

In the Dragon's Tight Embrace? A Neo-Gramscian Perspective on Malaysia's Foreign Policy towards China

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Abstract

Existing literature on Malaysia-China relations have conveniently relied more on external and geopolitical variables, where hedging is perceived as the only viable foreign policy (FP) within the context of the rise of China and corresponding security dilemmas in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects and the South China Sea (SCS). By adopting a foreign policy analysis (FPA) framework of FP decision-making (i.e., the process) and a Neo-Gramscian perspective of state-business relations (SBRs), with a particular focus on domestic political shifts from the Najib to Mahathir administrations, we study the hegemonic forces at play in the business-ruling elite nexus, resistance to attempted FP recalibration after the 2018 election, the interplay between domestic and international distinctions, as well as formal and informal individual agency in various dimensions of bilateral ties. Drawing on elite interviews, and key secondary literature in global FPA, Malaysia's FP, and domestic politics, this study offers a provocative premise: domestic constraints and FP dilemmas. Our findings illuminate three lessons that

Malaysian policymakers and researchers have to learn with regard to this bilateral relationship: (a) foreign policymakers are not a *tabula rasa*; (b) they must move away from hedging prescriptions; and (c) the need for a critical turn in the FPA framework.

Keywords: *Malaysia-China relations, Malaysia's international relations, New Malaysian Foreign Policy, state-to-state business relations, elite and regime survival, Neo-Gramscian perspectives, structural realism, foreign policy analysis, hedging, extraversion, neopatrimonialism, Najib Razak, Mahathir Mohamad, United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Barisan Nasional, Pakatan Harapan, Perikatan Nasional, IMalaysia Development Berhad, security dilemma, Look East Policy (LEP), Belt and Road Initiative, South China Sea*

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that the evolution of foreign policy (FP) is an integral part of Malaysia's (formerly Malaya) post-independence history. While there is a conventional yet disputed¹ set of beliefs that Malaysia's foreign engagements have been less actively contested than its domestic politics, scholars and practitioners of FP recognise a complex interplay between domestic and exogenous factors in the formulation of priorities and orientations (Saravanamuttu, 2010, 1983; Leifer, 1976, 1989; Md Khalid, 2011; Ruhana, 2006; Nor Azizan *et al.*, 2011; Dhillon, 2015; Milner and Siti Munirah, 2018; 2020; Muhammad Ghazali, 1982, 1998; Jeshurun, 2008; Rajmah, 2010). Our readings and fieldwork confirm that they uphold a universally agreed-upon tradition within the mainstream literature on international relations (IR), wherein FP is regarded as a continuation and extension of a state's domestic public policy (Rosenau, 1980; Holsti, 1967; Reus-Smit and Snidal (eds.), 2010). Given this

context, arguably, the formulation of historical and present Malaysian FP reflects the complexities faced by modern and hybrid states (i.e., those containing western and non-western elements) in balancing various competing demands, domestic sources, and geopolitics (Saravanamuttu, 2010: 12). Therefore, balancing domestic and international environmental factors in FP decision-making (FPDM) is a continuous² exercise undertaken by the Barisan Nasional (BN), dominated by the United Malays National Organisation, UMNO), Pakatan Harapan (PH), and Perikatan Nasional (PN) administrations (while engaging other non-state stakeholders, i.e., agencies and other components of the state structure) – especially in terms of (re)defining “three important factors that shaped the country’s FP; (a) strategic location of Malaysia, (b) a trading nation status, (c) and the country’s unique demography” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia, 2021).

While IR scholars have increasingly paid attention to the rise of China in global politics (Shambaugh, 2021; Shambaugh and Yahuda, 2014; Jacques, 2012; Abdul Razak Baginda, 2016; Zhang, 2020; Yeoh, 2020; Kuik, 2013a), past historical encounters with China, the domestic climate of Malaysian elite brinkmanship as well as public responses to government business arrangements under China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects have arguably significantly increased the applicability of IR theories to contemporary Malaysia-China relations (Saravanamuttu, 2021: 88-89). These include official diplomatic circles, bilateral defence and technological procurements, trade profits, transnational networks and private business investments, high-end property acquisitions, cultural and student exchanges, as well as scholarly networks (Milner, 2020; Md Nasrudin et al., 2018; Md Khalid and Shakila, 2012a; Kuik, 2015; Liow, 2000; Yeoh, 2019; Leong, 2017; Ngu and Ngeow, 2021; Xia *et al.*, 2019). Inadvertently, recent literature has fixated on a parochial structural realism interpretation of Malaysia’s

external environment in responding to the rise of China (Gerstl, 2020: 109; Kuik, 2015, 2016, 2021b, 2021a, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Kuik and Liew, 2018). While the advancement of structural realism is a welcome development, some scholars warn that its reductionist approach limits Malaysia's FP options (including hedging) in mitigating uncertain regional and international security threats (Xiaoyu Pu, webinar speaker 21st May 2021; Ogden, 2019; Lai, 2017; Montes and Cruz, 2020; Elina and Qistina, 2017; Breslin (ed.), 2010; Morin and Paquin, 2018; Zhang and Chang (eds.), 2016; Buzan and Zhang (eds.), 2014; Shih, 2013). As such, ongoing debate on Malaysia's FP options in responding to security dilemmas³ means that FPDM is misleadingly construed as being predominantly structured by the external environment and international systemic factors (Alatas, 2021; Jones and Jenne, 2021; Saravanamuttu, 2021; Yahuda, 2019; Lam, 2018; Malhi, 2018; Foot and Goh, 2019; Katada and Liao, 2020; Kaarbo, 2015).

2. Argument

We argue that structural realism is not in itself invalid. However, it is limited by a theoretical adherence to a narrow understanding of Malaysia's interests with China, defined almost exclusively in terms of the external dimensions of the state. Without discounting the relevance of structural factors, overemphasising their role in determining state interests in FP de-emphasises how ideational factors and ideology characterise state (more specifically, the human agents who manage the state) interests in the first place (Wagner, 2016: 25; Snyder *et al.*, 1954: 72; Sprout and Sprout, 1956: 24-27; Maren, 2016: 45; Rosenau, 1980: 45-78). Apart from material factors and external structural environments, state interests in FPDM with regard to China are largely shaped by non-material considerations, such as the historical value of bilateral ties

and Malaysia's unique demography.⁴ Thus, to understand how official and non-official individuals/agencies determine national interests and expected behaviours within the international system, attention must be paid to the role of ideology⁵ (Huang, 2020: 17; Hudson and Day, 2019: 74). A former economic advisor during Mahathir Mohamad's second term⁶ (2018–2020) warned us about “the overreading of Realism” in interpreting “classified negotiation notes” and “diplomatic signs” between top leaders and political elites in Beijing and Putrajaya⁷ (authors' personal communication, 6th May 2021). He also regarded a recent spurt of “hedging-based interpretations” of Malaysia-China relations as an unfortunate “blind spot” and criticised “populist” readings by “some Malaysian IR researchers who are obsessed with China” and the United States (US), but not the future of Malaysia.

Bearing this in mind, this paper revisits Malaysia-China relations, specifically during the administrations of prime ministers Najib Razak (BN) and Mahathir (BN and PH) through a Neo-Gramscian lens. We argue that Malaysia's FP engagement demonstrates an open desire to renegotiate China's hegemony in the BRI and to reject China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea (SCS). Our readings demonstrate the relative autonomy of Malaysia as it seeks to “renegotiate” and express “nonconformity” with the China-led order of East Asia (vis-à-vis the BRI and SCS). We identify these FP actions as a clear exhibition of an “improvised counter-hegemonic role” and Malaysian elite attempts at recalibration⁸ to include domestic constraints upon uncertain FP directions (authors' personal communication with Professor Ian Taylor,⁹ 11th November 2020).

We first briefly explore the limits of mainstream neorealism perspectives (including those of its subset, structural realism), which often provided a “partial analysis” of recent Malaysia-China relations (authors' personal communication with the former senior advisor during

Mahathir's BN administration, 6th July 2019). We then introduce our Neo-Gramscian perspectives using a FP analysis (FPA)¹⁰ framework that emphasises the FP "process" instead of its "output". This discussion will apply Robert Cox's interpretation (1981, 1983, 1996, 2002) of Gramscian hegemony as it relates to domestic forces (i.e., the role of the Malaysian business elites and their interests) and the global system (i.e., China's BRI): we will use Cox's interpretation to investigate extraversion¹¹ in this bilateral relationship. FPA scholars are increasingly highlighting the importance of looking at the nature of the state in explaining the likely dynamics of the FP process and outcomes (Ozkececi-Taner, 2017; Parepa, 2019). Alden and Aran (2017) identified the quasi-state nature of many developing countries as a particularly important explanatory variable in determining their FP choices.

Previous works by Jomo (1986), Rajah *et al.* (eds.) (2021), Nasr (2003), Milne and Mauzy (1999) and Weiss (*Asia Unscripted* podcast interview, 2020) have explored the neopatrimonial nature of Malaysian state and society. In fact, Md Khalid *et al.* (2012a, 2012b, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2020) have briefly explored the intricate ties between civil servants, public policy, technocratic economy, and foreign policy. Moreover, recent works by Gomez (2019) and Gomez *et al.* (2021, 2020) on state-business concoctions of China's BRI projects in Malaysia have only confirmed Grove's (2021) ground-breaking findings that the "interest[s] and identities" of Global South leaders are "transnationally" linked to their political economy and FP decisions. As such, FP is a lens which illuminates how Malaysian ruling elites and their business interests ensure regime survival and legitimacy (Alatas, 2021: 3-4). Our Neo-Gramscian reading unravels the highly dependent nature of Malaysia (within the rise of China's BRI projects), which only exacerbated PH's problems in recalibrating FP neutrality and equidistance.

Next, we summarise Malaysia-China relations over the last five decades (1971–2021), with special emphasis on the distinct changes and developments during the Najib and Mahathir administrations. We contend that several major “developmental” projects meant to be implemented as part of the bilateral “strategic” partnership were not in the best interests of the country, but instead its business-ruling elites. Despite expectations that these dominant hegemonic forces would lead to Malaysia “converging with” or being subservient to China’s norms, Malaysia’s renegotiation of FP (after PH took power from BN in 2018) is a clear indication of the shift in competition and interests among these elites. By projecting contradictory FP narratives in the BRI and SCS, Malaysia was able to negotiate and pursue an “improvised counter-hegemonic role” in which the relative autonomy and inconsistencies of its FP were revealed. However, tensions and negotiations among the PH business-ruling elites “constrained” the formulating of a clear FP outlook.

Finally, we analyse the detrimental effects of deepening bilateral ties on domestic politics, the economy, and society over the last ten years. It is evident that Malaysia’s growing economic dependence on China and the ensuing “special” ties only served the narrow and vested interests of the latter at the expense of national security and sovereignty. As Malaysia becomes increasingly beholden to China, its leadership has increasingly lost its historically strong voice in world politics. We explain how the challenges faced in PH’s recalibration of the FP “process” mirrored power struggles among competing business-ruling elites. In effect, overdependence and the lopsided nature of bilateral relations continue to pose a serious challenge to the present administration, amid growing global and regional tensions between China and the US.

3. Limits of Structural Realism

Most commentators¹² agree on a major shift towards more positive diplomatic, political, social, and economic bilateral relationships, compared to the formative Cold War period. Yet the existing literature often highlights contradictions: (a) stable and friendly engagements in terms of the political economy, with some critical appraisals of China's BRI projects in Malaysia; and (b) more FP difficulties in responding to the increasing assertiveness of China's claims in the SCS. Yet ongoing hedging-based analysis and structural realism have paid less attention to domestic dimensions and the FP process, which we argue leads to most discussions of Malaysian FP becoming output-oriented.

This subsection analyses the inherent contending natures of structural realism and hedging prescriptions, as well as the unintended consequences of "blind spots". We recognise that FP constitutes two major dimensions: the process¹³ (i.e., FPDm) and output (i.e., FP itself). The second subsection provides a brief analytical distinction between traditional FP (through a broad IR literature review) and a specific FPA framework. Our elite interview fieldwork (conducted with former prime ministers, ministers, diplomats, and top bureaucrats) has shown a clear shift in FP discussions – from structural realism to the FP process. Instead of viewing the state as a unitary actor in world politics, FPA views the state as a "structure" or a "black box" in which various individual agencies interact to formulate FP (Hudson, 2017; Alden and Aran, 2017). Thus, the fact that FP is made and implemented (while also considering international and domestic politics) must be understood by commentators. Again, we emphasise the equal merit of process (FPDM) and output (FP). Secondly, we consider the interplay between various state and non-state actors, as well as formal and informal modes of governance or socio-political interactions between business and political interests in FPDm (Huang, 2020). Through FPA and studying FPDm,

Alden and Aran (2017: 45) use the Weberian state (either institutional, quasi- or clustered states) to explain diverse FP options with regard to a single external actor. We believe that their description of the quasi-state precisely captures the nature of Malaysia's neopatrimonial state – thus explaining the inconsistencies between positive stable ties (in terms of economic, trade, and business relationships) and more negative and difficult FP choices (in terms of asserting territorial sovereignty and relative autonomy) (Alatas, 2021; Mohamed Nawab and Gomez, 2020; Gomez *et al.*, 2021; Weiss, *Asia Unscripted* podcast interview, 2020). The third subsection introduces Neo-Gramscian theory, based on Cox's notion of hegemony and counter-hegemony, with the aim of introducing fluid interactions between business classes, the political elite, and Malaysia's FP and FPDM. We explore the intertwined interests of business-ruling elites and individual state agency in the domestic setting, and how such interplay informs different sets of logic in handling two different issues: the BRI and SCS.

