflict de-escalation, isolation of hostile insurgents and their subsequent 'rehabilitation' and integration into mainstream society (Mindanao Monograph, 2010). In addition, well-trained military peacekeepers, non-military negotiators and humanitarian providers can work in synergy and greatly assist the entire process of conflict de-escalation, peacebuilding and reconciliation (Mohd Hedzir & Noraini, 2021). The role of peacekeeping, peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction is vital to halt violations of human rights, restore law and order and allow for international assistance to be brought into war-torn territories (McCarthy, Metcalfe-Hough & Willitts-King, 2016).

In such contexts, regional peacebuilding approaches are essential as these conflicts are interconnected. The negative impacts, like refugee inflows, international migration, and smuggling of weapons and illicit goods, are regional, affecting neighbouring countries the most, giving them a direct interest in resolving the conflicts. After law and order have been successfully reinstated, various long-term assistances can commence. Long term assistance and reconstruction can be invested to rebuild damaged infrastructure, reinstitute local economy, re-educate population and remedy all social imbalance perpetuated by decades of conflict and anarchy (Ramli & Eko, 2015; Mohd Hedzir & Noraini, 2021).

Through partnership between regional and international donors and facilitators, the group of sovereign humanitarian actors became the epicentre of global humanitarian diplomacy and platform to deliberate consequential humanitarian actions, diplomacy and post-conflict recovery at global and regional level diplomacy (Turunen, 2020; Bogatyreva, 2022). Moreover, peacekeeping, peacebuilding and conflict mediation became intertwined with humanitarian intervention and aid to restore peace, maintain security and rebuild the livelihood of affected population (Cutts, 1999; Sung, 2011; Orgad & Seu, 2014; Ayesah, 2019). Such humanitarian imperatives are essential as core ingredients of regionalism to spread prosperity unto immediate neighbour to mitigate negative externalities from an otherwise local, communal conflict (Griffiths, 1993; Wallensteen & Svensson, 2014; Turunen, 2020).

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This paper examines how Malaysia's humanitarian regionalism, expressed through peace mediation and post-conflict assistance in Mindanao and Timor-Leste operationalises soft power and humanitarian diplomacy. It traces the mechanisms, actors, and diplomatic practices through which Malaysia translated humanitarian engagement into influence, showing how non-coercive tools were mobilised to de-escalate conflict and shape regional outcomes.

The study also documents and analyses notable instances of Malaysia's regional humanitarian activism, explaining how specific interventions contributed to regional stability and enhanced Malaysia's diplomatic profile. Each case is assessed for its immediate effects on security and cooperation as well as its longer-term contribution to Malaysia's reputational, political, and material standing in the region.

Finally, the paper extracts qualitative lessons from these case studies to inform broader theoretical and policy debates. These lessons are used to identify transferable practices,



highlight gaps for policy or institutional reforms, and propose avenues for future research that can deepen understanding of humanitarian-driven statecraft in Southeast Asia.

## MATERIALS AND METHOD

### Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative approach combining documentary analysis, deeply immersive semi structured interviews, and observations of recorded lectures and public forums. Primary documentary sources include journal articles, theses, policy papers, and news reports; secondary empirical material comprises notes from at least three recorded forums and eight in depth interviews (two of which are foregrounded in the analysis). Data from these sources were triangulated to develop a conceptual account of sovereign humanitarianism and humanitarian diplomacy and to trace their intersections with traditional statecraft.

### Respondent Selection Criteria

Purposeful sampling was used to identify respondents who could provide rich, relevant insights into Malaysia's humanitarian regionalism. Selection criteria included:

- a. *Direct involvement*: current or former diplomats, ministry officials, or mediators who participated in peace mediation or post-conflict assistance in Mindanao or Timor-Leste.
- b. *Operational experience*: Diplomats and humanitarian coordinators who implemented relief, reconstruction, or capacity-building programmes in the target contexts.
- c. *Scholarly expertise*: academics and policy analysts with peer-reviewed publications or recognised research on regional diplomacy, humanitarianism, or Southeast Asian security, sampled as secondary, corroborating references.
- d. *Diversity of perspective*: a balance of seniority, institutional affiliation (state, non-state, multilateral), and nationality where possible to reduce institutional bias.

Respondents were screened for availability of verifiable credentials (e.g., institutional affiliation, publication record, documented or referral-confirmed participation in relevant missions) and for willingness to participate in a one-hour interview and to allow anonymised quotation. Moreover, respondents were recruited through professional networks, institutional referrals, and purposive outreach to organisations active in the relevant periods. Invitations included a plain-language summary of the study, an outline of topics, and assurances of confidentiality. Two respondents who provided particularly detailed, corroborated accounts were selected for extended use in the paper; the remaining six informed thematic triangulation and corroboration.

### Instrument

#### *Interview Protocol and Logistics*

Each interview followed a semi-structured format and lasted approximately one hour. Interviews were conducted in person or via secure video call, recorded with consent, and transcribed for analysis. Prior to each interview, respondents were reminded of their right to decline to answer any question and to request anonymisation.



### *Generic interview question sets*

#### Opening and background questions

1. Can you briefly describe your role and involvement in peace mediation or post-conflict assistance related to Mindanao/Timor-Leste?
2. What was the institutional mandate and primary objectives of your mission or programme?

#### Questions for diplomats and state officials

1. How did Malaysia frame its humanitarian and mediation efforts in official policy and practice?
2. Which diplomatic tools and channels were most effective in de-escalating tensions and why?
3. Can you describe a specific episode where humanitarian assistance directly influenced diplomatic outcomes?
4. What constraints (political, legal, resource) shaped Malaysia's approach?

#### Questions for NGO and humanitarian practitioners

1. How were humanitarian programmes coordinated with Malaysian diplomatic initiatives on the ground?
2. What operational challenges affected delivery and how were they overcome?
3. To what extent did humanitarian activities build local trust and contribute to longer-term stability?

#### Probing and follow-up prompts

1. Can you give a concrete example or document that illustrates that point?
2. Who were the key interlocutors and what were their incentives?
3. How would you compare Malaysia's approach with that of other regional actors?
  - *Closing questions*
4. What lessons should Malaysian policymakers take from these experiences?
5. Are there unresolved issues or research gaps you think deserve further study?

