

# ***NAMA, GROUP-BINDING AND MORAL BALANCE:*** Themes and Origins of Malaysian Foreign Policy

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## **Preface**

It was a privilege to be chosen as the second holder of the Tun Hussein Onn Chair in International Studies. I am grateful to the Noah Foundation, which supports this position, and to the host organisation, ISIS Malaysia. I would like to thank especially the Foundation's Chair, Datin Paduka Dr Faridah Dato' Abdullah. I have been familiar for a number of years with ISIS Malaysia and my impression has long been that it is a fine organisation, playing a vital role for Malaysia and for the ASEAN countries more generally. I am particularly indebted to the former Chairman and Chief Executive, Tan Sri Dato' Seri Mohamed Jawhar Hassan, the current Chairman and Chief Executive, Tan Sri Rastam Mohd Isa, and their excellent research and administrative colleagues, for their kind hospitality and for making ISIS Malaysia an excellent institution in which to work.

I would also like to record how honoured I feel that the Tun Hussein Onn Lecture was given in the presence of HRH Sultan Perak Darul Ridzuan, Sultan Nazrin Muizzuddin Shah Ibni Almarhum Sultan Azlan Muhibbuddin Shah Al-Maghfur-lah, also Royal Fellow of ISIS Malaysia and Chancellor of the University of Malaya. It was in addition a great privilege to have the involvement of Puan Sri Datuk Dr Suraiya Hani Tun Hussein, representing the family of the late Tun Hussein Onn.

Anthony Milner



# ***Nama*, Group-Binding and Moral Balance: Themes and Origins of Malaysian Foreign Policy<sup>i</sup>**

Anthony Milner

## **Introduction**

Over recent months I have been surveying Malaysian approaches to foreign policy — doing so as an outsider, and as someone whose background is in the discipline of history. The record is in many ways impressive — and yet certain aspects of Malaysia's handling of international policy do seem puzzling, and call out for further explanation. For all its many analytical strengths, I have the impression that the International Relations discipline may welcome contributions from other disciplines when undertaking a single case study. Seeking to define idiosyncrasies in Malaysia's (or any other country's) approach to foreign affairs, it can be argued, also offers the opportunity to enrich our understanding of international relations more generally.

Today I want to suggest that the study of Malay history — going back to pre-modern times — may throw light on these puzzles in Malaysian international policy. As the title of this lecture indicates, I identify three themes or perspectives in early Malay thinking about foreign relations — perspectives that I think help to explain particular preferences and priorities emphasised in post-independence Malaysian state policy. These three perspectives — which assist in defining what might be called Malaysia's international personality or identity<sup>ii</sup> — are:

- i) First, a stress on *nama*, a term which in traditional Malay writings appears to have been understood as conveying 'reputation' or 'prestige', and is in significant ways different from the idea of 'state sovereignty' (as it is generally defined today).

- ii) Second, a preoccupation with relationship building, and with fostering relations in a manner that would seem to be internationally distinct. The best phrase I can come up with to capture the Malaysian concern for the socio-cultural dimension of this endeavour is 'group-binding'.
- iii) Third, an approach to foreign states — to the range of foreign polities in all their variety and contests — which aspires towards what might best be described as 'moral balance'.

Let me begin, however, by glancing back over Malaysia's foreign relations — to provide a rudimentary narrative that might set the scene for this analysis. I will then outline a number of the issues which seem puzzling, and lead me to delve into history to try to achieve a better understanding. In the last and longest — and most important section — I will examine pre-modern Malay documents which seem to me to offer insights into Malay thinking about what we today call 'international relations'. In this section I also suggest how the three perspectives I identify help to make modern Malaysian foreign policy more comprehensible.

### **Surveying Malaysian foreign policy<sup>iii</sup>**

Following the defeat of Japan, various elements in the leadership of the states and settlements on the Peninsula — the communities that together had been in one way or another under British authority before the War — negotiated with the British to determine the constitutional structure for a new, united, post-British nation state. Not surprisingly, the new Malaya of 1957 was still in important ways tied to Britain — tied in economic terms and, for the first few years especially, in the defence area (with the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement). Some accounts of this early, post-Merdeka period, however, have in my view laid rather too much stress on the Anglo-orientation of Malaysia's first government, the Tunku Abdul Rahman government<sup>iv</sup> — and we

will return to this observation.

The creation of Malaysia in 1963 involved first, intensive diplomatic work with the different Borneo units and Singapore — and then an elaborate international response to counter President Sukarno's 'Confrontation' campaign. This response involved expanding or strengthening the country's diplomatic relations in many directions, including in the large Afro-Asian bloc and the Communist world.

In the early post-Merdeka period, Malaya — and then Malaysia — was especially active on a further front. Almost from the time it took power, the government began to promote the idea of regional collaboration — what the Tunku called the "linking between nations within our ethnological and geographical group" (Tarling 2006: 101). In 1959, hoping to attract the Indochinese states (including North Vietnam, according to some reports) and Burma, as well as Indonesia, the Malayan government launched the concept of a South East Asia Friendship and Economic Treaty (SEAFET) (Tarling 2006: 103, 107) — and then, two years later, the Association of Southeast Asian States (ASA). When ASA was eventually constituted it only succeeded in adding Thailand and the Philippines as members, but the aspiration for a broader membership remained. In 1963, with some caution, the Tunku's government joined both Indonesia and the Philippines in Maphilindo — a grouping based on claims of "historical ties of race and culture" (Saravanamuttu 2010: 107; Ghazali 2004: 423), but one seriously challenged by disputes arising in the creation of Malaysia.

In the following years, Malaysian governments worked to advance the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which began in 1967, following Indonesia's recognition of Malaysia — and included, as well as these two countries, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines. The Tun Razak and Tun Hussein Onn governments did much to lay the groundwork for

the eventual expansion of ASEAN — the expansion which was to lead to all ten countries of Southeast Asia becoming members. Within days of the fall of Saigon in 1975, Malaysia was the first country in ASEAN to recognise the Communist governments of Indochina — and (under Prime Minister Hussein Onn) rapidly developed diplomatic and other links with those states (Saravanamuttu 2010: 179).

What the Malayan/Malaysian governments adamantly did not do in their early regionalism measures, even in the Tunku's period, was agree to join SEATO (Jeshurun 2007: 30) — the US-led South East Asia Treaty Organization which was designed for the struggle against Communism, and did incorporate the Philippines and Thailand. On the contrary, within ASEAN, Malaysia took a lead in pursuing the long-term goal of neutralising the region — that is, of trying to get the major powers to guarantee the neutrality of Southeast Asia, to exclude the region from their Cold War struggle. In the cause of neutrality, Malaysia hoped that it and other Southeast Asian countries could maintain 'equidistance' with respect to the competing, major powers (Saravanamuttu 2010: 122). In order to advance the region's neutralisation Malaysia (with some important compromises) also persuaded the other ASEAN members in 1971 to support the idea of Southeast Asia becoming a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) — a region (in the words of the formal announcement) "free from any form or manner of interference by outside powers". (Saravanamuttu 2010: 120; Liow 2005: 125–6). In 1976 another step in region building — strongly urged by Malaysia — was the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), which promoted security cooperation, including regional peacekeeping measures. Prime Minister Hussein Onn called TAC "the first wholly indigenous multilateral treaty in the entire history of Southeast Asia" (Saravanamuttu 2010: 170).

Apart from these endeavours in the immediate Southeast Asian region — as we were reminded many times in 2014, forty years later<sup>v</sup> — Malaysia was the first ASEAN state to open up diplomatic relations with China. Positive steps had been taken much earlier. Even in 1959, Tunku Abdul Rahman had suggested the possible necessity of recognising the People’s Republic of China (Jeshurun 2007: 31). Senior officials accompanied a table tennis team to China in 1971, and the leading United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) figure Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah went there early the next year, meeting Chinese Premier Chou En Lai (Jeshurun 2007: 106–7). These were the years, of course, when Henry Kissinger, Richard Nixon and Australia’s Gough Whitlam were opening up relations with China. Malaysia, however, moved earliest among the ASEAN countries, despite the fact that the Chinese Communist Party was continuing to support the largely Chinese-membership Communist Party of Malaya in its violent insurgency — and, also, despite the very sensitive relations between Malaysia’s Malay majority and the country’s strong Chinese minority.<sup>vi</sup>

Much else happened in these decades, including the creation of a strong involvement with many Islamic countries, and the forming of a distinct critical perspective on the Palestinian issue. In 1970 the Tunku became the first Secretary General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). Some of the many high-profile roles assumed by Malaysia over the next decades were the country’s several terms on the United Nations Security Council, participation in a large range of peacekeeping forces, and the chairmanship of both the Non-Aligned Movement and the OIC.

In the 1990s, a period when Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia were brought into ASEAN as full members, Malaysia (under Prime Minister Mahathir) also took a leading role in building a wider, East Asian regionalism — reaching out from ASEAN to Japan, China and South Korea. This ambitious project

faced competition from the United States and a number of its close allies — competition which favoured the alternative of an Asia-Pacific regionalism in which America would play a dominant part. Responding to this Asia-Pacific vision, Malaysia's Mahathir insisted that East Asians ought to be able to work together on the basis of their East Asian identity, just as Europeans were cooperating on the basis of European identity on the other side of the world (Milner 2014: 74).

To a large extent, the Mahathir vision of East Asian regionalism triumphed in 1997, when the ASEAN Plus Three process began — bringing together the ten ASEAN states with China, Japan and South Korea. In 2005, ASEAN took the further step of initiating the East Asia Summit (EAS). When Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi hosted the first EAS meeting in Kuala Lumpur — a meeting that brought in India, Australia and New Zealand — he was cautious (as Prime Minister Mahathir had been) about how successfully Australia and New Zealand could be drawn into East Asian processes. He agreed, however, that there is “so much we can do together” (*The Age*, 8 April 2005).

From the 1980s, as this discussion of regionalism has implied, a key development in Malaysian policy was the growing determination to ‘Look East’, towards Japan, China and South Korea — and this development certainly reflected the changing balance of global economic power. Prime Minister Mahathir insisted that it was not a “lopsided policy”: the East Asia emphasis would correct rather than create an imbalance, and would not mean exclusion of the United States and Europe (Jeshurun 2007: 173, 189). As it turned out, Malaysia was sharply critical of the United States at certain points — for instance, for its attack on Iraq in 2003. However, Mahathir was also reported to have had very successful meetings with United States leaders and gave America support in the 1990 Gulf War (Jeshurun 2007: 179, 222, 254). The Malaysia-United States economic relationship

continued to be of vital importance, and certain aspects of the military cooperation between the two countries were actually enhanced in the Mahathir period.<sup>vii</sup> In the case of Britain, the economic relationship certainly declined in prominence, but here again significant security cooperation continued — including under the Five Power Defence Arrangements. This initiative — introduced in 1971, and including Australia, New Zealand and Singapore as well as Malaysia and Britain — continues to be active today.

In terms of Malaysia's international positioning, the year 2014 saw the United States relationship being upgraded to become a 'comprehensive partnership' — with a promise being made to give Malaysians visa-waiver entry into the United States (*Malay Mail*, 19 August 2014). Apart from continuing its vigorous promotion of East Asian regionalism, the Malaysian government also established what was called a 'comprehensive strategic partnership' with China<sup>viii</sup> — the country which is now, overwhelmingly, Malaysia's major trading partner. It seems true to say, in addition (as various commentators have noted),<sup>ix</sup> that Malaysia has been taking a less strident position than some others in the region with respect to China's claims in the South China Sea — less strident, in particular, than the responses of the Philippines and Vietnam.

