FOCUS IN CONTINUITY:

A Framework for Malaysia's Foreign Policy in a Post-Pandemic World

A Monograph

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Fax : (603) 2144 3487
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"Focus in Continuity: A Framework for Malaysia's Foreign Policy in a Post-Pandemic World" was launched on 7 December 2021 by the Prime Minister of Malaysia, YAB Dato' Sri Ismail Sabri bin Yaakob. The Framework serves as an extension to the previous Foreign Policy Framework and complements the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Strategic Plan 2021-2025, the 12th Malaysia Plan (2021-2025), and the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030. The Framework sets out the priority areas of Malaysia's foreign policy amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and aids the conduct of Malaysia's foreign policy. The priority areas include:

- Global Economy
- Health Diplomacy
- Digital Economy
- Cybersecurity
- Cultural Diplomacy
- Peaceful Coexistence
- Multilateralism
- Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Taking the Framework as a reference point, this monograph is published to further elaborate on some of the areas of the Framework, namely Global Economy, Health Diplomacy, Digital Economy, Cybersecurity, Cultural Diplomacy and Peaceful Coexistence, which are contributed by researchers of the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR) and the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia. It is part and parcel of a larger effort to bring the work of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia to the people, for it to be better understood.

It is my greatest hope that Wisma Putra and all interested parties find this publication beneficial.

YB Dato' Sri Saifuddin Abdullah
Minister of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia

Malaysia and Health Diplomacy

An Interview with Tan Sri Dato' Seri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah

Source: Ministry of Health

Introduction

For the topic of Health Diplomacy under the Focus in Continuity, IDFR managed to solicit the views of none other than the Director-General of the Ministry of Health Malaysia – a man who has been at the forefront of Malaysia's stalwart efforts in handling the COVID-19 pandemic, and whose legendary composure, informed decisions and medical track record has won him acclaim both in Malaysia and abroad. The interview was held in January 2022.

Q

Thank you Tan Sri Dato' Seri Dr Noor Hisham for agreeing to this interview. You have been a medical practitioner for 40 years now. In your view, what are today's main global and regional health threats and challenges? How would you rate the effectiveness of Malaysia's health policy response(s) to these challenges and threats?

A

The world is facing multiple health challenges. These range from the emergence of the COVID-19, growing rates of non-communicable diseases (NCD), obesity and physical inactivity due to the health impacts of environmental pollution and climate change.

The COVID-19 pandemic has turned the world upside down. Currently, nations are focusing on COVID-19 response and recovery in addition to rebuilding their economies. Here in Malaysia, we have shifted into the mitigation phase and resumed our daily activities while adopting the new norms and SOPs. This could not have been possible without the sacrifice, dedication and commitment of our healthcare workers and frontliners from not just government agencies but also NGOs and the community at large.

Malaysia did struggle in facing the COVID-19 pandemic, especially during the earlier stage of it. But we managed to respond and work together to strengthen our action plan to curb this pandemic. At the same time, we identified areas for improvements so that we can prepare better for the future.

Of course, there is a lot more that needs to be done and we must continue to be vigilant. The collision of NCDs and COVID-19 demonstrate the need to invest in NCD prevention and control as an essential foundation for security and preparedness. As we remain resilient, recover and rebuild, we need to also take into consideration that there is an opportunity for us to improve our provision of Universal Health Coverage and strengthen our health system to better care for our population and prepare for the future.

Q

Where does international aid and cooperation stand in health diplomacy? How can Malaysia improve her health diplomacy?

A

Firstly, let us be clear on what we mean by health diplomacy. Global health diplomacy is a practice by which governments and non-state actors attempt to coordinate global policy solutions to improve global health. Health diplomacy is important because it is the intersection of public health and foreign affairs. This is an area that I personally take very much interest in.

International aid forms a part of global health diplomacy. Malaysia continues to extend assistance to communities and countries in need, within our capacity. Our participation in the humanitarian and

disaster relief assistance are both monetary and in-kind contribution, either independently as a nation, or part of joint efforts by the United Nations. NGOs such as MERCY Malaysia also act as a key player, not just locally but also internationally. COVID-19 and other global pandemics, climate change, political turmoil and natural disasters have shown the inter-connectivity of actions taken by individual countries in achieving health goals. Therefore, Malaysia must aim to be a key voice in global health diplomacy.

Earlier in January 2022 in his annual address to the Ministry, Minister of Health Malaysia Khairy Jamaluddin talked about a future-proofed future for health in Malaysia. One of the point she raised was the 'internationalisation' of the MOH. Currently, we have an important role to play within the World Health Organization.

Malaysia is currently a member of the WHO Executive Board and will be the Vice-President for the upcoming 75th World Health Assembly in May 2022. Together, both the Minister and I would like to see more Malaysians working in international organisations.

Our role at the international level is very important in terms of network, in terms of our voice in international organisations and so on. For many years, Malaysia has been the founding member of Drug for Neglected Disease Initiative (DNDi). This has not only benefitted Malaysia but also the world at large.

One of the very successful works that Malaysia has been involved in was to push the boundary to make curative drugs for Hepatitis C to be made more accessible to public sector in Malaysia. Recognising the public threat it posed to Malaysians, the MOH has embarked on a very tumultuous yet very satisfying journey with DNDi, Pharco drug company in Egypt and Pharmaniaga in Malaysia, and also the Foundation for Innovative New Diagnostics (FIND).

Today we can provide diagnostic and curative care for Hepatitis C at local primary care clinics, something which is now possible at a cost of less than USD 200 per patient as compared to exorbitant cost of USD 20,000 for 12 weeks treatment per patient previously. This shows how important it is to grasp the subject of health diplomacy well and use it in the right context.

So right now, we are looking at ways to strengthen Malaysia's role at the international level. Another example, taking lessons from this pandemic, is on how the international networking is very important for us to learn new methods for public health and pandemic management.

Q

How can governments and non-state actors work together to improve global health?

A

We talk about the whole-of-government and the whole-of-society approach. We fully acknowledge the importance of these approaches in achieving common goals for the good of the nation. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the importance of these approaches, in particular working with non-state actors to manage the pandemic.

Source: Ministry of Health

Working together with different partners, particularly from the government's perspective in engaging the private sector and civil societies, presents a set of challenges. We have to conduct due diligence to ensure that the interest of the government and the population are protected, for example patient data confidentiality in the context of COVID-19 management. We also need to avoid any conflicts of interest, both real and perceived. Our engagement with non-state actors also needs to be transparent and we need strong accountability mechanisms.

Global health players now also consist of strong philanthropic organisations such as Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation that invests huge funds in health, both for research and implementation of programmes. It is certainly to our benefit for Malaysia to be a more active player in global health.

Q

How do you see Malaysia's health system now and in decades to come and how do we improve?

A

We have come a long way from the origins of the Malaysian healthcare system decades ago. In keeping abreast with technology, I foresee that the future of medicine will be very much technology-assisted, much more than it is now. Public health surveillance, preparedness, clinical expertise and hands-on diagnosis are still the fundamental components of healthcare delivery. Nevertheless, we will have Artificial Intelligence (AI) and wearables that can even help doctors diagnose

diseases. This would be very useful especially in remote and rural populations which are hard to access.

All of us need to keep ourselves updated with the latest science as it keeps evolving. What we learned decades ago could soon become obsolete. Besides arming ourselves with a wealth of knowledge, I do believe that we have to be mentally receptive and open to these changes. Embracing technology and innovation is truly the way forward. As often mentioned by Minister of Health Khairy Jamaluddin, there has been a chronic under investment into public healthcare in Malaysia for such a long time. We ought to spend 3-4% of GDP on healthcare yet we have only spent approximately 2% of our GDP. This needs to change so that a greater impact can be seen across the healthcare service delivery system. We ought to 'future proof' our healthcare system with a healthcare reform.

Q

How can Malaysia play a more leading role in promoting vaccine equity?