It should be noted however that due to the fluid, unstructured flow of the interview sessions, lots of these questions were either address simultaneously in interwoven responses, obliquely addressed or left out altogether as per respondents' rejoinders.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Soft Power and Humanitarian Diplomacy Theoretical Application from Past Researches**

#### *Humanitarian Diplomacy and Regionalism: The Use of Soft Power to Share Prosperity and Mitigate Conflict*

There are four major elements of soft power; traditional diplomacy, humanitarian diplomacy, international activism and economic clout, all of which constitute a major leverage in states craftsmanship (Ping et al). Out of all four constituents of soft power, humanitarian diplomacy has arguably received the least amount of academic attention and policy discourse, making it largely unnoticed to the public and policymakers alike. This is in stark contrast to the growing interest and usage of the term among humanitarian practitioners and researchers since the early 2000s (Turunen, 2020). Humanitarian diplomacy involves the complexities of addressing humanitarian needs, setting it apart from other forms of diplomacy (De Lauri et al). In the realm



of government and political science, humanitarian governance refers to the increasingly organized and international efforts to save lives, resolve conflict, improve welfare, and restore normal livelihood among the world's most vulnerable populations (Barnett, 2013).

The state is a crucial actor and stakeholder in the humanitarian sector, legally responsible for ensuring the protection and welfare of people in crisis, whether within their own borders or in other countries, as stipulated under the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle (Mohd Hedzir & Noraini, 2021). In practice, states play various roles during humanitarian crises: they act as aid financiers and donors, service providers, aid recipients, partners to humanitarian organizations, and sometimes as conflict parties, obstacles to humanitarian access, and violators of international humanitarian and human rights law (McCarthy, Metcalfe-Hough & Willitts-King, 2016). Within Southeast Asian context, there has been a strong linkage between humanitarian imperatives and post-conflict rebuilding efforts. Global and regional donors, including Malaysia shared national resources and capacity building to reverse post-conflict devastation and foster regional friendship (source: open media interview with Malaysian Ambassador to Timor Leste, dated 30<sup>th</sup> October 2023 and the researcher's google meet interview with Malaysian High Commissioner to Namibia dated 16<sup>th</sup> October 2023).

State involvement in international humanitarian action, though less prominent than development aid, is deeply connected to global, regional, and national politics (Ticktin, 2014; Turunen, 2020). Numerous innovative measures have been implemented to address the root causes of communal and ethnic conflicts and to develop strategies for containing them (Ibid). These measures include normative instruments to clarify minority rights, procedures such as fact-finding missions, goodwill missions, election monitoring, and on-site human rights monitoring. Additionally, verification missions and the deployment of peacekeeping troops have been utilized to prevent crises from escalating into violent clashes that threaten regional stability (Mindanao Monograph, 2010; Asry & Asmady, 2020). New forums have been established to address ethnic and minority disputes. Positions within multilateral and minilateral platforms like lead negotiator, non-military peace facilitator (who were experts in de-escalation diplomacy), and various special representatives appointed or supplied by donor states have been commissioned to help prevent further escalation and resolve regional conflicts (Shahrin, 2015).

Additionally, humanitarian efforts encounter several challenges, including regional competition among donor entities, ethno-religious diversity that complicates de-escalation diplomacy and long history of conflict, particularly evident in areas like the southern Philippines (Jawhar & Sariburaja 2016; na Thalang, 2017). Other major challenges include fluctuating support from beneficiary government, the shifting alliances within belligerent forces of conflict, and the changing dynamics that shape the relationship between humanitarian action and other forms of support, such as developmental assistance, peacekeeping, and stabilization operations (Shahrin, 2015; Jawhar & Sariburaja 2016). To address these challenges, there are cooperative arrangements with regional and international organizations for burden-sharing in diplomacy and expenditures, as well as instruments to promote reconciliatory measures following conflicts (Ibid).

A state's participation in humanitarian action is often driven by its desire to achieve or promote its national interests in relation to other states (Bogatyreva, 2022). Furthermore, a state's self-perception within the changing global or regional order greatly influences its aid decisions and practices (Sezgin & Dijkzeul, 2016). Recent academic and policy discussions





regarding the emergence of developing countries in the international arena and their role in international humanitarian action have generally been negative (McCarthy, Metcalfe-Hough, & Willitts-King, 2016). These analyses often highlight the differences between states, with little attention paid to the similarities in how they engage in humanitarian action abroad and the implications for international and nongovernmental humanitarian organizations (ibid).

However, despite variations over time and across different crises, there is a fundamental commonality among all states involved in humanitarian action: the influence of their foreign policy agenda on their international humanitarian strategies, policies, and decisions (McCarthy, Metcalfe-Hough & Willitts-King, 2016). Despite their longstanding commitments to humanitarian law and principles, it is evident that foreign policy considerations—such as national security, economic interests, trade, and the desire for regional and global influence—play a critical role in shaping a state's international humanitarian aid priorities, objectives, and approaches (ibid). While the relationship between a state's foreign policy and its humanitarian actions is not a new topic of debate, recent developments underscore the growing complexity of this relationship.

This is especially true in light of dynamic changes in the global and regional order and evolving threats to global, regional, and national security (Jawhar & Sariburaja 2016; Sezgin & Dijkzeul, 2016). This complexity can be seen as a conflict between interest-based and values-based decision-making, highlighting the tension between a state's national interests and its international legal and sometimes moral obligations (Ibid). This conflict is evident in the tensions between states' commitments to international humanitarian law and the pursuit of national security and economic goals. This growing complexity presents both opportunities and challenges for humanitarian organizations seeking financial, political, or diplomatic support from states to achieve their humanitarian objectives. A deeper understanding of this relationship is crucial for humanitarians to navigate the significant challenges and leverage the opportunities associated with state engagement in humanitarian action, including in regional context (de Coning, 2015; Jawhar & Sariburaja 2016).

Consequently, in the case of Malaysia, the interplay between foreign policy and humanitarian action is particularly pronounced, as seen from the subsequent case studies presented. Kuala Lumpur's humanitarian engagement has been consistently shaped by a balanced calculations of domestic considerations and international activism that seeks to solidify Malaysia's profile as a trusted peace broker and a benign communitarian state actor who always prefer peaceful conflict resolution over divisive political egoism.

