

AN ANALYSIS OF THE SPRATLY ISLANDS DISPUTE FROM A NEOCLASSICAL REALIST PERSPECTIVE DURING THE PRIME MINISTER NAJIB BIN RAZAK ERA (2009-2018) IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract: This study discusses the dispute over the overlapping claims on the Spratly islands during the administration of Najib Razak's 2009-2018. The island is claimed by six countries including Malaysia. Malaysia has put its official claim since 1979 with issuance of Peta Baharu (the New Map). Since then, Malaysia has continued to strengthen its claim over the area. Malaysia has used a range of strategic moves to strengthen its position in the Spratly Islands in the face of conflicting claims. Engaging diplomatically with regional and international parties to gain support for its territorial claims has been one noteworthy tactic. In addition, Malaysia has worked to strengthen its de facto authority over these areas by fortifying its presence on important features through marine patrols and infrastructure development. But there have been a number of issues involving China and the United States of America in the area. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to provide light on Malaysia's strategy, particularly during the Najib Razak administration. It is critical to comprehend how Malaysia manages the situation by pursuing its national interest in the region while simultaneously keeping positive relationships with China and the United States of America. In doing so, the neo-classical realism perspective is employed to better explain the dynamics of Malaysia's approach during Najib's era visa-vis balancing its ties with China and the United States, without sacrificing its interest in claiming the Spratly islands.

Keywords: *Spratly, Neo-Classical Realism, Najib Razak*

INTRODUCTION

The issue of territorial disputes in the South China Sea (SCS) has the potential to erupt into a more significant battle, involving the United States, primarily interested in preserving freedom of passage in the SCS. Malaysia first staked its claim to the Spratly Islands in 1979. Several other countries, including China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, and Taiwan, have also staked claims to the Spratlys since then. The area is strategically located and thought to be abundant in valuable natural resources, making it valuable for both military and economic purposes. Tensions and incidents have arisen because of overlapping claims, and diplomatic efforts to resolve the dispute have failed. International organizations and major powers are actively engaged to manage and resolve the issue, but so far, no conclusive resolution has been reached (Rizal and Rafiq, 2014). While Prime Minister Najib Razak was in office, commerce, tourism, investment, and other fields greatly benefited from the close connections established between Malaysia and China. However, tensions between the two countries had arisen over territorial disputes in the SCS involving the disputed Spratly Islands. Despite these obstacles, factors such as economic interdependence and diplomatic approaches have helped to ease tensions in Malaysia and China's relationship. This paper applies the neoclassical realism framework to analyze how these strategies have helped to reduce tension and discuss the progress in the Spratly Islands dispute during the Prime Minister Najib bin Razak administration.

The Spratly Islands dispute is a highly complex issue due to the multiple countries involved and their competing claims to the islands and surrounding waters. The nine-dash line is a U-shaped line seen on South China Sea (SCS) maps that China uses to claim sovereignty over the Spratly Islands. The Republic of China (ROC), which controlled mainland China until 1949, initially drew the line on a map in 1947. When the PRC took control, it inherited the ROC's claim.

The issue of the nine-dash line intersects with numerous other nations' claims, including Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam. These countries have all accused China of infringing on their sovereignty by constructing artificial islands and military bases in the South China Sea. The nine-dash line issue is a prominent source of tension in the South China Sea. The Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) found in 2016 that China's claims to the Spratly Islands were unconstitutional. However, China has refused to recognize the verdict and has increased its military presence in the region. The nine-dash line disagreement is a complicated problem with no simple solution (Jalil, et al., 2022). The nations concerned have various historical claims to the Spratly Islands, and there is no clear international law defining who has sovereignty over the islands. The fact that the Spratly Islands are located in a strategically important location with abundant natural resources complicates the conflict even further. The nine-dash line issue poses a significant threat to SCS peace and stability. If their claims are not honored, the countries concerned have all vowed to employ force (Idris and Abdullah, 2022).