3.1. The Limits of Structural Realism and Hedging Prescriptions

Although there are lengthy discussions on the roles played by all Malaysian prime ministers since 1957 in determining FP orientation (an example of an idiosyncratic factor)¹⁴, such works are mostly descriptive and either serve as historical records or are based on the experiences of former civil servants (authors' personal communication with a Harvard professor, 26th May 2021). In short, most FP works generally belong to the category of historical and descriptive discussion (Balakrishnan, 2009: 108). Only recently has the field witnessed a growing attempt to integrate systematic IR theories, but they mostly concentrate on the application of neorealism (including recent structural realism analyses of light hedging), therefore prescribing FP options in security dilemmas (the SCS debacle, for instance) (authors' personal communication with

Officer 1, Minister of Foreign Affairs, 10th February 2021). Meanwhile, few opt to apply the basic assumptions of social constructivism and securitisation theory to define the non-traditional security agenda (Saravanamuttu, 2010; Nor Azizan *et al.*, 2011). These recent advancements are neither able to provide a systematic framework to explain and understand FPDM, structure, institution, and flow of information in negotiation-making, nor can they address the actual “placement” of key dynamics in the interplay between various state and non-state actors which cut across binary distinctions (i.e., informality/formality, domestic/international).

Nonetheless, these state-centric and conservative readings are widely employed for two obvious reasons. Firstly, among those pundits who are directly and indirectly consulted (or even involved) in FPDM, neorealism is considered the easiest framework for providing a complex theoretical explanation. Our informal conversations with retired Malaysian diplomats to China (authors’ personal communication with retired Malaysian diplomat 1, 9th January 2020), the UN and the US (authors’ personal communication with retired Malaysian diplomat 2, 10th February 2020) and a Malaysian IR scholar based in London (authors’ personal communication with an Oxford professor, 7th February 2020), have confirmed that many recent Malaysian IR scholars are western-educated, while senior civil servants/diplomats mostly furthered their postgraduate training in Global North institutions. As a result, these “Malaysian IRians” tend to view the formative years of the Malaysian state (i.e., the colonial and postcolonial periods) as a “parallel *durée* of a modern origin or moment of the Weberian and Westphalian state” and identify their likely attributes in contemporary Malaysia. Thus, much literature concentrates on external and geopolitical dimensions of maritime routes and land borders (spatial factors), especially in mitigating risks in the volatile Southeast Asian region.

Their key limitations are inherent and unstable epistemological assumptions of structural realism (which evolved in turn from Mearsheimer's neorealism) (Walker *et al.* (eds.), 2011; Weeks and Cunrilton, 2017).

In this regard, FP must only reflect the most appropriate responses to systematic (mostly external) circumstances (Liang *et al.*, 2021; Lai and Kuik, 2020; Kuik, 2021a, 2020b). Domestic politics and leadership characteristics play little to no significance, given the danger of acting inconsistently with external imperatives (Ripsman *et al.*, 2016: 18). Thus, the ontological foundation for structural determinism is taken for granted and illogically linked to state capability or the hierarchy of power in world politics. This squeezes FP prescriptions with vague and disputed claims that Malaysia is a permanently small state (authors' personal communication with an Oxford professor, *op. cit.*). While IR literature has analytically differentiated variations of power (i.e., capability and relational) and recognised the fluid dynamics of state formation (i.e., the interchangeable status between small and powerful states), present reductionist readings are confined to a static analysis of (mostly) external factors and give limited space to internal dimensions. But even this tautological reading is rejected by neoclassical realism, which shares an ontological agreement on the external threats to the state with structural realism (Ripsman *et al.*, 2016: 19). Neoclassical realism rejects the implication that states necessarily respond fluidly and mechanically to international shifts in power in the international system, thus illuminating the inappropriateness of structural realism in addressing FP options (Jørgensen, 2018: 34). In fact, analytical "obsessions with hedging" were recently criticised as being purely "misguided" (Jones and Jenne, 2021; Ciorciari and Haacke, 2019; Halper, 2021; Gomez *et al.*, 2020; Bearce and Velasco-Guachalla, 2020; da Conceição-Heldt and Mello, 2017; Alden and Aran, 2017). Analysts

of China's FP have cautioned and reminded policymakers not to subscribe to anti-China and pro-US propaganda, since not all of President Xi Jinping's FP can be reduced to being anti-liberal (Bitzinger and Char (eds.), 2019; Chow and Perkins, 2015; Cai and Nolan (eds.), 2019; Zhang and Chang (eds.), 2016; Teufel Dreyer, 2018; Freund Larus, 2020; Dittmer, 2021; Schaller, 2015).

Secondly, bureaucrats (Malaysia's administrative and diplomatic officers), retired ministers and politicians, as well as politically appointed advisors on FP and China matters recognise the limits of structural realism and hedging-based analysis (authors' personal communication with retired Malaysian diplomat 2, *op. cit.*). Many do not refer to the theories or lack of awareness of their influence. However, their analyses of major historical and contemporary events (which are regarded as historically analogous) suggest strong neorealist remnants of the Cold War period on contemporary key FPDM. This is *prima facie* in the top-down process of consultation and limited public participation in the Defence White Paper and the New Malaysia Foreign Policy (NMFP), which were formulated during the PH administration (Ngeow, 2019a, 2019b). A former political secretary to a Malaysian prime minister remarked on "regrettably and unnecessary expensive reimbursement fees [that were paid to] weird consultative experts from Columbia and John Hopkins" (authors' personal communication with a former political secretary of a prime minister one, 12th April 2021). Others at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) described tacit suggestions made by a "few selected" Malaysian scholars as "mostly archaic, mundane and unrecognisable[able], even among their colleagues in foreign and local universities" (authors' personal communication with officer 2, Minister of Foreign Affairs, 13th February 2021). Nonetheless, the theoretical predilections of a few select "Malaysian IRians" who advised former PH and current PN administrations certainly inform us

not only of the limitations of hedging strategies, but of Cox's assertion that "theory is always for someone and for some purpose" (Moolakkattu, 2009: 439).

It is significant to understand that no single IR theory can explain the entirety of FPDM and FP. All theories are value laden and represent the "political agendas" and "hierarchical power relations" embodied by foreign consultants. Yet our interviews reveal that previous administrations recognised the danger of framing our FP decisions based on the hedging prescriptions of structural realism, approaches as espoused by these consultants. Some even labelled this recent obsession as "blind spot[s] and lopsided analyses" (authors' personal communication with the former senior advisor during Mahathir's BN administration, *op. cit.*). For instance, one key senior member of the 1999 BN-era Mahathir cabinet hinted that the Special Envoy to China was a political appointee, unlike the ambassador. While the justifications for these special positions have been criticised, they were never abolished by the subsequent PH and PN administrations. Our personal communication (with FPA scholars) and elite interviews (with Malaysian leaders) have confirmed the precarity of Malaysia's FP with regard to China. Interestingly, not many existing works have engaged in a systematic analytical assessment of FPDM itself. As such, it is logically fallacious to prescribe FP advice while simultaneously underestimating the interplay between the interests and identities of leaders and policy dynamics – in turn embedded within a nexus between the formal and informal negotiation process.

3.2. *The FPA Framework*

Alden and Aran (2017), Hudson and Day (2019), Morin and Paquin (2018), and Feng (2015) have called for more analytical assessments at the domestic level and invisible interactions among various agencies

(individual actors) in FPDM. We agree that present and future research in FPDM should specifically locate and map the interplay between domestic and international environments as well as interactions among various state and non-state actors. Smith *et al.* (2017) and Hudson (2019; 2015) were among those who first emphasised the importance of analysing FP beyond tautological attributes, providing a few key recommendations: (1) investigating domestic level or actor specific information; (2) creating a commitment to building middle-range theory as an interface between actor-general theory and global complexity; (3) pursuing multicausal explanations spanning multiple levels of analysis; (4) utilising theory and findings from across the spectrum of the social sciences; and (5) viewing the FPDM process as being as important as the output (Hudson, 2017: 30). These recommendations can be extended to our reading of Malaysia-China relations. Firstly, to explain and understand their inconsistency and complexity, there is a need to recognise competing domestic tensions and interests within multiethnic groups (Malaysian FP choices are dominated by the ruling elite and the majority ethnic Malay population). “Apart from quietly playing a role in key FP decisions, the ethnic Chinese remain a significant minority with an equally powerful economic influence” (Alatas, 2021: 3-4).

Secondly, there is a need to mitigate risks from domestic communal and political tensions while shifting alliances among ruling elites – e.g., unstable political alliances, power-sharing arrangements, equity access, and patron-client networks. Thus, FPDM are about domestic level dynamic interactions between state and non-state actors, as well as interplays between formal and informal power networks – where the state and elite patronage networks are perceived as gatekeepers to patrimonial resources – which lead in turn to lucrative contracts and resources linked to China’s BRI activities and intrusions into the

Malaysian market (authors' personal communication with the former senior advisor during the Najib administration, 15th August 2019).

Thirdly, we observe that bilateral relations remain mostly about domestic constraints and contestations, despite the introduction of PH's NMFP. Thus, Malaysia's domestic constraints and FP inconsistency fits well with Robert Putnam's conception of "Two-Level Games" in FPA (1988: 428).¹⁵ In addition to domestic woes, relations with China's BRI were increasingly impeded by China's assertiveness in the SCS (Ngeow, 2021a, 2021b, 2019a, 2015a). Domestically, the tendency to harp on inter- and intra-ethnic tensions resulted in a false projection of China as the enemy, while demonising ethnic Chinese as internal political enemies (authors' personal communication with former minister 1, 26th January 2019). Thus, whenever a new government was formed, difficult domestic political negotiations hampered coherent FPDM on China, which feed on tensions from divided domestic politics (Elina and Qistina, 2017).

Fourthly, ethnic Malay hegemony has been fractured by elite brinkmanship and shifting political alliances. Thus, inter- and intra-ethnic competition over limited state resources is geared towards domestic regime survival – as a result, bilateral relations reflect the active participation of multiethnic elites in sustaining the country's marginal position with major powers (Gomez *et al.*, 2021: 5-8; Mohamed Nawab and Gomez, 2020: 117-118). Therefore, difficult or inconsistent FP options matter less when it comes to global systemic changes (e.g., the rise of China and the decline of the US) but more on domestic tendencies by elites to manipulate structural and superficial disadvantages to induce more foreign influence, which in turn destabilises the country in the long run (Case, 2020; Brummer, 2015; Abuza, 2020). Subversive business links (see below) have contributed to dependency in the interest of the elites, thus highlighting their capacity

to manipulate unequal bilateral relations to their advantage (authors' personal communication with former minister 2, 8th February 2019).

Finally, neopatrimonialism and extraversion have confirmed the salience of the nature of the state and FP options in Malaysia. Nonetheless, Alden and Aran (2017: 154) called for a critical investigation of the nature of the state, wherein relative autonomy determines states' FP approaches.¹⁶ Malaysia, in their system, would be classified as a quasi-state (Jackson, 1993; Scott, 1999; Case, 2013, 2017; Farish, 2014; Chin and Welsh, 2019; James Chin, 2019, 2021; Alatas, 1997). Two notable features are summarised here. Firstly, while quasi-states may enjoy equal legal sovereignty, they lack the institutions which constrain and outlast corrupt politicians, implicating how FPA conceives of the relationship between state, society, and FP. Secondly, the exploitation of FP tools that is constrained. FPA recognises and accounts for a multiplicity of conventional tools: military force, economic and diplomatic sanctions, diplomacy, soft power, etc. Their security and development entitlements, as endowed by institutional, normative, and legal frameworks, grant access to different types of tools. However, by dint of their partial material statehood, quasi-states have little to no such access (Jackson, 1993: 42; Alden and Aran, 2017: 78). The discussion now moves to a Neo-Gramscian reading of this bilateral FP: especially useful in locating the difficulties of post-BN leaders and their policy strategies to contain China.

3.3. A Neo-Gramscian Perspective of Malaysia-China Relations

As already noted earlier, the FPA framework rejects the neorealist conception of the state, domestic constraints upon FP options, as well as domestic relations with China's BRI investments. We believe that Cox's Neo-Gramscian views will be the right framework here. The neo-Marxist perspective often used the concept of "dependency" with regard

to the world system theory during the Cold War in order to explain the structural dependency of the periphery (the Global South) on the core (the Global North). In fact, Neo-Marxism was the earliest attempt to use Classical Marxism's arguments to explain the destructive nature of capitalism when applied to such unequal economic relations; an extension of the class struggle between the European bourgeoisie and proletariat (Rupert, 2013: 160). Indeed, insights from Frank Gunder, David Gordon, John Roemer, Jon Elster, Adam Przeworski, Samir Amin, and other scholars in Critical International Political Economy (CIPE) were used to explain the underdeveloped nature of developing economies (Burnell *et al.* (eds.), 2017). Despite decolonisation, many developing countries (i.e., in Africa, Asia, and Latin America) heavily relied on the modes of production and capitalist relations "inherited" from their former colonial masters, and remained "dependent" on the existing global economic structure, in which existing economic exploitation and capitalism became embedded in their external relations (Linklater, 2013: 148). In return, the local ruling class (i.e., the political elites) were considered proxies of the ruling elite and bourgeoisie of the core. Attempts to reform the political economy (including in Malaysia) during the Cold War were resisted by the ruling elite. These gatekeepers had a vested interest in preserving the existing model of economic exploitation, and as such, progress and industrial development was stifled (Mahathir – interviewed in August 1985 by Altaf Gauhar – 1986: 9-10). Mohammed Ayoob (1995: 17) argues how colonialism, as an extension of the pre-industrial form of capitalism produced by the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century, delayed modern transformation.