#### *Defining Sovereign Humanitarianism*

Under this paper, sovereign humanitarianism is defined as the practice of statecraft by which states frame, control, and deliver humanitarian action in ways that reflect and reinforce their sovereignty, international survival and foreign policy priorities rather than purely neutral, needs-based humanitarian principles. It emphasizes state authority, political interests, and non-interference even as states provide relief or engage in humanitarian diplomacy. Within trans-continental multilateral setting, the United Nations as a 'world government' and most influential multilateral institution has played an active role in elevating the concept of 'sovereign humanitarianism' via the doctrine of 'responsibility to protect' (R2P) which Malaysia, along with other superpowers and middle powers contributed immensely via mobilization of humanitarian and military resources (Mohd Hasim, 2023).



Within a more nuanced regional and minilateral context such as ASEAN and MAPHILINDO, sovereign humanitarianism can be useful in illuminating how carefully pre-meditated humanitarian activities become extensions of state power whereby aid, protection, and refugee protections are shaped by a state's political calculations, security concerns, and claims to legitimate authority, rather than only by impartial humanitarian needs (McCarthy et al, 2016). Malaysia's regional niche of sovereign humanitarianism is henceforth explored to address the aforementioned research objectives.

### **Findings From Case Studies**

#### *Case Study One: Malaysia's Mix of Peace-Brokering and Sovereign Humanitarianism Through International Monitoring Team (IMT) Leadership in Southern Philippines*

The 2005 Philippine Human Development Report (2005 PHDR) and the Mindanao Monograph report 2010 identified several major historical and contemporary roots of the conflict in Mindanao:

1. The forcible and illegal annexation of the Moro Archipelago to the Philippines under the Treaty of Paris in 1898.
2. Military pacification by the American colonial government.
3. The imposition of confiscatory land laws.
4. The "Filipinozation" of public administration in the Moro Archipelago and the dismantling of traditional political institutions.
5. Central government-financed and induced land settlement and migration from Luzon to the Moro Archipelago.
6. Cultural incursions unfavourable to the Bangsamoros.
7. The Jabitah Massacre in 1968, where Muslim paramilitary recruits were killed by their superiors following a failed attempt to invade Sabah.
8. Atrocities committed by Ilaga (Christian vigilante groups) and Philippine military forces between 1970 and 1972.
9. Central government neglect and inaction regarding Bangsamoro protests and grievances.

The Philippine National Government's land redistribution policies in the post-war period encouraged settlers from Luzon and the Visayas to move into the fertile, uninhabited lands of Mindanao (Mindanao Monograph Report 2010, p.6). Over the years, these settlements benefitted from various government programs aimed at growth and development. Consequently, the settlers prospered and their areas developed, while the original inhabitants, the Lumads (indigenous peoples) and the Moros (Islamized indigenous peoples), lagged behind and struggled to keep pace with their settler neighbours and the modernizing world. Government-organized resettlement of Christian settlers, at the expense of both Muslim and non-Muslim natives of Mindanao, had a devastating impact on the displaced communities. According to the 2000 census, only 20 percent of Mindanao's eighteen million people were classified as Muslim, while 72 percent were classified as "migrant settlers."



Muslims resented the loss of their lands, including idle, uninhabited lands that were part of their ancestral realm in the Bangsamoro Archipelago. This resentment grew as Muslims witnessed large-scale demographic disruption and the usurpation of vast tracts of prime land by Christian settlers (International Crisis Group, 2016). First, their areas were not prioritized for government projects, making them less productive and offering fewer opportunities to engage with and benefit from the mainstream economy. Second, war and displacement resulting from AFP-MNLF fighting (at its height from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s), AFP-MILF fighting (most intense in the late 1990s to recent years), and intermittent activities of Abu Sayyaf and other extremist groups, further exacerbated poverty and hopelessness in conflict-affected areas.

These longstanding conflicts and instability created a number of negative externalities affecting the state of Sabah, Malaysia which became the epicentre for influx of refugees and asylum-seekers from southern Philippines (Jawhar & Sariburaja 2016; Ayesah, 2019). These negative externalities have prompted trans-boundary demographic and security challenges that require carefully-crafted peace mediation initiative, peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance via International Monitoring Team (IMT) and International Contact Group (ICG). The International Monitoring Team (IMT) was officially deployed in Mindanao on October 10, 2004, with a one-year mandate.

The team consists of 60 members, including four Libyans, 10 Bruneians, and the remaining members from Malaysia. Upon arrival, the team was divided and stationed in five sectors covering conflict areas: Iligan City, General Santos City, Davao City, Zamboanga City, and Cotabato City, which serves as the headquarters. Initially, there was controversy due to the Mayor of Zamboanga City's refusal to allow the IMT headquarters to be established there. The idea originally came from the Philippines government, but the reconnaissance mission by Malaysia in March 2004 planned for the headquarters to be in Cotabato City. Eventually, the Philippines government located an IMT office inside the Armed Forces of the Philippines Southern Command (AFP-South Comm) Headquarters in Zamboanga City.

The following graphic illustrates the evolution of Philippines – Mindanao peace process and the role of the IMT and ICG over the last two decades:

**Figure 1:**  
Illustration of Evolution of Philippines – Mindanao Peace Process

| Third Party Facilitaion   | International Monitoring Team (IMT)   | IMT + International Contact Group (ICG)  |
|---|---|--|
| <p>Malaysia as third-party facilitator (peace broker) between Philippines Government and MNLF.</p> <p>Lasted between 2001 - 2004 with primary epicentre in Kuala Lumpur.</p> <p>PMO served as main secretariat.</p> | <p>Six member countries contributed 60-strong peacekeeping troops stationed in 5 sites. A regional union (EU) contributed funds and expertise.</p> <p>Deployed in 2005 in Cotabato, Iligan, Davao, Zamboanga, Gen Santos.</p> <p>Reports to the CCCH</p> <p>IMT headed by Malaysia, with a Major General and a Brigadier General as Head and Deputy Head of Mission respectively.</p> <p>MILF replaced MNLF as the negotiating party representing Bangsamoro. MNLF remains claimant of the unsuccessful MOA-AD.</p> | <p>ICG established in 2009 comprising of 4 state actors (United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Japan) and four non-state actors (Conciliation Resources (UK), Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (Switzerland), Asia Foundation (USA) and Muhammadiyah (Indonesia).</p> <p>8-member Peace Committee headed by Indonesia reviews the implementation of the 1996 MNLF-GRP Peace Agreement</p> |