A

Vaccine inequity was one of the most glaring crises that emerged during this pandemic. Malaysia raised this matter during the recent WHO Executive Board Meeting. Malaysia has always been a strong advocate for not just vaccine equity but also the accessibility and affordability of vaccines and medicines. Lack of access to affordable and quality medicines and vaccines are a common barrier experienced by many low- and middle-income countries. In August 2017, Malaysia invoked the Compulsory License for government use, exercising 'Rights of Government' under the Patent Act 1983 (Act 291) to procure the Direct-Acting Antiviral (DDA) Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) drug Sofosbuvir at an affordable price. Through a Research and Development collaboration between Clinical Research Malaysia (CRM), Ministry of Health Malaysia with the Foundation for Innovative New Diagnostics (FIND), a new Hepatitis C Virus Rapid Diagnostic Test Kit was developed. To find and treat our 'missing millions', free testing and treatment of HCV were scaled up through decentralisation of these services up from just 25 centres to 146 centres between 2019 and 2021.

The world today is still in the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the virus continues to mutate and wreak havoc, putting it under control remains our top priority. In the battle, vaccines are of vital importance and should be distributed around the world fairly and equitably with no country and no one left behind, not only pertaining to COVID-19 vaccine but other vaccines as well.

In reality however, inequitable distribution and unbalanced vaccination remain prominent challenges. The immunisation gap between high- and low-income countries needs to be addressed by the international community. Solidarity and cooperation is the only right choice to ensure vaccine supply equity.

Malaysia can play a leading role in ensuring vaccine supply equity to other countries through multiple health diplomatic ways, namely:

1) Promoting solidarity in vaccine accessibility around the world

The COVID-19 vaccination is the largest effort of its kind in human history. People's life and health must always be our first priority, and economic, political or other interests must not precede them. Vaccines are first and foremost a global public good; we must ensure they remain so and reject rising vaccine nationalism. They are supposed to be used as a weapon to save lives, not a means by any country for selfish gains, still less a tool for geopolitical rivalry.

2. Step up support of vaccine supply to developing countries

a) Firstly - the production deficit. While ramping up total supply, producing countries should also support developing countries through technology transfer and joint production, and safeguard the global supply chain of raw materials.

b) Secondly - the distribution deficit. Vaccines should be shared with greater intensity and speed to make them accessible and affordable for developing countries as quickly as possible, especially the least developed countries.

c) Thirdly - the cooperation deficit. This requires greater solidarity and sense of responsibility, and full mobilisation of governments, businesses and international organisations, to form synergy.

3) Promoting vaccine donation to other countries

Many high-income countries had the luxury to have an excessive supply of vaccines thus can even provide booster doses to their population. It is not the case in the low-income countries in which until now, their vaccination rate remains at a low level even for their primary series vaccination. Hence, countries with excessive supply should donate their vaccines to these lower income countries especially those with high incidence and mortality rate of COVID-19 infection.

Q

What are the main challenges in vaccine development in Malaysia?

A

Vaccine development is uniquely challenging. The cost of vaccine development from its research and discovery to registration is high, ranging from an estimated USD 200 to 500 million. The costs may be further amplified by post-approval requirements for additional studies before broad recommendations are made. Furthermore, safety and effectiveness studies to assess the benefit-risk profile are essential for vaccines.

Other components, including technical development issues and clinical trial implementation, contribute to vaccine development challenges in Malaysia. Even in the best of circumstances, large studies with good safety, efficacy, and immunogenicity objectives are difficult to implement. Potential concerns among communities about study conduct, myths, rumours and misinformation that may circulate once the study has started are also challenging to address.

Q

Global/multilateral vs. bilateral health diplomacy: When, Why and How?

a. When and how do we choose which approach works best?

b. How do we execute such responses to address global health?

A

a. There is no 'one size fits all' answer to this as it depends on a case-by-case basis. Having been in the international health scene for decades now, I can tell you that multilateral and bilateral health diplomacy certainly has its own set of strengths. There is an abundance of benefits that can come out of a multilateral relationship amongst countries. This has been seen via the WHO, ASEAN, OIC and other multilateral platforms.

b. Countries within the region would work together towards a positive outcome. Nevertheless, the role of bilateral relationships between countries cannot be undermined as well. Whilst some global health issues can be addressed on a multilateral platform, there are times when a more specific bilateral approach may be required particularly when dealing with a sensitive issue that is unique to just the two countries involved. This is especially true for our neighbouring countries. As with any other negotiations, ideally, the gold outcome is to ensure that it is a win-win situation for both parties of the bilateral negotiations.

Q

Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) varies from country to country. Can a universal SOP be created? What are the challenges in creating one?

A

We witnessed the various ways countries around the world 'reacted' to SOPs being implemented and executed. Clearly, the mindset of the public varies vastly from one country to another. This explains why it was 'easier' to implement SOPs such as mask-wearing during the pandemic in some countries, whilst we witnessed mass amounts of people rallying against these SOPs as they strongly felt it infringed upon their basic human rights.

Therefore, taking into account the unique personalities and receptivity of each nation, I personally think that while it is possible to develop universal advisory, adherence to it is another matter altogether. The challenges are aplenty and again, adherence to each policy or SOP developed will have to take into account the local settings, as it will have to be customised accordingly. Of course, it does not hinder collaboration between countries especially when it comes to travelling and vaccination to ease or minimise bureaucracy, particularly in the COVID-19 context.

Tan Sri Dato' Seri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah is the Director-General of Health, Ministry of Health, Malaysia. He is also the current President of Malaysia Medical Council (MMC) and a Member of Board of Directors of the Drugs for Neglected Diseases Initiative (DNDi).

Malaysia's Place in the Global Economy

By Calvin Cheng

Background

As much of the world transitions into an endemic phase, countries across the globe are looking to repair the global linkages that were shattered by the pandemic. This means restoring international trade and investment flows, deepening economic integration and cooperation, and reenabling safe travel and tourism. Malaysia, too, has been eager to rebuild its linkages with the world. As Malaysia looks towards recovering an economy battered by the pandemic, policymakers have renewed their focus on placing Malaysia in the global economy.

Indeed, in recent months, the Malaysian government has repeatedly affirmed the role of international trade and foreign direct investment (FDI) in driving economic growth and development. In the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Foreign Policy Framework published in December 2021, restoring Malaysia's economic links with the world is listed as an immediate priority.[1]

Likewise, the Malaysian government has accelerated efforts to deepen bilateral economic relationships with other countries and strengthen multilateral engagement. Malaysia successfully ratified the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in January 2022[2] and is making swift progress in ratifying the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)[3]. The Prime Minister has also welcomed initiatives like the newly launched Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) and expressed the potential of mega-regional trade agreements like RCEP and CPTPP to pave way for the creation of the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP) – an ambitious trade pact that first appeared 14 years ago in a joint statement from Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) trade ministers in 2008[4].

How International Trade and Foreign Investment Helps

This renewed interest in increasing Malaysia's openness to trade and investment could grease the cogs of Malaysia's development in the coming decades. Greater international trade and investment tends to boost economic growth[5], productivity[6], employment[7], and incomes[8]. For developing countries like Malaysia in particular, openness to trade promotes inward foreign direct investment[9] (FDI) and in turn, creates opportunities for technology[10] and knowledge diffusion from abroad[11]. In recent decades, the advent of digitally enabled trade and e-commerce has magnified these potential gains, generating opportunities for small-and-medium enterprises (SMEs) to access global markets and participate in global production networks[12].

Trade policy can play a large role in enabling this type of economic openness. Reducing trade barriers and deepening economic integration creates avenues for greater trade intensity with our peers from across the region – directly reducing the cost of inter-regional trade and facilitating greater access to goods, services, and technology. Together, the forces of trade, investment and economic integration have allowed developing countries around the region to grow richer and more productive. After all, it is these global forces that have catalysed the growth and development of Malaysian economy over the past six decades – as it has for rapid industrialisation of East Asian economies like Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan[13].

Trade, Openness, and Long-term Economic Development

While the globalisation of trade has transformed living standards in Asia over the past few decades, harnessing openness for economic success is much more complicated than it may appear.