However, simply viewing recent Malaysian FP in the context of a small state hedging its options (because economically, Malaysia is mostly dependent on the rise of China) or in the context of the US-China

trade war is simply another typical failure to recognise the ascendancy of China into the global capitalist system (Ly, 2020). Furthermore, growing interactions between many African and Asian countries with the BRI is not just a simple case of subjugation to the unique core that is China's mix of capitalism and authoritarianism (Khoo, 2019; Lim *et al.*, 2021; Zhang, 2020). While capitalism is indeed at the heart of China's modernisation, it was a combination of Xi Jinping's idiosyncratic style and the BRI model that led to the negotiation of a particular form of interaction between China and these dependencies (Alagappa, 2016; Ngeow, 2019; Farish, 2014; Liu and Lim, 2019; Rajah, 1996; Møller Mulvad, 2019). Thus, if dependency existed and indeed structured the political economy and IR of developing countries accordingly, their relative autonomy allowed for decision-making by the ruling political classes – in the case of Malaysia, an extension of existing unequal domestic economic and business injustices, in order to exploit opportunities presented by irregular financial transactions with the BRI projects (Md Khalid and Shakila, 2012b; Lim *et al.*, 2021; He and Feng, 2013). The revelation of financial transactions and witness testimonies during the high-profile SRC trials illuminated how the highest political echelons and FPDM was infiltrated by the business classes and patronage networks (CLJ, 2020). In fact, when reading his verdict on Najib's SRC case, High Court Judge Mohd Nazlan's infamous assertion that "the fund is nothing but an implausible concoction" (*Malaysiakini*, 31st July 2020) provides straightforward evidence of the "criminal behaviour of Najib" and his patronage networks (*New Straits Times*, 25th October 2021). Our Neo-Gramscian perspective indicates how imperative it is to study linkages in state-business relations (SBR) and the extent of involvement of government-linked companies (GLCs) in the BRI projects (Abdul Muein, 2021; Bearce and Velasco-Guachalla, 2020; Bieler and Morton, 2003). Rather than merely responding to

China's offensive infrastructural investments and loan packages, Najib's administration and the complicity of his business associates became part of the interplay between formal and informal negotiations and actors, and further obscured the relations between the two states. The unintended consequences were failed and constantly changing decisions under PH, and uncoordinated FP under PN with regard to China's recent encroachment into Malaysian territorial waters in the SCS (*Al Jazeera*, 5th October 2021).

Nonetheless, when Kuik (2021b) argues for "elite legitimization" and "asymmetry and authority" in theorising Southeast Asian responses to China BRI's hegemony (2021a), he unpacks the most important debate in the social sciences – the interplay between agency and structure. Existing comparative politics, studies on political economy and the social history of the Malaysian state and society have explored different dimensions of Anthony Giddens's structuration. But Kuik's focus on structural determinism and state-centrism as proponents of hedging fails to recognise the "black box" nature and "social reality" of Malaysia's quasi-state – i.e., how policies are a pretext for regime legitimisation and survival – the state is actually a site for vertical and horizontal power accumulation, contested and competed over by multiple individual state and non-state actors takes place (see also Alden and Aran, 2017). Gomez *et al.* (2020: 4-5) found that state-to-state SBR is seen in "state-supported private enterprises" or "influential privately-owned companies that are intricately linked to elites in power". Informal business-ruling elite ties have seen various politicians and civil servants becoming privy to and accessing government-generated rent mechanisms – direct tenders, contracts, and monopolistic licenses. In short, Malaysian leaders and their patronage networks (both in politics and business) determined decisions on BRI projects. As will be shown below, SBRs, within the closed-door context of the BRI projects,

increased dependency on China. Gomez *et al.* (2021), Saravanamuttu (2021), and Rajah *et al.* (eds.) (2021) examine the changing dynamics of SBRs due to different power structures in various BRI projects, demonstrating how the Malaysian state is not a unitary actor. Multiple involvement by different levels of government means that China cannot compel *all* of Malaysia's federal and state level agencies to simply endorse all agreements (see Lim *et al.*, 2021; Liu and Lim, 2019). As such, it is especially important not to reductively study the complex dynamics within the BRI projects (Alatas, 2021; CLJ, 2021; da Conceição-Heldt and Mello, 2017; Ahmad Mokhtar, 1987; Breecher *et al.*, 1969). Only inquiries into the actual projects can illuminate the different dimensions and multiple narratives of Malaysia's FP with China (Liang *et al.*, 2021). As such, according to Cox (1981; 215), Gramsci's anarchic scepticism of objectivity in prevailing views of world politics clearly challenges the failure of realism to recognise domestic discontent and social forces of class struggles in a state's external relations. Neorealism fails to study the social domestic context (i.e., power relations of the privileged ruling-business class), wherein FP is an extension of closed-door elite deals at the expense of the state's patrimony (Cox, 1983; 215). A critical approach to global politics and FP would be relational, process oriented and seeks to illuminate how social forces (class, business-ruling elite relations, etc.) counter China's BRI supremacy (Cox, 1987; 15-20). However, given neopatrimonialism (Weiss, 2015; Gomez, 2019), FP bargaining options with China are limited. The subversive nature of the Najib administration's FPDM caused difficulties for subsequent governments in recalibrating FP. While an increasing dependency existed, it was the Najib administration and not China's assertiveness that further indebted Malaysia.

Through the insights from the Neo-Gramscian approach, we examine (growing imbalance in) Malaysia-China relations, especially

from the perspective of the increasing dependency on China's BRI and its assertive politics in the SCS. While one author highlights superficially positive outcomes (Abdul Razak Baginda, 2016, 2020), their supposed complicity in the Altantuyaa and 1MDB cases only confirm Cox's assertion that a non-(fake)-organic intellectual can rise as a critical agent of societal emancipation (Abdul Muein, 2021; Cox and Sinclair, 1996). Similarly, Kuik (2015) described Malaysia-China relations as asymmetrical in terms of territorial size, population, resources, as well as economic and military capacities. Owing to geographical proximity, they are multifaceted, with both standing to gain from "two-way flow of goods, services, capital and people" (p. 418). Kuik and Liew (2018) shared similar views, noting that power asymmetry can even result in "positive and desirable outcomes as well" (p. 10). Thus, our scepticism and critical reading of these elite-oriented narratives are informed by Syed Hussein Alatas's maxim of the captive mind (Alatas, 2020; Alatas, 2016) and Edward Said's criticisms of the colonial mind. Elsa Lafaye de Micheaux (2019: 84) went further in describing Malaysia-China relations as inevitable, recalling that "Mahathir Mohamad had to face the reality of the close, positive, lasting and asymmetrical relationship". He also suggested that imbalance would gradually and eventually benefit China, escalating from "close interdependence" to "strong asymmetry" (de Micheaux, 2019), with Malaysia's economic dependency escalated by the BN administration's megaprojects. Yeoh (2020: 3) also described Malaysia as having exhibited an "increasing politico-economic dependence and subservience to China" under the rule of the BN regime, elaborating on the unequal terms in various projects. Several others note the increasingly disadvantageous position of Malaysia, elucidating its position in relation to China, the nature of the agreements, the degree of dependency, as well as domestic impacts.

4. An Overview of Malaysia-China Relations

In this section, the discussion turns to major events that contributed to the increasing ties and engagements between China and Malaysia since 1957. However, more emphasis will be given to unravelling dynamic disproportions – beginning with the limited diplomatic ties under Prime Minister Tun Razak (1970–1976) and moving towards more pervasive business encroachments under his son, Najib Razak (2009–2018). Thus, the detrimental effects of increased dependency of the patronage networks of the business-ruling elites (especially during the Mahathir and Najib Razak administrations) and China’s massive strategic infrastructural investments cannot be unassumingly ignored.

Fully aware of huge expectations for more assertive and vibrant domestic leadership after the Abdullah Badawi administration (2003–2009), FP under Najib reflected the prime minister being portrayed as the nation’s new top leader, negotiator, and diplomat soon after assuming power. On the international front, Malaysia seemed set to transform its lacklustre foreign relations and diplomacy (Md Khalid, 2013; Mustafa, 2014), focusing more on managing relations with major actors, including the US and China. In his first eighteen months, Najib seemed eager to resolve some of the outstanding issues and “irritants” in Malaysia’s bilateral ties with surrounding neighbours, among them Indonesia and Singapore (Saravanamuttu, 2010, 2021). The priority list of bilateral relations included Indonesia, China, and the US. Arguably, Malaysians generally anticipated more vibrant foreign relations under Najib, who had a different persona, style, and worldview from his immediate predecessor, and was regarded as being capable of becoming a technocratic and “transformational leader” (Parameswaran, 2017), reminiscent of the bold heyday under the first Mahathir administration (1982–2003) (Ahmad Mokhtar, 2014; Ngeow, 2015b).

Thus, Najib took advantage of his unique patronage ties as the son of Tun Razak – it should be recalled that Razak was the first Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) leader to establish diplomatic ties with China (Yong, 1974: 134). It was apparent from the onset that China would be accorded a special place in Malaysia's FP priorities and directions (see below). Their relations had evolved from previously hostile relations during the Cold War to China becoming a more "reliable" economic (namely, trading) partner, and even as a potential "saviour" for the BN government in the 2018 general election (Malhi, 2018: 718). Thus, it is imperative to understand that the increased dependency and the roles played by business interests which forced the influx of China's economic and political strength, aimed to boost public confidence in Najib's leadership's ability to bring China closer to Kuala Lumpur, thus surpassing his father's own legacy.

In short, Malaysia's FPDM approaches to China have varied according to domestic considerations and perceptions of its prime ministers (Ott, 1972: 372). The staunchly pro-Western Tunku Abdul Rahman (1957–1969), who faced a domestic Communist insurgency, did not see the need to establish diplomatic relations with China, as part of the Communist bloc. Apart from the Tunku's idiosyncratic judgement, a historical factor was the large ethnic Chinese population, accounting for about 37 to 38 per cent of the population (Hirschman, 1980; Ahmad Mokhtar, 1987). These demographics were among the major considerations which eventually influenced the anti-Communist Tunku not to recognise China (Ahmad Mokhtar, 1987). His cabinet ministers included influential leaders from his allies in the ruling coalition, the Malay(si)an Chinese Association (MCA), who saw the need to disassociate local Chinese communities from China. The granting of citizenship to win the loyalty and allegiance of millions

of Chinese migrants became a contentious issue in the Tunku administration, especially with the heightening of the Cold War in Asia (Lee, 2015: 108-111). Despite close rapport with Tunku, the MCA leadership had not insisted on a more reconciliatory stance towards mainland China, being focused as they were on the national integration of ethnic Chinese. Moreover, many leaders were more sympathetic towards anti-Communist Taiwan, given that the Kuomintang Malaya (KMTM) influenced the basis of the MCA's ideology (Heng, 1988: 78).

Much has been said and written about Malaysia's "special relations" with China under Razak, who made his historic official visit to Beijing in 1974 at the height of the Vietnam War (Leifer, 1976; Miller and Wich, 2011), to which the close ruling elite ties between BN and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) can be traced (Ngeow, 2017: 54-66). The instrumental role of Razak also signified the growing influence of the MCA as an emerging individual actor in Malaysia's FPDM towards China. Michael Chen, an MCA veteran and who was appointed Special Functions Minister under Razak, was among the key players who paved the way for improved ties (Ahmad Mokhtar, 2014: 92-93). Although trading between Malaysian and Chinese businessmen was not formalised until the mid-1980s, the Associated Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Malaysia (ACCCIM) was among those at the forefront of pushing for economic collaboration (ACCCIM, 20th August 2014). Thus, we argue the importance of the roles and positions of the individual or agency in FPDM.

Furthermore, it is widely believed that BN's overwhelming victory in the 1974 general election could be attributed to Razak's successful visit. As shall be discussed below, driven largely by his strong personal interests and motives, Najib would elevate bilateral ties to an unprecedented level, as clearly illustrated in the close party-to-party relations between UMNO/BN and the CCP (Mansoor Marican, 1979:

190-192). Without the critical roles and strong ties played by political elites and individual business interests and lobbies, especially on the Malaysian side, it will be impossible to justify the increasing encroachment of China's massive infrastructural investments under Najib – including the illegal deals that nearly threatened Beijing-Kuala Lumpur relations (Siddique and Zafarullah, 2020; Thomas, 2021). Efforts to recalibrate Malaysia's FP orientations (especially with China) under PH were taken, together with the massive civil and criminal investigations into alleged irregular financial transactions and money laundering (centred on the 1Malaysia Development Berhad [1MDB] fiasco) under Najib (Abdul Muein, 2021). Testimonies and revelations during the SRC International trial¹⁷ not only illuminate intimate business-ruling elite relations, but also the pivotal role played by the fugitive Low Taek Jho (Jho Low), who facilitated direct communication between Najib and his counterparts in China, thus expediting direct contracts and negotiations with China's BRI projects (Gomez, 2020: 24). This too will be discussed further below. Despite the alarming tensions and diplomatic objections to China's aggressive land reclamation in the SCS, Malaysia allowed for friendly economic ties, even beyond 2018.

In contrast, historic Malaysia-China relations took into account wider diplomatic needs. Improved relations could have been further enhanced if not for the untimely demise of Razak, two years after normalisation. Attention soon shifted to another major Asian power, Japan, via the Fukuda Doctrine – still within the context of the Cold War (Leifer, 1989: 15-16). Pragmatic and strategic approaches towards China took precedence with the (first) ascendancy of Mahathir in 1981. Malaysia's bilateral ties under Mahathir can be broadly analysed in three separate periods/timeframes: (1) under the BN administration; (2) the period of two years prior to his return to power in May 2018, and (3) his brief two months in early 2020. Known for its critical views of

the West, the Mahathir government followed up its Buy British Last campaign with the Look East Policy (1982), which emphasised the virtues of Japanese values and work ethic (and to a certain extent South Korea's) (Md Khalid, 2000). China was still very much preoccupied with its own domestic economic transformation until the 1990s (Ogden, 2019: 41). Although China was excluded from the Look East Policy, Mahathir did later acknowledge its growing importance as a regional power and economic partner. Following Foreign Minister Ghazali Shafie's visit to China in 1984, Mahathir ordered a review of FP with China through the formation of a special task force before transforming it into an inter-ministerial committee. During his official trip to China in 1985, Mahathir expressed "the desire to see the tempo of bilateral relations in the second decade dominated by economic cooperation" (Ahmad Mokhtar, 1987; Leong, 1958). However, bilateral ties were only strengthened in the 1990s following the surrender of the Communist Party of Malaya in 1989.