Source: Major Shahrin Mohd Nahrawi, Malaysian Armed Forces Staff College, Ministry of Defence, 2015





All IMT members were financially supported by their respective governments, while operational costs, including local travel, accommodation, security, medical facilities, support staff, and other requirements, are covered by the Philippine government. Team members wear their official military uniforms and generally do not carry firearms, although they are permitted to do so if necessary. The IMT was led by Malaysia from its inception on the 10<sup>th</sup> October 2004 until 30<sup>th</sup> June 2022 when the IMT's mandate was not extended by the Philippine government (Benar News, 15<sup>th</sup> July 2022).

One year later, an MILF spokesperson had formally requested the Philippine government to reinstate the IMT operation following the deaths of seven MILF leaders (Philippines Daily Inquirer, 30<sup>th</sup> June 2023). Speaking in a resolution passed earlier in the month, the MILF central committee headed by MILF chair Ahod “Al Haj Murad” Ebrahim, concurrent interim chief minister of the Bangsamoro publicly appealed to President Marcos to allow the IMT back in Mindanao to ensure that the gains of the peace process would be protected from fresh spate of violence.

Revisiting the largely successful initiative, the Mindanao leader noted that deployment of the IMT represented a significant commitment from the governments of Libya, Brunei, and Malaysia. As the leader of IMT for two decades, Malaysian leaders have shown unequivocal support through high-level visits made by Malaysian Deputy Minister Foreign Minister to personally boost the morale of the IMT peacekeepers and negotiators. It remains to be seen whether the Philippines government would entertain the request from MILF leaders or maintain current status quo. But the benefits from the recently-concluded IMT operation are still being remembered by local population in southern Philippines (Julian, Ronnie & Kaalim, 2023). As of 2023, the civilian community in Mindanao relied on their respective vigilant movement to maintain relative peace to make up for the loss of protection that they previously enjoyed under IMT operation (ibid).

*Case Study Two: Malaysia's Reconstruction, Post-Conflict Development and Disaster Risk Reduction in Education Sector in Mindanao: A Small Gesture with Immense Humanitarian Value*

Malaysia's commitment to sovereign humanitarianism and neighbourly assistance has been cemented further through its multifaceted engagements in post-conflict reconstruction and development across various regions, including Mindanao, Philippines and Timor Leste. Much have been academically written pertaining to the Malaysia's conflict mediation and peacekeeping leadership in Mindanao, Philippines. However, there is a little-known side of the Malaysian humanitarian contribution in the Philippines. For example, on 10<sup>th</sup> April 2014, MERCY Malaysia (an international welfare and humanitarian NGO) in collaboration with Maybank Foundation reconstructed the Nasunogan Elementary School in Ormoc City, Leyte, Philippines. The school was previously damaged during Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) that hit the country on 8<sup>th</sup> November 2013, rendering the entire school building unusable.

The damaged school was reconstructed at a total cost of 4,518,651.50 Philippines Pesos (377,442.96 Malaysian Ringgit) and the works were completed on 28<sup>th</sup> November 2014, seven months after the project commenced. The official handover ceremony took place on 12<sup>th</sup> May 2015, whereby Malaysia was represented by Ambassador (H.E) Dato' Mohd Zamri Mohd Kassim along with the Honorable Secretary of MERCY Malaysia, (YM) Raja Riza Shazmin and Maybank Foundation's Board of Trustee, Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2015). The Nasunogan elementary school is the only learning institution that served the area. Majority of the school's 246 students (from kindergarten to



grade 6) came from low-income families who depended on rice-farming as their main source of livelihood (Sunstar Philippines 21<sup>st</sup> May 2015).

It is also noteworthy that the Malaysian humanitarian donors not only rebuilt the school. The donors even improved the overall building design and facility by installing generators to supplement the supply of electricity (which were often interrupted due to problems from main supply grid). Moreover, the newly built building was sturdier, thus abler to withstand rough weathers and minor earthquakes compared to the school's old building. Mercy Malaysia President Dato' Dr. Ahmad Daizal Mohd Perdaus who was present during the official handover ceremony told the media that the new school building can now serves dual purpose. The new building can function not only as a place for education, but moreover it can also function as a temporary evacuation centre during a local disaster. The new building has the capacity to accommodate and protect the people of the village, similar to Malaysian schools which were frequently used as temporary evacuation centres during flood seasons (Source: Berita Harian, Cebu Daily News, MERCY Malaysia, Sunstar Philippines and Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs official website).

Thus, not only the Malaysia's Maybank-sponsored project had reconstructed a damaged school, it has an added dimension of disaster risk reduction which may had not been present during the time when the old building was still in use (ibid). Consequently, although this project may appear small in terms of numbers and material dimensions, the lasting goodwill and impression left within the community may resonate far across generations and geographical borders. This project, combined with Malaysia's IMT leadership during conflict de-escalation and development assistance in Mindanao arguably solidified Malaysia's profile as a potent, responsible and benign actor of sovereign humanitarianism and a helpful neighbour.

Through small but meaningful assistance in infrastructure rehabilitation, economic revitalization, disaster risk reduction and capacity-building initiatives, Malaysia has contributed to the reconstruction efforts in conflict-affected regions, laying the groundwork for social rejuvenation and resilience.

The reconstruction of Nasunogan Elementary School address fundamental humanitarian needs, such as education and healthcare, in communities affected by disasters and conflict. These initiatives contribute to the protection and promotion of human rights, particularly the right to education and shelter for vulnerable populations. Through this humanitarian gesture, Malaysia empowers communities to rebuild and thrive in the aftermath of crises. The confluence of humanitarian assistance and risk reduction acted as the glue between different actors operating in humanitarian and fragile contexts, bridging the gap between immediate needs and long-term resilience-building. These initiatives not only provide immediate relief but also support long-term resilience and sustainable development, enabling communities to break the cycle of poverty and dependency. Malaysia's engagement in humanitarian efforts upholds the principles of humanity and compassion, fostering a sense of unity and cooperation in the international community especially within regional context.