For one, unbridled trade and investment liberalisation can create trade-offs. Even as it brings gains on the aggregate level, trade ultimately creates winners as well as losers. Better-educated, higher-skilled workers in export-facing industries may see larger gains from trade openness than lower-educated, lower-skilled workers in import-competing industries[14]. Likewise, because the surviving higher-performing firms tend to pay higher wages, inequality between workers across different firms can increase.

At the same time, harnessing trade for development needs to go beyond managing its costs. Experience over the

last few decades show that for developing countries, trade is a necessary but insufficient condition for development.[15] The ability of greater trade and investment to produce positive spillovers for countries depends largely on existing country characteristics (regulatory environment and human capital) and complementary supply-side policies. Indeed, research indicates that the gains from international trade and foreign investment are rarely automatic. A country that has stronger institutions, good infrastructure, better-developed human capital, and a higher-skilled workforce will be better able to internalise the knowledge, technology, and growth spillovers from international trade and capital flows[16].

Indeed, the successful export-led industrialisation of the East Asian economies were accompanied by large supply-side investments in human capital and infrastructure. Rising trade and investment were supported by an emphasis on internalising the benefits of foreign investment to build domestic capabilities and drive industrial upgrading.[17] Large amounts were spent on research and development, and to incentivise domestic innovation. Steadfast political will was exercised to undertake politically difficult structural reforms.

After all, FDI flows matter little for development if its benefits are captured by foreign firms instead of being directed towards building indigenous capacity to produce and innovate. Trade matters little for productivity if the benefits accrue to large multinationals "winners" while the domestic "losers" of trade bear the costs. Similarly, large free trade agreements and market access mean little if local firms are not exporting or cannot produce goods and services that the world demands.

Lessons Learnt and Policy Recommendations

Making trade openness work for Malaysia will require more than just the signing agreements. Truly harnessing the forces of global linkages means that Malaysia's trade and development policy should be: 1) Focused on the long-term: aimed at internalising the benefits of trade and FDI towards long-term growth and building domestic innovative capacity; 2) Inclusive: making efforts to democratise potential gains from trade across regions, sectors and workers.

Focused on the long-term: a large part of maximising the gains from international trade and foreign investment is internalising the benefits of these global forces, directing it towards accelerating long-term productivity growth, and developing domestic human capital and innovation. As Malaysia strengthens its economic linkages with the world, it also needs to improve the 'absorptive' capacity of Malaysia's economy and labour market in order to fully maximise the potential gains from trade and FDI.

This means accelerating human capital development while strengthening political and institutional governance. This would also need to include concerted efforts to redirect the gains from greater trade and FDI towards developing domestic capacity, innovation, and competitiveness. One way to ensure this is to encourage greater backward and forward linkages between local firms and SMEs and large export-facing multinationals.[18] To be sure, this can be done without the use of blunt tools like local content restrictions and/or overly generous tax incentives with dubious cost-benefit track records. Policy initiatives to improve information

matching, increasing SME capabilities in line with international demand, and encouraging partnerships can go a long way in making economic openness work for Malaysia's long-term development.

Inclusive: Trade creates winners and losers, and as such it is crucial that trade and development policy make inclusivity a main priority. This would need to involve policies that support inter-regional and inter-industry mobility, supporting the ability of workers who are affected by import competition and/or technological change to be able to switch sectors, regions, or upskill. First steps include ensuring universal access to retraining programmes and active labour market policies (ALMPs) like those offered under the national Employment Insurance System (EIS).

Additionally, Malaysia can make negotiating trade agreements itself more inclusive. Trade agreements like the CPTPP and RCEP constitute a lot more than just tariff reduction and as such, can have profound effects on the entire Malaysian economy, households, and workers. This calls for higher transparency and greater involvement of stakeholders in the negotiation of trade agreements, alongside actively working to assure everyday Malaysians that trade agreements would not diminish opportunities for local businesses. After all, these are all notions that echo ideas outlined in the Malaysian government policy concepts and documents like the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030, and *Keluarga Malaysia*.

Conclusion

Across the globe, even as COVID-19 anxieties move into the background, newer uncertainties are fast emerging; from surging global food prices to geopolitical conflict and an imminent climate crisis, new hazards once again endanger the engines of Malaysia's development. As Malaysia begins to decide its place in a rapidly shifting post-COVID world – it is becoming clear that economic openness and strengthening global linkages will need to be a central part of this. Policymakers should note however, that taming the forces of globalisation will be neither easy nor automatic – it will require both careful policy action and steadfast political will.

Calvin Cheng is a Senior Analyst in the Economics, Trade and Regional Integration Division, Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia.

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Securing Malaysia's Digital Future

By Farlina Said, Sofea Azahar and Calvin Cheng

Introduction and Current Policies

Across the world, the advent of digital technologies has changed the world. It has made cross-border trade cheaper, business processes more efficient, and allowed small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to access global markets through e-commerce. COVID-19 has further accelerated this digital shift. In 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, information of communication technologies (ICT) and e-commerce activities contributed nearly 23% of Malaysia's economy – up 3.4 percentage points from a year ago.

Indeed, throughout the numerous movement restrictions in Malaysia, digital technologies have been a lifeline for businesses and SMEs across the country. Even as COVID-19 restrictions continue to be relaxed nationally, there are many signs that this digital shift will be enduring. This is helped along by the Malaysian government's keen focus on digital transformation, with the launch of the Malaysia Digital Economy (MyDigital) blueprint and numerous other initiatives over the past two years. Since the onset of COVID-19, numerous digital transformation policies were expanded or introduced through the government's eight economic stimulus packages. For instance, the June 2020 *Penjana* package included expansions of policies like the SME Digitalisation Matching Grant, Smart Automation Grant and the SME Technology Transformation Fund.

Additionally, the government has also issued major digital policy blueprints, such as the MyDigital blueprint, published in February 2021. The MyDigital blueprint comprises action plans for digital transformation across numerous areas and outlines the government's objective for Malaysia to be a regional leader in the digital economy and drive sustainable socioeconomic development. Other major policy documents on specific areas include the National Policy on Industry 4.0 (Industry4WRD) – which focuses on the smart manufacturing and high-technology industry – and Malaysia's Cyber Security Strategy 2020-2024.

Nonetheless, despite this growth and the government's keen focus on digital policy, numerous challenges loom in Malaysia's digital and strategic future. These include issues like equal access to infrastructure and digital skills, in addition to a lack of digitally-driven innovation. As Malaysia progresses towards its goal of becoming an advanced and developed nation in the coming years – it will become increasingly important to overcome these challenges.

Key Challenges for Malaysia's Digital Future

Access to Digital Infrastructure and the Digital Divide

Despite the progress made over the last decade, ensuring adequate access to digital infrastructure across Malaysia remains a major policy challenge. For instance, fixed broadband penetration rates are still relatively low at 39% nationally[1] – with lesser-developed states like Kelantan and Sabah reporting even lower penetration rates of only 18% and 15% respectively. Internet speeds matter too. Surveys suggest that about 44% of MSMEs report that poor speeds remain a major obstacle to utilising more advanced digital technologies.[2]

Likewise, there still exists large disparities in access to digital devices across socio-economic status and regions. This in turn directly leads to learning losses amongst low-income students amid the COVID-induced shift to remote learning. Ensuring universal access to high-speed internet and internet-enabled digital devices would benefit both SMEs and households – increasing exports,[3] productivity, and human capital development. Indeed, safeguarding the right for every business and household throughout Malaysia to access the opportunities afforded by digital technologies will be an important prerequisite for Malaysia's ability to secure its strategic digital future.

Digital Skills Gap

Digital skills are an essential component for fostering Malaysia's shared digital future. While adoption of frontier technologies presents opportunities, a shortage of digitally skilled pool of labour remains a key challenge for Malaysia. This is often attributed to insufficient focus on digital literacy and innovation,[4] as well as shortfalls in digital infrastructure.