MALAYSIA AND THE SPRALTLY ISLANDS ISSUE

Although the bilateral relationship between Malaysia and China has had a positive impact on the development of both countries, especially in the economic sector, the relationship is also often strained due to issues that arise. For example, the issue of territorial overlapping in the Spratly Islands involving Kuala Lumpur and Beijing has to some extent become a challenge for both countries to maintain a harmonious and stable relationship status, especially in the long term. If these issues are not managed well, of course Malaysia's relationship as a

developing country with China, which is the world's economic giant, will be affected. Additionally, if this matter is not addressed by Malaysia through a proactive approach, it will certainly affect Malaysia's opportunity to promote economic cooperation through trade and investment with China at a higher level (Idris and Abdullah, 2022).

This study will analyze the strategy and role taken by Malaysia during the era of Prime Minister Najib Razak's administration, employing the Neo-Classical Realism approach as outlined by Kuik (2012). Neo-Classical Realism provides a framework that combines the insights of classical realism, which emphasizes the influence of human nature and domestic factors on state behavior, with the structural constraints emphasized by neo-realism. This approach is particularly relevant in understanding how Malaysia navigated the complexities of international relations and regional tensions during this period. From the study's problems, the main research question arises: What strategies helped to reduce tension and discuss the progress in the Spratly Islands dispute during Prime Minister Najib Razak's administration? This question aims to uncover the specific diplomatic, economic, and military strategies that Malaysia employed to manage and potentially mitigate the longstanding territorial dispute in the South China Sea, particularly concerning the Spratly Islands.

Under Najib Razak's leadership, Malaysia faced the challenge of balancing its national interests with the need to maintain regional stability and good relations with neighboring countries, including China. The study will explore how Malaysia's foreign policy and strategic decisions were influenced by internal and external factors, such as domestic political considerations, economic dependencies, and the broader geopolitical environment. By examining these strategies, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of Malaysia's approach to the Spratly Islands dispute, highlighting the successes and limitations of Najib Razak's administration in navigating this complex international issue.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Neoclassical realism is a complex theory that sheds light on how governments conduct their foreign policies in the context of contemporary maritime warfare. It can help us explain why states act in specific ways and forecast how they could react to new threats. Some contemporary maritime conflicts are explained here using examples from neoclassical realism. For instance, China's aggressiveness in the South China Sea (SCS) may be understood in light of the country's rising strength and the need to protect China's maritime interests. Nevertheless, the reactions of other governments in the area and the international community limit China's capacity to fulfill its aims. To prevent China from using force to enforce its claims in the SCS, the United States has taken measures to discourage China from doing so. The U.S. is acting to counter China's expanding influence and safeguard American interests. Japan is another example. Due to concerns about China's expanding maritime strength, she has recently been boosting her military budget. Japan has taken these measures to prevent China from employing force against Japan or its friends in the area. When applied to studying state behavior in international relations and modern maritime conflict, neoclassical realism is invaluable. It can help us explain why states act in specific ways and forecast how they could react to new threats.

The goal of neoclassical realism, a school of thought in international relations, is to explain the actions of governments in the realm of foreign policy. It posits that nations are driven by the need to maintain their existence and expand their power but are limited in both endeavors by factors at home and abroad. Neoclassical realism is both a theory of international relations and a method for analyzing foreign policy. Gideon Rose first coined the term in a 1998 *World Politics Review* article. It combines classical realist and neorealist theories, particularly defensive realist theories.

Neoclassical realists contend that the distribution of power in the international system is a significant determinant of state behavior, but that this behavior is also influenced by domestic factors such as political institutions, economic resources, and public opinion. In other words, neoclassical realists believe that states are not merely passive actors in the international system but can influence their destinies by considering the domestic constraints and opportunities they face (Jalil, et al, 2022).

Neoclassical realism has been used to explain various foreign policy behaviors, such as the rise of China, the US invasion of Iraq, and the European Union's response to the Ukrainian crisis. One of the most critical insights of neoclassical realism is that the distribution of power in the international system is not always an accurate predictor of state behavior. The United States, despite being the most powerful nation in the world, has not always acted in a hegemonic manner. Domestic factors, including the public's aversion to war and the separation of powers, have constrained the United States. According to a fundamental insight of neoclassical realism, states are not always rational actors. They may base their decisions on emotion, ideology, or misunderstandings. For example, the U.S. invasion of Iraq was predicated on the false belief that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. Neoclassical realism is an approach to international relations theory that combines realist and liberal perspectives. This makes it a more realistic and nuanced theory than realism or liberalism alone as it applies to a broader spectrum of situations and accurately reflects the world.