In summary, the humanitarian initiatives undertaken by Malaysia, including the reconstruction of Nasunogan Elementary School and other projects, carry significant diplomatic and humanitarian significance. These initiatives not only address immediate humanitarian needs but also strengthen Malaysia's diplomatic relations, promote regional stability and



development, and solidify its profile as a responsible actor of sovereign humanitarianism on the global stage.

*Case Study Three: Malaysia's Humanitarian-Driven Diplomatic and Security Assistance During the Tumultuous Transition of Timor Leste from an Indonesian Territory into an Independent, Sovereign State with Full UN Membership*

Timor Leste is one of the lesser-known state actor whose seemingly obscure pre-modern history and subsequent post-colonization struggles are under-studied and under-documented. Thus, this thesis should constitute a potent contribution in addressing this lacuna by exploring the dimension of sovereign humanitarianism that Malaysia as a state actor has played in the course of assisting Timor Leste. Being a colony of Portuguese for over four centuries (1515 – 1975), Portuguese left a profound influence 'homogenizing' the language, religion, education and culture of Timor Leste's diverse ethnicity (Kingsbury, 2010). By the end of Portuguese colonization, most of Timor Leste's population had already embraced Christianity, spoke Portuguese and used Portuguese-derived names for their indigenous persons.

The long history of Portuguese colonization in Timor Leste gave the country its pioneering territorial reach, an official language, broadly common religion and elements of institutional organizations which formed the basis of modern governance. Months after Portuguese withdrawal, the Indonesian army invaded Timor Leste and occupied the country for 27 years before acceding to the outcome of Timor Leste independence referendum.

Indonesia's short governing period underlined by a rather suppressive handling of dissidents overtime ignited and expedited the process of self-determination and the desire to seek independence as a sovereign nation amongst Timor Leste's population (Wan Shawaluddin, & Ramli & Diana 2018). Timor Leste's independence referendum was largely brokered by state actors which also provided peacekeeping troops to quell the violence that erupted following Indonesia's military suppression of dissidents and subsequent withdrawal. Malaysia was one of the leading state actor that acted as a primary facilitator in Timor Leste's quest for independence and peace.

In Timor-Leste, Malaysia played an active role in various phases of peacekeeping efforts, including International Force East Timor (INTERFET) September 1999-February 2000, United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) June 1999-May 2002, United Nations Mission of Support in East Timor (UNMISSET) May 2002-May 2005, and United Nations Integrated Mission in East Timor UNMIT (2005-2012). INTERFET, tasked with restoring peace and security in Timor-Leste after the unrest caused by pro-Indonesian militia, was predominantly led by Australia, with a significant contingent of 5,000 personnel out of the total 11,000. Given the strained relations between Malaysia and Timor-Leste at the time and the Australian leadership of INTERFET, Malaysia's involvement was limited to the dispatch of 30 translators to support the mission. INTERFET was then taken over by UNTAET (United Nations Transitional Administration for East Timor) with a mandate passed on October 25, 2002, Resolution 1272.

A combination of legal and political assistance to Timor-Leste plus humanitarian assistance to the new country's citizens were necessary because the pre-independence civil war had wiped out majority of Timor-Leste's infrastructure and displaced original population to neighbouring regions, mainly West Timor. As of 2015, Timor Leste was still a major recipient of foreign aid from donor countries, half of the population were illiterate and many were unemployed, infrastructure was still poor with strife and civil war still plaguing the country.



On 13th April 2001, the Malaysian government sent a liaison officer (LO) who later became Malaysian chargé d'affaires to Timor-Leste. Timor Leste at that time was still a dependent territory seeking independence from Indonesia.

Timor-Leste gained independence on May 20, 2002 following an international referendum held by United Nations with permission from the Indonesian Government. As a fledgling nation, Timor-Leste faces numerous internal challenges following its independence from Indonesia in 2002. Like many newly established states emerging from independence struggles, Timor-Leste grappled with common issues such as fiscal constraints, the need to develop of a robust and self-sustaining economy, long pursuit of comprehensive education across all levels to equip future generations for socioeconomic demands, challenges in safeguarding natural resources, and maintaining a capable defense force. The pervasive poverty, combined with nascent defense capabilities and fragile governmental institutions rendered Timor-Leste particularly exposed and vulnerable.

Emergent nations like Timor-Leste often require assistance and mentorship from countries with comparable historical trajectories to aid in their journey toward stability. Malaysia has emerged as one of the foremost regional contributors, extending developmental support to Timor-Leste from the early stages of its nation-building process. Prime Minister Mahathir was the first head of state to visit Timor Leste after its independence. Malaysia assisted the whole process of independence-brokering, diplomatic recognition for the new country. Mahathir's official visit to Dili on 23 October 2003 also included some of Malaysia's senior ministers at that time, such as Najib Razak (Defense Minister), Syed Hamid Albar (Foreign Minister), Rafidah Aziz (International Trade Minister) S. Samy Velu (Transport Minister), Lim Keng Yeik (Principal Basic Commodity Minister), Koh Tsu Koon (Chief Minister of Penang) and some 50 Malaysian business leaders (Hassan, et al).

During the 2003 visit, Mahathir donated 32 brand new "Handalan" brand army trucks and other military equipment to strengthen Timor-Leste's defence. At the end of UN's Peacekeeping in Timor Lester on PDRM donated 29 multi-purpose vehicles valued at RM3.5 million to the Timor- Leste at a ceremony held at the Malaysian Embassy in Dili on 7 November 2012 (Wisma Putra, 2015). Malaysia contributed USD2.56 million as part of its efforts to assist Timor-Leste in developing its defense forces. As of 2006, there were 333 Malaysian military personnel and a compliment of police force being deployed, operating closely with the defence and security forces from Australia, New Zealand and Portugal (Statement of Malaysian Permanent Rep to UNSC, 13th June 2006).