Data shows that the share of Malaysians who possess advanced ICT skills (i.e. computer programming) is low at 17.6%.[5] The bulk of the population is reported to have only basic and standard ICT skills such as copying and pasting information, email and basic spreadsheet knowledge. One of the main factors could be due to the weaknesses in education system. This includes low interest in Science,

Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)[6] and social stigma towards Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)[7].

The COVID-19 pandemic has raised the demand for digital-savvy talents as companies re-evaluate their business strategies to shift to digital. However, Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation's (MDEC) survey revealed a greater need to reskill workers given the acceleration of business digital adoption since the COVID-19 crisis[8]. Additionally, research by ISIS Malaysia also revealed that among MSMEs, the digital skill gap has made it difficult for firms to digitalise even basic processes, preventing them from reaping benefits of digitalisation[9].

Regulatory Gaps in Building Digital Trust

Malaysia's ability to grow the digital economy would be dependent on the nation's ability to facilitate an ecosystem of trust, where transactions and activities take place within digitally secured and resilient systems. This would require strong cybersecurity standards, appropriate regulatory frameworks and capacity for enforcement. The cyber environment features complexities in identity, jurisdiction and a low barrier of entry for criminals especially in acquiring tools that can affect systems and society.

Responsibilities to ensure a safe and secure cyberspace in Malaysia are still developing. Malaysia has around 46 different laws and guidelines related to cyberspace, covering aspects of trade, e-commerce, cybersecurity and intellectual property rights. However, the task of enforcement is scattered with domestic coordination challenged by silo approaches to addressing issues in cybersecurity. For instance, the Malaysia Computer Emergency Response Team (MyCERT) is housed in the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia in coordination with the Royal Malaysia Police, Securities Commission and Bank Negara Malaysia – causing fragmentation issues related to enforcement and regulation. In addition, while Malaysia has the Personal Data Protection Act, the declaration of data breaches is not mandatory, and notifications of data breaches and data being moved are not practiced. As the interconnectivity of cyberspace means harm can cross borders, international and regional coordination would be crucial.

As such, building trust in the digital economy would require constructing regulatory frameworks for present and future technologies as well as enhancing cooperation mechanisms between enforcement bodies. Indeed, as technologies increasingly become more complex, trust will become an increasingly essential part of securing Malaysia's digital future.

Shortfalls in the Innovation Ecosystem

Research and development, innovation and commercialisation are necessary to build the future digital economy, whether such a future consists of the ICT industry or e-commerce related to other industries. Due to the rapid shifts in technology, there is a need for Malaysia to remain competitive in developing, manufacturing or contributing future technologies. According to the Global Innovation Index (GII), Malaysia innovation has stagnated over the past decade, even as regional peers continue to gain.

Malaysia's research and development strategy are written in Malaysia's Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 (SPV 2030), National Policy on Science Technology and Innovation (2021-2030), 10-10 MySTIE Framework and the 12th Malaysia Plan. Nonetheless, currently, the adoption of digital tools amongst businesses is limited to basic tools such as e-mail or social media presence, partly due to the high costs of digitalisation.[10] While incorporating basic tools could diversify sales channels, the technologies would not necessarily have the strategic impact it could have such as data analytics and productivity.

Regional Comparison – Looking into Singapore and Indonesia

Singapore

Singapore's digital transformation has been driven by early computerisation efforts in 1980s and further accelerated by its Digital Economy Framework for Action and Smart Nation vision. One of the significant enablers to boost digital economy is the outstanding infrastructure.

Singapore is ranked among the top countries with fast 5G speed,[11] materialised by government's investments[12] to build an inclusive 5G ecosystem. The development of the Nationwide Broadband Network since 2009 has helped provide the citizens with wide, high-speed and affordable access to broadband services. In 2021, the residential wired broadband penetration rate stood at 92.2% while mobile penetration rate improved to 158.8%.[13]

Furthermore, the nation's pro-business policies and Digital Government also facilitate the use of data and digital technologies for the ease of citizens and businesses. Singapore ranked 2nd out of 190 countries in 2020 in the Doing Business Index.[14] Industry Transformation Maps (ITMs) have also been rolled out, among other initiatives, for industries to prepare for the future economy through innovation and productivity measures. Some of the achievements include 95% of transactions being conducted digitally from end-to-end, increased number of officers trained for data analytics and data science and ministries' plans to adopt Artificial Intelligence (AI).[15] On the digital skills front, initiatives have been launched, including SkillsFuture for Digital Workplace and Skills Ignition SG, a programme initiated by government and Google.

Indonesia

Efforts to digitally transform Indonesia commenced since President Joko Widodo's administration and because of his vision in making Indonesia 'the digital energy of Asia'. One of the country's key drivers of digital growth is the e-commerce market that has emerged as the fastest-growing market in ASEAN region.

In 2018, Indonesia contributed to nearly 45% of regional e-commerce revenue, the highest relative to its regional peers.[16] Further, estimates have shown that the pandemic has further accelerated e-commerce transactions.[17] Gross merchandise value (GMV) of e-commerce has jumped by 54% because of the COVID-19 crisis.[18] In 2020, e-commerce accounts for 72% of digital economy value.[19] The growth is supported by a sizeable population of 202.6 million that is connected to internet[20] and increased use of smartphones.[21] As such,

these factors, among others, have contributed to a substantial rise in online spending. According to estimates, Indonesia's e-commerce transactions are expected to increase with GMV at US$83 billion in 2025, up from US$32 billion in 2020.[22]

Indonesia's digital economy is also propelled by the presence of five unicorns which harness innovative technologies – Gojek, Tokopedia, Bukalapak, Traveloka and OVO. The growth of these tech companies has been bolstered by government's initiatives to encourage digitalisation of firms, particularly the SMEs. These include support measures for firms to establish digital presence such as Pasar Digital (PaDi), Belanja Pengadaan (BELA) and Laman UMKM (MSMEs Page), subsidised soft loans and reformed venture capital regulations, and pro-innovation policies like 1001 Digital Startup Movement.

Policy Recommendations

1) Deepening regional integration and cooperation for a shared digital future

Malaysia is amongst the most export-dependent and open economies in the region. As such, it is crucial that Malaysia continues to deepen regional integration and cooperation on areas related to cross-border digital trade and digital connectivity.[23] This includes ratifying existing free trade agreements with strong digital trade rules like the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and pursuing digital economy partnership agreements like the existing one between Singapore, Chile, and New Zealand. At the ASEAN level, accelerating implementation of the ASEAN agreement on e-commerce (AAEC) and other trade-facilitation initiatives would enable greater cross-border e-commerce transactions, improve consumer trust and enable capacity building initiatives that will help increase digital adoption in the country.

2) R&D and Innovation

There are gaps in Malaysia's R&D ecosystem, among which is the linkages between R&D, industry, innovation and commercialisation. Malaysia's research is concentrated in Higher Learning Institutions[24], however the papers produced may not necessarily result in a commercialised product. There may need to be a paradigm shift needed to understand the lifecycle of research to production, inclusive of the support needed to support the process such as further awareness on patents, shorter funding cycles with monitoring mechanisms to support the long period of research in addition to identifying specific niche areas and pairing approaches with the knowledge-base and sandboxes needed.

3) Digital Diplomacy

The advancement of technologies is critical to drive digital transformation and the digital economy. As such, developing Malaysia's digital economy would be dependent on the ability to have access to or develop technologies critical for Malaysia's future. This might mean access to the hardware, the components or education exchanges needed to nurture Malaysia's knowledge bases and talent. However, major power rivalry impacts the way such technologies are researched, created and developed. As alliance-building for future technologies occur between

like-minded states (such as the Quad and AUKUS), the possibilities of such technologies developed with collaborations outside of such alliances are low, thus possibly isolating neutral and technology agnostic nations from the vulnerabilities of new technologies and further harms of cyberspace.