Ever since then, China has expressed a friendly and reciprocal attitude. During the 1997 Asian financial crisis, for example, the Chinese government held to its promise not to devalue the yuan, thus preventing currency speculation. In response, Mahathir reportedly said that China was a friend indeed, much more than some other so-called friends (Wain, 2012). China's support for Mahathir's East Asian Economic Grouping (EAEG), despite Japanese and certain ASEAN members' disapproval, further influenced Mahathir's view of China as an important partner (Furuoka, 2007: 516-517). Bilateral trade exceeded US\$20 billion by the time Mahathir stepped down, more than fifty times the 1985 figure (Goh, 2018). Although he succeeded Mahathir in an era of relative political stability, Tun Abdullah Badawi was faced with various conflicts, particularly internal opposition from within UMNO, resulting in the perception of weakness and being lacklustre (Md Khalid,

2013; Mustafa, 2014), whose leadership was marked with “half-hearted measures and indecisiveness” (Dosch, 2014).

Given the many criticisms from his detractors, including Mahathir, Abdullah Badawi’s FP outlook has been underestimated to a certain extent, particularly due to the comparative lack of “exciting” initiatives – they leaned more towards the maintenance and improvement of previous relations (Han, 2017: 290-291). Badawi de-escalated lingering tensions between neighbours such as Singapore and Indonesia (Md Khalid, 2013) and proposed the East Asia Summit (EAS), which raised the prestige of ASEAN (Bhatia, 1999: 45-46). Badawi’s focus on regionalism, particularly the centrality of ASEAN and intra-ASEAN relations, became the focus of Malaysia’s FP – evidently so, given that the ASEAN Charter was signed in 2008 (Muhammad Ali, 2016: 220-221).

However, bilateral relations with China also reached new heights. On the economic front, trade agreements between GLCs such as Sime Darby, Petronas, and Khazanah Nasional made significant investments in China, while bilateral trade further significantly increased to USD39 billion, making China Malaysia’s fourth largest trading partner (Kuik *et al.*, 2012: 317). Socio-cultural relations also increased while mutual trust and cooperation had reached its peak, with then Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar remarking that:

Malaysia-China relations have today matured. The mutual confidence, respect and trust that characterize the existing cordial ties have brought interaction between the two countries to a new and never seen before dimension, embracing virtually all areas of human activities and endeavours.

(People’s Daily, 10th June 2004)

Despite intensified economic and investment relations, Malaysia continued with a careful FP strategy, seen in the continuation of the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) while military expenditure reached a peak of RM14.7 billion in 2008 (Ruhanas, 2009: 32-33). It persisted in subtly maintaining balance and protection as insurance against a possible China threat. Regardless, Malaysia-China relations had dramatically transformed from hostile rejection to a cordial partnership over five decades (Leong, 2017: 397).

It is the contention of this paper that Malaysia eventually fell into the tight embrace of China under Najib, particularly due to his exclusive and personal relationship with China. This paper also argues that a major factor leading to the decline of Malaysia's sovereignty, autonomy and bargaining power is the decisions made by the top leadership with the intent of saving Najib and BN (Abdul Muein, 2021; Siddiquee and Zafarullah, 2020).

Mahathir's short-lived PH administration focused mostly on connecting Najib's various trials and lawsuits with the alleged involvements of UMNO's private and government-based activities and investments with the BRI projects (Yap *et al.*, 2020). Decisions to suspend, cancel, revise, or even renegotiate some of the deals (which delegitimised Najib's leadership and contributions) reduced economic dependency on the existing BRI contracts (Tapsell, 2020: 195). Apart from Mahathir's official visits to both Japan and China, he also initiated direct private meetings between his close advisors and Beijing, assuring them that the current domestic scenario was neither meant to undermine existing Malaysia-China relations nor assault the BRI and China's attempt to counterbalance US hegemony. In fact, Mahathir launched the NMFP in 2019, sending a systematic signal to recalibrate FP outlook, renew Malaysia's neutrality in major disputes, as well as champion the voices of the Muslim world and the Global South, thus recognising the

importance of both China and Japan while criticising the injustices of the West, especially the US under President Trump (Tang, 2018; Saravanamuttu, 2021). This reorientation is a clear indication of how domestic dynamics, administration, and leadership changes signify reformist intent, and was used as a pretext to reduce business-ruling elite collusion and gatekeeper access to the state and civil servants. This recalibration illuminates the pervasive role of the domestic contention and individual agency in the state system and FPDM process, beyond a simple reading of external geopolitical considerations and hedging options directed against China (Saravanamuttu, 2021; Alatas, 2021).

In summary: while external geopolitical and security dilemmas of the Cold War saw China as a threat, domestic considerations (i.e., the ongoing Communist insurgency and the sizeable Chinese minority) shaped the Tunku's FP. Meanwhile, Razak's administration's decision to normalise bilateral ties resulted from domestic needs to delegitimise the Communist insurgency, which claimed fraternal ties with the CCP. China's recognition of BN initiated close ties and political relations between the leaders of both UMNO and the CCP (essentially, cooperation between leaders of free-market and state-capitalist systems), and subsequent informal business patronage networks would then influence FP decisions and perceptions with regard to China. Apart from geopolitical considerations of China's economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping, Malaysia's domestic considerations and the interplay between various actors and agencies – across business associations, lobbies, civil servants, and ministerial positions – played a crucial role in encouraging more friendly diplomatic and economic relations.

Moreover, the existence of Malaysia's special envoy (as mentioned earlier) with China is unmistakable evidence of the government's recognition of the importance of domestic and informal business political ties with their counterparts. It was retained by both the PH and

PN administrations. Despite the potential for Malaysia to perform partial counter-hegemonic roles, it was the Najib administration and its pervasive intensification of dependency (under the BRI projects) which hindered Malaysia's ability to negotiate better deals while delaying a consistent diplomatic statement against China's offensive behaviour in the SCS.

5. Heightened Dependency on China's Infrastructural Investments and Business Deals in Government Projects

Under Najib, the number of Chinese-involved projects in Malaysia have increased dramatically over the last ten years (Yap *et al.*, 2020). On the surface, these projects were promoted and advertised as being beneficial and in Malaysia's national interests. However, we argue that the major projects resulted in the perpetuation of dependency. The paper also analyses several of the projects announced through Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) during Najib's official visit to China from 31st October to 6th November 2016, and a supplementary MoU signed on 13th May 2017 – which included the East Coast Rail Line (ECRL), Melaka Gateway, Bandar Malaysia, and the pipeline projects. Massive projects relevant to the BRI, such as the Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Project (MCKIP) and the Kuantan port expansion, are also analysed to identify their potential impacts on Malaysia.

5.1. East Coast Rail Line

While many authors have reviewed the ECRL, some, such as Abuza (2020), have only briefly commented on the ECRL with reference to Malaysia's deepening dependency. This research goes further in examining its impact within the purview of decisions made by Najib administration which led to this situation.

Ever since the announcement of the agreement signed by Najib and his counterpart, Li Keqiang, in Beijing, the ECRL has attracted scrutiny from both the public and opposition parties (Camba *et al.*, 2021). Former transport minister Liow Tiong Lai remarked that the 688-kilometre line, which aims to connect the east and west coasts, was the “biggest single deal Malaysia will be signing with China” (Kok Fay Chin, 2021: 16). The massive RM55 billion project is headed by Malaysia Rail Link Sdn Bhd (MRL), a subsidiary wholly owned by the Ministry of Finance (MoF), in collaboration with China Communications Construction Company Ltd (CCCC), a Chinese state-owned enterprise (SOE), and its Malaysian counterpart, China Communications Construction Company (M) Sdn Bhd. Although it is not clear how the project was initially proposed, reports have indicated that the project was mullied. James Chin (2021), Ahmad Fauzi (2018), as well as Mohamed Nawab and Gomez (2020) argue that the ECRL was seen as a means for Najib to achieve domestic legitimacy among rural Malay voters on the east coast, but we argue that it was also used as a bargaining tool to attain funds from China to cover up the debt ridden 1MDB scandal. As typical of Chinese involvement, the ECRL had not gone through an open tender, and much of its operations remained in secrecy (Camba, 2021).

Owing to the project's immense valuations, the ECRL was among the projects targeted by PH. Former Finance Minister Lim Guan Eng reported that the project's cost was highly inflated (Yeoh, 2020: 414) and entailed dubious payment structures, including mandatory payment structures based on timing milestones which required Malaysia to pay a certain amount every six months regardless of progress, PH administration further concluded that the ECRL was not economically viable and “made absolutely no economic sense” (Md Nasrudin *et al.*, 2018: 21). Furthermore, it was deemed “oversized in relation to

Malaysian needs and financial capabilities” (de Micheaux, 2019, p. 91). In other words, disadvantages outweigh advantages, which stem from the lopsided nature of the agreement. Chinese news outlets reported that over 80,000 jobs would be created, but neglected to mention that majority of workers would be hired from China (Xinhua, 25th October 2017).

Despite most of the project’s costs being financed by China, it is difficult to consider the deal as a worthwhile investment. Jomo K.S., a former member of the Council of Eminent Persons (CEP) tasked with investigating the projects with Chinese involvement, noted that the ECRL did not constitute a foreign investment because up to 85 per cent (RM55 billion) of its loans were financed by Exim Bank of China at a 3.25 per cent interest rate (*Malaysiakini*, 30th January 2019). The ECRL is not considered an investment or a form of foreign direct investment (FDI) because the money would ultimately have to be paid by Malaysia. Tham (2018) also noted that since China provides technology in addition to large loans transacted via non-affiliated companies, these transactions are not recorded as FDI data and thus not publicly published, unlike traditional FDIs (where investment flows from the investor country are utilised by the host country through the employment of locals, for example, in return for shares and equities in the project). With the ECRL, China would not only profit from incurred interest, but also the technology and workforce needed for the project. This lop-sidedness is further evidenced in the initial agreement, wherein only 30 per cent of the civil workforce was Malaysian. Although renegotiated agreements did increase Malaysian involvement to 40 per cent, the other expenses are still borne by Malaysia (*Free Malaysia Today*, 26th May 2019).

Furthermore, the original cost was also underestimated. Tun Daim Zainuddin, another former member of the CEP, stated that the cost of the second phase of construction would have amounted to an additional

RM11 billion, with the total cost exceeding RM66 billion (Zhang, 2020: 8). In addition, de Micheaux (2019: 23) noted that such additional costs were normally expensive for developments of this kind. As such, PH planned to cancel the project because the overall debt was perceived to overburden the country (Liu and Lim, 2019: 229). However, the threat of incurring significant penalties from China meant that the government could only renegotiate, ultimately reducing the cost to RM44 billion. Yet the cost of financing the loans remained significant, with no guarantee that the return on investment (ROI) will compensate for the loans. Jomo noted that even with the reduced cost, “the project would never pay for itself” (*Free Malaysia Today*, 12th April 2019). Ultimately, since the loans are guaranteed by the Malaysian government, the repayment of long-term debt must be borne by future generations (Abdul Aziz, 2021: 9).

5.2. Pipeline Projects

The costs of the pipeline projects reached upward of USD251 billion (Malhi, 2018: 719). Also announced during Najib’s 2016 visit to Beijing, the RM5.35 billion Multi-Product Pipeline (MPP) was envisioned to run between Melaka and Kedah, while the RM4.06 billion Trans-Sabah Gas Pipeline (TSGP) was planned to connect the Kimanis Gas Terminal to Sandakan and Tawau. They involved Suria Strategic Energy Resources Sdn Bhd (SSER), a wholly owned subsidiary under the MoF, and a Chinese SOE, China Petroleum Pipeline Bureau (CPP), the contractor for all the pipelines (Hutchinson and Tham, 2021: 689). A RM9.4 billion contract was awarded to a single company, financed with loans of RM4.53 billion by Exim Bank, again guaranteed by the Malaysian government (Tham, 2018).

Like the ECRL, the PH government revealed that the project was riddled with issues. According to Lim Guan Eng, of the RM8.3 billion

paid for by the Malaysian government, only 13 per cent of the work had been completed as of 2019, with scheduled completion by 2020 – far from Lim’s 88 per cent completion estimate (Lim *et al.*, 2021). However, the payment structure was based on timelines instead of physical progress (Yeoh *et al.*, 2019). As a result, the pipeline projects were suspended and subsequently scrapped, resulting in Malaysia having to pay a yearly penalty of RM678 million to Chinese lenders until 2037. It must be noted that the nature of the project was far from ideal for Malaysia since the very beginning. In addition to the loans, CPP was also the “engineering, procurement, construction and commissioning (EPCC) contractor” (Tham, 2018). Furthermore, an additional RM525 million worth of consultancy agreements and a maintenance contract worth RM476 million was awarded to Chinese companies instead of local consultancies. Again, China benefitted while Malaysia was left with incomplete infrastructure and mounting debts (*New Straits Times*, 5th June 2018).

5.3. Bandar Malaysia

Bandar Malaysia is a 486-acre project set to be developed on premium land at the centre of Kuala Lumpur, envisioned as a regional and financial business hub with integrated development, including arts and entertainment centres, recreational parks with attractions such as waterfalls and canals along with retail areas (Serina, 2017). Bandar Malaysia was announced in 2011 by Najib as a public-private partnership development, but faced several obstacles given that Bandar Malaysia Sdn Bhd was formally owned by the MoF’s wholly owned subsidiaries, TRX City Sdn Bhd and 1MDB. Amidst public outcry and the 1MDB debacle in 2015, the company announced that it would sell its 60 per cent stake in Bandar Malaysia to a joint venture between Iskandar Waterfront Holdings (IWH) and China Railway Group Limited (CREC)

for RM 7.41 billion – a proportional amount of the IWH-CREC's valuation of RM12.35 billion (*The Straits Times*, 8th May 2017).

Unexpectedly, TRX City Sdn Bhd announced in 2017 that the agreement had lapsed, citing that IWH-CREC had “failed to meet the payment obligations” (Wang and Zhao, 2021: 661). Several reports indicated that termination resulted from internal tensions between government actors, IWH's owner, Tan Sri Lim Kang Hoo, as well as disagreements involving Chinese parties. Aside from monetary factors, Malaysian government officials could not agree to the demands of Chinese actors, who wished to secure the tender for the proposed high-speed rail (HSR) project connecting Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, since it would be “against national interest to allow strategic assets to be owned by foreigners” (Liu and Lim, 2019: 225). Thus, the cessation of the contract resulted in the full project and land reverting to TRX City.