According to Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's initiatives aimed at facilitating the development of Timor-Leste encompass the Malaysian Technical Cooperation Program (MTCP) and the Malaysia Defence Cooperation Program (MDCP). These endeavours epitomize Malaysia's commitment to aiding Timor-Leste in advancing its nation-building efforts and cultivating proficient officials capable of overseeing national affairs and administration, thereby fostering structured and systematic institutions. From 2000 to 2013, the Malaysian Technical Cooperation Program has imparted training to 399 officers across various domains, including public administration, conflict resolution, diplomacy, law enforcement, airport management, microfinance, infrastructure management, agriculture, community healthcare, and penitentiary administration (Wan Shawaluddin, & Ramli & Diana, 2018).





Additionally, Malaysia, in collaboration with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and third-party funding, has provided technical expertise in agriculture, procurement, microeconomics, and statistics (Hussein, 2012). These supportive measures, facilitated through the MTCP and MDCP, have been in effect since the nascent stages of Timor-Leste's independence in 2001. A total of 43 officers from the Timor-Leste Armed Forces have attended the Malaysian Defence Cooperation Programme (MDCP). Courses that have been offered included Ship Diver's 3 courses; Language training; Law of Armed Conflicts; Joint Warfare and UN Military Observers. Malaysian assistance to Timor Leste in the aspect of security, political diplomacy, peacebuilding and professional training has helped the country create a relatively conducive environment for pursuit of development in economy, trade and education (Source: open access media interview with Malaysian Ambassador to Timor Leste dated 30<sup>th</sup> October 2023).

Additionally, the Ministry of Education collaborated with academic faculty from University Kebangsaan Malaysia, University of Malaya, Universiti Utara Malaysia, National Defense University of Malaysia and Universiti Malaysia Sabah in providing syllabuses and curriculum to support the establishment of the Timor-Leste Institute of Diplomatic Studies in 2013. The importance of diplomacy and international assistance in Timor Leste's post-conflict and post-independence reconstruction efforts was underscored during a recent interview with Malaysian ambassador to Timor Leste, Mr Amarjit Singh Sarjit Singh on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2024. During this media interview, the Malaysian ambassador reiterated the importance of training and institutional capacity building amongst Timor Leste's civil service members to improve literacy in governance, international negotiations and political economy in the open market.

Such an insight is an apt contribution from the point of view of sovereign humanitarianism and Wilsonianism, both of which share parallel idealism with the 'prosper thy neighbour' doctrine that underscores Malaysian foreign policy. These recommendations went far beyond mere suggestions when Malaysia executed bilateral 'human capital diplomacy' to an estimate of 630 Timorese officials under the Malaysian Technical Cooperation Program (MTCP). All MTCP courses were conducted in Malaysia under various institutions including Malaysian Institute of Public Sector Administration (INTAN) and Malaysian Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR). The Malaysian government under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is currently looking at conducting MTCP courses in Timor Leste to expand the base and increase the participation numbers among Timor Leste officials.

Such human capital diplomacy is a form of empowerment and capacity building that emphasizes 'soft-landing approach' for gradual shift towards self-sufficiency. This is a critical enabler for Timor Leste to move away from extended dependency on humanitarian aid and post-conflict development assistance, similar to what was about to be done unto the people of Afghanistan by Malaysian humanitarian diplomacy. Timor Leste still has a long way to go to achieve full self-sufficiency after a mere 22 years of independence and Malaysia's sovereign humanitarianism remains a major contributor towards this objective for many more years to come.

### **Summarizing the Motivations and Outcomes from Malaysia's Sovereign Humanitarianism in Mindanao versus Timor Leste**

Malaysia's sovereign humanitarianism in Mindanao is driven primarily by balanced considerations of national and regional security, religious solidarity, and long-term reputational enhancements from mediation performances. In Mindanao, Malaysia's humanitarian posture





is strongly shaped by security and communal ties that are underpinned by concerns about cross-border spillover, protection of Muslim minorities and marginal populations.

Whereas Malaysia's humanitarian imperatives in Timor Leste seems to be driven largely by pre-emptive de-escalation to prevent the worsening of the armed secession into a regional crisis similar in scale to the Mindanao crisis. Consequently, Malaysia's engagement with Timor Leste is strategically oriented towards regional diplomacy and institutional integration, using assistance and training to support Dili's ASEAN trajectory and to strengthen bilateral ties as a core element of regional integration (Kingsbury. 2010; Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 24<sup>th</sup> September 2025).

Remarkably, the doctrine of 'peace and security building through voluntary disarmaments and re-integration' emerged as common denominators that characterized Malaysia's sovereign humanitarian activism in both Mindanao Timor Leste. Malaysia's adaptive approaches in Mindanao and Timor Leste illustrate how sovereign humanitarianism must be versatile and context specific, shaped by a mix of security imperatives, identity politics, while accommodating both national and regional diplomatic ambitions. In Mindanao the emphasis on mediation, discreet relief, and protection of Muslim communities reflects an urgency to manage cross border risks and preserve regional stability (Mindanao Monograph, 2010; Jawhar & Sariburaja, 2016).

In Timor Leste the focus on training, institution building, and ASEAN integration reflects a preventive, state to state strategy designed to reduce the likelihood of escalation and to embed Dili within regional norms. Malaysia's experience shows that sovereign humanitarianism can be a force for constructive regional engagement when state activism is paired with principled safeguards, transparent partnerships, and a clear commitment to needs based assistance; conversely, without those safeguards, humanitarian action risks becoming an instrument of narrow political objectives rather than a vehicle for impartial protection and durable peace.

#### *Lessons from Regional Humanitarian Diplomacy and Activism Part 1: The Humanitarian Imperatives Back Home to address Regional Imbalances*

Despite favourable international opinion and legal justification, the author opines herein that Malaysia actually took a major risk in assisting Timor Leste's independence and nationhood. Malaysia itself has a dormant territorial challenge onto the state of Sabah which became recently active when the self-proclaimed heirs of Sulu claimed ownership to the state and demanded USD 14.9 billion compensation purported to be owed by the Malaysian government to them (Law Minister, Azalina Othman Said via Nikkei Asia, 29<sup>th</sup> February 2024). Although Malaysia has so far managed to fend off the claim with legal refutation and carefully crafted sovereign diplomacy, the risk of losing Sabah remains small but real and present.