One advantage of neoclassical realism is that it is a more realistic approach than realism. Realism posits that states are always motivated by power and security and will always act in their self-interest. However, neoclassical realism acknowledges that domestic factors such as public opinion, ideology, and bureaucratic politics influence states. Therefore, neoclassical realism is a more accurate reflection of the actual world. Additionally, it is more complex than progressivism. Neoclassical realism recognizes that states are also motivated by power and security and will occasionally act in ways that are contrary to the interests of other states. Thus, neoclassical realism is a more nuanced and realistic international relations theory that applies to a wider range of situations. Concerning the essence of the international system, both realism and liberalism are based on assumptions. The premise of realism is that the international system is anarchic, and states are always motivated by power and security. Liberalism presupposes that the international system is becoming increasingly interdependent and that states can cooperate to accomplish shared objectives. However, these assumptions do not hold in every circumstance. Neoclassical realism posits that the international system is a mixture of anarchy and order, and states are motivated by power, security, and domestic factors. This makes neoclassical realism applicable to a broader spectrum of situations (Idris and Abdullah, 2022).

However, it is also deemed to be too intricate. Neoclassical realism is a complex theory that requires an in-depth knowledge of the international system and the domestic politics of the state in question. This can make it challenging to apply the theory to instances. It cannot make accurate predictions (Kuik, 2012). The midrange theory of neoclassical realism does not make precise predictions about state behavior. This is because it acknowledges that the behavior of states is influenced by multiple factors, such as the distribution of power in the international system, the domestic politics of the state, and the personalities of the state's leaders. It is sometimes apparent how to quantify domestic factors influencing state behavior. Neoclassical realism contends that domestic factors that influence state behavior are significant, but how to measure them is only sometimes obvious (Kuik, 2012).

This can make it difficult to verify the theory empirically. Neoclassical realism and hedging are closely related. Neoclassical realism argues that states will hedge when they perceive that the international system is inhospitable or when they face multiple threats. Hedging allows states to avoid making commitments that could lead to conflict and to preserve their options if the situation changes. Hedging may take various forms. States can hedge by

building up their military capabilities, by strengthening their alliances, or by engaging in economic diplomacy. The specific form of hedging that a state chooses will depend on the specific circumstances facing the state. Hedging is a complex and nuanced strategy. It can be challenging to implement successfully and carries a degree of risk. Nevertheless, hedging can be an effective way for states to protect their interests in a complex and uncertain world.

Despite these flaws, neoclassical realism continues to play a significant role in the study of international relations. It provides a valuable framework for comprehending the complex interaction between systemic and domestic factors that influence state behavior. To understand the actions of governments fighting for maritime territory and resources in the contemporary era, neoclassical realism may be helpful. For example, China's growing aggressiveness in the South China Sea is a manifestation of its expanding strength and the country's efforts to protect its maritime interests. However, the reactions of other governments in the area and the international community limit China's capacity to fulfill its aims. Even when governments are not directly involved in maritime conflicts, neoclassical realism can help explain their behavior. The United States, for instance, has taken measures to discourage China from employing force to press for its rights in the South China Sea, where free passage is vital. The United States of America is acting to counter China's expanding influence and safeguard American interests (Ridzuan, et al., 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several issues that Malaysia and other countries must take into account in order to maintain stability in their bilateral relations with China. Dollah and Hassan (2005) found that there are several issues on which Malaysia and other countries have agendas that have not yet been resolved with China, such as economic issues, security issues in the South China Sea, China's transparency in its military development, provocative issues, and China's military actions against other countries. These issues arise because of the negative perception of ASEAN countries towards China. This situation occurs as a result of the concept of "asymmetrical multilateralism" in the relationship between ASEAN and China. This is because the difference in China's capabilities from military, economic, or social aspects can invite risk perception and attention and change the interaction behavior among ASEAN countries, especially Malaysia. The disagreement has been more contentious in recent years. China has made the most assertive claims, and its military presence in the area is the largest. Therefore, the other claimants are worried that China will try to dominate the whole South China Sea. The South China Sea dispute has become a major source of tension in the Asia-Pacific region, with multiple countries and their conflicting claims over the islands and waters in the region. The area is also an important shipping lane, connecting Asia to Europe and Africa, making it a crucial economic and strategic waterway.