In 2019, however, the deal between IWH-CREC was reinstated when Lim Guan Eng announced that TRX City had resold 60 per cent of its stake for the same price. However, the agreement was amended to entail a larger advance payment of RM1.23 billion, along with an increase in the number of affordable homes, a reduced payment period from seven to three years, and the establishment of an advisory committee under the MoF to ensure that the project would benefit Malaysia (Veerasanai and Anuar, 2020). In addition, Ekovest, also owned by Tan Sri Lim, announced its plan to purchase 40 per cent of the IWH-CREC's stake, although to date an agreement has yet to be made. What is notable about Bandar Malaysia is the fact that IWH-CREC has secured the same open tender twice, with no increase in the valuation even after five years. Nevertheless, the Malaysian government left IWH-CREC as the master developer (Kok Fay Chin, 2021: 17).

Overall, Bandar Malaysia would be favourable only so long as the government does not relinquish its 40 per cent stake, which leaves IWH

with 36 per cent and CREC with 24 per cent (Yap *et al.*, 2020). Yet it remains unclear how much influence CREC has on the development. Prior to 2017, Bandar Malaysia's major draw was as the proposed terminus for the HSR line – as of 2021, the HSR has been cancelled by the PN government due to its inability to reach an agreement with Singapore (Camba, 2021). This has undeniably set back China's BRI plans, but it remains to be seen how China will engage the current government (Camba *et al.*, 2021).

5.4. Melaka Gateway

The RM42 billion Melaka Gateway project differs from the abovementioned projects, having been launched in February 2014 by a local property and contractor, KAJ Development Berhad (KAJD) (Hutchinson, 2019) with no participation from the federal government. In 2016, however, the project managed to attract various investors and was included among the MoUs signed (Jones, 2019). The project was planned to be built on four islands, three of which were on reclaimed land, with proposed facilities such as a private marina, cruise terminals, deep water ports, theme parks and technology parks, residential areas, as well as multiple commercial lots within a free trade zone. Also officiated by Najib, it was declared an "Island of Tourism" by the state government and included in the federal government's National Key Economic Transformation Programme (ETP), despite having no public funding (Cipriani, 2021: 188-189).

Among the international investors were the US-based Royal Caribbean International as well as three Chinese SOEs: Power China International, the Shenzhen Yantian Port Group, and the Rizhao Port Group (Hutchinson and Tham, 2021: 698). Aside from KAJD, Chief Minister Incorporated (CMI), Melaka's state-owned management and consultancy firm, also owns a stake in one of the islands. According to

the Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA), which classifies Melaka Gateway as an FDI-based development project (in comparison to the ECRL), Power China International had agreed to invest up to RM30 billion – the bulk of the investment – over two years from the signing of the MoU (Zhang, 2020: 22). Former Melaka Chief Minister Adly Zahari further affirmed that the project is under the supervision of local companies and would benefit locals in terms of employment opportunities (*Malaysiakini*, 17th November 2020).

However, the megaproject had come under scrutiny in terms of its financial feasibility. The World Bank reported that Malaysia's existing eight priority ports are adequate for its needs until 2040, and thus recommends their full utilisation by shipping traffic (Hutchinson, 2019). Furthermore, it reiterated Mahathir's concerns about the costs – despite BN government support, “the Najib administration had not placed any public funds in the initiative” (Patrick, 2017), probably indicating that the port was not pertinent to their economic plans. While Hutchinson regards the project as “questionable”, we argue that the issues are potentially destabilising for Malaysia's sovereignty.

The project was almost scrapped on two occasions, once in 2019 and again in 2020. In 2018, former Minister of Transport Anthony Loke was cited by various sources saying that the port, scheduled to be completed in 2019, had not shown any progress and that the technical approvals awarded by the Department of Environment and the Department of Irrigation and Drainage had expired (Zhang, 2020: 22). Furthermore, Loke mentioned that the 99-year operating lease was conditional on the port being in operation by 2021. As a result, the operating licence for the integrated deep-sea Melaka Gateway and cruise terminal jetty was cancelled in 2019. When KAJD retaliated by threatening to file a lawsuit, seeking RM139 billion in damages, its license was reinstated. On 16th November 2020, the Malacca state

government terminated the land reclamation agreement on the grounds that the project had failed to be completed within the deadline (3rd October 2020). However, on 28th November, Chief Minister Sulaiman Md Ali allowed the project to continue, citing technicalities in the contract. Notwithstanding legal instability, these incidents have demonstrated the feebleness of sovereign governments – here, a property developer along with its foreign partners were able to pressure state and federal governments into continuing to greenlight an unstable project (Heydarian, 2019: 18). As of April 2020, only one out of four islands had been reclaimed. At its current pace, it is entirely possible for KAJD to run out of funds before completion. If the state government is unable to reclaim the land, KAJD may sell off strategic assets, and thus it is in the best interests of the state to secure its land and directly engage with private parties on legal grounds (Lupo-Pasini, 2021: 172).

As is typical of Chinese BRI projects, severe negative effects on the marine environment and the socioeconomic welfare of locals have also been reported, eliciting protests from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Sahabat Alam Malaysia and the Kristang population. Development works have not only reduced the livelihoods of fishermen, but the stench from the silted surface during low tide has also affected surrounding businesses (Cipriani, 2021: 188-189). Scholars have also argued that the project stands to benefit China more than Malaysia. Hong *et al.* (2019: 73) further notes the “Melaka Dilemma” faced by China, which it aims to resolve through several BRI projects. Ownership of several ports here gives China increased security over essential assets passing through the Strait of Malacca, as well as allowing it to dock several vessels, thus highlighting their geopolitical strategic value (Gomez *et al.*, 2020: 45-71).

5.5. The Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park and the Kuantan Port Expansion

Although not among the MoUs signed in 2016, these projects remain highly related to China's BRI (Gomez *et al.*, 2020; Zhang, 2020; Hutchinson and Tham, 2021). Initiated by Najib in 2013 to stimulate economic growth in the eastern region of Kuantan, he had proposed that a sister park be built in Kuantan during the launch of the China-Malaysia Qinzhou Industrial Park (CMQIP, over 13,600 acres) in 2012 (Ngeow, 2021b: 59). This would strengthen bilateral economic ties under the Five-Year Program for Economic and Trade Cooperation (2013–2017) (Liang *et al.*, 2021: 734). The resulting joint venture was divided into three phases, with development planned in three areas: MCKIP 1 (1,200 acres); MCKIP 2 (1,000 acres); and MCKIP 3 (1,300 acres). Malaysian and Chinese consortiums were involved, with the former holding a 51 per cent stake. Key Malaysian actors included a public-private partnership between IJM Land Bhd, Sime Darby Property Bhd, and the Pahang state government, while their Chinese counterparts were the SOEs Guangxi Beibu Gulf International Port Group (GBGIP) and Qinzhou Investment Development Co Ltd (MCKIP, 10th January 2017).

At present, the local subsidiary of a Chinese steel plant, Alliance Steel (M) Sdn Bhd, has been established at MCKIP 1 with an investment of RM5 billion, with other manufacturers expected to open in the future (Gomez and de Micheaux, 2017: 812). The Pahang state government also reported that in 2017, employment at MCKIP involved 2,400 locals and 3,600 foreigners, with 89 per cent of the land sold to investors. Meanwhile, 20 per cent of MCKIP 2 was allocated for investors, with 20,000 jobs expected to be created there by 2020. Despite reports of increased economic growth in the area, the developments have elicited several concerns. Khor (seminar, 7th March 2014), for example, noted

imbalances in the MCKIP compared to its sister park, CMQIP. Although the MCKIP is undergoing expansion, the total area would only amount to 3,500 acres, and thus generate much less production and income. Furthermore, China can re-export products to saturated markets as well as attain Certificates of Origin, thus effectively exporting products under Malaysian labels (Zhang, 2020: 22). Dai (2021) and James Chin (2021) note that Chinese companies tend to crowd out local small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

Regardless, the region has seen an increase in activity with the Kuantan Port Expansion. Along with the establishment of the MCKIP in 2013, Najib signed and announced an MoU with Chinese companies for the expansion of the former local federal port. Initially operated by a federal statutory body under the Ministry of Transport, Kuantan Port was privatised in 1998 and subsequently handled by the Kuantan Port Consortium Sdn Bhd (KPC), owned in turn by IJM Corporation Berhad, which sold a 40 per cent stake to GBGIP and International Port Group Co. Ltd for RM334.42 million in 2013. Capacity was set to expand to 52 million freight tonnes, and RM3 billion was jointly invested by IJM Corp and GBGIP (60:40 equity shares respectively), funded by local banks and internally generated funds (Tham, 2019). While Tham (2019), Noorul Shaiful Fitri and Ahmad Fayas (2017), as well as Hutchinson and Tham (2021), view the expansion project as a positive factor for economic growth, we contend that Chinese involvement poses a security concern.

In effect, China vis-à-vis its SOEs holds a 49 per cent stake in the MCKIP as well as a 40 per cent share of Kuantan Port. To a certain extent, GBGIP's investments enable a degree of foreign control: one of the streets in the Gebeng Industrial Estate has even been renamed "Qinzhou Road". Kallianiotis (2013: 24–56) has described the political risks of foreign entities having control of certain industrial sectors. Key

strategic sectors such as ports must be highly protected and regulated (Lim *et al.*, 2021). The concerns are further aggravated by the port's direct access to the SCS, to which China has consistently asserted its territorial claims and conducted maritime espionage in, allowing China easy access to and surveillance of the waters puts not only Malaysia but also other regional nations at risk (Camba, 2021; Camba *et al.*, 2021; Heydarian, 2019; Grove, 2021). A point of comparison is Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port, where 80 per cent of its stake was sold to China in return for debt relief, even then only reluctantly (Lee and Md Nasrudin, 2021: 90). If Malaysia does not take measures to increase security, the country may enable China's military activities, essentially serving as a proxy of both domestic and international elites and their business interests (Zokhiri, 2020; Abdul Aziz, 2021; Taylor, 2017).

5.6. Critical Appraisals of the BRI Projects

Several similarities can be discerned above. The first is that major actors are involved on both the Malaysian and Chinese sides. Many of the Malaysian public actors consist of government entities and their subsidiaries, such as the MoF and Suria Strategic Energy Resources Sdn Bhd (SSER), although a few private investors such as KAJD do get involved. However, the lines are blurred with the involvement of GLCs such as IWH and Sime Darby Property. Similarly, Chinese actors are characterised by the involvement of SOEs, where the lines are also blurred when it comes to private actors. In China, all "private" entities – including all those listed above – are not entirely separate from the government, which exercises either direct or indirect involvement (Gomez *et al.*, 2020; Gomez *et al.*, 2021).

Secondly, all of them are financed by Chinese creditors. According to Tham (2018), these projects "are funded through loans that are

transacted through non-affiliated companies”, where their exact sizes are unknown: data from China is not published, thus leading to transparency issues.

Thirdly, most of the projects involve secrecy. Because Chinese companies typically do not publish financing agreements or the terms of their BRI projects, their true nature and cost remains undisclosed. Chinese creditors do not subscribe to multilateral financing approaches such as those espoused by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) or the Paris Club, which impose guidelines on borrowing and lending (Cai and Nolan (eds.), 2019). The lack of transparency opens the doors to corruption in the ECRL and the pipeline projects, for example (Alatas, 2021; Abdul Muein, 2021; Rewcastle Brown, 2018; Grove, 2021; Thomas, 2021; Siddique and Zafarullah, 2020).

Fourthly, they are characterised by imbalances in the labour involved and contracts awarded, among others. According to Zaharul *et al.* (2020: 38), the terms of the agreements of the ECRL, TSGP, and MPP are “lopsided and unfavourable to Malaysia”, and the majority benefit China, particularly with regard to the flow of capital.

Lastly, the projects are also potential risks to security. The Melaka Gateway project resulted in environmental degradation, loss of livelihoods for the locals and legal issues (Abdul Muein, 2021). Loans, penalties, and interests accrued are also financially burdensome. We agree with Abuza (2020) that Najib agreed to many dubious deals due to the need for financial bailouts. We observe his willingness to surrender to China to protect his domestic legitimacy and personal interests.

6. The Implications for Malaysia's Political Economy and Foreign Policy

As discussed earlier, the deepening of Malaysia-China relations under the Najib administration was prompted by the need to protect vested interests and ensure regime stability (Bloomberg, 10th January 2019). The indebted ruling BN grew precariously closer to the CCP, which essentially “bailed out” Najib at the height of the debacle, causing other problems and challenges to surface (Rewcastle Brown 2018; Thomas, 2021; Malhi, 2018). Here, we analyse the multifarious impact of Najib's personal role and neopatrimonial rule in influencing and deepening China's intrusions into our domestic politics, economy and FP before and after the 2018 general election.

6.1. Growing Economic Dependency

One lasting legacy of Najib's premiership is how domestic politics and the economy have become intricately linked with and significantly influenced by China (Abdul Muein, 2021). It is evident that FP and diplomacy have become tools by which the narrow business interests of the highest leadership of Malaysia and the CCP advance their interests.

We contend that certain parties within and outside the ruling coalition have taken advantage of Najib's vulnerability and desperation, which in return led to the assertion, promotion, and protection of China's strategic interests in Malaysia. This helps to explain the rapid and unprecedented inflow of investment into the BRI projects without much public scrutiny.

Typical of China's investment practices, it does not reveal information on the terms for its loans and deals exclusively with the recipient country's government (Hernandez, 2019; 30-32). The lack of transparency is conducive for corruption, and the projects themselves are

not necessarily in the best interest of the country. As noted by Liew Chin Tong, PH's deputy defence minister, the ECRL and other proposed projects were unfeasible and "made no economic and strategic senses", and he called for their revaluation and revamp (*The New York Times*, 20th August 2018). It is not far-fetched to claim that such investments are different from and more precarious than those undertaken in other developing countries, given that they are directed at ensuring regime stability. Najib's former Special Envoy, Amhari Efendi Nazaruddin, testified as much to the High Court:

Najib had offered [Chinese] SOEs (state-owned enterprises) the opportunity to be involved in infrastructure projects and resolve 1MDB's and SRC's debts simultaneously. The sentence "while simultaneously completely resolving 1MDB and SRC debts" clearly means DS [Dato' Sri] Najib wanted to convey the message that this relationship would help 1MDB and SRC by bailing them out.