One thing is immediately clear when one surveys the development of Malaysia's foreign policy: it is an aspect of government which has been taken very seriously. An immediate indication is the number of Malaysia's diplomatic posts around the world: a larger number than my own country, Australia, although Malaysia's gross domestic product (GDP) is still well under a quarter the size of Australia's. Since 1957, Malaysia has also been elected onto the United Nations Security Council more times than any other Southeast Asian nation during that period — and, for that matter, more times than Australia. It is striking as well to see how many

times Malaysia has contributed to United Nations peacekeeping operations — thirty, I am told, beginning in the Congo in 1960.<sup>x</sup>

In the words of the current website of the Malaysian Foreign Ministry (Wisma Putra), the country's foreign policy seeks to be "principled" and to bring "international recognition and admiration for Malaysia".<sup>xi</sup> It is, in fact, this proud insistence on principle — and also on "consistency and coherence" (to quote again the Wisma Putra website) — that provokes the first puzzle I encounter when reading the record of Malaysian foreign policy.

### **Puzzling aspects of Malaysian foreign policy**

The emphasis on principle has been repeated time again over the years. Tun Dr Ismail was keen that Malaysia be "respected" (Jeshurun 2007: 18);<sup>xii</sup> Prime Minister Mahathir was concerned that Malaysia should have a "good image" (Jeshurun 2007: 273); Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi referred to Malaysian foreign policy as being "principled at all times" (Jeshurun 2007: 325), and in August 2014 Prime Minister Najib insisted again that Malaysia possesses a "principle-based foreign policy" (*The Star*, 24 August 2014). The problem is that from some points of view, Malaysia can look not so much principled as highly pragmatic or expedient — seeming to prioritise practical calculation rather than long-term consistency. Such judgements, as I now understand things, are based on a misunderstanding — but first it is important to try to appreciate why the accusation is made. It is not just the present question of whether Malaysia's primary commitment is to the United States or China — though the issue of how Malaysia can have a serious 'strategic partnership' with both the United States and China has certainly attracted interest.<sup>xiii</sup>

Even when we go back to Malaya/Malaysia's first decade, the claim of principle might be seen as difficult to reconcile with actual policy decisions. While the Tunku's government spoke

warmly of the country's British connections, taking shelter it might be said in the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement (1957), it is possible to identify tendencies moving in the opposite direction. Indian non-alignment appears to have had an important impact on Malaysia's early leaders — including the influence of Krishna Menon, credited with coining the term 'non-alignment' (Jeshurun 2007: 9; Ghazali Shafie 2004: 18–19). The Tunku himself claimed to be “guided by the spirit of Bandung and Geneva” (Jehurun 2007: 23) — referring to the Bandung Afro-Asian Conference of 1955 in Sukarno's Indonesia. Also, research has shown that he was quite capable of acting independently of the British (and surprising them) — for instance, in developing relations with Japan and forging plans for Southeast Asian regionalism (Jeshurun 2007: 50–1; Tarling 2006: 102). As noted already, he absolutely refused to join the British and the United States in SEATO; and then there were the reports in 1960 that he might welcome Communist Vietnam's involvement in SEAFET (Tarling 2006: 107). In 1965 his government was already “look[ing] forward” to a “regional association” that would reach out across Southeast Asia — even to Vietnam (Tarling 2006: 120–1). It is also the case that both the British and the Australians — believing they had established confidential relations with the Tunku — were surprised not to have been consulted before the 1965 decision to remove Singapore from the Federation (Jeshurun 2007: 84). On reflection, the British may well have wondered about the Tunku's sincerity when they looked back on the assurance he gave in his Independence Day Ceremony speech, which assured them that Britain would “ever find in us her best friend” (Abdullah Ahmad 1985: 121). It is also possible to argue, however, that the Tunku's behaviour was entirely consistent with a principle-based foreign policy.

In the post-Tunku years, Malaysia's Western friends watched carefully as Malaysia, so soon after the fall of Saigon, began moves to engage the Communist victors — as the Tunku's

government had to some extent anticipated in 1965. In 1975 Tun Razak declared his hope that the countries of Southeast Asia — all the countries “irrespective of political ideology and social system — could cooperate together”.<sup>xiv</sup> Hussein Onn used very similar words in 1978, when speaking to the Prime Minister of Vietnam (Morais 1981: 192).

With respect to the Mahathir years, I have already hinted at the presence of contradiction — on the one hand, the ‘Look East’ policies and the building of East Asian regionalism; on the other, a strong economic and even security relationship with the United States. Today — as I have indicated — this looking both ways, East and West, is being played out in the specific fostering of relations with China on the one hand and the United States on the other.

This apparent moving back and forth in Malaysia’s foreign policy endeavours — reaching back to the Tunku’s time — does raise the issue of exactly which principles are being invoked in Malaysia’s principle-based foreign policy. In recent developments, some commentators have insisted that (as one put it) Malaysia has an “overall policy of balancing its alliance with Beijing and Washington”.<sup>xv</sup> There have also been predictions that Malaysia will move towards bandwagoning with China — ‘bandwagoning’ meaning that a state chooses to align itself primarily with a growing power. Another term employed is ‘hedging’ — whereby a state, in accommodating a growing power, seeks to offset potential risks by investing in another relationship or in a range of relationships. This is an obviously softer strategy than balancing — and has, once again, been attributed to Malaysia.<sup>xvi</sup> One further assessment is that “keeping strategic options open has been a hallmark of Malaysian foreign policy”.<sup>xvii</sup>

All these concepts — balancing, bandwagoning, hedging, keeping options open — may capture aspects of Malaysia’s international

behaviour, but in each case they tend to conjure up the image of a calculating or opportunistic foreign policy rather than a principled one. The problem here, however, is that Malaysian leaders have been consistent and apparently sincere in their insistence that Malaysia's approach to foreign relations has been 'principled'. The challenge, in my view, is to see whether historical insights can be employed to develop an interpretation of Malaysian foreign policy that is comprehensive enough to take into account the aspirations which the Malaysian leadership has persistently stated — an interpretation that reaches beyond accusations about contradiction and hypocrisy. One starting point, I think, is the seemingly facile claim, made time and again by Malaysian leaders, that their country wants to be friends with everyone — “with all countries in the world”, as the Tunku put it (Jeshurun 2007: 23); “with all countries which are friendly to her”, in Tun Razak's words (Jeshurun 2007: 127); “with all countries irrespective of their social systems”, according to Hussein Onn (Morais 1981: 187); “with everybody”, as Prime Minister Mahathir insisted (Jeshurun 2007: 168). Malaysia is “willing to cultivate relations with everyone”, Prime Minister Najib confirmed in 2014;<sup>xviii</sup> and, as stated today on the Wisma Putra website, with all countries “regardless of political ideology and system”. The objective of being ‘friendly to all’ — which entailed the Tunku establishing a friendship with the Soviet Union's Deputy Foreign Minister (Jeshurun 2007: 53) and even officially recognising Israel (Nair 1997: 84 note 6) — would appear to be related to the aspiration, spelt out in certain circumstances, that Malaysia should be “independent” or “equidistant” in its handling of competing major powers (Saravanamuttu 2010: 122; Jeshurun 2007: 18, 24, 28). With the help of some historical background, I believe, it can be argued that this ‘friendly to all’ aspiration has not been mere empty rhetoric.

The second matter that continues to be puzzling about Malaysian foreign policy is more specific, focusing on one historical

episode, and can be stated briefly. I have not yet seen what I find a convincing explanation of why Malaysia moved so quickly to recognise and establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China in 1974. With all the anniversary celebration of that event in 2014, the question must be on many minds. For the Malay leadership of Malaysia to have moved before other ASEAN governments — “against the grain of strategic thinking vis-à-vis China in the region at that time”, in Joseph Liow's words (2005: 127) — does seem genuinely surprising. There were obvious reasons for Malaysia to move cautiously, given the social make-up and recent history of the country — and we know Malay nationalists were concerned about these matters (Lee and Lee 2005: 26 note 12). Nevertheless, Malaysia not only recognised China but also continued to be an ASEAN leader in accommodating China — for example, bringing China to its first multilateral meeting with ASEAN in Kuala Lumpur in 1991, and working hard to develop an East Asian regional structure that China would find reassuring rather than hostile (Kuik 2008: 173–4).<sup>xix</sup>

True, the Malaysian government in its 1974 initiative obtained important commitments from China — especially with respect to “non-interference in each other's internal affairs”, to quote the joint communiqué issued by the two countries (Saravanamuttu 2010: 125). It has also been argued that the government saw rapprochement with China as likely to gain domestic political benefits.<sup>xx</sup> But it is nevertheless of striking interest that the Malay-led government, still dealing with a largely Chinese Communist challenge, and not long after the traumatic inter-ethnic violence of 1969, should have led ASEAN with respect to China. It seems even more surprising, at least at first glance, when we recall that the same Malay elite had been so anxious to assert the neutrality and autonomy of Southeast Asia — keeping the region free from the contest between the major powers.<sup>xxi</sup> In 1974 the Malaysian government gave the impression of being relatively relaxed, even

sanguine, in handling the re-emergence of China, the country that had for centuries been the region's paramount power. Since that time the Malay elite has enhanced its control over Malaysia — and it has continued to assume a strikingly optimistic perspective on the continuing, and dramatic, rise of China.<sup>xxii</sup>

The third puzzling aspect of Malaysian foreign policy, as I read the historical record — and again it is perhaps already obvious from the overview narrative above — is why Malaysia, perhaps more than any other ASEAN country,<sup>xxiii</sup> has laid such a great emphasis on the building of a regional community, and a community grounded in a specific regional identity. Of course, it was not just Malaysia but a number of Southeast Asian states which saw the need to develop regional cooperation. Nevertheless, as soon as the Tunku and his colleagues took power, they moved very quickly in their regionalist endeavours — announcing SEAFET.<sup>xxiv</sup> The type of regionalism they promoted is essential to note. The reputedly pro-West Tunku did not join SEATO, with its Western leadership and Cold War agenda, but urged an indigenous regionalism — one based, as he put it, within 'our ethnological and geographical group'. The Tunku's position anticipates to some extent, as observers of Malaysia's international policy development may note, the type of hesitation about APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation), and other US-focused 'Asia-Pacific' regional endeavours, which Prime Minister Mahathir famously expressed decades later — and also the hesitation Malaysia continued to display when considering the merits of rushing to bring Australia and New Zealand into its regionalist planning.

From the very beginning, it is clear that Malaysia was not only concerned with the functionalist dimension of regionalism — the economic, security and other practical tasks which might sometimes be better accomplished through cooperation with regional neighbours. Rather, Malaysia seems always to have put a premium on what might be called identity regionalism — on

the building of a regional sense of community, on the importance of the cultural and sociological underpinning of regionalism. This emphasis was evident when the Tunku talked about 'our ethnological' group and when Deputy Prime Minister Ismail (in 1971) stressed the objective of developing "a strong sense of regional consciousness and solidarity" (Tarling 2006: 152; Acharya 2009: 90); it seems to have been implicit in Tun Razak's and Tun Hussein Onn's thinking about ASEAN, and was certainly spelt out in Tun Mahathir's advocacy of East Asian rather than Asia-Pacific regionalism. Minister and diplomat Tun Ghazali Shafie, a giant in the development of Malaysian foreign policy, invoked the 'ethnological' concept when in 1993 he dismissed APEC as "a foreign guided jamboree with an imperialistic odour", trying to hold together "different members" with "different visions and paradigms" (Ghazali Shafie 2000: 224–5).

