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A Taste of Things to Come: Secretary Clinton's Visit to Malaysia

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US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's three-day trip to Malaysia in her seven-nation tour of the Asia-Pacific signaled yet another development in the unfolding of increasingly warm relations between Malaysia and the United States. Clinton's visit reflected an undercurrent of converging interests and vision by both countries. Significantly, it reanimated a connection that seeks to make the most out of the present by transforming itself from a stable and solid relationship into a strategic and enduring partnership for the future.

Elina Noor, Assistant Director, Foreign Policy and Security Studies at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia, analyses US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Malaysia, and explains that the visit "... reanimated a connection that seeks to make the most out of the present by transforming itself from a stable and solid relationship into a strategic and enduring partnership for the future."

The US-Malaysian bilateral relationship has long been underpinned by strong trade and economic fundamentals. Two-way trade in goods between the United States and Malaysia totaled approximately US\$34 billion in 2009, and the United States has consistently ranked among Malaysia's top foreign direct investors. Even at the relationship's political nadir in the late 1990s, economic ties prevailed and were bolstered in the background by security and defense cooperation that stretched back to the 1960s.

These elements persist, but what has changed most this past year has been the visibility of the relationship and the momentum with which it has progressed. Catalyzed by President Obama's quest for a new beginning with Muslims around the world and his declaration as America's first Pacific president, US-Malaysia ties took off with a series of remarkable developments in 2010 that opened a new chapter in bilateral relations. Five years after it was first tabled, Malaysia passed the Strategic Trade Act 2010 in April to curb the export and transshipment of weapons of mass destruction-related material. Shortly after, Prime Minister Najib met with President Obama in Washington ahead of the Nuclear Security Summit as one of only two Asian leaders to have a bilateral meeting with the US president on the sidelines of the summit. The other Asian leader was Chinese President Hu Jintao.

That same month, Malaysia made its first military deployment to Afghanistan, sending an initial twelve of a forty-member medical team including seven women to help provide critical health services, at the request of the Afghan government. In July, following multiple overtures by the office of the US Trade Representative, Malaysia announced its readiness to participate in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Last month, Malaysia joined the TPP's third round of talks in Brunei as a negotiating member with full support from the United States and the TPP's other seven members.

Clinton's maiden trip to Malaysia mirrored this multi-pronged approach to deepening and widening ties between the two countries. As part of her comprehensive engagement to elevate relations to a higher level, she met with Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin



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Yassin—Prime Minister Najib was in hospital—and Foreign Minister Anifah Aman in Putrajaya to discuss trade, Afghanistan, and non-proliferation. She also held a town hall meeting with 400 youth at the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization in Kuala Lumpur, where she spoke of Malaysia’s potential to be a thought leader in representing a diverse and dynamic facet of Islam to the world. The next day, Clinton delivered remarks to the American expatriate and Malaysian business communities at an aeronautical trade event at Subang Airport, where she acknowledged that the sale of fifty American-built Pratt & Whitney engines to Malaysia Airlines would create high-paying, skilled jobs in both the United States and Malaysia.

Clinton did not avert reporters’ questions about the prosecution of Malaysia’s opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim, but as testament to how far bilateral relations have matured since the late 1990s, she chose instead to focus on the prospects of a dynamic partnership between the two countries whose bilateral interests far outweigh the differences that divide. She underscored the importance of people-to-people engagement through education and technology transfers, and pledged US assistance in English-language instruction and learning to address an urgent need in Malaysian human capital development. Additionally, Clinton witnessed the signing of a joint-venture agreement between Johns Hopkins University Medical School and the Malaysian Academic Medical Center to establish a new medical school and teaching hospital following the Hopkins curriculum, as part of an ongoing US contribution to capacity-building and skills training in Malaysia. Together with Minister of Science, Technology, and Innovation, Dr. Maximus Johnity Ongkili, she signed a memorandum of understanding between the respective governments to expand collaboration on the research and development of new technologies.

However, the US-Malaysia relationship is more than the sum of its bilateral parts, and Clinton’s visit should be considered against the backdrop of the evolving regional context. That Clinton’s first full day in Malaysia coincided with the Congressional mid-term elections in the United States was a sobering reminder that political changes in the United States—and elsewhere—have the potential to be quick, complete and dramatic. Crucially, it highlighted the importance of anchoring bilateral engagement not only across multiple issue-areas but also through multilateral regional institutions. It ensures that the core bilateral aspect of the relationship is complemented by sustained and active regional engagement that bolsters the relationship against domestic political vagaries. This is a premise that is recognized by both the United States and Malaysia, borne not only by Clinton’s affirmation of the centrality of ASEAN—and Malaysia’s role in ASEAN—to the emerging regional architecture but also by Malaysia’s welcome of the United States as a signatory to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, as well as a new partner in the ASEAN Defense Minister’s Meeting Plus and the East Asia Summit.

Secretary Clinton brought to Malaysia the same spark and optimism that has reignited bilateral relations after a long lull. Calling her visit “an appetizer,” she bade farewell with a rally of “*Malaysia, Amerika Boleh* (Malaysia, America can do it)!” a variant of the “*Malaysia Boleh!*” slogan that preceded but mirrored the “Yes, we can!” cry of Obama’s presidential campaign. It took fifteen years for a US Secretary of State to return to Malaysia since the last bilateral visit by Warren Christopher. The fact that Clinton’s visit this year was followed only a week later by US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates is testament to the promise relations now hold for both countries. The only other visit that would have topped this run of Cabinet-level trips to Malaysia would have been one by President Obama himself. After the appetizer, perhaps next year, the “full banquet.”

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