The international community has been closely monitoring the situation, and there have been efforts to resolve the dispute through diplomatic and legal means, including the ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague in 2016. In a formal tone, the issue remains unresolved and continues to cause tensions in the region. The involvement of major powers such as the United States has added another layer of complexity to the situation, making it difficult to find a resolution that is acceptable to all parties involved. The ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in 2016, which was in favor of the Philippines and invalidated China's claims to most of the South China Sea, including the Spratly Islands, was a significant development in the dispute. However, despite the legal victory, the Philippines has been unable to enforce the ruling due to China's refusal to recognize the decision. China has continued to assert its claims over the area and has increased its military presence and construction activities in the disputed islands. Additionally, other countries with

claims in the South China Sea, such as Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei, have also continued to assert their claims, further complicating the situation. The lack of a unified stance among the affected countries has made it difficult to find a diplomatic solution to the dispute. Furthermore, the South China Sea is a critical region for global trade and has abundant natural resources, including oil and gas reserves, making it a highly valued and sought-after area. This has further complicated efforts to resolve the conflict as multiple countries have vested interests in the region (Bentley, 2023).

With the addition of other countries, such as Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei, continuing to assert their claims in the South China Sea (SCS), the situation has become further complicated. The lack of a unified stance among the affected countries has made it difficult to find a diplomatic solution to the dispute. Moreover, the SCS is a critical region for global trade and has abundant natural resources, including oil and gas reserves, making it a highly valuable and sought-after area. This has further complicated efforts to resolve the conflict as multiple countries have vested interests in the region. Nonetheless, there is no simple answer to the conflict over the Spratly Islands to-date (Idris and Abdullah, 2022).

The Spratly Islands dispute, which encompasses conflicting territorial claims, the presence of valuable resources, and the refusal of some parties to accept the legal ruling, has made it challenging to find a lasting solution through diplomatic and legal means. Malaysia's claim over the Spratly Islands dates to 1979, when the Malaysian government officially submitted a claim to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (UNCLCS) to extend its continental shelf to include the islands. Consequently, Malaysia's claim over the Spratly Islands is based on both technical and legal grounds, as stipulated by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Bentley, 2023).

UNCLOS, adopted in 1982 and entering into force in 1994, establishes a legal framework for the use and conservation of the world's oceans and their resources. Under UNCLOS, coastal states have the right to claim an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) extending 200 nautical miles from their coast, in which they have special rights to explore and exploit the natural resources, including the seabed and subsoil. In accordance with UNCLOS, Malaysia has submitted a claim to extend its continental shelf to include the Spratly Islands. This claim is based on the fact that the islands are located within Malaysia's EEZ and are therefore considered to be a natural extension of the country's continental shelf. To date, Malaysia has laid claims to Swallow Reef, as well as Investigator Shoal (Beting Peninjau), Erica Reef (Terumbu Sirut), Mariveles Reef (Terumbu Mantanani), Ardasier Reef (Terumbu Ubi), North Luconia Shoal (Beting Raja Jarum), and South Luconia Shoal (Beting Patinggi Ali). James Shoal (Beting Serupai), Commodore Reef (Terumbu Laksamana), Amboyna Cay (Permatang Amboyna Kecil), and Barque Canada Reef (Terumbu Mascado) are all located within Malaysia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) (Bentley, 2023).

Malaysia has also submitted evidence to support its claim, including geological and geophysical data, which shows that the Spratly Islands are part of the same geological formation as Malaysia's continental shelf. This evidence supports Malaysia's argument that the islands are a natural extension of its continental shelf and therefore should be recognized as part of its territory. The Spratly Islands are located in the South China Sea and are believed to be rich in natural resources, including oil and gas reserves (Kuik, 2013; Lai, et al, 2021). The close proximity of the islands to Malaysia and their potential resource wealth makes them a valuable and strategic area for the country. In addition to its natural resources, the Spratly Islands also have strategic significance for Malaysia as they are located near important shipping lanes and serve as a potential military outpost. Control over the islands would allow Malaysia to better protect its territorial waters and improve its maritime security. In addition, Malaysia has a long history of fishing and trading in the area and has consistently maintained that the Spratly Islands are part of its traditional fishing grounds (Lai, et al, 2021; Lai, et al, 2023). This