Intuitively, Malaysia's involvement in 'carving out' an Indonesian territory to become an independent nation, although perfectly legal under international and humanitarian law, could actually incur future territorial losses out of Malaysia's own territory. Malaysia could potentially lose the state of Sabah the same way Indonesia lost Timor Leste, should any powerful foreign actor decide in the future to 'aid' Sabah to separate from Malaysia on grounds of sheer discontent and breach of Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63). As of today, there is a groundswell of discontent among Sabah natives and Malaysian citizens in Sabah stemming from unfulfilled rights and promises made to Sabah under MA63 and federal constitution (Muzafar Shah, Dayang-Affizzah, Chin, 2012; Mohammad Azziyadi & Mohammad Agus, 2022).



To add insult to injury, Sabah (as well as Sarawak) are major contributors of oil, gas and other natural resources to the federal coffers, yet both states have long received disproportionately little in return for those contributions. This structural imbalance is not merely a matter of perception as it obviously translates into tangible regional disparities in infrastructure, public services, and human capital investment across large swathes of East Malaysia, reinforcing patterns of underdevelopment and economic dependency. The sense of grievance has been amplified by scholarly and journalistic accounts documenting gaps in revenue sharing and development spending (Muzafar Shah, Dayang-Affizzah, Chin, 2012; Noor Serihamsa & Lai, Noor Aziah, 2021), and it has hardened into political discontent among indigenous communities who see resource extraction benefit the core regions far more than local populations.

This sentiment is solidified more profoundly following the 109-page judgment handed down by the Kota Kinabalu High Court on 7 November 2025; a landmark ruling that publicly exposed the Federal Government's failure to honour the 40% Special Grant entitlement under the Malaysia Agreement 1963. The cumulative legal, political and social discourses crystallised these long-standing complaints into a legal and moral reckoning. The recent high court ruling did more than recount broken promises: it provided judicial validation of East Malaysian claims, legitimised demands for restitution, and shifted the debate from the realm of rhetoric to enforceable obligations. The decision therefore raises urgent questions about fiscal justice, constitutional fidelity, and the mechanisms through which the federation fulfils its fiduciary duties to Sabah and Sarawak.

If anything, the high court ruling further highlights perennial issues and factors that constrained east Malaysia's development for over six decades. Among others, centralised fiscal control, political dependence, and limited institutional capacity have altogether prevented Sabah from reaping the full benefits of its oil, gas, and forestry resources (Lee & Connie, 2025). Ongoing poverty, uneven regional development, and inadequate infrastructure underscore the state's marginalisation within Malaysia's federal system. Breaking this cycle requires reforms that strengthen state fiscal autonomy, improve transparency, and promote economic diversification away from extractive sectors. Only by pursuing inclusive governance and sustainable development strategies can Sabah convert its natural endowments into durable socioeconomic gains and escape the resource curse that has shaped its trajectory for decades.

The socioeconomic consequences of continued shortfalls are profound. Chronic underinvestment exacerbates rural poverty, constrains education and health outcomes, and increases the cost of doing business in geographically dispersed communities all of which depress long-term growth prospects and fuel out-migration of skilled workers (Rongen, et al). Politically, perceived breaches of MA63 obligations erode trust in federal institutions, strengthen regionalist narratives, and risk destabilising the very national cohesion that the Agreement was designed to secure. Internationally, failure to address these grievances undermines Malaysia's credibility as a state that honours its founding compact and its commitments to equitable development.

Addressing this legacy requires a multi-pronged response: transparent accounting of resource revenues and transfers; legally binding mechanisms to operationalise the 40% entitlement and other MA63 guarantees; targeted, ring-fenced investments in connectivity, health, and education; and meaningful devolution of administrative authority so that Sabah and Sarawak can exercise greater control over local development priorities. Equally important are independent monitoring and public reporting to rebuild trust, and participatory processes that



centre indigenous voices in decisions affecting land, resources, and livelihoods. Only by translating judicial findings and moral claims into concrete fiscal and institutional reforms can the federation repair the material injustices that have long fuelled East–West disparities and restore the legitimacy of the Malaysia Agreement 1963.

Thus, while Malaysia has been largely regarded as a responsible humanitarian actor with memorable humanitarian assistances at global and regional context, there remains a domestic pressure to tread carefully with issues of socioeconomic imbalances and regional marginalization between East Malaysia and West Malaysia. Such issues of regional marginalization and general apathy against the plight of East Malaysia has been perpetuating dissatisfaction among significant portion within the natives of Sabah and the neighbouring state of Sarawak (Mazlianie & Shad, 2023).

Resource governance and revenue sharing remain central fiduciary issues. East Malaysia supplies significant natural resources, yet local value capture and fair revenue allocation have historically lagged (Mohammad Azziyadi & Mohammad Agus, 2022). Fiduciary obligations under MA63 imply a duty to ensure that resource rents translate into sustained local development, not merely central coffers. Unfortunately, unequal development undermines the MA63 promise of equitable federation. MA63 envisaged special safeguards and fiscal arrangements for Sabah and Sarawak to protect native interests and ensure parity of development. Persistent gaps in infrastructure, human capital, and public services signal a shortfall in meeting those fiduciary commitments and fuel legitimate grievances (Abdul Karim Rahman Hamzah, Sarawak State Minister for Arts & Culture via Free Malaysia Today, 10<sup>th</sup> June 2019).

Thus, there is a critical need for the Malaysian government to amplify the level of compassion, commitment, investment and capacity building for East Malaysian territories in order to preserve Malaysia's territorial integrity and protect Malaysia's international profile as a responsible sovereign nation. Such critical need is accentuated further by the ever-growing concern over traditional and non-traditional security threats against Sabah's contentious survival and elusive prosperity within Malaysian Federation (Lai, 2015; Jawhar & Sariburaja 2016; Ramli, Wan Shawaluddin, Diana, Zaini, 2016; Noor Serihamsa & Lai, 2021; Mazlianie & Shad, 2023). Armed incursions, kidnapping for ransom, trans-boundary crimes and trafficking of contrabands and persons may have been brought under control, but the security forces remain on high alert to fend off any future threats in Sabah (Jawhar & Sariburaja, 2016; The Malay Mail, 8<sup>th</sup> December 2023).