The hands-on building of identity regionalism — of a sense of regional community — needs more careful research. Ghazali Shafie's fine-grained narrative of the formation of Malaysia, and his writings on ASEAN, provide a fine starting point. They give a sense of the personal, diplomatic skills — the courteous appreciation of the challenges of cultural difference and the capacity to deal with emotional encounters — that have to be employed in the promotion of what he called "togetherness". Key individuals, he explained with reference to ASEAN, need to be "continuously exposed to each other"; representatives of the private sector as well as officials must meet one another in a way that can "blunt the edges of conflict" and help all involved to develop a "habit of mind, of thinking in terms of ASEAN" (Ghazali Shafie 2000: 109). "Friendship", he reflected, "must be kept in constant repair" (2000: 396). The role played by golf in such processes, it would seem, is not frivolous (2004: 300). Prime Minister Hussein Onn invoked this tradition of diplomacy in 1978 during a visit to Malaysia by the Vietnam leader. Malaysia, said Hussein Onn, believed "in a step-by-step approach" in developing

“mutual confidence and trust”. With visits of leaders and officials, it was possible to “foster a feeling of goodwill and friendship towards each other”, dispelling “any remaining feeling of distrust and fear” (Morais 1981: 192).

Malaysia is by no means the only ASEAN country that puts priority on fostering a sense of community — but it has certainly been serious about the task of building ‘togetherness’. Only in the last few months we have seen Malaysia once again assert this priority in region building — and doing so in the context of taking over the chairmanship of ASEAN. Given that in 2015 the ASEAN Economic Community is scheduled to be introduced with the aim of making ASEAN a “single market and production base”,<sup>xxv</sup> it may at first glance seem surprising that the Malaysian government has been highlighting not the practical reform challenges this objective faces but the need (in the words of a senior official) to strengthen “our sense of community and collective responsibility”.<sup>xxvi</sup> Only by obtaining a greater “direct involvement of the peoples of ASEAN”, Prime Minister Najib has argued, will it be possible to “truly advance regional integration”. He then declared his wish to build “an ASEAN which reflects the dreams of our peoples ....”<sup>xxvii</sup>

Some international commentators may conclude that the government is merely drawing attention away from the hard-edged task of administrative and economic reform — and there is considerable reform to be implemented to achieve the objectives of an ASEAN Economic Community.<sup>xxviii</sup> But the point needs to be highlighted that the current Malaysian government’s priority on building the sense of regional community — on identity regionalism as much as functionalist regionalism — is a priority insisted on by Malayan/Malaysian governments since the 1950s. This provokes the question of just why does Malaysia approach regionalism in this manner and, equally important, why in fact has Malaysia been so active in region building?

A range of factors may be relevant to these questions. As a relatively small country in East Asia, Malaysia might have felt more secure being embedded in a regional grouping. Also, the fact that, in Malaysia's first years, the Malay community was threatened with being outnumbered by the Chinese and Indians of the country may have been important. The state's Malay leadership could well have seen domestic advantages in establishing close relations with other Southeast Asian leaderships. Another consideration could be that the experience of nation building in Malaysia, a country facing the challenge of an exceptional ethnic division, gave the Malaysian leadership precisely the right experience to take on the task of region building. All these elements and more would need to be taken into account in a detailed study of Malaysia's leading role in Southeast Asian (and East Asian) regionalism. But the possibility should also be investigated that some dimension of the tradition of foreign relations — some facet of an historical Malay political culture — might have played a role. Ghazali Shafie's writings, for instance, tend to encourage such investigation. In discussing 'togetherness', he suggested that it is a "natural tendency" in the "Malay world" — and pointed out that the Malay word used is *berkampung* (2000: 357). Certainly, when we think of the so-called traditional Malay *kampung* — with houses connected by free-flowing paths, a stress on "community intimacy over personal privacy" (Yahaya 1998: 19) — the suggestion that *berkampung* or community building is a deep-seated Malay preference has appeal. But the question must still be asked, has such a supposed instinct for togetherness been a serious factor historically in Malay diplomacy?

The fourth and last puzzling feature of Malaysian foreign policy that I encounter concerns the particular way in which Malaysia seems to deal with disputes in the South China Sea. Like Vietnam and the Philippines, Malaysia has serious demarcation disagreements with China, and yet Malaysia appears to take a

relatively relaxed approach. In the words of one international report, Malaysia gives the impression of “downplay(ing) tensions”.<sup>xxix</sup> Although there have been reports in 2013 and 2014 of Chinese naval visits to James Shoal, located only 117.7 kilometres from Sarawak, the Malaysian government response has tended to be low-key. Unlike the Philippines it has not taken the dispute to arbitration under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea; Defence Minister Hishammuddin has emphasised “self-restraint” in handling such disputes,<sup>xxx</sup> and suggested that Malaysia might be open to the idea of collaboration with China in the development of oil and gas resources in the area.<sup>xxxi</sup> True, there are reports of some upgrading of Malaysian defence relations with Washington, and of the country’s own military presence in the South China Sea, but the Malaysian tone is still subdued: the government-inclined newspaper, the *New Straits Times*, conveyed this well when it praised Malaysia’s “more sober and highly nuanced way of resolving conflicts”.<sup>xxxii</sup>

From some angles this Malaysian response is surprising. Pride seems to be important in the international thinking of the Malaysian leadership, as I have noted. The Foreign Ministry website even declares the desire to make Malaysia the “preferred brand name in international relations”. It is also often insisted upon by International Relations scholars that national sovereignty — with its stress on absolute and perpetual authority over a territorially-defined nation state (and the juridical equality of all such sovereign states)<sup>xxxiii</sup> — is a concern of fundamental importance in Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Exactly why Malaysia seems relatively laid back in confronting a sharp challenge to its perceived territorial rights in the South China Sea is an issue of serious analytical interest,<sup>xxxv</sup> and does seem to warrant closer examination.

The aspects of Malaysia's handling of international relations which continue to be puzzling — at least as I read the record — are, therefore: first, how to reconcile the insistence on a principled foreign policy when Malaysia can often look opportunistic, developing relations at the same time with nations that are profoundly suspicious of one another; secondly, why was it that Malaysia was the first ASEAN country to recognise China, despite its domestic circumstances; thirdly, why has Malaysia been so active in region building, and in a way that has highlighted the cultural and social dimensions; and finally, why Malaysia — a seemingly proud nation, much concerned about national sovereignty — has been more relaxed than some other countries in its handling of the contest in the South China Sea.

### **Interrogating the Malay heritage for International Relations perspectives**

Confronted by such questions, it seems to me that the methodology employed by many International Relations specialists is limiting. The suggestion that states behave as states — or even that middle-size states behave as middle-size states — can stimulate useful comparative insights,<sup>xxxiv</sup> but also tends to leave some important questions unanswered. To speak of Malaysia, the Philippines or Australia as middle powers, for instance, tells one little about why they differ in their international behaviour — for instance, in their handling of major power rivalry. Also, the preoccupation with power — the will-to-power, calculations of power — in most International Relations analysis<sup>xxxvii</sup> has often been analytically illuminating, but it can also lead to the neglect of other types of drivers. Political actors may of course operate in more than one register, or idiom: even when action is not driven by the will-to-power, it might still have far-reaching implications for power relations between one state and another.<sup>xxxviii</sup> It is also quite possible — and potentially significant — that an action not

arising specifically from power calculations will be interpreted by others as having been so, and will be responded to on that basis. Following these observations, a problem in analysing foreign policy decisions in terms of balancing, bandwagoning and hedging is that doing so tends to highlight only the power-calculating register — and for this reason can fail to capture the mixture of perspectives and motives that is likely to be the basis of a foreign-policy preference.

As a starting point it might be argued that there is little point in trying to develop International Relations models — state-to-state paradigms — that could operate outside of specific historical, sociological contexts.<sup>xxxix</sup> We need, in particular, to think carefully about the prevailing value or norm systems — about the international personality, the international identity, of the different countries we examine. In Malaysia's case, one problem in defining the country's international identity is that very little scholarly attention has been given to its pre-1957 heritage. Looking through the academic literature on Malaysian foreign policy, one much-cited study insists that the new Malaya suffered from “a lack of experience in foreign relations” (Leifer 1974: 48); another comments dismissively that foreign policy was “very foreign indeed to Malaysians” (Tregonning 1964: 86).<sup>xl</sup> The important general overview studies on Malaysian diplomacy and foreign policy by Chandran Jeshuran (2007) and Johan Saravanamuttu (2010) begin in 1957, and give no serious attention to earlier history.

The first objection to neglecting this history must be that those crafting the foreign policy of the new state tended to come from the elites of Johor, Kedah and other sultanates. They were therefore able to draw on a heritage of experience in diplomacy and international thinking — an experience which included, in recent decades, dealing with the British, the Japanese and the Thais.<sup>xli</sup> As a prince of Kedah, Tunku Abdul Rahman came from a

royal house that had to engage in complex diplomatic manoeuvres over the centuries. It is surprising that the question is seldom asked: how might such a heritage have influenced the behaviour of post-1957 leaders? How might it have helped to forge a specific international identity for Malaysia?

The world of the Peninsular sultanates, it is true, especially in the pre-colonial era, was strikingly different from conditions in post-1957 Malaya.<sup>xlii</sup> The Peninsular sultanates, or *kerajaan*, were generally based on rivers — as *kerajaan* were in Sumatra, Borneo and other parts of the Archipelago — and supported by trade and some agriculture. There was no sense of the sea — for instance, the Strait of Melaka — being a natural border separating one polity from another.<sup>xliii</sup> The populations of these monarchies were not large — in many cases tens, not hundreds, of thousands — and high value was placed on the number of subjects a ruler possessed.<sup>xliiv</sup> The common people were conceptualised not as national communities but as subjects of a ruler — and rulers were always keen to attract (or capture) more subjects.<sup>xliv</sup> What we would today call ‘international relations’ would be better described as ‘ruler-to-ruler relations’.<sup>xlvi</sup>

The rivals or enemies of rulers were other rulers or potential rulers, not states.<sup>xlvii</sup> Rulers also tended to have hierarchical relations — with no distinct, Westphalian-like assumptions about formal equality — and spent considerable energy in defining, publicising and adjusting those relations. In general, as will be explored below, status mattered greatly in this regional, inter-*raja* architecture. The hierarchies were not limited to the Peninsula and Archipelago, but reached out to Siam, Burma, Laos, the Shan states, Vietnam and China, and even as far as the Ottoman Empire. Gradually European powers, through such centres as Melaka, Batavia, Penang and Singapore, gained high status in the regional system.<sup>xlviii</sup>

Although this community of river-based monarchies was a far cry from the nation state system of the Archipelago — even the present Brunei monarchy differs fundamentally from the old Brunei *kerajaan* — some recent scholarship on China provides reassurance regarding its possible relevance to international relations behaviour today. Yan Xuetong’s celebrated study, *Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (2013),<sup>xlix</sup> examines Chinese writings from the pre-Qin period (pre-221 BCE) — writings not in all cases focused explicitly on interstate politics — in order to glean ideas which might “enrich contemporary theories of international relations” (21, 61).

Yan acknowledges immediately that the pre-Qin world is distant from our time — the “language and vocabulary”, he says, are “very different from those used today” (26, 202) — but considers that “traditional Chinese thought” can assist in creating a new “hard core” of “key assumptions” for thinking about international relations (257–8). He does not claim to be uncovering a “complete system of thought”, but rather specific “insights” (212) — and reminds us that maxims enunciated by Thucydides, writing about the ancient Greek states of his time, have helped in modern times to create a “theoretical system of thought” (202). Elements in the pre-Qin hard core, Yan’s analysis suggests, concern alliance building, the positive features of hierarchical relations, the role and dissemination of norms in interstate relations, the importance of leaders and — in particular — what he calls “humane authority” (a concept distinct from “hegemony” and, in Yan’s view, of vital importance today).