historical connection, combined with the strategic and economic importance of the islands, has reinforced Malaysia's claim over the Spratly Islands. Essentially, Malaysia's claim over the Spratly Islands is based on a combination of strategic, economic, and historical factors (Bentley, 2023). The country views the islands as a valuable and integral part of its territory and has made sustained efforts to assert its claim through diplomatic means and by increasing its presence in the area.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative method of secondary sources through content analysis of journal articles, theses, books, and online resources to explore and understand the topic undertaken. Qualitative approaches rely on first-hand accounts and experiences. The information collected through this approach is typically unstructured yet comprehensive. Information from secondary sources may be available in a wide variety of published works and online resources.

Each subject or subtopic in this scientific writing requires its own unique set of data, which is gathered and used as reference materials and information. Secondary sources are documents that have been written by someone other than the researcher. They can include books, articles, reports and government documents. Secondary sources are used to provide background information on a topic, to identify key actors and events and to understand the different perspectives on an issue (Klotz, et al., 2008). By analyzing secondary sources, researchers can gain insights into the motivations and decision-making processes of states and identify the key factors that shape international outcomes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on these findings, the strategy adopted by Prime Minister Najib Razak's government (2009-2018) in dealing with China on the Spratly Islands issue comprises several key components. Malaysia endeavored to bolster its relationships with other claimants to the Spratly Islands, such as the Philippines and Vietnam, through joint military exercises and diplomatic cooperation, fostering a sense of unity and collective security among the Southeast Asian nations involved. Additionally, Malaysia pursued international arbitration to resolve the disputes over the Spratly Islands. In 2013, Malaysia filed a case with the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague, reflecting its commitment to a rules-based international order and peaceful dispute resolution, with the PCA expected to issue a ruling on the case in 2016. Despite the disputes, Malaysia also sought to work collaboratively with China. In 2009, Malaysia and China signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for the management of fishing activities in the South China Sea, which was renewed in 2014, highlighting Malaysia's pragmatic approach to maintaining constructive bilateral relations while addressing contentious issues.

The strategy adopted by Prime Minister Najib Razak's government can be analyzed through the lens of neoclassical realism theory. Neoclassical realism is a middle-ground approach to international relations theory that combines the insights of both realism and liberalism, providing a nuanced and realistic framework for understanding international interactions by considering both the influence of domestic factors and the constraints imposed by the international system. By applying neoclassical realism, it becomes clear that Najib Razak's government attempted to balance the power of China through a combination of strengthening regional alliances, seeking legal avenues for dispute resolution, and maintaining

bilateral cooperation. This multifaceted strategy reflects a sophisticated approach to managing complex international relations and protecting national interests (Omar, 2006).

By strengthening ties with other claimants, Malaysia is attempting to increase its own power and to deter China from taking any aggressive action. By seeking international arbitration, Malaysia is trying to gain the support of the international community and to legitimize its claims to the Spratly Islands. By working with China, Malaysia is trying to avoid conflict with China and to find a peaceful resolution to the dispute (Idris and Abdullah, 2022). The neoclassical realist analytical lens used in this study frames structural variables as shifts in the relative power and commitments of the world's major powers, which in turn create systemic pressures and opportunities that can make or break the survival prospects of a smaller state in a more decentralized system. This idea goes beyond the neorealist view of international structure in three key respects. First, structural elements are not just potential dangers and difficulties; they also have the potential to deliver positive outcomes. Second, a state's physical circumstances (security), economic foundations (prosperity), and political foundations (sovereignty and policy flexibility) can all be affected by structural causes. Structural factors are not just the result of a shift in the relative power of states; they are also shaped by unknown factors and changes that they bring. There are benefits to being courted by competing powers, such as tangible rewards and the shadow cast by the unknown intentions of the great powers, but there is also the risk of becoming entangled in a conflict between the great powers and the risk of being banned as a result. When such structural elements have a more significant impact, a state is more vulnerable due to factors including its size, location, and international characteristics.

