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Abdul Razak Baginda



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China–Malaysia Relations and Foreign Policy

When Malaysian Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, paid an official visit to China in May 1974, it secured Malaysia a place in the annals of regional diplomatic history as the first Asean country to establish full diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. This book analyses the process of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Malaysia and China, and provides a detailed explanation and understanding of the decision-making process in Malaysia.

Shedding light on the roles played by the various principal actors in the process of foreign policy formulation and the influences – both internal and external – that shaped Malaysia's behaviour, the book highlights why Malaysia decided to pursue a policy of normalisation with China, culminating in the visit in 1974, and in particular why it became the first Asean country to establish diplomatic relations with the Chinese. After Malaysia's recognition of Beijing, two other Asean states followed suit, namely Thailand and the Philippines, and the book discusses whether there was some degree of policy coordination amongst Asean countries in dealing with China, or if both these countries gave way for Malaysia to be the first. The book also looks at the policy debates within some Asean countries regarding relations with China, either conducted officially or unofficially, bilaterally or otherwise.

This book will be of interest to scholars of Asian Politics, Asian History, International Relations and Foreign Policy.

Abdul Razak Baginda is currently Advisor to a private think tank on global affairs, based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

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Razak Baginda
February 2015

Abbreviations

AMDA	Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement
ASA	Association of Southeast Asia
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASPAC	Asian and South Pacific Council
BMA	British Military Administration
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (US)
COMINTERN	Communist International
CPC	Communist Party of China
CPM	Communist Party of Malaya
CTA	Chinese Telecommunications Administration
DAP	Democratic Action Party
FELDA	Federal Land Development Authority
FPA	Foreign Policy Analysis
FPDA	Five Power Defence Arrangements
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MCP	Malayan Communist Party
MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
MMA	Malaysian Medical Association
MTD	Malaysian Telecommunication Department
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NEC	National Executive Council of Thailand
NEP	New Economic Policy
NOC	National Operations Council
OIC	Organisation of the Islamic Conference
PAS	Parti Islam SeMalaysia (Islamic Party of Malaysia)
PKI	Parti Komunis Indonesia (Communist Party of Indonesia)
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
ROC	Republic of China
SEATO	South East Asia Treaty Organisation
UMMA	University of Malaya Medical Alumni Association

UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WTO	World Trade Organisation
ZOPFAN	Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality

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1 Introduction

The purpose of the study

When Malaysian Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, paid an official visit to China in May 1974, it secured Malaysia a place in the annals of regional diplomatic history as the first Asean country to establish full diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC).¹ According to Tun Razak, he made this journey in order to 'sow the seeds of mutual understanding and trust between Malaysia and the People's Republic of China'.² He also expressed the hope that it would be the basis of an enduring friendship between the two countries and would contribute to lasting peace in East Asia. While this statement provides the official public objectives for the trip, it does not explain why Malaysia decided much earlier than its neighbours to embark on the path of normalisation with China; neither does it explain the decision-making process leading towards the normalisation of relations with China. The official statements provide little insight into the various policy considerations behind the decision.

This study, with a detailed explanation and understanding of the decision-making process in Malaysia, thus contributes significantly towards the appreciation of the reasons for the normalisation of relations between the two countries. It also sheds light on the roles played by the various principal actors in the process of foreign policy formulation and the influences – both internal and external – that shaped Malaysia's behaviour. As the China factor was intertwined with domestic politics, the study gives us an especially significant window through which to examine the linkage between internal and external factors.

Key questions

This study seeks to address a number of key questions. First, the main thrust is to explain why Malaysia decided to pursue a policy of normalisation with China, culminating in the visit and Joint Communiqué of May 1974. There were two critical steps involved, namely, the initial and more diffuse decision to embark on the road towards normalisation and, subsequent to this, the specific decision to establish formal ties with China in May 1974, thereby putting Malaysia at the forefront of the development of Asean's relations with China.

2 Introduction

The year 1970 has been chosen as the starting point of this process since it was then that a change in the Malaysian leadership, with Tun Abdul Razak Hussein becoming the country's second prime minister, resulted in a significant shift in Malaysia's foreign policy, moving it from a pro-west policy orientation to the adoption of a more neutral stance. Although the changes were evident before 1970, the rise of Tun Razak to the country's leadership confirmed this shift.

A second question that this study seeks to resolve is why Malaysia became the first Asean country to establish diplomatic relations with the Chinese. After Malaysia's recognition of Beijing, two other Asean states followed suit, namely Thailand and the Philippines, giving the impression that there was some degree of policy coordination amongst Asean countries in dealing with China, or that both these two countries gave way for Malaysia to be the first. This current work, therefore, explores the policy debates within some Asean countries regarding relations with China, either conducted officially or unofficially, bilaterally or otherwise. *Inter alia*, this study seeks to establish whether there was a China policy within the Asean grouping, that is, some kind of loose collective understanding reached amongst its members to coordinate their national policies towards Beijing. Or, alternatively, was it Malaysia's own initiative, and simply explained to the individual countries, with the others subsequently following Kuala Lumpur's move? And was it the case that there was some element of competition amongst a number of Asean states as to which member would be the first?

To answer this requires an examination of how the issue of China was addressed by Asean, and to look at bilateral discussions amongst officials, especially between Malaysia and other members of this organisation. It also focuses on how Malaysia viewed its Asean neighbours, within the context of its own pursuit of its evolving ties with China. In other words, to what extent was Kuala Lumpur's policy towards China influenced by the perception of other Asean countries towards China, and specifically towards the development of Sino-Malaysian ties?

Significance and contribution of the study

This study makes a distinct contribution in a number of ways. First, it contributes to the overall understanding of the formulation of Malaysian foreign policy. It provides a fuller explanation than is currently available in the literature of the factors that influence the decision-making process, at least during the period under review here. As will be seen later on, there is little academic work done on Malaysian foreign policy, and as such this study offers a contribution towards this body of literature.

Second and more specifically, this study helps us to understand the processes and policy discussions of a small country like Malaysia when it deals with a giant neighbour. Interesting too is that this small country took the regional lead, and as noted earlier this study highlights the policy debates between Malaysia and