Yan, it needs to be stressed, is not concerned about the “authenticity” of the pre-Qin works he is using — whether they might have been written at a later date and merely attributed to the “pre-Qin masters” — nor does he carry out a detailed historical analysis of the pre-Qin strategic context. His objective is

to identify “axioms or principles” that “can help to deepen modern international relations theory” (202; 261 note 1).

When we ask about Malay heritage — about a possible ‘hard core’ of elements, norms or perspectives that might have a relevance to foreign relations today — the written sources come from a much more recent period, reaching back over only some 500 or 600 years. In fact, many of these written materials — texts from royal courts, letters written on behalf of rulers — are only two centuries old. Much of the court prose literature (*hikayat*) is in narrative form, and the term *hikayat* carries the idea of serious investigation or analysis.<sup>i</sup> The best known and most widely cited *hikayat* are the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (in some ways a book on statecraft, focused on the career of a royal official) and the so-called *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals) — the real name of which is *Sulalatus Salatin* (Genealogy of Kings). Both these texts are associated with the 15th century monarchy of Melaka, though they are available only in manuscripts of a much later date.<sup>ii</sup>

Three perspectives embedded in this pre-modern Malay writing seem to throw light on the puzzling features of Malaysian foreign policy which I have outlined. As anticipated at the outset, these perspectives relate first, to the concept of *nama*, or prestige; secondly, to the task of relationship building or ‘group-binding’; and thirdly, to the preference for ‘moral balance’. These are not to be seen as specifically international relations perspectives; nor are they enunciated explicitly in a will-to-power register — though they all have implications for power relations. In each case, and this must be highlighted, to say these perspectives appear to be influential does not deny the role of other factors. In discussing these three ‘hard-core’ elements I will suggest the way each of them could assist to make better sense of the puzzling aspects of Malaysian foreign policy — features elaborated in the previous section. Interrogating the pre-modern Malay-language texts, it should be admitted, requires patience — on the

part of the reader perhaps, as well as the analyst. Nevertheless, as Amitav Acharya has pointed out, if we are to search for non-Western international relations theory, “we need to move beyond discourses to research and scholarship...” (2014: 53).

### ***Nama***

Turning first to *nama*, in the writings of the pre-modern polities, this would appear to be a key term — a term that offers us today a point of entry into early Malay thinking about foreign relations, *raja-to-raja* relations. On one occasion after another — in the renowned *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, for instance — action is taken to bolster or defend the *nama* of the ruler. Embassies are sent for this purpose, and the same reason is given for fighting (or, in some cases, avoiding) a war (Kassim Ahmad 1968: 100, 249, 421, 79).<sup>lii</sup> A ruler’s *nama* is influenced by the number of his subjects, and he will try to recruit or capture subjects to bolster that *nama*.<sup>liii</sup> In losing subjects the ruler is said to experience shame or dishonour (*malu, aib*) (Milner 1982: 27).<sup>liv</sup> Wealth was sought — so the Malay writing suggests — not as an end in itself but as a resource for attracting and rewarding subjects.<sup>lv</sup> It was needed for ceremonies and gifts, which are said to be given ‘according to status’ — and which defined the ruler’s subjects, locating each within the elaborate *kerajaan* hierarchy.<sup>lvi</sup> In the discourse of such Malay pre-modern writing, therefore, it seems to have been the concern for *nama* that drove action — not considerations of power or material gain.

Defining exactly what *nama* means in these texts is difficult. There is no easy English translation. *Nama* suggests more than ‘name’. It was used in a way that conveys the sense of ‘reputation’, ‘prestige’, ‘status’ — and is sometimes linked to ‘title’ (*gelar*). In certain cases,<sup>lvii</sup> it is also made clear that a person’s *nama* in this life bears a significance in the afterlife. Portraying *nama* as a key dynamic in interstate relations may be viewed with scepticism

by some political analysts — and yet it must be stressed that this is how it is presented in Malay writings. A similar interpretive challenge has arisen in research on Northeast Asia. The 16th century Japanese leader, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, when he attempted to conquer Korea and China, declared that his “sole desire” was to “have our glorious name revered ....” Modern scholars have emphasised the economic and domestic political factors underlying his actions — as modern scholars tend to do — and yet one recent study has warned that Hideyoshi’s declared objective ought not to be trivialised.<sup>lviii</sup> The point is developed further, and with reference to recent history, in a book that has received too little attention, *The Dignity of Nations: Equality, Competition and Honor in East Asian Nationalism* (2006). In the words of the editor, John Fitzgerald, it is important that modern nations be imagined not only as “sites for the accumulation of wealth and power” but also as “sites of status recognition” (Chien and Fitzgerald 2006: 3).

Determining what the concept of *nama* conveyed is one matter, but it is also helpful — in considering the role of *nama* in a Malay heritage of ideas about foreign relations — to examine what it did not mean. A ruler’s concern for *nama*, for instance, did not imply that he saw himself at the centre of the world. In 12th century Burma the ruler called himself the “king of kings, the lord supreme ..., the mighty universal monarch” (Tambiah 1976: 81), and even in the 19th century one Burmese ruler expressed amazement and anger when he was shown the small size of his country on a foreign-made globe of the world (Olson and Shadle 1996: 215). By contrast, the preoccupation with *nama* in Malay writings was set in a hierarchical context. There seems to have been nothing intolerable about being in a hierarchy — looking down on some other rulers, looking up to others. The *Hikayat Hang Tuah* refers respectfully to the rulers of Ottoman Turkey, China, Vijayanagara (in Southern India) and Siam — but we are

left in little doubt that the rulers of Pahang or Kampar were seen to be of lower standing.<sup>lix</sup>

A concern about *nama*, therefore, was by no means the same as a commitment to sovereignty, with implications regarding independence and formal equality. Hierarchy diplomacy could be challenging, especially when one ruler was growing in importance with reference to another — and the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* can be understood in part as a manual to guide the practitioner — but it was not always about resisting the more prestigious ruler. In fact, when a less powerful ruler sent an embassy to a great ruler, the Malay texts suggest this could benefit the *nama* of the less powerful ruler. One example concerns the relations of the ruler of Melaka with the Ottomans, as outlined in the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. When the Melaka ruler thinks of sending a mission to the Ottoman empire, his senior officials agree — and point out that the Ottoman ruler “is a great *raja*”, and that it is “proper that we establish close relations with him so that Your Majesty’s *nama* will be famous ....” (Kassim Ahmad 1968: 437).<sup>lx</sup> A similar observation is made about the advantage to the Kedah ruler’s *nama* in sending the *bunga emas* (the ‘golden tree’ of tribute) to Siam (Dzulkifli 1973: 56–7). Hierarchy was clearly seen to offer opportunities.

In the case of China, historical investigation has suggested that Archipelago rulers again perceived advantage in establishing positive relations with a great emperor. From the Chinese perspective — it has been argued — the reception of tributary missions from Southeast Asian rulers was seen as “an illustration of the efficacy” of their ruler’s *te*, or ‘moral power’ (Wolters 1970: 25, 51) — and an efficacious *te* could bring economic advantages to China (34). On their part, the Archipelago, Malay-speaking rulers — in particular the rulers of Srivijaya, based in Sumatra, and Melaka — gained a special status on the basis of their China connection. They received titles and seals of investiture from the

emperor (41), and such recognition from China helped in their struggle with local rivals, including in struggle over trade. The number of missions sent to the Chinese emperor testifies to the rulers' enthusiasm for Chinese recognition – and there is plenty of evidence of competition having taken place to obtain that recognition (Wolters 1970: chapters 5 and 11).<sup>lxvi</sup>

As elements in a Malay heritage of ideas, the acceptance of hierarchy in the *nama* system, and the interest in the opportunities, which relations with a superior ruler could offer, might well have had a role in modern times in encouraging a more accepting attitude towards a hierarchy of power in East Asia. Such historical experience — stressing the advantages of hierarchy and not only the threats — could help to make the Malaysian leadership relatively relaxed, in particular, about the re-emergence of a powerful China. Do we see a reflection of the old hierarchy diplomacy, one might ask, in Malaysia's move towards China in 1974; or when Malaysia was the first country to host China at an ASEAN meeting; or when Malaysia speaks proudly today of having more trade with China than any other ASEAN country? Do we see in these Malaysian initiatives a degree of positioning with respect to the country's Southeast Asian neighbourhood? Tun Razak was certainly reported as stating that his initiative with China had made Malaysia “special” in Southeast Asia (Jeshurun 2007: 132).

Another way in which *nama* differs from sovereignty is that, when applied to a ruler, it does not imply that he or she possesses supreme and independent authority over a specific, territorially-defined state. Nor can I see any other key Malay term that carries this concept.<sup>lxvii</sup> The issue, of course, is important — partly because, as already noted, it is so common in International Relations scholarship to read that national sovereignty is a given (a deeply-embedded norm) in Southeast Asia, and that as a consequence the development of ASEAN as a regional institution

is hindered.<sup>lxiii</sup> As indicated already, the historical *nama* framework tended to entail what might better be understood as overlapping sovereignty, with rulers comfortable at times with acknowledging a superior power. Such rulers, it must be added, do not appear to have been easy about their local customs (*adat*) being transgressed. It is a theme in the pre-modern text that local *adat* demands respect: for instance, in installing his son on the throne of an inferior *kerajaan* — according to the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* — the Melaka ruler warns him to not to “alter the traditions (*adat*) that exist there” (Kassim Ahmad 1968: 411, 376).<sup>lxiv</sup> To be warned against interfering with local customs, however, is of course not the same thing as non-interference on the basis of acknowledging local sovereignty.<sup>lxv</sup> The former, on the face of it, must allow more flexibility.

Malaysia — like most other nations — speaks today in an international discourse of national sovereignty. Nevertheless, in considering Malaysia’s future operations within ASEAN, the observation can be made that there is nothing in the heritage of ideas about inter-polity relations — the hard-core ideas — that would make Malaysia unusually sensitive about defending the principle of national sovereignty *per se*, with its connotation of absolute independence.

With respect to the territorial dimension of national sovereignty, again the contrast with the *nama* priority is significant. Although great store was set on the prestige of the monarch — as it has been seen as critically important to highlight modern Malaysia’s international prestige — the *nama* of a ruler, as already noted, was linked to the number of his subjects rather than to territorial possessions. When Europeans met Malay rulers they tended to be surprised by the seemingly casual approach they took to territorial possessions. In the 1870s the Sultan of Terengganu told an Englishman that he had no idea of where his boundary ran.<sup>lxvi</sup> In a Dutch account from the early 17th century — recently edited

by Peter Borschberg — a negotiation between a Dutch admiral and the Johor ruler is recorded in detail. They were planning to seize Melaka from the Portuguese, and the Dutchman proposed that after the conquest he should take possession of the city, and the Johor ruler could have all of the countryside. The ruler's reply is quoted as: "why would we fight if we cannot have the city. As to the countryside, I do not care. I already have twenty times more countryside than I could fill with subjects" (Borschberg 2015: 156). In this remarkable record of a conversation, the ruler's priority on subjects rather than territory could not be clearer.