#### *Lessons from Regional Humanitarian Diplomacy and Activism Part 2: Addressing the Deeply Marginalized, Misunderstood Stateless Community in East Malaysia*

Security challenges remain a top concern in East Malaysia, along with issues of regional imbalances caused largely by under-funded infrastructure, under-invested development and mostly unequal fiscal and resource distribution (New Straits Times, 2021; Free Malaysia Today, 27<sup>th</sup> September 2023; Mazlianie & Shad, 2023; Mohammad Azziyadi & Mohammad Agus, 2022). Additionally, Sabah has been perennially plagued by controversial handling of an uncertain number of stateless Bajau community, estimated in the thousands, with huge variations depending on who made the estimate. These stateless Bajaus frequently suffered rough treatment from federal and state authorities (Wan Shawaluddin & Diana 2020) and their homes were regularly razed to the ground for being 'illegal settlements' (Oh My Media, 4<sup>th</sup> April 2020; Malaysian Broadcast Department, 8<sup>th</sup> June 2024).



Beyond episodic enforcement actions, the stateless Bajau face entrenched structural neglect that systematically limits their access to basic rights and services. Lacking recognized legal status, many are excluded from civil registration, formal employment, public healthcare, and state schooling, which forces families into precarious informal economies and heightens vulnerability to exploitation. Geographic isolation compounds these barriers: remote settlements receive fewer public investments in roads, sanitation, and electricity, so the material conditions of stateless communities deteriorate in ways that are invisible to policymakers and the wider public. Over time this produces intergenerational disadvantage as more children born into stateless households confront lifelong obstacles to education, legal identity, and social mobility, perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalisation. Their livelihoods are routinely and adversely affected by security measures imposed unto them, compounding their hardships (Wan Shawaluddin & Diana, 2020). Their plights are further aggravated by xenophobic sentiment amongst a sizable portion of local citizens in Sabah who could not differentiate the stateless community from illegal immigrants, thus viewing them with a very inhumane and condescending outlook (ibid).

The indelible presence and intricate issue of the stateless community add another catalyst into the already complicated need for prompt policy response and immediate, tangible resolution by state and federal government (Jawhar & Sariburaja 2016). The most unfortunate thing is, the stateless Bajaus are frequently painted as troublemakers with huge propensity to commit crimes despite no evidence and no empirical data whatsoever to support such negative stereotypes (Wan Shawaluddin & Diana, 2020). Thus, there is a need to end the ostracization, xenophobia and eliminate all forms of dehumanization levelled against the stateless community in East Malaysian region, who are mostly Bajau. The author postulates herein that the issue of stateless community in Sabah requires carefully crafted solution that emphasizes a moderate path between lax naturalization versus outright denial of legal documentation and non-conferment of basic rights.

In the face of the multitude of challenges afflicting East Malaysia, the Malaysian leaders and policy makers within the federal government and law-making bodies retain fiduciary duties to conform to their legal and constitutional obligation to rectify all socioeconomic imbalances and security concerns within East Malaysia (Mazlianie & Shad, 2023). Although the situation here is relatively peaceful and much better compared to Timor Leste's experience under Indonesian occupation two decades ago, the growing dissatisfaction amongst diverse strata of East Malaysian society cannot be ignored indefinitely. Consequently, a set of prompts, coherent policy response coupled with tangible and impactful corrective measures should be urgently instituted and executed. Such action is urgently needed in order to eliminate all socioeconomic imbalances and security concerns that could snowball into a potent political force that may pose real existential threats to the Malaysian Federation in its current political form.

Conceivably, some combination of permanent and equitable national budget recalibration, accelerated legal and administrative empowerment, frequent state-federal engagements via joint policy committees and technical working groups, civil society empowerment plus a plethora of other formal and semi-formal initiatives should be promptly deliberated and implemented to address the long list of overdue commitment for East Malaysian states. Otherwise, failure to heed these recommendations may result in Sabah (and possibly Sarawak) to follow the footsteps of Singapore and Timor Leste, both of which were eventually forced to separate and become independent due to lack of empathy from and chemistry within their former sovereign nations.



## CONCLUSION

Despite tumultuous history of regional rivalries and existential threats coming from Malaysia's two traditional neighbours, such insalubrious experience did not hinder Malaysia from extending a great deal of assistances and support to both neighbouring countries, either in bilateral, sovereign capacity or as a member of multilateral cooperation. These gestures of friendship and sharing of prosperity are underpinned by the concept of sovereign humanitarianism. This concept combines values of progressive statescraftmanship attributed as 'Wilsonianism' which believed that collective security, open diplomacy, liberal internationalism and states-led humanitarian collaborations are important manoeuvres to promote global and regional prosperity. Additionally, it should be noted that Malaysia's case of regional humanitarian activism uniquely blends national interests and international humanitarian imperatives in a relative balance.

Incorporating both state agencies (mainly the military and the diplomatic fraternity) and non-state actors (corporate donors), Malaysian international humanitarianism follows the trend of global humanitarianism that serves both as a political leverage and international soft power to complement the lack of 'hard power' for such an emerging middle power state. This form of statecraft has a strong appeal in the long run, both as a tool to further national interest, to benefit humanity and to add voice in counter-narrating islamophobia. These premises merit further debate for current and future researchers in cross-discipline analysis that may include but not limited to international relations, political science, ethology, humanitarianism and social science.

Additionally, there exists an urgent need to apply such an adept humanitarian activism back home and to augment domestic policies that seek to correct regional imbalance between East and West Malaysia. A set of domestic imperatives in East Malaysia that requires immediate attention and tangible responses should be instituted urgently from fiscal and socioeconomic remedies to address structural intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic imbalances among rural and stateless communities. Malaysia must uphold its local and international obligation both as an international humanitarian player and as a sovereign nation entrusted to govern both sides of the nation's territories with equal emphasis and commensurate priorities.

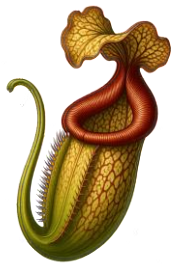
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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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