Due to the geopolitical and geostrategic implications of technology adoption, the role of diplomacy that could articulate the Malaysia's objectives as well as promote Malaysia's participation in the development of future technologies is imperative to build Malaysia's future digital economy. Diplomacy has always been Malaysia's approach to strategic and security issues. Thus, Malaysia should explore the possibility of developing flexible and wide cyber diplomatic capabilities to meet challenges introduced by technological diffusion. Others have pursued this agenda, with countries such as Australia, France, Germany, Finland, Denmark and Estonia have ambassador-at-large with a cyber portfolio. The United Kingdom's Foreign Office has up to 50 attachés (one in ASEAN based in Singapore) to invigorate economic and capacity building relations based on cyber. Diplomacy is the interconnectors to raise the bar of cybersecurity, whether it is between the public and private sectors, governments and Big Tech or government to government. If cyber and digital technologies are the catalysts for development and future economic activities, these diplomats would be crucial to pave the way for Malaysia's capability in cyber.

4) Promoting Involvement of Private Sector

The private sector is a key stakeholder in digital transformation – creating jobs, upskilling talent and delivering digital products as well as digital infrastructure. As such, there is a need to encourage greater involvement of private sector to complement the vision and objectives of other stakeholders in enhancing Malaysia's digital economy. Given the current environment which reveals lacking participation of businesses in the digital ecosystem and societal digital divide, Malaysia should explore more avenues to encourage private sector in leveraging digital platforms and ecosystem through open data initiative,[25] deepening public-private partnerships and fostering cooperation.

Conclusion: Towards Securing Malaysia's Shared Digital Future

Overall, these policy recommendations provide a starting point for Malaysia to secure its strategic digital future. The post-COVID world is one that is characterised by rapid shifts and large uncertainties. Technological change has accelerated, and digital transformation is quickly becoming a prerequisite for countries to remain competitive, relevant, and productive in the near future. To this end, policymakers should look towards an overarching and holistic digital policy that recognises that the pathway towards Malaysia's digital future should be one that is shared by all Malaysians.

Farlina Said, Sofea Azahar and Calvin Cheng are Senior Analysts and Senior Researcher at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia.

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Crafting a Malaysian Position in Cyber

By Farlina Said & Dr Moonyati Yatid

Introduction

There are moments in history where technology played a decisive role in geopolitics. The invention of the steam engine bolstered the British Empire, driving the Industrial Revolution, the search for raw materials and an age of colonisation. Another is in nuclear politics where the transfer of "sensitive nuclear assistance" shaped nuclear power for the coming decades. Matthew Kroenig highlights the peculiar logic of developing the nuclear capabilities of other states. For instance, China's assistance with Pakistan's nuclear programme in the 1980s and France's aid to Israel fed into their own national interests.[1]

There are patterns of such alliances today, where the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) aims to advance the vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific with leader-level working groups on critical and emerging technologies and cyber[2] or China's call for the Global initiative on Data Security[3] . Such power structures, formed by technological advancements, persist today whether to maintain the gap between developing and developed nations, preserve technological dominance in military equipment or control over industrial bases.

Geopolitics and Cyber Engagements

Technological maturity sets the tone for international engagements, where rules and norms are at a juncture of development. From international platforms, such as the United Nations Group of Governmental Experts (UN GGE) to UN Open-Ended Working Group (UN OEWG), mini-laterals like the QUAD and safety standards determined on industrial platforms, the international community is determining means and ways to build a safer cyberspace.

However, the connection between technology and geopolitics could cleave technological development along the lines of values which can differ in areas, such as governance, transparency or data management. Governments may prefer greater controls over data flows or stricter governance on private companies, with policies such as data localisation requirements or back-end access for the purpose of national security. For developing nations, data governance policies may decide partnerships, allies and participation in supply chains as privacy and transparency policies build confidence and trust between parties.

Managing an opaque and asymmetrical cyber environment means dealing with the challenge of threats or cyberattacks below the thresholds of force. Threats and cyber operations may also not take familiar forms addressed by states, especially for interpretations in violation of sovereignty. For instance, security firms such as Insikt Group[4] and FireEye[5] have reported cyber activities in Southeast Asia where the broad strategic objective is information gathering in the South China Sea or the Belt and Road Initiative. Rampant information gathering may not be interpreted to reach thresholds of force, complicating paradigms for appropriate responses. Leaked personal information of government and military officials may also present risks for identity theft, doxing, fraud or targeted influence campaigns.

As cyber becomes ubiquitous, cyber operations may exploit different centres of gravity. State-sponsored disinformation campaigns can impact on public sentiment, which could result in paralysis for decision-making[6] or colour perceptions of an incident.[7] Influence over public sentiment may not be safeguarded by existing legislation and upholding values, such as freedom of speech and opinion, may impact on a government's ability to balance between national security and human rights.

Constructing the appropriate response is a diplomatic, strategic and security challenge. Countries such as Estonia, France, Germany, the Netherlands and UK use scale and effect to determine if a cyberattack is comparable to kinetic attacks, which would activate different responses. The US Executive Order 13757 allow for the imposition of sanctions on individuals and entities determined to be responsible for tampering, altering or causing the misappropriation of information with the purpose or effect of interfering with or undermining election processes or institutions.[8] Such responses are part and parcel of maintaining a nation's strategic environment and autonomy in cyber though they correspond with a nation's capability to investigate such operations and international mechanisms.

Malaysia's Cyber Outlook

Even prior to the pandemic, Malaysia was one of the more digitally advanced countries. More than 70% of households were connected to the internet in 2015, and a year prior to the pandemic[9], in 2019, more than 90.1% of Malaysian households had access to the internet.[10] According to the Malaysia Communications and Multimedia Commission, Malaysia's internet activities have remained consistent through the years, with more than 90% using it for messaging (96.5% in 2018 and 98.1% in 2020).[11] COVID-19 further aided the digitalisation process, with lockdowns forcing the public and private sector to utilise cyber for economic and social needs.

Despite the urgency to set up remote work systems, organisations and companies did not have sufficient oversight mechanisms in place. About 79% of organisations reported ransomware attacks in 2021.[12] Global security company Kaspersky stated that Malaysia registered the highest number of COVID-related cyberthreats in Southeast Asia in 2020, followed by Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia[13]. Malaysia has been experiencing a rise in the number of cyber incidents. Between January and August 2021, CyberSecurity Malaysia recorded 7,495 cases,[14] compared with 5,078 in 2018[15] and 6,478 in 2019[16]. During the pandemic, concerns were also raised about an increase in content-related issues in Malaysian cyber, such as disinformation and misinformation, which had a significant impact on clarity of government action and public calm.[17] During the movement-control order, the National Cyber Control and Command Centre, or NC4, detected and contained several cyber-attacks on government agencies, including advanced persistent threats, ransomware, and zero-day cyber-attacks.

Malaysia had recognised cyber security as a national priority since the late 1990s. The country had taken steps and made early commitments to address cybersecurity concerns and develop a solid national strategy with laws, such as the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 and National Cyber Security Policy (NCSP) launched in 2006. At least 15 years have passed since the first cybersecurity policy, NCSP, which established mechanisms addressing threats to the critical national information infrastructure (CNII). Its successor, the National Cyber Security Strategy was launched in 2020.

Cybersecurity is an issue that transcends borders, hence strong international alliances and intelligence-sharing between trusted international partners are important to build greater stability in cyber. For instance, cybercriminals take advantage of the interconnected and replicable nature of the internet.

Strategic partnerships between governments and the private sector must be established to address vulnerabilities along the entire supply chain or system. There is a need for ASEAN-based partnerships in cybercrime, norms and capacity-building along with engagements in international fora, Track II conversations and private sector-led conversations to harmonise processes and exchange best practices to build a safe cyberspace. Key to this is Malaysia's impartial and careful navigation of international affairs that would allow it to establish relationships facilitated by engagements, dialogues and international collaboration.

Way Forward

The Belfer Centre's national cyber power index 2020[18] ranks Malaysia as 19th out of 30 countries in terms of cyber capabilities, while the International Telecommunications Union's (ITU) cybersecurity index 2020[19] ranks Malaysia fifth, highlighting its achievements in cybersecurity.