(The Edge Markets, 7th September 2019)

Amhari was certain that "Najib and Jho Low planned to use the deals with China GLCs to bailout 1MDB's debts" (para. 166), and these projects included the TSGP, MPP, and ECRL. Leaked cabinet documents and information from a whistle-blower also indicated that the ECRL's cost was purposely inflated by RM30 billion for this purpose (Rewcastle Brown, 2018). Jones and Hameiri (2020) further note that while the projects were initiated by Najib, Chinese officials served as "brokers". Furthermore, Najib admitted to using funds from SRC International for political purposes in a seven-minute video posted on his personal Facebook page, diverting them towards UMNO's political activities, including welfare programmes and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives for orphans (CLJ, 2021). This suggests

that Chinese financing was misappropriated for 1MDB's and UMNO's purposes. The depth of these links meant that Najib and BN, as well as post-BN leaders, would find it difficult to disassociate or distance themselves from Beijing (Yoong, 2021: 419-420).

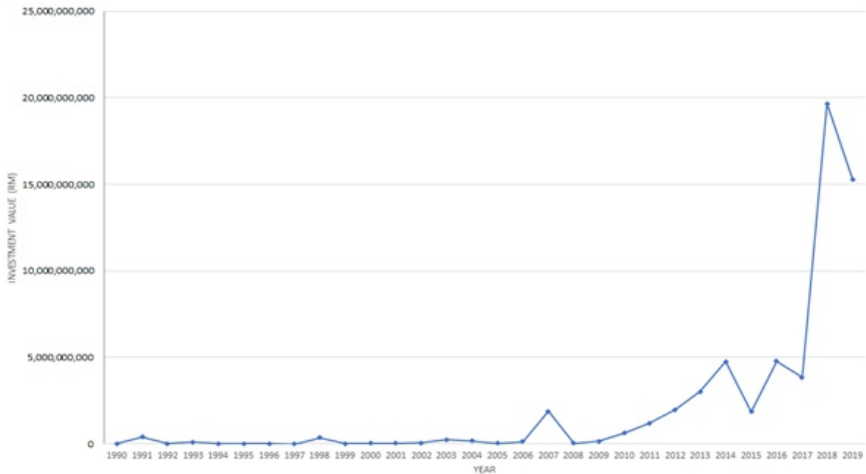
Malaysia's lopsided economic ties have become reminiscent of the unequal and "exploitative" nature of other quasi-state and neopatrimonial regimes, creating further incentives for the elites in exploiting its disadvantages. Thus, a Neo-Gramscian reading confirms the intimate intricacies between domestic business and ruling elites, debunking the myth of "debt-trap diplomacy" – it was not easy to argue that Malaysia was passively relying on China. Jones and Hameiri (2020: 4-5) argue that the BRI is being built piecemeal, through diverse bilateral interactions. While China's decidedly non-western model and BRI arrangements are popular options for authoritarian states, their resulting severities are mostly determined by the political economy and poor governance of the recipients (Gonzalez-Vicente, 2019: 510). There is no doubt that both China and recipients suffered substantially negative economic consequences, yet findings from Sri Lanka and Malaysia confirm that debts arose mainly from the misconduct of local elites and the western-dominated financial market, which inflicts more harm upon recipients' economic, political, social, and environmental conditions (Sufian, 2018: 14-15). In these BRI projects, local elites and their business patronage networks pursued their own political agendas (Grassi, 2020: 17-19). The result is the blatant exploitation of Malaysia's natural resources, including its land and sea, most clearly illustrated in the Melaka Gateway and MCKIP projects. The MCKIP is particularly concerning – here, a major foreign power which espouses different ideological beliefs and authoritarian values is allowed to take control of territory in resource-rich Pahang – incidentally, Najib hails from Pahang,

meaning that the project is also driven by electoral considerations (Dettman and Gomez, 2020).

Even under PH, Malaysia's domestic politics, economy and FP continued to be dominated by unresolved issues with China, now its top foreign investor and trading partner, and managing these issues became topmost priorities (Hutchinson, 2018: 583). They were subsequently renegotiated to rescale costs and terms, with two pipelines cancelled entirely. Other private projects, such as the Melaka Gateway, remain at risk of being repossessed and thus controlled by Chinese SOEs if the developers are unable to meet their financial obligations and ROI (Chang, 2020). Despite all efforts, post-Najib governments continue to be "subservient" and weak, compounded by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic (Mark, 2019). The Malaysian economy was already suffering major setbacks from Najib's economic mismanagement (Kurlantzick, 2021). But even as Covid-19 crippled the domestic economies of many advanced and developing countries, China emerged stronger than its closest rivals and continues to provide "financial" support via the BRI (World Bank, 30th September 2020). Chinese SOEs have taken the opportunity to offer over 500 manufacturing projects to Malaysia, valued at over RM72 billion in 2020, including paper mills (Kyaw San Wai *et al.*, 2021: 84-87). The present PN leadership cannot afford to review its existing "partnership" to reduce China's economic presence, given that bilateral economic relations have seen China's investments steadily rising since 2009, peaking in 2018 at over RM19.6 billion (see Figure 1).

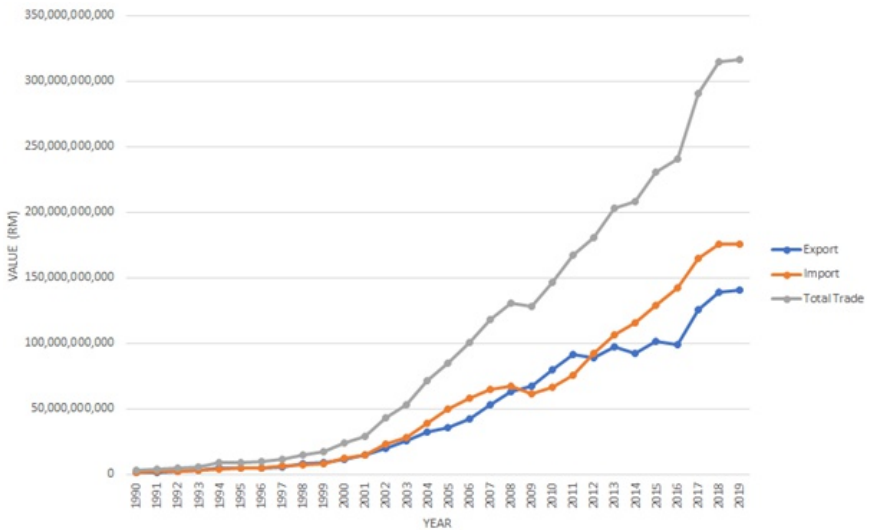
The deepening relations are particularly apparent in the trade sector and palm oil market – the latter is among Malaysia's top export products (Malaysia External Trade Statistics, 2020). China imported over RM9 billion worth of palm oil in 2019 (World Bank, 23rd June 2021), and is the third largest user of Malaysian palm oil.

Figure 1 China's Foreign Direct Investment to Malaysia, 1990–2019



Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia.

Figure 2 Malaysia-China Bilateral Trade, 1990–2019



Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia.

Following the European Union's proposed ban on palm oil imports that year, former Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah reported that China had aided Malaysia by increasing the volume of purchases (Yogambigai, 2020). Beyond palm oil, Figure 2 shows that Malaysian exports to China accounted peaked at RM140 billion in 2019, providing a steady market and buffering uncertainties in the broader international market.

On a related development, China's economic visibility has spilled over into other areas of concern: the migration of thousands of Chinese nationals to Malaysia. The former Ambassador to Malaysia, Bai Tian, noted that around 100,000 Chinese nationals either worked locally or resided in Malaysia under the "Malaysia My Second Home" (MM2H) programme (*The Star*, 26th September 2020). While overall interactions between Malaysia and China were affected badly during the pandemic, especially private and business sectors, Chinese soft power, asserted through vaccine diplomacy and the presence of its medical teams has helped but also challenged Malaysia's domestic and international outlooks (Pyzhikov and Gushchin, 2021; Chang, 2021; *The Star*, 17th September 2021; Chheang Vannarith, 2021). Simultaneously, there have been several instances of Chinese nationals illegally crossing borders and triggering security issues, exploitation in the BRI projects, as well as involvement in transnational crimes (*The Wall Street Journal*, 27th October 2021; *The Diplomat*, 8th June 2020; Mohd Faudzi and Noraini, 2021; *South China Morning Post*, 19th July 2020; Azmil and Por, 2021a, 2021b). Many Chinese nationals have also purchased high-end properties such as units in Forest City, while others are interested in pursuing their tertiary education in Malaysia (Wang and Reagan, 2020; Serina, 2017; Lye, 2019; Xia *et al.*, 2019). Surveys by ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute on Southeast Asian views of China in 2020 and 2021

have shown a gradual decline in positive views of China. Malaysian views on Chinese officials and private citizens in matters related to the BRI, SCS, Covid-19, and culture are stable, but are gradually growing more negative because of China's assertiveness and the extent of illegal Malaysian political involvement in the BRI (Seah *et al.*, 2021; *Malay Mail*, 20th January 2020). Yet it is imperative to acknowledge that there is no single Malaysian narrative about China, since apart from official diplomatic narratives, people-to-people narratives "on the ground" are diverse and contested, which we shall discuss next.

6.2. China's Soft Power and Malaysian Education

International students from China have found Malaysia an ideal destination for higher education, enrolling in private and public universities – the (not they) cultural similarities (i.e., with ethnic Chinese Malaysians) as one of their pull factors (Wong and Ooi, 2013; Mok, 2012). The neoliberal influence on higher education and varsity rankings means that local universities have become more dependent on students from China, whose numbers are expected to grow (Wan *et al.*, 2020; Olssen and Peters, 2007; Kim *et al.*, 2015). Nonetheless, the rise of "Asian Ivy Leagues", the decline of Western universities' hospitality towards Chinese students, and the pandemic have catalysed the arrival of large numbers of foreign Chinese students (Ma *et al.*, 2021; Chan, 2012; *Asia Times*, 3rd September, 2020; *South China Morning Post*, 3rd October 2020).

This significance is not lost on the Chinese government, which specifically chose Malaysia as the location for Xiamen University's pioneering overseas campus – the first such instance in China's tertiary education system (Md Nasrudin *et al.*, 2018; Lee and Md Nasrudin, 2021). Additionally, the rise of Confucius Institutes in Malaysia is also an apparent subject of concerns among local commentators, especially

the extent of their effectiveness in helping boost China's soft power – and even in gauging negative local views on China (Ngu and Ngeow, 2021; Lee and Ting, 2016; Xia and Yang, 2018; Petru, 2021; Kluver, 2014; Lei and Chang, 2017). China also has no qualms about making political donations to Chinese vernacular schools (see more below), and former Ambassador Bai Tian even remarked about wishing to establish an international Chinese school (*The Star*, 27th September 2020). In 2019, “propaganda material” in the form of a comic book which heavily promoted the BRI was distributed to several libraries and schools (*The Star*, 24th September 2019). Although the book was written by a Malaysian, Hew Kuan Yau, he was also the chief executive officer of the Malaysia-China Business Council. Nonetheless, it can be argued that China, vis-à-vis local elites and proxies, is attempting to instrumentalise Overseas Chinese narratives and the complexities of Malaysian Chinese vernacular education to mould and orient Malaysian public and youth views of China.

6.3. The Influence of “Wolf Warrior” Diplomacy

In recent years, senior Chinese diplomats and ambassadors, labelled as “wolf warriors” and “patriots”, have played an instrumental role in promoting and protecting China's national image and interests abroad, becoming increasingly bolder and aggressive in their conduct (Martin, 2021a; Alden and Chan, 2021; Poling and Tran, 2020). For example, Liu Xiaoming, China's ambassador to the United Kingdom, sternly defended China's persecution of minorities in Xinjiang due to their “anti-Chinese” elements, asserting China's successful ethnic policy, while consistently denying all reports from credible sources (Brandt and Schafer, 2020; Martin, 2021b – interviewed by Joanna Nawrotkiewicz, 22nd October 2021). This undiplomatic behaviour may be associated with China's growing confidence and pre-eminence on the global stage, particularly in

terms of its advances in technology and scientific innovation, and has been widely criticised amid growing anti-China sentiment particularly in Australia and the US.

In recent years, there have been many examples of backlash against these wolf warriors, particularly under Xi – including in Malaysia (Mohd. Amir and Loo, 2020: 21-28). It is interesting to note that such reactions and responses have been rather muted. One Malaysian academic specialising on China opines that such behaviour is unnecessary since many Malaysian leaders (in both the ruling coalition and the Opposition) are already very friendly with the top leadership of the CCP. Successive Chinese diplomats are noticeably confident that relations with Malaysia will remain strong despite turbulent domestic and international politics. The newly appointed Ambassador, Ouyang Yujing, confidently “regard[s] China-Malaysia relations as a priority.... And [they] have overcome the adversities together” (*Sinar Harian*, 12th July 2021).

6.4. Cultivation of “Pro-China” Malaysian Elites

A strongly associated issue is the successful cultivation of influential Malaysian personalities, namely politicians, businessmen, academicians, media personalities, and NGO leaders, who are instrumental in promoting a more positive image of China (Gomez *et al.*, 2020, 2021). The fact that many Malaysians of Chinese descent are successful and influential corporate players means that the CCP leadership also relies on their endorsement. Over the years, pro-China leaders and personalities have helped portray a more positive image of China and served its interests. The MCA, for example, openly showed support for China during Najib’s administration, enacting billboards and banners which proclaimed that “One Belt, One Road is a blessing for the people” and “To vote for the National Front is to support China!” in the lead-up

to the 2018 election (Yeoh, 2020: 220). Images of MCA President Liow Tiong Lai shaking hands with Xi were also prevalent. The MCA, which once vilified communism, now relies on the CCP for domestic legitimacy.