It is tempting today to see something of this downplaying of the territorial dimension in early Malay political thinking as throwing light on another facet of current Malaysian foreign policy — particularly with respect to maritime sovereignty. Could the pre-modern approach help explain, for instance, Malaysia's relatively relaxed, sometimes almost laid back, attitude to the South China Sea disputes — a willingness, it would seem, to trade off just a little the settlement of border issues against the economic and other advantages to be gained from a positive engagement with China? In this context, it would be possible to interpret Malaysia's response to China not as weak, or supine, but as maintaining a focus on the opportunities of hierarchy — a focus true to the *nama* diplomatic tradition.

To elaborate on other ways in which the pre-modern downplaying of territorial sovereignty may be an influence on modern Malaysian thinking is not possible here. Nevertheless, following an observation by Kenichi Ohmae some years ago, I am interested in why Malaysia has shown so little hesitation about engaging with its neighbours in 'growth triangles' and other seemingly sovereignty-risking endeavours.<sup>lxvii</sup>

## Group-binding

Turning to what I have called ‘group-binding’ — examining it as a second hard-core perspective of possible lasting significance — I have already alluded to the diplomatic virtuosity demanded in hierarchical, *nama* diplomacy. Knowledge of different languages and customs, attractive manners, and a talent for sweet speech are qualities which the Malay texts often stress when discussing the role of the envoy.<sup>lxviii</sup> In certain circumstances a mission has a specific practical task — perhaps to obtain some goods or settle a dispute — but what needs to be taken note of, because it is unusual and may have implications today, is the degree to which the texts emphasise building bonds of friendship. Terms like *berkasih-kasih* are often employed in letters between rulers, and seem to suggest something more emotive than merely ‘good relations’. The term *kasih* — sometimes translated as ‘love’ — is employed in the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* in a powerful description of the meeting between the ruler of Melaka and the ruler of Majapahit. When the Majapahit ruler “laid his eyes on the Raja of Melaka approaching, pangs of love and sympathy (*kaseh rasa hati-nya* and *kasehan rasa-nya*) tugged at his heart.”<sup>lxix</sup> Even in developing relations with the Ottoman ruler, the Dutch and the British, the Malay texts use the terms *kasih* and *berkasih-kasih* (the latter suggesting a continuing and reciprocal love, including between man and woman) in describing what the Melaka and other rulers are trying to achieve (Kassim Ahmad 1968: 447, 489; Ahmat 2009: 47; Winstedt 1938: 110). Diplomacy, it would seem, was very much concerned with creating good feelings — bonding people together, one senses, before getting on to practical collaboration or cooperation.

In this respect, the often lengthy opening sections of the royal letters of the period — the elaborate introductory compliments (*puji-pujian*) — seem to be of fundamental importance, and yet they have often been ignored by modern scholars as well as early

European officials.<sup>lxx</sup> Professor Ahmat Adam, in drawing attention to this neglect, has explained that traditional manuals on Malay letter writing viewed the *puji-pujian* as being the most important part of a letter. This introductory section not only had to deal delicately with differences in status between the sender and the recipient of the letter, but also had to convey the sincere desire for affectionate and unlimited friendship on the part of the sender (Ahmat 2009: 7–10).<sup>lxxi</sup> The *puji-pujian*, one senses, were aimed at establishing a relationship — a foundation that would precede negotiation about practical matters.

Another word that appears to be of significance here is *muafakat*. It is often translated as agreement but the way the literature specialist, Muhammad Haji Salleh, has explained the term is helpful. Looking at the use of *muafakat* in a particular *pantun* (four-line verse), he indicates it is more about the process of binding people together — binding them, as the *pantun* puts it, in the way a pipe holds water. The last line of the *pantun* puts the stress on unity, not practical outcome: it insists that “men are united through *muafakat*” (2006: 74). Translating *muafakat* in this way — with an emphasis on its bonding capacity — makes sense, for instance, of the explanation in the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* of why Hang Tuah is being sent to the ruler of the Ottomans. He is bringing to the ruler a letter that has the intention of promoting *muafakat berkaseh2an* — perhaps best understood as ‘understanding and affectionate relations’ — and also purchasing firearms. The terms *muafakat* and *berkaseh2an* appear to be linked in a way that makes ‘understanding’ a better translation than ‘agreement’.<sup>lxxii</sup>

In trying to describe this relationship building it may be helpful to consider the Japanese term, *nemawashi* — which tends to be used to refer to the social binding that goes on before a real deliberation takes place.<sup>lxxiii</sup> This process seems to involve

the promotion of a feeling of confidence among members of a group — making sure as well that no one feels marginalised. The word *nemawashi* originally referred to the practice of preparing the roots of a tree before transplanting, giving the tree the greatest opportunity to grow. Just as the *puji-pujian* in royal letters were to further *nemawashi* objectives — along with the work of culturally skilful Malay diplomats — so it may make sense in modern times to see the same process at work in the way Malaysia has been approaching the task of region building.

Ghazali Shafie, it could be said, was drawing our attention to this type of possibility when he insisted that the idea of *berkampung* — ‘togetherness’ — was located deep in his society’s “cultural heritage” (2000: 355). He argued as well that the bamboo plant — which, he recalled, is centrally important in the cultures of Southeast and East Asia — had been the original teacher of this lesson. The bamboo “by nature does not stand alone or singly”. A bamboo that does stand alone will be “a broken reed by a single gust”. Growing in protective clusters, “with the taller tree stooping in humility” — Ghazali was at the time talking to an audience in Japan — the bamboo can withstand the worst winds (2000: 205–6, 220).

In Malaya/Malaysia this *berkampung*, this group-binding, appears to have been underway from the time of independence — with the Tunku’s government soon proposing the SEAFET and then the ASA institution. The spirit of group-binding appeared too in the way the Tunku’s administration and later Malaysian governments gave priority to building a ‘sense of community’ in their immediate ‘ethnological group’ — a sense of community that would presumably be the basis for practical cooperation in the future. The activity of group-binding has been at work too in more recent times, one might surmise, in the way Malaysian governments have prioritised relationships in their region building — starting first with the neighbouring states (Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines

and Singapore); then moving more widely in Mainland Southeast Asia; then again, reaching out to the states of Northeast Asia. The wariness Malaysian leaders have shown about a too-hurried involvement of Australia and New Zealand in regional endeavours can also be seen in the light of this group-binding. It was not just Prime Minister Mahathir, but his successor Abdullah Badawi who wondered whether Australians had yet reached a point where they “could regard themselves as East Asians” and become members of a “community of East Asians” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 December 2005).<sup>lxxiv</sup>

If the Malaysian government had seen regionalism as being primarily about practical cooperation — if the government had given priority to ‘functionalist’ rather than ‘identity’ regionalism (Lee and Milner 2014; Milner 2014) — then this cautious socio-cultural spade-work would have been unnecessary, and Malaysia might have been happy with any type of regional cooperation and regional membership, so long as it offered the prospect of practical advantages in economic, security or other areas. In fact, Malaysian leaders, in the tradition of group-binding, have continued to stress identity regionalism, and have therefore focused on the building of a sense of community — on the fostering of a feeling of ‘goodwill and friendship towards each other’ (as Hussein Onn expressed it) — as the true basis for regional cooperation. As discussed above, this seems to be precisely the priority and the approach the Malaysian government has adopted in again taking over the leadership of ASEAN in 2015.<sup>lxxv</sup>

## **Moral balance**

Returning to the pre-modern world of the Archipelago monarchies, a third hard-core perspective that may be of continuing relevance today concerns the way in which these rulers reached out in every direction, attempting to be ‘friendly to

all'. True, they paid careful attention to promoting emotive bonds of friendship — and this was bound to be easier to achieve in the first instance with people possessing similar customs and type of government. But the writings of the pre-modern period do suggest that rulers in that time were willing to attempt to develop relations — bonds of reassurance and affection — with any polity, however different it might seem from their own, and however delicate the task of binding might appear. The potent term *berkasih-kasih* (continuing, strong and reciprocal affection) is used in the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* with reference to building relations with the Ottoman ruler and the ruler of Vijayanagara — as well as with rulers closer at hand. In the last pages of the text, the term is also used when speaking of developing the connection with the Dutch (a rising world and regional power by the 17th century) (Kassim Ahmad 1968: 442, 447, 343, 489).

This looking out 'in every direction' deserves careful attention, especially considering the need to reconcile the modern Malaysian insistence on a principled foreign policy with a tendency to cultivate relations with states in sharp competition with one another. The historical records of the pre-modern period, it is true, sometimes suggest calculations of power — hedging, bandwagoning, even some balancing — but there appear to be other types of consideration in play as well. In 1810 the ruler of Kedah wrote to the British, pointing out that the rulers of both Siam and Burma (to whom he had sent tribute) were stronger than Kedah, but the English *raja* was even more powerful. If the Siamese or Burmese happened to do something which went beyond the normal tributary relationship, transgressing his kingdom's *adat* (customs) — always a cause for anxiety — "the Company's power" could "strengthen Kedah" (Ahmat 2009: 38, 45). Another seeming power calculation arises in the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, when the decision is being made about whether to send the Melaka ruler's son to become the ruler of Vijayanagara. The great

diplomat, Hang Tuah, advises that if the ruler's brother did become king there, all the polities both "above and below the wind" would become more respectful to Melaka. He then adds that, following such an installation of his brother, the Melaka ruler's *nama* would be famous everywhere (Kassim Ahmad 1968: 79). At a later point it is suggested that a mission to the Vijayanagara ruler would be wise, especially considering that — at that time — the Melaka ruler had tension with the ruler of Majapahit (Kassim Ahmad 1968: 339).

It is challenging to determine exactly what the drivers were in these initiatives. There are indications of an attempt to develop relations in one direction in order to advantage relations in another. But the sources seem to suggest that the rulers operated in other registers as well. The Kedah rulers had taken the initiative to send the tributary *bunga mas* (the golden flowers or tree) to both Burma and Siam in the past, especially when those kingdoms were flourishing (Bonney 1971: 111, 134, 176; Ahmat 2009: 46; Skinner 1965: 18; Gullick 1983: 62). Just as in the case of the Melaka ruler and his Vijayanagara connection, a Kedah court text states explicitly that the objective is reputation or *nama* building (Dzulkifli 1973: 56–7; also Gullick 1983: 62; Bonney 1981: 111, 121). The Kedah ruler apparently did not resist being a tributary to the ruler of Siam — only attempts by the latter to interfere in his domestic arrangements, or *adat*. The Kedah initiative with the British was not quite hedging or balancing, partly because Britain, not Siam, was the rising power. Nor was the Kedah ruler bandwagoning, because he still seemed to see advantage (including advantage for his *nama*) in the Siam relationship. From the perspective of *nama* diplomacy, one has the impression that the Kedah ruler may have wished ideally to enhance relations on every front — just as the royal text suggests was the case with the Melaka ruler, whom it describes as sending out one foreign mission after another, some to close-by royal courts, others to very distant ones.

Another way of understanding this looking out ‘in every direction’ — the Kedah ruler desiring relations of affection (*kasih*) with the British as well as the Siam and Burma rulers (Ahmat 2009: 48, 54), just as the Melaka ruler sought to enhance his connection with the Ottomans and the Dutch — is in terms of what might best be called ‘moral balance’. This does not rule out the influence of strategic calculations of power, or of *nama* enhancement, but there does seem to be evidence of a long tradition of moral balance — a tradition which could even be having an influence in modern times on Malaysia’s foreign policy style.