Malaysia has consistently been in the top 10 since the ITU cybersecurity report was first released in 2014. Its strengths are in the legal framework for dealing with security and crime, capacity building through research and development, education and training, and international partnerships and information sharing. Areas for improvements include organisational and technical, where the lack of defensive abilities and control over information[20] dampens power projection. Malaysia must also improve its pragmatic international engagement strategy, one that aims for a secure, trusted and resilient cyber while fostering economic growth and stability for the well-being of its people.

Developing cyber-related foreign policy objectives can leverage on existing instruments concerning cybersecurity, digital economy and innovation. These include policies, such as the national cyber security strategy 2020-2024, defence white paper, Malaysia digital economy blueprint and national policy on science, technology and innovation as well as the 10-10 Malaysian science, technology, innovation and economy (MySTIE) framework. The defence white paper and 21st chief of defence forces grand command address characterise the approach towards addressing cyber threats as the state would need to develop capabilities to detect, analyse and act upon any cyber-related threats. Meanwhile, the blueprint focuses on data flows and data protection in addition to international standards adoption and infrastructure development. The MySTIE framework identifies the science and technology

drivers and 30 niche areas for technological adoption that would chart Malaysia's innovation and economic way forward. By synchronising its approach to cyber affairs with these instruments, the way forward would be promoting existing national agenda that have been identified by stakeholders.

A consistent engagement agenda with international partners that adopt a whole-of-government approach could achieve the goals of existing policies and safeguard Malaysia's national interests in cyber. The objective is to amplify Malaysia's soft power to bolster our competitiveness, digital economy and innovation standing. Leveraging on its strengths, Malaysia's foreign policy position should amplify soft power, shape discourse, norms and rules and guide whole-of-government engagements at the international level. These goals are attainable if Malaysia's identity is well identified. For instance, Malaysian identity in cyber can be:

Non-aligned and neutral: Malaysia is a firm believer in the principles of non-alignment and neutrality, traditional geopolitical concepts that are applicable in cyber. Technology neutrality is an important principle whereby individuals and businesses have the freedom to decide which technology is most appropriate and suitable for their needs, without being influenced to use a particular type of technology. This position is consistent with ASEAN's approach to technological adoption, shared by Singapore's communications and information minister.[21] However, to move the bar higher, Malaysia should build partnerships and participate in fora, discussions and platforms that will support the principle of non-alignment and technology neutrality, including regional transparency oversight mechanisms, engagements on interoperable technologies, confidence-building measures and partnerships with the private sector.

A responsible state in cyber: A responsible state in cyber would include: 1) building domestic capacity to ensure the protection of systems, data, transmissions, or people; 2) participating in international mechanisms that encourage responsible state behaviour. As responsible state behaviour should be the baseline of bilateral and multilateral engagements, Malaysia could consult conversations and statements from such fora as UN GGE and the UN OEWG as well as those led by mini-lateral arrangements or the private sector. Consultations should focus on improving domestic capabilities, building platforms to promote conversations on responsible state behaviour and crafting internal response mechanisms in situations where responsible state behaviour is not practised. Malaysia has been active in shaping a concerted national position on key international cyber security issues, particularly the UN norms of responsible state behaviour in cyber.

Malaysia collaborated with Singapore to develop a regional action plan to ensure effective and practical implementation of these norms, resulting in ASEAN becoming the first regional organisation to adapt these norms in principle.

A good neighbour and capacity builder: stability in cyber is dependent on the ability of states to be adept technically, regulate effectively and collaborate to combat common and upcoming threats. To this end, Malaysia should aim to play a

larger role in capacity building that would amplify its technical capacity and internal collaboration experience.

Practical and aim for development: as the digital economy can enrich many lives, the growth of the economy and development of society can be among the anchors of foreign policy engagements. Being a nation of limited resources, Malaysia's agenda for cyber should aim for practicality, innovation and serve the objective of national prosperity. Thus, international engagements should harness the activities of ministries, agencies and the private sector tipped towards economic growth. This would also be inclusive of building a trusted digital environment, facilitating collaboration in cyber-crime, ensuring that data harmonisation and protection of personal data would project Malaysia's cyber capabilities and promoting its technical and human resource capabilities.

An upholder of digital rights and its cultural values: the diffusion of technology will complicate the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms online. As developing nations have different experiences with digitisation and technologies, cybersecurity concerns can impact on societies differently, such as gendered lenses to network shutdowns or cultural nuances to data ownership that impact on privacy practices. Thus, digital rights must include access and telecommunication policies, privacy and surveillance or content moderation and hate speech. Malaysia's identity and values should stay aligned to practices of diversity, tolerance and respect in the management of data or the creation of online spaces.

A believer in multi-stakeholder processes: Malaysia is a true believer in diplomacy and multi-stakeholder engagement and there is no reason not to pursue the same course of action in matters concerning cyber. As cyber is a multi-stakeholder domain – with geopolitical and cyber stability tensions affecting the public and private sectors – Malaysia should support mechanisms that would amplify its voice and participation in international fora. Encouraging and facilitating Malaysian private sector and civil society organisations in technical standards or other geopolitical spaces (such as the UN OEWG) could boost the Malaysian profile in these areas. Widening spaces of discourse to include the private sector in foreign policy would be useful for innovative policymaking and leverage on various actors for cyber diplomacy.

The national cyber security strategy 2020-2024 highlights priorities for greater cross-border collaboration in cybercrime, intelligence connectivity, engagement with international platforms on international standards development and the identification of confidence-building mechanisms. To achieve the goals, Malaysia would need to deepen understanding of national interests in a shifting domain. Mapping the engagements and areas of concerns from ministries, agencies and state government activities, inclusive of values and future technological concerns, would contribute to Malaysia's understanding of the geopolitical challenges from the perspective of various stakeholders.

Additionally, cyber diplomacy would need to be agile, multi-disciplinary and highly collaborative. Diplomats can be trained on the basics and nuances of cyber-related matters, especially those concerning cybersecurity, Big Tech, international regulations, critical technologies and future issues. They need to have sufficient capacity to address

challenges and opportunities arising from cyber affairs. This would include trainings and exercises aimed at building awareness on strategic cyber issues. Diplomats must also engage in cyber-related and cyber diplomacy fora to ensure they are consistently updated on development in this domain.

Last is to develop a skills pipeline that would ensure expertise and human capital are available in Malaysia. According to Malaysia cyber security strategy 2020-2024[22], one of the main challenges in having a robust cybersecurity ecosystem is workforce shortage, as well as talent gaps in a variety of fields. Shortage of skilled cyber security professionals is not just a challenge for Malaysia but globally. However due to the critical nature of these skills, it is key for Malaysia to ramp up its efforts – with cyber security content and skills taught in schools, colleges, and universities, as well as for experts and non-experts in both the public and private sectors.

Technology and cyber-related issues will determine the way states and countries engage with each other. It will also be the basis of future development, where developing countries are able to carve niches and spaces for economic engagements that will trickle into social development. Maintaining spaces for autonomy can be a challenge, especially if sovereignty must be interpreted and exercised to the best of its capacity to protect national interests. The role of the Foreign Ministry is vital, as data, people and technology flow between borders.

Farlina Said is a Senior Analyst in the Foreign Policy and Security Studies programme, Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia.

Dr Moonyati Yatid was a Senior Analyst at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia. She is currently a Senior Manager of Corporate Strategy and Research at Malaysia Petroleum Resources Corporation (MPRC) and a Policy Analyst at the Global Foundation for Cyber Studies and Research (GFCyber).