Further examples can be found in the diplomatic corps. Upon retiring, many former ambassadors to China have joined the ranks of various China-related organisations. In situations where, for example, the president of the Malaysia-China Friendship Association (former ambassador Abdul Majid Khan) simultaneously chaired MIDA, concerns about conflicts of interest must be raised. Other prominent examples are former Singaporean ambassador, Kishore Mahbubani, the Malaysian political analyst, Abdul Razak Baginda, and British journalist, Martin Jacques. Within Malaysia, it is widely believed that a number of Malaysian political leaders and party members from across the political spectrum are apologists for China with funding ties to Chinese think tanks (Lee and Md Nasrudin, 2021: 70). Former religious affairs minister, Mujahid Yusof Rawa, the son of a respectable member of PAS (Yusof Rawa), drew criticism from the public and Islamic NGOs when he described “re-education centers” in Xinjiang as “vocational and training institution[s]” (*Free Malaysia Today*, 28th June 2019).

6.5. UMNO-CCP Relations

Interestingly, not much attention has been paid to UMNO’s establishment of formal relations with the CCP in 2010, which resulted through the signing of an MoU not long after Najib became prime minister (Ngeow, 2017). There were no formal precedents for such an arrangement, and ties between the two parties did not slow even after the fall of BN, which even received a courtesy visit from a CCP delegation in 2019. UMNO’s secretary-general, Tengku Adnan, expressed that it was a “great honour”. Elsa Lafaye de Micheaux (2019) and Yeoh (2020)

have noted China's active campaigning and public support for BN, and that the "Beijing deemed the survival of the Najib administration to be of utmost importance" (Yeoh, 2020: 220). As mentioned above, China previously made political donations to Chinese vernacular schools (*The Star*, 13th February 2017) – former ambassador Huang Huikang announced a donation of RM200,000 to 11 schools in 2017. He had previously made headlines in 2015, following his visit to Petaling Street (part of the historic Chinese enclave in Kuala Lumpur), where he made comments "tantamount to interfering in Malaysia's domestic affairs" (Han, 2020: 184-185). Such actions may be an attempt by the Chinese government to increase its political influence at the grassroots level, particularly among the ethnic Malaysian Chinese.

Interestingly, a rift was created between BN cabinet members following the incident, who argued amongst each other regarding MOFA's summoning of Huang Huikang (Parameswaran, 2015). Former Tourism, Arts and Culture Minister Nazri Aziz lambasted Deputy Foreign Minister Reezal Merican for his actions – even though Huang refused on the grounds that he was too occupied and insisted on MOFA officials visiting his embassy instead (Ponnudurai, 2015). Members of cabinet (who were also UMNO party members) lambasted each other in defence of Huang, a situation which diplomatic sources called "a big blow to Malaysia and national sovereignty.... The Chinese influence appears to have reached the top echelons of power" (Ponnudurai, 2015). These events are indicative of former Malaysian diplomat Dennis Ignatius's (2017) observation that the "firewall" enacted by Razak to prevent China's interference in domestic affairs has been gradually undermined under Najib in order to court investments, loans, and deals.

6.6. Jho Low and the Rise of the Kleptocracy

Among the influential personalities or non-conventional actors was Jho Low, who claimed direct access to the Najib family, and who was tasked to negotiate with China on behalf of Malaysia regarding 1MDB. Amhari's court testimony above revealed that he and Jho Low was sent by Najib on a (successful) secret mission to persuade China to purchase 1MDB assets and secure finances in return for awarding the projects relevant to the BRI (Wright and Hope, 2018: 315–6). Recent works by Abdul Muein (2021), Hafiza Aishah *et al.* (2020), Ting *et al.* (2020), as well as Isma Noornisa and Thilagavathi (2019), demonstrate how Amhari's statements unravelled the extent of vested interests between policymakers and shadow business patronage. Here, a businessman and a political secretary usurped the roles of formal national bureaucratic and diplomatic officers (i.e., MOFA, the Ministry of International and Trade Industry, MITI, and MIDA), who understand and operate around the mechanisms of domestic interests. They were not only forced to take a back seat but also left in the dark.

6.7. The Uyghurs and Malaysia's Deafening Silence

As a Muslim-majority country, Malaysia was renowned for its firm stance in issues revolving around the plight of Muslims worldwide. From 1981 to 1983, Malaysia strengthened its pro-Muslim FP under Mahathir, who was regarded as “new voice for the Third World” (Walid Jumblatt, 2021; Nair, 1997; Suzalie, 2005; Abdul Majid Hafiz *et al.*, 2017; Muhammad Fuad and Zaheruddin, 2013; Nasr, 2003). While Malaysia once voiced out on behalf of Muslims in Bosnia, Palestine, the Rohingya crisis, and India, it has been subdued on the issue of Uyghur persecution. Kelemen and Turcsányi (2020) explain why the Muslim governments largely abstained from raising the case, given China's BRI

projects in their respective countries, thus signifying the dilemmas caused by domestic constraints on FP. Joanne Smith Finley (2019) further confirms the extent to which the domestic nature of hybrid political regimes of many Muslim countries played a crucial role on the sudden invisibility of consistent official statements condemn China's actions. Thus, despite the increasing role of domestic public opinion, many Muslim countries compromised, given existing their unfinished BRI negotiations (*The Diplomat*, 5th October 2021). Building on Nair (1997) and Nasr (2003), Walid Jumblatt (2021), Smith Finley (2019), as well as Kelemen and Turcsányi (2020), have confirmed the politically ambiguous roles of Islam in Malaysian FP since Mahathir's "ideological positioning" of Malaysia's struggle to seek international political legitimacy vis-à-vis the solidarity of the global ummah during his first administration (Delfolie, 2012: 27-28). However, subsequent regime change meant that resolving the human rights paradigm within its existing narrative of non-interference was further exacerbated by difficult BRI negotiations (Yu, 2021: 37-38).

Despite credible reports on the maltreatment of the Uyghurs, no officials made public comments or statements in their defence under Najib. The only reports that surfaced during Najib's tenure were those regarding the deportation of Uyghur refugees in Malaysia. According to the former Bar Council president, George Varughese, eleven Uyghurs were deported in 2011, including those registered as refugees under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (*The Star*, 15th February 2018). In 2018, former deputy prime minister, Zahid Hamidi, also reported intentions to extradite another eleven Uyghurs who were held in custody on China's request. Sources indicated that Malaysia was "under great pressure to hand them over to China" (Oxford Analytica, 2016).

Malaysia's official stance only slightly changed under Mahathir (Wani, 2021: 22), despite being vocal about oppressed Muslims in Myanmar and Palestine (Ezell, 29th July 2021; Hoffman, 2021: 79). The Mujahid Yusof Rawa situation mentioned earlier is a case in point (*South China Morning Post*, 2nd July 2019). As Abuza (2020: 128) observed, "Malaysia has said almost nothing about China's treatment of its Turkic Muslim population ... never formally identified the persecution of the Uighurs, and in fact has actively exonerated the PRC's [People's Republic of China] oppression". However, we find that Mahathir did officially recognise the oppression in a 2019 (non-verbal) parliamentary reply, noting that it "must be acknowledged by all" (*Nikkei Asia*, 20th May 2021). The fact that the response was not widely publicised suggests that Mahathir was hesitant about provoking China, although it made efforts to protect Uyghur refugees by redirecting them to Turkey, thus pushing back in "small but principled ways" (Abuza, 2020: 131). However, "there is reason to fear that China could weaponise economic instruments should Malaysia pursue policies antithetical to Chinese interests" (Wani, 2020: 8). Expectedly, Mahathir was reported to cautious about upsetting China over these issues (Cohen, 2020). Thus, the growth of China's economic leverage under Najib has resulted in Malaysia losing its ability to express dissent. In return, internal discontent and chaos since 2018 is a domestic structural constraint on Malaysia's ability to renegotiate its position in the Chinese dominated East Asian order and in exiting the BRI (He, 2021; Fernandez, 2020; Saleena, 2020; Azmil, 2021), with FP compromised accordingly (Yeoh, 2020; Han, 2020). Both conflicting narratives in the BRI and SCS unravel further, and there are limited future options to ensure that "everything will be positive and good" (Alatas, 2021: 9). Difficult periods of renegotiation with China's BRI projects, means that

Malaysia has less viable options in asserting its territorial sovereignty, signifying fluid and contested FP dynamics, caught between domestic and external dimensions (BBC, 5th March 2020).

7. Concluding Remarks: What Have We Not Learned So Far?

As eloquently summarised by Garrison *et al.* (2003: 155), the importance of reflection, evaluation and integration are “essential to opening the black box of domestic politics and policymaking” in FP. Indeed, in his FPA framework, Saravanamuttu (2010: 1–5) constantly reminds us of the “intersubjectivity” of the Malaysian state, which is “the principal actor” in the international system, as well as the key material and social structures where identities and interest are equally important – they are socially constructed rather than determined by material variables only. Inspired by Wendt’s constructivist and other critical stances, Saravanamuttu (2010: 3) also recognises Cox’s Neo-Gramscian conceptualisation of hegemony beyond structural realism’s hegemony (i.e., a superpower’s material capability to impose sanctions on small states). Hegemony is not an inevitable product of preordained logic, neither is it a natural law, but rather a peculiar emergence from various social and economic forces – FP decisions by leviathans are not dictated by the logic of consequences, but rather the logic of appropriateness, always relative and conditioned by a specific time and space. The current increased dependency on China and attempts by Malaysia to escape struggles in the BRI project and the SCS were the outcomes of political contingencies between 2009 and 2020 specifically, and not since 1957. We highlight three major lessons that current scholars of Malaysia-China relations have not learned.

7.1. Foreign Policymakers Do Not Behave as a Tabula Rasa

Our analysis of Malaysia-China relations during the Najib, PH-era Mahathir and PN administrations has found that the hegemony of elite-business interests (i.e., the neopatrimonial regime) and gatekeeping systems operates via Malaysia's quasi-state reality, particularly salient in winning and incurring more Chinese contracts, loans and debts. Thus, various levels, dimensions, and analyses – including in turn individual roles, FPDM, institutional, cultural, and societal factors – converge to constitute FP. Malaysia's FP decisions cannot be reduced to reactive manoeuvres against external perceptions of threats from either Beijing or Washington, in line with the conventional application of hedging strategies by small state. Hence, we are reminded of blind spots in current FPA research and Malaysia-China relations.

Pandemic lockdown measures and unstable political regimes have constrained positive outlooks of Malaysia's FP, requiring more nuanced analytical and critical explorations to explain and understand the current political climate. Consequently, our Neo-Gramscian readings and focus on FPDM (i.e., the process) are not intended to simply dismiss structural realism; rather we are circumspect in correcting a misguided trend that reduces FP to a reaction to external power shifts and tensions. Such a view assumes an unhistorical premise: that small state cannot exhibit a relative autonomy. Simultaneously, it is dangerous to assume that FP shifts are conditioned by either international changes or domestic chaos alone: such arguments imply that domestic business-ruling elites became important in FPDM only after BN's defeat in 2018. Thus, while we favour the interplay between domestic and external factors, as well between formal and informal dimensions with individual agents, we are more concerned about misleading analytical readings in Malaysia-China relations, as will be seen below.

Mohammad Ikhrum *et al.* (2021: 127-128), for example, attempt to apply neoclassical realism approaches and highlight the importance of “intervening variables” (e.g., domestic politics and individual leadership) to explain the impact of an independent variable (i.e., the Cold War and the rise of China in the international system) upon a dependent variable (i.e., the Razak administration’s decision to normalise relations) (pp. 128-140). Their conclusion leads readers into more dangerous terrain, since it reduces such Cold War normalisation to three plausible explanations: (a) systemic shifts in the international politics and US-China diplomacy; (b) domestic factors (i.e., the Second Communist Insurgency and economics needs); and (c) the extension of a complex dependency, in which both Malaysia and China saw the greater benefits of regional capitalism, a system that Japan exploited. While Mohammad Ikhrum *et al.* conclude that international politics and external environment were more influential factors (p. 142), one can also cherry-pick explanations of why Razak’s administration become friendly towards China. They mistakenly argue that Kenneth Waltz’s (2018) “third images”, or third level of analysis (i.e., the international system), were more influential than the individual or state system levels of analysis.

Our objections are as follows. First is the introduction of Giddens Rose’s (1998) “intervening variables” to criticise the limitations of structural realism for FP theory, especially its obsessions with international factors, mainly by proponents such as Holsti (1967: 56), Waltz (2018; 1979) and Mearsheimer (2001: 46). As such, the inclusion of three levels of analysis and neorealism is antithetical to Rose and subsequent second-generation neoclassical realists (Lobell *et al.* (eds.), 2009: 67). While states interact in response to global opportunities and constraints, their FP decisions are shaped at the levels of state-society relations, domestic political regimes, strategic cultures, and leader

perceptions (Ripsman *et al.*, 2016: 67). In fact, the introduction of intervening variables leads to FP considering both internal and external factors due to its immediate external environment (region). Thus, Mohammad Ikhrum *et al.*'s confusion of “domestic politics and leadership” as “intervening variables” on Cold War politics (independent variable) is antithetical to Rose’s dictum since Rose’s intervening variable is referred to the regional variable (and not domestic politics and leadership, as implied by Mohammad Ikhrum *et al.*) and not “everything is reduced to international politics” (see Meibauer, 2021).

Second, suggesting that Malaysia and China (after it distanced itself from the Soviet Union) wanted to follow the Japanese model of western liberal capitalist is entirely inaccurate (Mohammad Ikhrum *et al.*, 2021: 141). Distancing itself from the Soviet Union and normalising relations with the US does not mean China was in favour of embracing the US-moulded Japanese model (see Tan, 2016). Despite the increasing stability of Sino-Japanese relations since the end of the Second World War, contested memories and tensions persisted (see Shambaugh and Yahuda, 2014). Furthermore, the authors claimed that Razak’s normalisation was part of Malaysia’s FP’s orientation in distancing itself from the West and abandoning neutrality is historically inaccurate (Mohammad Ikhrum *et al.*, 2021: 141). The actual shift was only realised during Mahathir’s first administration (1981-2003), as expressed in the “Buy British Last” and “Look East” policies (see also Md Khalid, 2000).