The concern for balance is expressed in many areas. It is evident, for instance, in the handling of difference — contrasts in culture, which are noted in the Malay texts, and had the potential to be a challenge in pre-modern *raja-to-raja* interaction. The court texts are not naïve in describing the range of polities and societies dealt with by their *raja* and his envoys. Differences in customs (*adat*) and forms of government (*perintah*) are often mentioned. The customs of Siam are certainly contrasted with those of Melaka (Kassim Ahmad 1968: 389), as are those of the Ottoman empire (Kassim Ahmad 1968: 461); there is also mention of differences with Javanese polities (263) and Brunei (384). One of Hang Tuah’s great strengths as an envoy, the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* explains, is that “he knows about the forms of governing of all the great” (392).<sup>lxxvi</sup>

Openness to different perspectives was a hallmark of good rulership — and would have been particularly valuable in states largely dependent on trade. Malay writings praised rulers who could not only attract more subjects, but also many foreign traders (Kassim Ahmad 1968: 428, 486; Winstedt 1938: 188). Successful cosmopolitanism in an Archipelago port would be assisted by a ruler open to — or at least tolerant of — foreign ideas, including in the sphere of religion. Contemporary accounts of the adoption of Islam in Melaka stress how the pre-Islamic

ruler engaged philosophically with learned Muslims who came to his port and, once he had himself been converted, went on to propagate the religion more widely (Milner 2011: 40–1). In the 19th century, Christian missionaries were somewhat surprised to find that despite their commitment to Islam, a number of the Peninsular rulers were inquisitive to learn about Christian perspectives and were acquainted with the contents of Christian tracts that had been sent to them (Milner 2002: 76). In terms of rapid adaptation to Western culture more generally, the Johor ruler in particular — long before his state accepted a British advisor and was brought formally into the British sphere — was said to have become well acquainted with the “tastes and habits” of an “English gentleman” (Milner 2002: 198).<sup>lxxvii</sup>

Although the importance of acknowledging difference is stressed, therefore, it was by no means seen as a deterrent to initiating the process of relationship building. The rulers appear to have been ready to develop inter-polity relations in the way Tun Razak recommended in 1975, ‘irrespective of political ideology and social system’. As the Tunku and his successors claimed in that seemingly glib statement, they were willing to be friendly with ‘all the countries in the world’. To describe this seeming flexibility, it is perhaps tempting to employ the term ‘pragmatic’; but this plays down the role of principle. The preference for balance would in fact seem to be a deep-seated value in the Archipelago, Malay-speaking societies — and one operating in many areas as well as foreign relations.

The frequently-used term *adil* is relevant here. Although it is often defined as ‘just’, the idea of being ‘fair’ seems to capture the word more accurately. In the *Sejarah Melayu*, for instance, a dying Melaka ruler warns his son that when he becomes ruler he must remember to “consult with all his ministers and chiefs” — because no ruler can be *adil* unless he does consult “all” those in authority under him (Winstedt 1938: 124).<sup>lxxviii</sup> The

difference between 'just' and 'fair', of course, is significant. The search for 'justice' can appear dogmatic from one perspective; a commitment to being 'fair' can be seen as morally compromising from the other, as a willingness to place harmony above principle. Time and again in pre-modern Malay writing the quality of *adil* is associated with the need to investigate or inquire widely — to *pereksa* in every direction. A successful ruler, according to the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, acted with "*pereksanya dan adilnya*" — investigating thoroughly and fairly (Kassim Ahmad 1968: 412).<sup>lxxix</sup> Such a ruler was likely to attract many subjects (Kassim Ahmad 1968: 42). When a ruler does not investigate thoroughly, so the texts suggest, complete chaos could occur in his polity (Kassim Ahmad 1968: 296; Dzulkifli 1973: 70–1).<sup>lxxx</sup>

The sense of balance in these aspirations regarding fairness and inquiry is reinforced when the Malay texts describe the functioning of a royal court. When the ruler is presented as sitting in state (explains the *Hikayat Deli*, in an account quite similar to one in the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*): "forty ministers were in attendance on the right and on the left, and one hundred strong warriors and captains were in front of him, behind him, and on the left of him and on the right of him ... the ruler acted justly, fairly and liberally; he was meticulous in inquiry, and widespread were the reports of him in all lands" (Milner 1982: 96; Kassim Ahmad 1968: 1, 74–5).

It is tempting to view this preference for balance in aesthetic as well as moral terms. Farish Noor, for instance, in writing about Malay woodcarving, has referred to the "alternating convex and concave curves" that represent the "unity and balance of life" (Farish and Khoo 2003: 25). The carving conveys "restrained symmetry and balance".<sup>lxxxi</sup> In discussing textile design Haziyah Hussin has commented on the "balanced and repetitive wavy curves, with no beginning nor end" (2010: 78; Selvanayagam 1991: 113). With respect to the *pantun*, Muhammad Haji Salleh stresses the balancing of the four lines — the first two often invoking the

natural world; the following two, the human world of “emotions, speech and action” (Muhammad 2006: 109–10).<sup>lxxxii</sup>

The aspiration towards moral balance and fairness — reinforced by a strongly-grounded aesthetic preference — offers a further perspective on the approach modern Malaysia has taken to international issues. It provides another standpoint for thinking through some of the puzzling features identified above. It may help, for instance, in assessing the way the Tunku and some later prime ministers combined their pro-West stance with attempts to foster relation with non-aligned, Islamic and even Communist worlds — and why they refused to join the Cold War SEATO, which must have been viewed as the very opposite of a balanced endeavour. When we factor in the preference for balance, it is also easier to comprehend why — from the earliest post-1957 years — Malaysia was a leader in ASEAN in stressing ‘independence’, and then ‘neutrality’ and ‘equidistance’ in the country’s foreign policy.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> As Hussein Onn put it, Malaysia did not want to “get involved in or be dragged into big power rivalries and conflicts” (Morais 1981: 192). One senses here an anxiety about being thrown off-balance by that rivalry — and yet, in speaking during the 1970s of neutrality for Southeast Asia, the Malaysians were not seeking to exclude the major states from the region. Like the earlier sultanates, they were activist in their international relations. In Dr Ismail’s words, although hoping to avoid Southeast Asian countries becoming “pawns in the conflict between the big powers”, Malaysia wanted “increased relations with other countries of the world whatever their ideology” (Tarling 2006: 152–3).<sup>lxxxiv</sup>

Taking note of the stress on moral balance could throw light as well on why even Malaysia’s earliest region building included the idea of incorporating Communist states and, of course, Burma — and why, so quickly after the fall of the South Vietnam government, Prime Ministers Razak and Onn worked diligently to

pave the way for these states to be brought into ASEAN, while acknowledging the differences between their political and social systems and that of Malaysia. When Prime Minister Mahathir spoke strongly of the need to 'Look East', it seems significant from the perspective of balance that he insisted Malaysia would continue to 'Look West' — and when one looks at his actual policy decisions this commitment does appear to have been serious.

In more recent years the 'moral balance' viewpoint might have analytical relevance again, in considering the way Malaysia has been handling both China and the United States — supplementing the insights gained in a 'calculation of power' approach, or an approach based on the assessment of Malaysian domestic imperatives, or when such international behaviour is examined in a hierarchical *nama*-diplomacy register. Establishing a 'comprehensive partnership' with both China and the United States — though it might provoke scepticism from some commentators — could be seen to convey an aspiration towards moral balance (in addition to or instead of an attempt at power balance), and seems quite consistent with the commitment to 'equidistance' vis-à-vis international powers that was formulated in the 1970s. Over 2014 this preference for balance might be said to appear again as one influence in Malaysia's handling of the MH17 tragedy in the Ukraine. After the plane had been shot down, Malaysia — unlike many other countries — did not immediately hold the pro-Russian rebels responsible, but rather negotiated with them in order to retrieve the bodies of passengers and crew, and the airliner's black boxes. The criticism was made that Prime Minister Najib was in effect offering legitimacy to the rebel struggle against the pro-West, Ukraine government — but the Malaysian reply referred to the country's long tradition of cultivating relationships with everyone, and not being "beholden to any country". If Malaysia had been "beholden to the United States", Prime Minister Najib explained, "I do not think we would have received the remains of

MH17 so fast.”<sup>lxxxv</sup> Whether one agrees or not with the Malaysian response to the Ukraine tragedy, it was certainly consistent with a centuries-old inclination towards moral balance.

A further recent strand in Malaysian foreign policy, the stress on ‘moderation’ also seems consistent with the moral balance preference. The particular focus of the Malaysian initiative, the Global Movement of Moderates (begun in 2010), is the task of combating extremism in the Muslim community — and the Arabic term usually translated as ‘moderate’, *wasatyya*, might equally be said to convey the idea of ‘justly balanced’ or ‘morally balanced’.<sup>lxxxvi</sup> Prime Minister Najib has certainly linked together ‘moderation’ and ‘balance’ in his speeches, seeking to draw an important connection between “moderation and balance” in his government’s domestic policy and its foreign policy.<sup>lxxxvii</sup>

The point to be highlighted here, of course, is that this search for balance — this determined openness to multiple perspectives — appears to be a well-established moral preference. It is not specifically focused on foreign policy, but its influence in Malay society helps to give substance to the oft-stated claim that Malaysia’s foreign policy has been based on principle and not merely pragmatic expediency. As a preference, moral balance may operate alongside other considerations — including strategic calculations in a will-to-power register — but it ought not to be discounted in an analysis of the drivers of Malaysian foreign policy.

## Conclusion

In this lecture I have listed aspects of Malaysian foreign policy which have caused puzzlement (including for me):

- the apparent contradiction between the claim of principle and a tendency to reach out in all directions, including to countries in determined competition with one another;
- the willingness to accommodate the emerging China in advance of all other ASEAN countries, when Malaysia's domestic context would seem to have warranted relative caution;
- the vigour with which Malaysia has approached region building, and the stress it has placed on creating regional identity; and
- the surprisingly relaxed manner in which Malaysia has dealt with tensions in the South China Sea.

Looking back over these problematic features, it does appear helpful — as Yan Xuetong has proposed in the case of China — to identify some hard-core perspectives operating in pre-modern times, perspectives that appear to be relevant to international policy. The preoccupation with *nama*, a concept quite different from sovereignty; the commitment to group-binding as a basis for practical cooperation; and a moral preference for 'balance' in handling the international community — all seem to be pre-modern perspectives, hard-core perspectives, which continue to be influential today and help to define Malaysia's international identity. Taking these perspectives into account assists in setting Malaysian foreign policy in its specific historical and sociological context — but, of course, this is not to imply that other domestic factors can be ignored. Political considerations — shaped by the

ethnic structuring of Malaysia, with its large Chinese and Indian communities, and the need to cater to increasingly influential Islamic imperatives — need to be assessed, as must the personal traits and beliefs of key leaders, including their capacity to interpret signals from a potential ally or adversary.<sup>lxxxvii</sup>

The Malaysian leadership, like most national leaderships, will at times operate within an inter-state power calculus that promotes more or less predictable responses. Nevertheless, even when confronted by the classic challenge of a rising power, and the relative decline of a former hegemon, the Malaysian response is likely to be determined by a mixture of influences — including a long-established heritage of ideas relevant to ‘foreign relations’. In this context, I would argue, taking into account three hard-core perspectives from the pre-modern era — perspectives that do not fit easily into the structure of assumptions about ‘power’ and ‘sovereignty’ that underpins most International Relations analysis today — make Malaysia’s foreign affairs behaviour a little less puzzling. The discussion of *nama*, group-binding and moral balance, it might also be suggested, can play a role in the internationalising of International Relations — helping the discipline to draw on a non-Western as well as European heritage of thought.

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<sup>ii</sup> The term 'international personality', though helpful, is rarely used. It is used by Abdullah Ahmad 1985: 140.

<sup>iii</sup> Two important surveys of Malaysian foreign policy are Saravanamuttu, *Malaysia's Foreign Policy*, 2010, and Jeshurun, *Malaysia*, 2007.

