

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentary, Yang Razali Kassim.

The Rise of Trump and Its Global Implications

Malaysia-US Relations: Challenges and Continuities

By David Han

Synopsis

In the coming Trump era, Malaysia-US relations are likely to face both challenges and continuities. Existing structural factors would continue to undergird Malaysia-US relations while potential extremes of the Trump presidency could affect domestic politics in Malaysia. Personality-driven foreign policy still counts in future Malaysia-US relations.

Commentary

THE INAUGURATION of President-elect Donald Trump on 20 January 2017 will herald a new era in United States foreign policy. This will have implications on Malaysia-US relations. Although Prime Minister Najib Razak had openly expressed that bilateral ties would not be affected with a new US president at the helm, it is uncertain how bilateral ties will fare under the Trump administration's Southeast Asia policy which remains unclear.

There are three possible scenarios on continuities and challenges in Malaysia-US ties in the Trump Era. Firstly, embedded structural factors will continue to undergird Malaysia-US relations. Secondly, potential extremities arising from the Trump presidency could pose domestic political challenges for Najib and his government. Thirdly, Malaysia's elite-driven foreign policy could lead to positive developments in Malaysia-US relations.

Enduring Structural Factors

Firstly, enduring structural factors will still undergird Malaysia's response to uncertainties concerning Trump's foreign policy to the region. Malaysia could leverage on its position as a key state in ASEAN and continue to present itself as a node through which the US could maintain its presence in Southeast Asia.

This is, of course, predicated on whether the Trump administration would place as much focus on Southeast Asia as Obama did. In the past, there had been periods when the US had neglected Southeast Asia. As such, there is no guarantee that Southeast Asia would feature prominently in the next four years. Obama's marked focus on ASEAN multilateralism was a bonus. Most probably, Malaysia and other ASEAN countries know that Obama's Asia Pivot is not likely to be the norm.

Therefore, Malaysia is likely to focus on working with other ASEAN countries to ensure ASEAN centrality so as to steer the trajectory of Southeast Asian geopolitics. Traditionally, Malaysia has strived to avoid leaning too closely to any major powers. Malaysia's stance on equidistance and non-alignment is to help prevent the US or any other major powers from gaining a greater foothold in the Southeast, and thus mitigate potential great power politics which would cause instability in the region.

On an optimistic note, Malaysia would still be friendly towards the US but this friendliness has to be moderated. Although the US and Malaysia did enjoy significantly better ties under Obama, Malaysia was careful not to side with the US fully on security issues to avoid upsetting China.

Malaysia's South China Sea Concern

Malaysia would also be concerned if the Trump administration takes on a more hawkish posture towards China on the South China Sea issue. Incoming Secretary of State Rex Tillerson criticised China's island building in the South China Sea and even suggested barring China's access to those islands. Malaysia and other ASEAN countries welcome US presence in the region as a stabilising force in view of China's rise.

But it is unlikely they would support the US in a confrontational stance against China on the South China Sea issue, as this could dangerously escalate existing tensions in this maritime dispute.

Malaysia could strengthen important aspects of existing bilateral cooperation with the US. One such avenue is Malaysia's ongoing collaboration with the US on the global coalition in the fight against ISIS. So far, Malaysia has contributed in intelligence sharing, counter-propaganda, and domestic security efforts to tackle ISIS threats in the country. If Trump keeps his word on his earlier declaration that he would take much tougher position against ISIS, his ISIS policy could possibly enhance bilateral cooperation in the fight against ISIS.

Impact of Trump's Presidency on Malaysia's Domestic Politics

Secondly, potential extremes arising from Trump's foreign policy posture could pose domestic political challenges for Najib and his government. Given Trump's harsh

rhetoric on making it difficult for Muslims to enter the US, a closer cooperation with the US against ISIS could be a sensitive issue. If Trump's eventual effort to counter radicalised Muslims takes on a hard line stance, Malaysian Muslims could view Trump's posture as very unfriendly towards Muslims.

If Najib and his government becomes too pro-American, it could invite a domestic backlash. Najib's political opponents could also exploit Trump's harsh rhetoric against radical Islam and undermine Najib's credentials as leader of a Muslim majority country.

Notwithstanding the potential impact of Trump's presidency on Malaysia's domestic politics, Malaysia's foreign policy under Najib has remained largely under the purview of the government and the foreign ministry. Malaysia's foreign ministry is still relatively insulated from public opinion. This relative freehand in Malaysia's foreign policy approach would allow Najib to mitigate potential fallout from religious sensitivities and ensure continuity in Malaysia's foreign policy towards the US.

Personality Still Counts

Third, since Malaysia's foreign policy is still elite-driven, personality factors still matter. After the election of Trump, Najib has been making positive remarks about Trump, and even spoke publicly about their joint golfing experience. On 27 November 2016, Najib had a phone conversation with Trump to congratulate him, reconnect ties and build up bilateral relations. One could expect to see more interactions between these two leaders in the future.

As golfing buddies Najib and Trump could possibly tee off to something positive in US-Malaysia relations the coming years in spite of the uncertainties. These interactions could even become stepping stones to new opportunities, such as trade and economic cooperation beyond the almost defunct Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) mega trade pact.

In the end, how Trump's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia and Malaysia would crystallise is unknown. What Malaysian and other ASEAN leaders could do is to engage the US proactively on areas of common interests in the hopes of inducing the Trump administration to take a greater interest towards this region. As a small country, Malaysia's leaders would have to make strategic adjustments and react accordingly to manage major structural changes due to changes in US foreign policy.

David Han is a Research Analyst with the Malaysia Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.