Finally, citing Abdul Razak Baginda’s assertion (Mohammad Ikhrum *et al.*, 2021: 139) that Tun Razak was not a statesman, and thus lacked a FP outlook in normalising relations with China, is a classic case of making an unhistorical argument. This is a tendency of the rationalist realist theory (an actor-specific theory) assumptions of Abdul Razak Baginda’s realist views, employed to disguise ontological and

epistemological failures in recognising the obscure distinctions between domestic and international facades of quasi-states (see also Alatas, 2021).

In embracing FPA traditions, Johan Saravanamuttu reminds us that the “analyst does not merely explain global phenomena ... (but) also attempts to steer it towards a particular intellectual trajectory” (2010: 3). After all, the minds of foreign policymakers are not a *tabula rasa*. FP does not merely function as an expression of the rational-realist prescriptions of policymakers, but actually also constitutes domestic and external processes (in which leaders’ decisions are embedded). Subsequently, a critical appraisal of historical or contemporary Malaysia-China relations should recognise the reality that FP is the product of multifarious processes, interlinked with identities and interests, and that they are products of societal needs and contestations: in short, the character of domestic politics. Only in recognising this can we probe the vested interests, social forces, and agents behind impulsive FP decisions.

7.2. The Limits of Rationalism and Structuralism in FPA

It is abundantly clear that the literature on Malaysia-China relations have mushroomed, especially the attempts to theorise Malaysia’s IR. But providing an analytical framework has resulted in ambiguity and demonstrates the pitfalls of existing scholarship in recognising the epistemological lacunae in the “foreign relations” (output-oriented) approach in mainstream IR theory, as well as in the FPA approach (a balanced matrix between FP and FPDM). In fact, recent work by Jones and Jenne (2021) have shed light on Southeast Asian FP, recognising that hedging suffers from two significant limitations: (a) it is just a binary opposite of balancing or bandwagoning; and (b) its neorealist and empiricist nature suffers from the burden of

rationalism (which heavily relies on international structures and the given categories of diffusions of capability between superpowers and small states). Consequently, hedging prescriptions overstate imaginary intentions and parochial possibilities – getting the rhetoric right, but strategy wrong.

Our critical and retrospective readings have instead unravelled the nexus behind the façade of the state – rather than being a rational actor, it is in reality a site of disputed political authority, with multiple agents engaged in FPDM. The extent of the interplay between agency and structure, as well as between formal and informal state and non-state actors, goes beyond binary distinctions between domestic and external environment variables. Ongoing literature often ignores the reality that FP is a neglected and contested object, in which discussions of the BRI projects, the SCS, or anything in between simply describe smaller individual dimensions of Malaysia's FP with China. Faridah and Nurulhasanah (2020: 1-5) have shown how the limited and largely unobserved core dimensions of Malaysia's FP are neglected. They have uncovered several neglected but valuable avenues, where the operational definition of FP either emphasises the process or output. Consequently, discussions have overlooked five factors which can be considered of FP: (a) individual personality; (b) roles, positions and behaviours of office holders and their patronage networks; (c) material and social structures; (d) societal, non-governmental, individual actors and private citizens; and (e) external and internal dimensions of the state (Faridah and Nurulhasanah, 2020: 9). As such, their findings are in line with Johan Saranamuttu's criticism of stock realist and hedging proponents (2010: 4). Future research must explore Saravanamuttu's schematic distinctions of FP – (a) objectives; (b) postures (i.e., orientations); (c) strategies; and (d) actions – in order to provide a more systematic and comprehensive study of FPA.

7.3. The Need for a Critical FPA Turn

Our research leads us to two important future but underexplored research areas. First, using the FPA framework goes beyond conventional FP studies in IR. Often, policymakers pay relatively more attention to IR theory, and many seem uninterested in policy-relevant work. While we recognise IR's essential advantages, it is unfortunate that many present FP debates on China ultimately rest on limited structural realist prescriptions (i.e., hedging). Without denying their merit, we worry about the possible effects of false and flawed theoretical. Walt's (2005: 23) reminder of the parochial relationship between IR theory and FP studies, as well as Cox's assertion that "theory is always for someone and some purpose" are both timely, especially at a time when politically biased and parochial approaches dominate and are adopted by present Malaysian "IRians" working in closed-door meetings. In fact, Smith *et al.* (2017) highlight the importance of striking a balance between theory and practice, as well as the importance of exploring middle-range theories (i.e., those from the broader social science traditions) in overcoming the limitations of such actor-specific (IR) theories.

Second, our investigations into various BRI projects have only confirmed the contested attributes of the state (as highlighted above). FP can no longer be attributed to the "black box" nature of the state, and there is a difficulty in recalibrating Malaysia's FP orientation accordingly. Thus, there is no singular narrative, no "theory of everything" that explains Malaysia-China relations. Different actors, government levels, business entities and transnational deals in various BRI sites reveal the multifaceted and complicated nature of China-Malaysia relations – certainly more complex than the Razak and Nixon visits to Beijing (Garrison, 2012). Significantly, Malaysia-China relations must embrace Brummer "critical features" in FPA (2021). Engagement with critical theories in FP studies allow existing studies to:

(a) challenge those in positions of power by scrutinising FPDM; (b) investigating “subordinated actors” and individual private citizens in their conceptual and empirical aspects; (c) investigating silenced or invisible actor; and d) challenging limited political engagement in asymmetrical power relation structures in domestic and international arenas.

The present preoccupation with domestic constraints and changing policies caused by political tussles only increase public disillusionment, while Malaysia’s FP is ridiculed by foreign ambassadorial representatives who advise their home countries (Aznil and Por, 2021a, 2021b; Aznil, 2021; Saleena, 2020). We have opted not to exaggerate geopolitics and external power politics, but at the same time, we do not underestimate the significance of the interplay between domestic forces, since they play a more significant roles in FP – the domestic constraints and variables of FPA. Within recent FPA traditions and process-oriented public policy studies, Grove (2021) and Hudson (2019; 2015) have shown more persuasive explanations of the Global South’s FP (in)consistencies, in which the interests and identities of leaders determine the likelihood of FP being used to safeguard regime survival and replicate ties with global elites (i.e., policymakers and rulers of powerful states) and capitalist networks – hence leading to our FP dilemma today. Thus, for incumbent policymakers, Putnam’s Two-Level Games and domestic constraints in FP are key areas of consideration – the policymakers must move beyond normative discussions of existing binaries (i.e., democratic or non-democratic natures, Western or non-Western political systems).

Future research needs to probe the dimensions and diffusions of power in state-society relations, variations between authoritarian regimes, concealed business deals among policymakers as well as poliheuristic and non-poliheuristic explanations of foreign economic,

diplomatic, and security relations (Oppermann, 2020; Raunio and Wagner, 2020). One may be reminded of the danger of reducing Malaysian security dilemmas since 1957 to a simple imitation of the pre-modern past – as Milner's orientalist simplistically sees it, the tributary relationship of the feudal *sistem beraja* and *negara* to the imperial dynasties in China (for example, see Milner, 2020; Milner and Siti Munirah, 2018; Milner, 2008).

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their heartfelt gratitude for the opportunity to conduct an online elite interview series with former prime ministers, ministers, and bureaucrats, as well as for the email exchanges with FPA professors from Ivy League and Oxbridge universities. Given the sensitive nature of the current political climate and possible repercussions in Malaysia, we adhered to research ethics¹⁸ in IR and can ensure that our interviewees' actual identities will not be revealed. We would also like to extend our appreciation for the comments on the earlier version of the draft, which we used to further refine our manuscript. Any mistakes are our own.

Notes

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1. A widely held assumption is that observing Malaysian domestic politics is more interesting than studying its IR and FP. See also Weiss, 2015; Gomez, 2019, 2020, 2021; Jomo and Wee, 2014; Rajah *et al.* (eds.), 2021; Case, 2017.
2. While the three official core objectives of Malaysia's FP, as established by MOFA, are often argued by a proponent of Realism as unchanged fundamental tenets (Kuik, 2015: 215-218), history has shown that several attempts to redefine present understandings or provide extended dimensions of our FP blueprint were clearly the result of selective domestic political calculations by the elite and intelligentsia. This resulted in ongoing (de)construction of FP, in consideration of the ever-changing internal and external environments (Saravanamuttu, 2010: 56; Nor Azizan *et al.*, 2011: 41-42). In this retrospective process, Zokhiri (2020: 159-182) argues that PH did not simply attempt to return to foundational FP tenets. Rather, the administration engaged in an ongoing paradigm shift seeking to strike a balance between domestic pressures and global diffusion of power. Chew (1982: 366) made a similar argument with regard to previous BN attempts to change FP towards Britain and Singapore (see also Saravanamuttu, 2021).
3. Such dilemmas result from the trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS), the US-China trade war, China's militarisation in the SCS and Malaysia's heavy engagement with the BRI projects.

4. Reducing Malaysia-China relations to external and material capabilities only distort the poliheuristic and non-poliheuristic fact that such FPDM is largely shaped by domestic calculus and nontangible variables. In fact, ambiguity and uncertainty further confirms that the recalibration of the FP requires a nuanced understanding of domestic constraints, beyond Realist obsessions with hedging and the external reality of the country. Presently, PN's disarray and silence over major global pressing issues reveal the unprecedented level of danger of maintaining existing FP through a simplified version of Realism (Saravanamuttu, 2021: 95-96; Parameswaran, 2019).
5. In this article, "ideology" refers to the complicity in state-to-state SBRs and GLCs. Such SBRs are increasingly pervasive since they reveal the appropriation of the state's (patrimonial) resources. Investigation by the US Department of Justice and ongoing high-profile trials related to the IMDB scandal have unraveled the extensive intrusion of direct business deals between ruling elites and business patronage networks at various levels of the state and business ties between Malaysia and China. According to Cox (1983; 1981), such hegemonic projections and defiance of public outcry are key domestic forces, which result in uniquely peculiar FP approaches to China. Thus, we argue that dealing with this (internal) "hegemony" is the main impediment to recalibrating FP. As such, explorations of the FP and FPDM must be brought into the political-economic dimension of FPA.
6. Mahathir originally served as prime minister under BN during 1981–2003. See also Milne and Mauzy, 1999; Wain, 2012.
7. For a good selection of readings on Malaysian history, politics, and international relations, see Andaya and Andaya, 2017; Weiss, 2015; Saravanamuttu, 2010.
8. We use FP recalibration based on Saravanamuttu's (2021) and Zokhiri's (2020) interpretations of Malaysia's placement within the China's BRI

zone and the SCS security dilemma. In this regard, the recalibration approach undertaken by PH illuminated three previously missing dimensions of the Malaysian FP dilemma: (a) a new FP blueprint that extensively considers layers in FPD; (b) corruption investigations and trials that unraveled business and elite ties in the former BN and current PN regimes; (c) the collapsed of the democratically elected PH government and subsequent Covid-19 lockdowns which showed the unstable nature of the PN regime and resistance to reform by the benefactors of direct tender and business ties with the BRI projects. These dimensions only confirmed the domestic constraints on FP, which have been underestimated by previous literature.

9. One of the authors (Muhammad Danial Azman) was a former Ph.D. student of the late Professor Ian Taylor (1969–2021). Taylor was an eminent expert of Neo-Gramscian perspectives and China-Global South relations. His critical reinvigorations of China in Africa, emerging powers in world politics and developing countries with China were not only ahead of his time but also inspired this author's reading of Malaysia beyond state-centric IR theories. The author remains indebted to Taylor's advice to improve our article's Neo-Gramscian readings.
10. Unlike conventional FP studies in IR which reduced the analysis of the state as a unitary actor in global politics, FPA developed a distinct interdisciplinary model bridging comparative politics and international relations. Thus, FPA adopted a pragmatic, systematic, and more nuanced analysis, where it treated FP as part of public policy and emphasised both the process and output over management of the state's external relations and activities. In effect, it challenges the given boundaries of external and internal dimensions and factors. For a more detailed analysis, see Hudson and Day (2019) and Smith *et al.* (2017).
11. In the recent literature, proponents of dependency and neo-imperialism have used the term "extraversion" to explain exploitation and

manipulation by the business-ruling class in emerging democracies. Instead of simply assuming the lack of political agency to defy “globalisation’s” pressures and foreign intrusions, sometimes, the elites manipulate their state disadvantages to *induce* foreign intrusion, thereby increasing further dependencies on major actors to their benefit. See Burnell *et al.* (eds.) (2017).

12. See, for example, Hamzah, 2021; Uras, 2017; Malhi, 2018.
13. According to Smith *et al.* (2017: 8-9), conventional IR literature has not analytically investigated the process and output of FP over two dimensions. Thus, when building a theoretical foundation of the process dimension of FPA, Hudson (2017; 2015) confirmed the importance of the paradigmatic works of Snyder *et al.* (1954), Rosenau (1984), as well as Sprout and Sprout (1956).
14. See also, Md Khalid (2000).
15. See, for example, Md Khalid (2000).
16. According to Hill (2003: 24-25), conventional IR literature is blind to the “political” nature of the state in question. He suggested that future FP research should consider the groundbreaking studies of Jackson (1990) and Mohammed Ayoob (1995) in comparative politics. Thus, inspired by Hill (2003), Alden and Aran (2017) argued for FPA proponents to reject the failure of neorealism’s hedging prescriptions, especially in acknowledging the nature of the quasi-state in explaining the FP of a developing country. Interestingly, a leading hedging proponent of Malaysia’s FP, Kuik (2021a), defended his previous failed analyses. Only recently during the pandemic did he pay more attention to the nature of the “elites” and the “political system”, but he remained silent on FPDM. Thus, we further argue that domestic constraints – i.e., instability since the collapse of the PH government and prolonged lockdowns – have further confirmed our agreement with Alden and Aran (2017) and Grove (2021), leading us to dismiss Kuik’s Sinocentric arguments.

17. SRC was a former subsidiary of 1MDB. See also Wright and Hope (2018); Rewcastle Brown (2018); Thomas (2021).
18. For a good reading on ethical considerations, elite interviews, and political repercussions in IR, see Lamont and Boduszynski, 2020; Lamont, 2021.

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