<sup>iv</sup> See, for instance, Abdullah Ahmad, *Tengku Abdul Rahman*, 1985: 108, 138–41; Ott, PhD thesis, 1971: 30; and Liow, *Indonesia-Malaysia Relations*, 2005: 118.

<sup>v</sup> See, for instance, the special supplement in the *New Straits Times*, 30 May 2014.

<sup>vi</sup> Some of the government's anxieties are discussed in Lee and Lee, "Malaysia-China Relations," 2005: 3–28.

<sup>vii</sup> Najib Razak, "US-Malaysia Defense Cooperation: A Solid Success Story," *Heritage Foundation*, 3 May 2002, <http://www.heritage.org/research/lecture/us-malaysia-defense-cooperation>.

<sup>viii</sup> Yantoultrangui, "China Elevates Malaysia Ties, Aims to Triple Trade by 2017," *Reuters*, 4 October 2013.

<sup>ix</sup> See the observations of Ian Storey, cited in Sharon Chen, "Malaysia Splits with ASEAN Claimants on China Sea Threats," *Bloomberg*, 29 August 2013; Carl Thayer, "'Speak Softly and Carry a Big Stick': What is Malaysia Playing At," *The Diplomat*, 28 February 2014; and Shahrman Lockman, "Why Malaysia Isn't

Afraid of China (for now)," *The Strategist*, 24 April 2013. Also, see "China Not Encroaching on Our Waters," *New Straits Times*, 29 January 2014.

<sup>x</sup> See also: <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/malaysias-peacekeeping-contribution-a-big-plus-to-get-united-nations-seat-b>.

<sup>xi</sup> [http://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/criteria\\_and\\_characteristics](http://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/criteria_and_characteristics).

<sup>xii</sup> Tun Dr Ismail called Malaysia's foreign policy "definite, logical and consistent" (Jeshurun, *Malaysia*, 2007: 18).

<sup>xiii</sup> See, for instance, Heng, "United States and Malaysia," 2015: 411–12; Felix Chang, "A Question of Rebalancing: Malaysia's Relations with China," *Foreign Policy Research Institute E-Notes*, July 2014; Prashanth Parameswaran, "Playing it Safe: Malaysia's Approach to the South China Sea and Implications for the United States," Maritime Strategy Series, Center for a New American Security, February 2015.

<sup>xiv</sup> Address by Prime Minister Razak at the opening of the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, 13 May 1975, [http://www2.arkib.gov.my/Koleksi\\_TAR/Ucapan/1975%20\(JILID%201\)%20UCAPANUCAPAN%20TUN%20HAJI%20ABDUL%20RAZAK%20BIN%20HUSSEIN.pdf](http://www2.arkib.gov.my/Koleksi_TAR/Ucapan/1975%20(JILID%201)%20UCAPANUCAPAN%20TUN%20HAJI%20ABDUL%20RAZAK%20BIN%20HUSSEIN.pdf)

<sup>xv</sup> Stuart Grudgings, "China's Assertiveness Hardens Malaysia's Stance in Sea Dispute," *Reuters*, 26 February 2014, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/02/26/uk-malaysia-china-maritime-insight-idUKBREA1P1Z020140226>.

<sup>xvi</sup> See, in particular, recent work by Kuik, "Essence of Hedging," 2008; and Saravanamuttu, *Malaysia's Foreign Policy*, 2010: 330. For a discussion of these terms, see Kuik, "Malaysia's China Policy," 2013.

<sup>xvii</sup> Felix Chang, "A Question of Rebalancing: Malaysia's Relations with China," *Foreign Policy Research Institute E-Notes*, July 2014.

<sup>xviii</sup> Lee Shi-lan, "Malaysia's Neutral Foreign Policy Paid Dividends in Ukraine, says Najib," *The Malaysian Insider*, 24 August 2014.

<sup>xix</sup> Malaysia was one country which maintained uninterrupted trade with China during the Cold War period (Leong, "Malaysia and the People's Republic of China," 1987: 1113).

<sup>xx</sup> It has been argued that the Razak government saw the move as likely to attract electoral support in Malaysia's Chinese community. See, for instance, Razak Baginda, "Malaysian Perceptions" 2002: 235. Acharya, "Containment," 1999: 134 has suggested, on the other hand, that anxiety about China can be a "device for shoring up Malay unity...." For a perceptive analysis of the way domestic factors — particularly the elite's need for domestic legitimation — influence choices between balancing, bandwagoning and hedging, see Kuik,

"Essence of Hedging," 2008, and "Malaysia's China Policy," 2013.

<sup>xxi</sup> Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community*, 2009: 69 suggests that Malaysia moved quickly on China, "partly in order to demonstrate its commitment to ZOPFAN, since the PRC was to be one of the external guarantors under the original neutralisation proposal." For further discussion of this point, see note lxxxii below under "moral balance".

<sup>xxii</sup> See, for instance, Kuik, "Essence of Hedging," 2008: 175–6.

<sup>xxiii</sup> The Indonesian government thought Malaya was moving too fast (Liow, *Indonesia-Malaysia Relations*, 2005: 86, 97, 99, 103).

<sup>xxiv</sup> Thinking about regionalism did not start in 1957. For future Foreign Minister Ghazali Shafie's proposal for a "Commonwealth of Southeast Asia" some seven or eight years earlier, see Ghazali Shafie, *Memoir*, 2004: 17.

<sup>xxv</sup> <http://investasean.asean.org/index.php/page/view/asean-economic-community/view/670/newsid/758/single-market-and-production-base.html>.

<sup>xxvi</sup> "Malaysia's Chairmanship of ASEAN," *New Straits Times*, 2 October 2014.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Keynote speech, 8 April 2014: <https://www.kln.gov.my/archive/content.php?t=4&articleId=3848364>.

<sup>xxviii</sup> See, for instance, the 2013 report by the CIMB ASEAN Research Institute (CARI): [http://www.wiwi.uni-rostock.de/fileadmin/Institute/IPV/Lehrstuehle/Internationale\\_Politik/J%C3%B6rn\\_Dosch/CARI-monash-report-2013\\_final.pdf](http://www.wiwi.uni-rostock.de/fileadmin/Institute/IPV/Lehrstuehle/Internationale_Politik/J%C3%B6rn_Dosch/CARI-monash-report-2013_final.pdf).

<sup>xxix</sup> Ian Storey, cited in Sharon Chen, "Malaysia Splits with ASEAN Claimants on China Sea Threat," *Bloomberg*, 29 August 2013: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-08-28/malaysia-splits-with-other-asean-claimants-over-china-sea-threat.html>.

<sup>xxx</sup> "Malaysia Calls for Self-restraint in Territorial Disputes," *Rakyat Post*, 21 May 2014: <http://www.therakyatpost.com/news/2014/05/21/malaysia-calls-self-restraint-territorial-disputes/>.

<sup>xxxi</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xxxii</sup> Stuart Grudgings, "China's Assertiveness Hardens Malaysia's Stance in Sea Dispute," *Reuters*, 26 February 2014: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/02/26/uk-malaysia-china-maritime-insight-idUKBREA1P1Z020140226>.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> For useful recent discussions of "sovereignty", see the essays in Kalmo and Skinner, *Sovereignty in Fragments*, 2010; also, Alagappa, "Constructing Security Order," 2003: 108–9.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> See Leifer, "The ASEAN Peace Process," 1999: 26–7; Narine, "Human Rights Norms," 2012: 366; Emmers, *Cooperative Security*, 2004: 65; and Alagappa, "Constructing Security Order," 2003:86.

<sup>xxxv</sup> See, for instance, recent comment in Carl Thayer, “‘Speak Softly and Carry a Big Stick’: What is Malaysia Playing At?” *The Diplomat*, 28 February 2014; Prashanth Parameswaran, “Playing it Safe: Malaysia’s Approach to the South China Sea and Implications for the United States,” *Maritime Strategy Series*, Center for a New American Security, February 2015.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> See, for instance, Saravanamuttu’s important list of “middlepowermanship” elements in the “Conclusion” to his study of Malaysian foreign policy (*Malaysia’s Foreign Policy*, 2010: 330).

<sup>xxxvii</sup> For a Chinese comment on that preoccupation, see Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought*, 2013: 84.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> The point is reminiscent of the philosopher Michael Oakeshott’s discussion long ago of modes of human experience or “idioms of utterance”. He identified three of them as “history”, “science” and “practice”, and explained that each has its own presuppositions and is thus incomplete (Oakeshott 1933; Alexander, “Oakeshott as Philosopher,” 2012).

<sup>xxxix</sup> The strength of the so-called “English School” in International Relations is that its practitioners tend to focus on historical contexts. The problem is that very little work has so far been done on non-Western contexts: see the excellent overview by Buzan, *An Introduction*, 2014.

<sup>xl</sup> See also R. Tilman, quoted in Ott, PhD thesis, 1971: 31. Ott himself sums up the Malayan government’s foreign policy team as “all Westernised, pragmatic, conservative” (12); James C. Scott in *Political Ideology* had a similar impression of the senior public servants (1968: 202).

<sup>xli</sup> The diplomatic role of Rulers in the late 1940s demands closer study. The Sultan of Perak may well have played a critical role in the decision to adopt a federal scheme for the new “Malaya” (Kobkua, *Palace*, 2011: 149).

<sup>xlii</sup> For an overview of the pre-colonial Archipelago world, see Milner, *The Malays*, 2011: chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>xliii</sup> When Melaka was conquered by the Portuguese — according to the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (Kassim Ahmad 1968: 488) — the ruler of Melaka “fled to a place about ten days’ journey from Melaka”, into the jungle “near the Batak settlements”. The reader gets no impression that this journey required crossing the Strait of Malacca. See also the 18th century Malay letter quoted in Andaya, Perak, 1979: 138, which lists regional polities in a way that takes no account of whether they were on Sumatra or the Peninsula.

<sup>xliv</sup> A “great ruler” (*raja besa*) is assumed to have many subjects (Kassim Ahmad, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, 1968: 392; Winstedt, “Malay Annals,” 1938: 75, 116–17; Milner, *Kerajaan*, 1982: 27; 131).

<sup>xliv</sup> This is discussed in Milner, *Kerajaan*, 1982: 27; see Kassim Ahmad, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, 1968: 43, for an excellent example of a ruler taking pleasure in acquiring new subjects. A 17th century Perak ruler complained to the Portuguese that the ruler of Aceh's fleets attacked his country "taking the people captive" (Andaya, *Perak*, 1979: 44).

<sup>xlvi</sup> This distinction may not be obvious, even in court writings — if they are read in English translation. In the case of the *Sejarah Melayu*, the English translation at one point states that "princes from all countries came to present themselves before Sultan Muhammad Shah" of Melaka (Brown, "Sejarah Melayu," 1952: 59). The Malay original just says "all the *rajas*" came (Winstedt, "Malay Annals," 1938: 88).

<sup>xlvii</sup> See how the ruler of Kedah in 1785, when seeking British assistance, refers only to "my enemy", and acknowledges (in English translation) that this might include people "in this country" and even "my own Children" (Bonney, *Kedah*, 1971: 172).

<sup>xlviii</sup> See, for example, Kobkua, *Thai-Malay Relations*, 1988: 52–7; and Bonney, *Kedah*, 1971: 60–1.

<sup>xlix</sup> The book has also attracted criticism, some of which is included in the 2013 edition; see also, Hui, "Building Castles," 2012.

<sup>i</sup> See, for instance, the use of the term in the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (Kassim Ahmad 1968: 461).