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Roundtable Discussion on Cultural Diplomacy: A Synopsis

By Dr Najwa Abd Ghafar

Introduction

Cultural diplomacy is not a new concept. In international relations, it gained popularity when the United Nations appointed an actor, singer, and comedian Danny Kaye as its first Goodwill Ambassador in 1954. It is a concept generally understood as a type of soft power where it deploys a country's culture in support of its foreign policy goals. Yet, for a heterogeneous country like Malaysia, putting it into practice is a challenging task considering Malaysia's culturally diverse demography. On 13 March 2022, a special Roundtable Discussion (RTD) on Cultural Diplomacy premiered on Astro Awani in this riveting discourse. The RTD was co-organised by the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR) together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia (MOFA) and the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia, as well as Astro Awani. The RTD invited three prominent figures and experts in the field as the discussants. They were Professor and Holder of Al-Ghazali Chair at International Institute of Islamic Thought and

Civilization (ISTAC), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Professor Datuk Dr Osman Bakar, Founder-Director of PUSAKA and Senior Fellow of ISIS Malaysia, Mr Eddin Khoo, and anthropologist and intercultural specialist, Dr Asma Abdullah. The discussion was effectually moderated by the Director-General of IDFR, Dato' Dr Shazelina Zainul Abidin.

Malaysia's Definition of Cultural Diplomacy

According to Professor Osman, every country tends to have its perspective of what cultural diplomacy is, and its significance differs as every country has different experiences. Malaysia's cultural diplomacy, therefore, is best understood when it is viewed in the light of its historical background. In the colonial period, the Western countries developed theories and practices of cultural diplomacy in pursuit of their foreign policy goals in the political climate of intra-Western rivalry. In the cultural domain, for which education is the core component, each Western country pursued policies that were meant to demonstrate and establish that it is better than and superior to all other powers. As for the colonies themselves, they were only on the receiving end. The growth of indigenous culture was only tolerated as long as it was subservient to Western culture. In reality, however, the cultural flow was a one-way or unilateral affair.

In the post-colonial era, this classical definition of cultural diplomacy survived for some time. According to this definition, cultural diplomacy designates a policy area or branch of public diplomacy which seeks to mobilize its cultural resources to achieve foreign policy goals. It is not a two-way flow in the sense that the major powers were only interested to mobilize the cultural resources of the colonies. Malaysia (Malaya), being a British colony, subscribed to this definition, meaning that the cultural resources are for the colonizer to use to achieve their foreign policy objectives. After achieving independence, these countries, including Malaysia (then Malaya) tried to interpret what are the cultural resources and their foreign policy goals. Therefore, it is not surprising that cultural diplomacy was limited only to music, dancing, dress, cuisine, buildings and religious festivals. Later, the understanding of the cultural resources expanded and more recently cultural diplomacy is redefined as an exchange of ideas, information, values, systems, traditions, beliefs and other aspects of culture with the objective to promote mutual understanding. This new definition is different from the previous one as it emphasizes mutual understanding, and dialogue is recognised as an important aspect of cultural diplomacy. Additionally, the range of cultural resources also has become very large that it has become none other than what can be called 'civilization diplomacy', which makes a lot of sense in the context of Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations.

Professor Osman further added that education has become an important aspect of cultural diplomacy. In the past, Malaysia did not receive foreign students to study in Malaysia and Malaysia only sent local students abroad. Malaysians, therefore, got to learn about other cultures while Malaysian culture remained unknown. However, these days, Malaysia also receives students from abroad, implying inevitable cultural exchange.

Malaysia's Cultural Identity

Dr Asma was of the view that Malaysia has a special and unique persona as the country is culturally diverse, which also at the same time makes fitting Malaysia into one cultural identity difficult. A Malay's perspective about Malaysia is different from a Chinese's, Indian's and other Bumiputera's perspectives. As such, the definitions of what a Malaysian is and what Malaysian culture is, are work-in-progress as they are very versatile. Despite the challenge, she stressed that understanding our culture – its versatility particularly, before understanding the culture of others is important, and it is a precondition in cultural diplomacy. Tourists and visitors who come to Malaysia are amazed at Malaysia's culture thus it is a comparative advantage that we need to utilize. In this respect, all ministries need to have a cohesive message in promoting Malaysia abroad.

Mr Eddin Khoo asserted the need to challenge the concept of Malaysian identity and cultural diplomacy. The reason for that is because Malaysian identity is neither reflected in nationality nor organized politically. The identity has a resonance and goes deeper back into the country's historical reality. He suggested that the characteristic of Malaysian culture is cosmopolitanism as it is very organic. He also pointed out that cultural diplomacy is not exactly about selling and promoting our country abroad. Instead, it is about education and knowledge in all spheres. One of the most pivotal foreign policy events was the establishment of relations between China and the United States which has defined world politics since then. The first phase of the relationship was a ping pong (table tennis) match which essentially was a political interaction, and cultural understanding needed to be forged before the match happened.

Mr Eddin elaborated that cultural diplomacy has been defined primarily by the United Nations and the United States. Cornwell University for example established a Southeast Asian programme that shapes American understanding of what Southeast Asia was. In other words, cultural diplomacy is foreign policy's push to create cultural understanding and engender basic solidarity and even conflict resolution. He highlighted the resolution and agreement that was brought about between third world nations in Bandung about 50 years ago, where they were able to come together and through a process of mutual understanding and solidarity begin to grapple with the idea of how cultures can be shared. The influence of culture is so powerful that it transcends politics. Therefore, Malaysia's cultural diplomacy has to be shaped along those lines. He argued that selling and promoting Malaysian culture i.e., Malaysian food, is part and parcel of the effort, but it is not the heart of the matter. As such, if cultural diplomacy is going to be pivotal to Malaysia's approach to foreign relations, we would need to start having a far more serious and profound understanding of what it is and what its resonance can be at the international level.

Mr Eddin further argued that cultural diplomacy entails a great deal of intelligence and learning, such as the promotion of Malay language. He shared that Malaysian Studies was promoted in universities abroad, and at one time was very prominent in his alma mater, the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. It was introduced by an English orientalist and

administrator with expertise in British Malaya, Richard Olaf Winsteadt (more commonly known as R.O. Winsteadt). Unfortunately, the effort was not sustained and therefore Malaysia needs to look back upon its foreign policy and understand that so many of our cultural resources can be benefitted to be our cultural diplomacy initiatives.

Cultural Diplomacy in Digital Era

Prof Osman reiterated that Malaysia should be proud that it is one of the most digitalised countries. It is a great achievement that Putrajaya is a modern capital city that applies e-governance. The IDFR and Ministry of Foreign Affairs need to embrace digital technology as it offers abundant possibilities for enhancing cultural diplomacy. Mr Eddin however, warned against misinformation that comes with digital technology. As such, technical skills and a strong knowledge base are needed to employ digital technology to our advantage. In agreement with them, Dr Asma added that technology is a new tool that will benefit cultural diplomacy initiatives if mastered well. She gave the example of publicizing and demonstrating the method of wearing sarong through a virtual platform. The pandemic has also proven that there are many initiatives that can be done as they are museums conducting virtual tours and promoting paintings virtually.