A more nuanced understanding of structural factors sheds light on the policy trade-offs faced by smaller states in response to uncertainty and system-level changes at the systemic level. Smaller governments are invariably confronted with a policy trilemma due to their inherent vulnerability and the need to seek external support to address existential threats. It is imperative to recognize that there are limitations to achieving all policy goals simultaneously, and a weak state must prioritize some objectives over others (Idris and Abdullah, 2022). Regardless of the external aid option chosen by a state (e.g., a great power, neighboring nations, or international agencies), relying solely on that option to mitigate threats results in additional risks and challenges. Although a smaller state may benefit economically and militarily by aligning with a larger power's alliance (through development aid and utilizing the security umbrella to channel resources towards domestic development), it also faces the risk of domestic opposition, undermined sovereignty, and domination by the larger power (Kuik, 2012; Farzana et al., 2019). In making foreign policy judgments, smaller states may need to choose between two less-than-ideal options, forcing them to prioritize their goals and assess the risks involved. It is reasonable to assume that a weak state will prioritize some policy goals over others due to the unrealistic nature of expecting it to achieve all objectives with a single act.

It is prudent for an actor to evaluate the costs and advantages of each alternative and select the one with the lowest risk and expense, given that it is uncertain whether a small state can achieve its objectives optimally without exposing itself to certain hazards. Consequently, the ultimate policy decision made by a state usually reflects its priority goals, including the risks and trade-offs it is willing to take (Hamzah, 2021). It is widely acknowledged that the forces governing the relations between Malaysia and China are not solely influenced by structural elements but are instead the outcome of international circumstances. This is largely due to the efforts of Prime Minister Najib bin Razak to build upon the solid foundation that he inherited from his predecessor. Since the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement (FTA) went into effect on January 1, 2010, the administration of Najib bin Razak has overseen a rapid and comprehensive growth in Malaysia's commercial relations with China. Since 2009, China has replaced Singapore, Japan, and the United States as Malaysia's most significant trading partner,

leaving those countries behind in the process. In 2011, the sum of all goods and services exchanged between the two countries reached a new all-time high of US\$90 billion, with Malaysia reaping an enormous trade surplus of US\$30 billion. China overtook Singapore as Malaysia's largest export destination in the same year, surpassing Singapore in the rankings. Palm oil was among China's most lucrative exports, alongside semiconductors and other commodities related to information technology. It is anticipated that two-way trade would amount to a total of \$100 billion in the year 2012. Pragmatism in economics serves as the guiding principle for Prime Minister Najib's China policy, which aims to increase Chinese investment in Malaysia and strengthen commercial connections between the two countries.

Since the appointment of Najib bin Razak as Prime Minister in April 2009, Malaysia has maintained strong diplomatic and strategic ties with China. This was reinforced by a working expedition to China by the Commander of the Malaysian Defence Forces, General Abdul Aziz Zainal, at the request of his Chinese counterpart, General Chen Bingde, in July 2009. The commitment to strengthening strategic and cooperative ties between the two countries was further solidified during Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to Malaysia in November 2011 to celebrate the 35th anniversary of diplomatic relations. During this visit, Malaysian and Chinese leaders agreed to strengthen their strategic and cooperative ties. In December 2011, the Malaysian Minister of Defence, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, and his Chinese counterpart, General Liang Guanglie, agreed to increase pragmatic military cooperation. Najib bin Razak also met with the Chinese State Councillor and Minister of Public Security, Meng Jianzhu, in February 2012, to discuss ways to strengthen connections between the two countries in the fight against transnational crime. These initiatives demonstrate Malaysia's commitment to maintaining strong diplomatic and strategic ties with China.

The current level of military collaboration between Malaysia and China is predominantly political and operational in nature, rather than strategic. Nevertheless, these developments can be regarded as positive progress considering the previous state of Malaysia-China security ties. To achieve their common goal of expanding and institutionalizing East Asian cooperation, the two countries' foreign policies should work together more actively and concretely than in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This may be due to the focus of the Najib's administration on internal issues rather than specific policy decisions. Despite the discussed development in bilateral ties, Malaysia's China policy under Najib's administration remained dominated by a "hedging" posture. While Malaysia may be eager to strengthen bilateral ties with China, this does not mean that it suddenly backs a regional order controlled by Beijing. Malaysia's strategic priorities remain fixed on countering the rise of a single superpower in Southeast Asia. This is demonstrated by the country's commitment to maintaining a neutral position towards all major nations and its emphasis on sovereignty equality. The Najib bin Razak government's strategy has been met with mixed results (Farzana, et al., 2019). On the one hand, the government has been able to strengthen its ties with other claimants and seek international arbitration. On the other hand, the government has not been able to reach a resolution with China. The dispute over the Spratly Islands is likely to continue to be a major challenge for Malaysia in the years to come.