<sup>ii</sup> These and other similar materials have been used before in discussing aspects of state relations. See, for instance, Chong, "Premodern Southeast Asia," 2012; Salmah Jan Noor Muhammad, Working paper, 2014; Mohd Jamil bin Mukmin, "Sejarah Hubungan Diplomasi," 2011; Bonney, *Kedah*, 1971; and Andaya, *Perak*, 1979. Two pioneering works dealing with inter-state relations in pre-modern Southeast Asia are Alexandrowicz, *An Introduction*, 1967, and Rubin, *The International Personality*, 1974.

<sup>iii</sup> The Kedah ruler writes to the King of England stating his aim as being to "obtain a good name" and continue to live "in terms of concord with you my Friends" (Bonney, *Kedah*, 1971: 141).

<sup>iiii</sup> *Hikayat Deli*, cited in Milner, *Kerajaan*, 1982: 105. For a similar statement, see Kassim Ahmad, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, 1968: 87. In certain cases the term for "shame" is directly linked to "*nama*" (Kassim Ahmad, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, 1968: 421). *Nama* is discussed in Milner, *Kerajaan*, 1982: 104–9, and passim — focusing, in particular, on the *Hikayat Deli* but also on the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, the *Hikayat Patani*, the *Sejarah Melayu* and the *Hikayat Seri Rama*.

<sup>liv</sup> In certain cases the term for “shame” is directly linked to “*nama*” (Kassim Ahmad, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, 1968: 421).

<sup>lv</sup> The *Hikayat Hang Tuah* relates that a wealthy Indian merchant offers to spend his money to bring a *raja* to his country. His country at that time had no ruler, and the merchant comments that “property in this world can have no benefit (*guna*)” (Kassim Ahmad 1968: 70). The Malay scholar, Za’ba, explained many years ago that the Malay language included no terms equivalent to “financial” or “economic” (cited in Milner, *Kerajaan*, 1982: 25).

<sup>lvi</sup> For a discussion of ceremonial defining, see Milner, *Kerajaan*, 1982, and also Andaya, *Perak*, 1979: 187. For an insight into the cost of such ceremonies, see Andaya, *Perak*, 1979: 190.

<sup>lvii</sup> For example, in the *Hikayat Sri Rama* (Shellabear 1964: 297), the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (Kassim Ahmad 1968: 319) and the *Hikayat Deli* (Milner, *Kerajaan*, 1982: 107). *Nama* is discussed in Milner, *Kerajaan*, 1982: 104–9, and passim — focusing, in particular, on the *Hikayat Deli* but also on the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, the *Hikayat Patani*, the *Sejarah Melayu* and the *Hikayat Seri Rama*. For the relation between *nama* and the afterlife, see also Kassim Ahmad, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, 1968: 14, 69.

<sup>lviii</sup> See the discussion and citations in Kang, *East Asia*, 2012: 95.

<sup>lix</sup> Although the *Sejarah Melayu* insists that the Kampar ruler (in East Sumatra) should send obeisance to the Melaka ruler, it acknowledges the Pasai ruler of North Sumatra as an equal (Winstedt 1938: 85, 125, 159, 163, 165). The Sultan of Trengganu admitted the “superiority” of the King of Siam (while insisting that he did not send him tribute (Sheppard, “A Short History,” 1949: 42). A 17th century Kedah ruler was quoted as admitting he was an “inferior of the Siamese” (but also said he was “no vassal”) (Andaya, *Perak*, 1979: 49).

<sup>lx</sup> For discussion of the way relations with the ruler in Southern India (the “Kling” region) could assist the Melaka ruler’s position with neighbouring *rajās*, see Kassim Ahmad, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, 1968: 79, 340.

<sup>lxi</sup> The *Hikayat Johor*, written in the early 20th century, provides another instance of gaining benefits from hierarchy. It presents the Queen of England as clearly superior to the Johor Sultan, but also conveys the impression that his status was raised through his association with the Queen — for instance, sitting on her right at a royal dinner in England, or being awarded an imperial title (Milner, *The Invention*, 2002: 211–12).

<sup>lxii</sup> The word used for “sovereignty” today is “*kedaulatan*” — but it is not used for “sovereignty” in the pre-modern texts.

<sup>lxiii</sup> See note xxxiv above for International Relations discussions of “sovereignty” in the ASEAN context. The view that the development of ASEAN as a regional institution is hindered by the way “ASEAN states jealously guard their sovereignty” is discussed in Kumar and Siddique, *Southeast Asia*, 2008: 95.

<sup>lxiv</sup> To obtain a superior position in the hierarchy — even by conquest — does not imply that the victorious ruler could alter the *adat*. In the *Hikayat Deli*, a victorious ruler gives an assurance that the “customs and ceremonial” (*adat istiadat*) of subject polities will not be altered (Milner, *Kerajaan*, 1982: 75, 77).

<sup>lxv</sup> The “non-interference in *adat*” tradition, of course, offers a different narrative for understanding the “doctrine of interference” which has been much discussed with reference to Malaysia and other ASEAN countries — a narrative less dependent on the influence of Westphalian influence. See Acharya, “Regional Institutions,” 2003: 223; and Acharya, *Constructing a Security*, 2009: 70–7.

<sup>lxvi</sup> Milner, *The Malays*, 2011: 58.

<sup>lxvii</sup> In *The End of the Nation State*, Kenichi Ohmae (1995: 81) praised the way Malaysia and other Southeast Asian states, in supporting “Growth Triangles” (incorporating territory from neighbouring countries), were willing to give up the “bunting and hoopla of sovereignty” for sensible economic advantage. For problems with Growth Triangles, see Steven Wong, “The Trouble with ‘Triangles’: The Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT),” September 2012, <http://www.isis.org.my/index.php/component/content/article/44-featured/1272-the-trouble-with-triangles-the-indonesia-malaysia-thailand-growth-triangle-imt-gt>. On Iskandar in Johor, and foreign ownership of housing (and Malaysia-Singapore cooperation in management) there, see Saravanamuttu, *Malaysia’s Foreign Policy*, 2010: 250; Jeshurun, *Malaysia*, 2007: 346; Khor Yu Leng and Vasiliki Mavroeidi, “Iskandar Malaysia Labours to Develop,” *ISEAS Perspective*, 4 November 2014; and Rennie Whang, “Iskandar Malaysia — China Developers’ New Land of Opportunity,” *Straits Times*, 8 July 2014. For a case study of a contrasting view regarding territorial sovereignty, consider Australian anxieties regarding a 1980s Japan proposal for a “Multifunction Polis” to be created in Australia. See, for instance, McCormack, “Bubble and Swamp,” 1998. With respect to territorial disputes with neighbours, the potential for tension would appear to be enormous — given the complex intertwining of European colonial and local perspectives over the last two centuries. In fact there has been relatively little tension. When disputes between Malaysia and Indonesia did sharpen in the late 1980s, it was when other issues were damaging relations between the two countries. A growing

concern about prestige seemed to influence both national leaderships (Liow, *Indonesia-Malaysia Relations*, 2005: 143, 167).

<sup>lxxviii</sup> See Muhammad, *The Mind*, 1991: chapter 6.

<sup>lxxix</sup> I am using Muhammad Haji Salleh's translation here (*Romance and Laughter*, 2010: 292).

<sup>lxxx</sup> Compare, for instance, Bonney, *Kedah*, 1971: 174, and Ahmat, *Letters of Sincerity*, 2009: 36–7 for the handling of a letter from a Kedah ruler.

<sup>lxxxi</sup> On royal letters, see also Gallop, *The Legacy*, 1994, and Drakard, *A Kingdom of Words*, 1999.

<sup>lxxxii</sup> I am following here Muhammad Haji Salleh's translation (*Romance and Laughter*, 2010: 484); and Kassim Ahmad, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, 1968: 442. See also the combination of the same two terms in a description of the reasons for sending an embassy to Vijayanagara (Kassim Ahmad 1968: 343); also, the use of "*muafakat berkasehkasehan*" in the *Sejarah Melayu* (Winstedt 1938: 123); a letter of 1810 from the Sultan of Kedah (Ahmat, *Letters of Sincerity*, 2009: 45); and the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (Kassim Ahmad 1968: 350).

<sup>lxxxiii</sup> I am grateful to Ayame Susuki and Lee Poh Ping for discussing this concept with me.

<sup>lxxxiv</sup> See Mahathir's observations in "Mahathir: Australia can't be part of East Asian Group," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 December 2004.

<sup>lxxxv</sup> This discussion of group-binding, it can be argued, has the potential to contribute to a Southeast Asian narrative about "institution binding", which has been identified as a significant element in the region's security strategies (Acharya, "Regional Institutions," 2003: 222–3).

<sup>lxxxvi</sup> He is particularly praised for the way he reports on the manner of behaviour (*kelakuan*) in China. (Kassim Ahmad, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, 1968: 372). The recognition of difference — of variation in custom and behaviour — appears to be deeply ingrained in Malay thinking. The anthropologist William Wilder, writing about Pahang, commented some decades ago on the common view that "every village has 'its own' accent, custom, personality and history" (Wilder, *Communication*, 1982: 117).

<sup>lxxxvii</sup> On the Malay rulers' determination to keep abreast of developments in the wider world, see Andaya, *Perak*, 1979: 87. Such "outwardlookingness" has been described as a general feature of Southeast Asian leaderships (Wolters, *History*, 1999: 66).

<sup>lxxxviii</sup> In his translation of the *Sejarah Melayu* passage, Brown omits the vital word "all" (*segala*) (Brown 1952: 124).

<sup>lxxix</sup> See also Winstedt, "Malay Annals," 1938: 150.

<sup>lxxx</sup> See also the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* (Dzulkifli 1973: 70–1).

<sup>lxxxi</sup> The phrase is used on the labelling of a display at the Kandis Resource Centre near Kota Bharu.

<sup>lxxxii</sup> See also Muhammad, *Romance and Laughter*, 2006: 64. For "balance" in Malay dance, see Mohd Ghouse, *The Malay Dance*, 1995: 14, 9–10.

<sup>lxxxiii</sup> Acharya compares Malaysia's position with that of other ASEAN countries (*Constructing a Security*, 2009: 62–70). The "moral balance" preference may throw further light on the 1974 initiative with China; see note xxi above.

<sup>lxxxiv</sup> Indonesia appears to have been much more cautious regarding the involvement of outside powers in the Southeast Asian region (Liow, *Indonesia-Malaysia Relations*, 2005: 125).

<sup>lxxxv</sup> Lee Shi-lan, "Malaysia's Neutral Foreign Policy Paid Dividends in Ukraine, says Najib," *The Malaysian Insider*, 24 August 2014; and Richard C. Paddock and Alexander Kolyandr, "Malaysia's Risky Talks with Rebels in Ukraine Paid Off," *Wall Street Journal*, 23 July 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/malaysias-risky-talks-with-rebels-in-ukraine-paid-off-1406147380>.

<sup>lxxxvi</sup> This translation also avoids the reply to "the Moderates" that there is something unsatisfactory about insisting on being only "moderately religious". To be "balanced" in one's beliefs does not run the risk of conveying a possible lack of religious conviction.

<sup>lxxxvii</sup> <http://www.theborneopost.com/2014/10/20/malaysias-multiracial-multireligious-success-also-helped-secure-unsc-seat-says-najib/#ixzz3HMO9wkOt>

<sup>lxxxviii</sup> See the useful, recent work by Keren Yarhi-Milo (2013), which I thank Shahrman Lockman for bringing to my attention.



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Professor Milner studied at Monash University, the University of Malaya, and Cornell University. He has been a member of a range of government committees and councils, and is a frequent commentator in the media. He is a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia.



## **Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia**

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