In addition to the previously mentioned measures, Najib Razak's government took several further steps to address the Spratly Islands issue. Malaysia increased its defense spending in recent years to deter China from any aggressive actions in the South China Sea. The government also enhanced its maritime surveillance capabilities to better monitor Chinese activities in the region. Furthermore, Malaysia promoted economic cooperation with China to mitigate the risk of conflict between the two countries. A notable example of this is Malaysia's enthusiastic participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a multi-trillion-dollar infrastructure investment program aimed at connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe. Malaysia

signed several agreements with China to be part of the BRI, reflecting its commitment to economic collaboration.

Additionally, Malaysia adopted a quiet diplomacy approach in managing the Spratly Islands issue. This strategy involved avoiding public statements or provocative actions that could escalate the dispute, as outlined by Kuik (2012; 2013). Instead, Malaysia focused on building trust and fostering cooperation with other claimants such as the Philippines and Vietnam. It also sought resolution through international arbitration, filing a case with the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague in 2013. The PCA was expected to issue a ruling on the case in 2016. Despite these efforts, some critics argue that the quiet diplomacy approach may have been too passive (Idris and Abdullah, 2022).

In any case, Malaysia has argued that its approach is necessary to protect its interests in the SCS. As a smaller country compared to China, Malaysia does not have the military power to challenge China's claims to the Spratly Islands. Therefore, Malaysia believes it is in its best interest to avoid provoking China and focus on building trust and cooperation with other claimants. The quiet diplomacy approach has had some success. Malaysia has built trust and cooperation with other claimants to the Spratly Islands. In addition, the PCG case is still ongoing, and there is a possibility that the PCG will rule in favour of Malaysia. However, the quiet diplomacy approach also has its risks. If China becomes more assertive in its claims to the Spratly Islands, Malaysia may be forced to take more proactive measures to protect its interests. In other words, Malaysia's quiet diplomacy approach is a practical approach that is designed to protect Malaysia's interests in the SCS (Farzana, et al. 2019).

The approach has achieved some success, but it also carries risks. Only time will tell whether the quiet diplomacy approach will ultimately resolve the Spratly Islands dispute. Potential areas of attention for future diplomatic research on the issue of Malaysia-China strategic engagement towards a solution of the Spratly Islands dispute include the conflict's historical context, the many competing claims of the claimants, and Malaysia's and China's long-term regional goals (Hamzah, 2021; Ridzuan, et al, 2022). It is also suggested that research be conducted in the future on the possibility of a completely peaceful ending to the dispute. Such research has the potential to educate politicians and the public on the difficulties of finding a peaceful and lasting solution to the Spratly Islands issue (Kuik, 2012; Kuik, 2013).

CONCLUSION

In summary, Malaysia's approach to the Spratly Islands issue can be understood as a neoclassical realist balancing act between safeguarding Malaysian interests and maintaining peace with other claimants, particularly China. According to the tenets of neoclassical realism, the international power balance and a country's domestic interests and perceptions of national capabilities are just two of the many elements that influence a country's foreign policy decisions. Malaysia has taken a cautious stance in the Spratly Islands conflict in order to protect its territorial claims and sovereign rights as well as maintain friendly relations with China, its main trading partner. Avoiding public confrontations and instead looking to address disagreements via private conversations, Malaysia has adopted a policy of "quiet diplomacy" in its dealings with China. Malaysia has been working to improve its position in the South China Sea by increasing its military might and collaborating on economic projects with other claimants. Nevertheless, the Najib bin Razak government's strategy on the Spratly Islands issue has been criticized by some for being too accommodating to China. Nevertheless, the government has argued that its strategy is necessary to protect Malaysia's interests in the South China Sea. Malaysia's position on the Spratly Islands dispute may be understood as an effort to strike a compromise between its national interests and the constraints of the international

system. Malaysia's approach to protecting its interests while avoiding open conflict with China has been one of low-key diplomacy and collaboration with other claimants. This strategy is in line with neoclassical realism theory, which places equal weight on external and internal influences on a nation's foreign policy.

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