Recommendations on Cultural Diplomacy

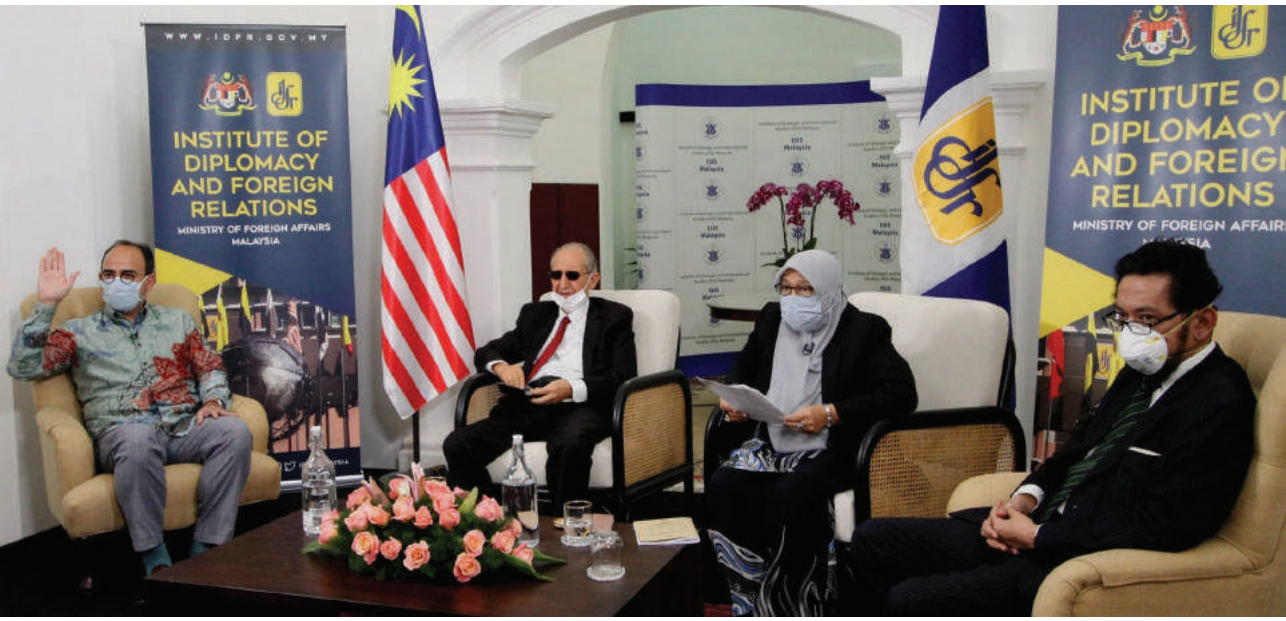
The panelists unanimously agreed that there is a lot more to be done on initiatives for cultural diplomacy. Prof Osman viewed that Malaysia has to be more aggressive in showcasing its achievements. One of them is the achievement of maintaining social and political stability despite the demographic heterogeneity. This is unique as not many culturally diverse countries are able to do it as successfully as Malaysia. As such, instead of looking up to other countries as models, Malaysia has to start acknowledging itself as a model for others. In agreement with Prof Osman, Dr Asma suggested focusing on the commonality across cultures, races and religions. It may not be an easy task and a lot more research needs to be done but it will be worth the effort. Malaysia also needs to highlight its intercultural competence – intercultural display of understanding, cooperation and collaboration, which is not uncommon in Malaysia. She cited Ramli Ibrahim, a Malay who championed Indian classical dance as an example.

Mr Eddin recapped that cultural diplomacy is an important aspect of foreign policy and the Ministry needs to benefit from Malaysia's intercultural understanding and its organic culture. Malaysians are beyond the perception of 'my culture versus your culture', for instance, the Malay language is not only spoken by the Malays and Malay culture is not only practiced by the Malays. Many Malaysians are trilingual and subscribe to multicultural practices. Indeed, this is among the things that need to be highlighted in the international arena.

Dr Najwa Abd Ghafar is Principal Assistant Director at the Centre for Political Studies and Economic Diplomacy, Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR).

A Summary from Roundtable Discussion on Peaceful Coexistence

By Mohamad Ika Danial Abdullah



Introduction

On 20 February 2022, the Roundtable Discussion (RTD) on Peaceful Coexistence exclusively premiered on Astro Awani. The RTD was co-organised between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia, together with the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR) and the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS), as well as Astro Awani. For this episode, the RTD invited three prominent figures and experts in the field as the discussants. They were:

1) The Founding CEO of International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia, Professor Datuk Dr Mohammad Hashim Kamali;
2) Director of Universiti Malaya Centre for Civilisational Dialogue (UMCCD), Professor Datuk Dr Azizan Baharuddin; and
3) Professor at the Department of History, Universiti Malaya, Dr Farish A. Noor. The discussion was successfully moderated by Chief Executive, ISIS Malaysia, Mr Herizal Hazri.

Peaceful Coexistence from the Islamic Perspective

Professor Kamali began his discussion by stating that peace cannot be taken for granted. However, there are specific challenges to peace. It is necessary, therefore, for one to know the challenges and find strategies, ideas and comprehensive ways in addressing them. Recognising his scholarship in the field of Islamic studies, Professor Kamali expressed his views on peaceful coexistence from the lens of Islam. Islam also faced threats to peaceful coexistence and challenges of extremism from groups such as al-Shahab, al-Qaeda, ISIS and Boko Haram. These occur due to lack of interpretations, basic education, enlightenment and understanding of Islamic concept of peace. In filling these gaps, he consistently emphasised the notion of Islamic guidelines on peaceful coexistence from main Islamic sources, mainly the *al-Quran* (the book of Islam) and *hadith* (Prophet Muhammad's words).

According to Professor Kamali, some Quranic verses provide guidelines on how people manage relationships with one another, interact and communicate internally in a pluralist society. Surah al-Hujurat (49:13) for example, provides guidelines on pluralism in peace and addressing humanity:

"O humanity! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may get to know one another. Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you. Allah is truly All-Knowing, All-Aware"

In further elaborating this verse, Professor Kamali added that this verse has the basic principles in humanity, pluralism, recognition of people with diverse backgrounds, friendship, and equality. Peaceful coexistence resonates within Islam closely. Although there is no literal expression of peaceful coexistence in Islam, but the religion support for a peaceful world and just society.

Islam also recognises the culture of society, specifically recognition of the existence of different religious groups, ethnic and languages - how they relate one another, share experience and develop friendships. For instance, Professor Kamali highlighted that the Southeast Asian region is well-known for softer touch in its approaches that impress the outside world. Among all the countries in the region, Malaysian culture is a valuable asset and the country itself is a peace-loving country through successfully managing pluralism. Thus, the efforts to promote peaceful coexistence by Malaysia must be by leveraging on the assets that this country has, which is to manage unity well despite having a diverse ethnicity.

In addition, Professor Kamali also added that the Quran outlines guidelines for conflict resolution. In this regard, Islam is in favour of courteous approaches which include negotiation and understanding people with different beliefs and backgrounds. It goes without saying that diplomatic and courteous ways lead to successful conclusions.

Professor Kamali also outlined Islamic guidelines on how to develop social relationships, communicate with one another, and how conflicts can be avoided. Among the guidelines are *qulu qaulan shadida* (speak in clear and concise way), *qaulan ma'rufa* (speak in good words), *qaulan karima* (in generous, beneficial

ways), *qaulan maithura* (easy, commonly understood), *qaulan baligha* (comprehensive in purposeful manner), *qaulan layyina* (gently and kindly), and *qaulan husna* (beautiful words).

Challenges in communication can be reduced through developing common understanding. Professor Kamali noted that Muslims seem to be having the most conflicts despite the basic teachings on peace that Islam has, citing examples from crises or conflicts in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Yemen and Libya. All these incidents happened because Muslims do not give sufficient and considerable attention to the basic guidelines in Islam and rational judgement in thinking. In conclusion, Professor Kamali highlighted that Prophet Muhammad had successfully created good relationships between the Companions in the most respectable, gentle and generous ways. This is evident when the Constitution of Madinah gave the principle of equality to people with different religions, including the Jews and non-Muslims. Professor Kamali also concluded that Islam undeniably has rich sources of education to keep reviving and strengthening foundations of peace.

Peace: Notion of Moral, Physical and Scientific Principle

In continuing the discussion, Professor Datuk Dr Azizan Baharuddin was asked to offer her views and perspectives to the question of identity and dialogue with regard to peaceful coexistence. Professor Azizan first pointed out the significance of expanding the concept, notion and understanding of peaceful coexistence as a fundamental human concept. Prior to making peaceful coexistence a reality, this concept must also be made known and understood to the people on the ground.

Professor Azizan spoke on peaceful coexistence in her capacity at the Universiti Malaya Centre for Civilisational Dialogue (UMCCD), the Theory of the Clash of Civilisations (1996) founded by American political scientist, Samuel P. Huntington was very dominant at the time, influencing most diplomatic ideas. Intriguingly, the alternative to the theory of the clash of civilisations is the theory of peaceful coexistence.

Stressing on the vitality of dialogue, Prof. Datuk Dr Azizan opined that dialogue and peaceful coexistence is inseparable. Dialogue enables people from diverse backgrounds to look at things from different perspectives and draw similarities that both parties believe and work around the similarities. In the context of Malaysia, the terms plural, pluralism, and pluralist must be used carefully. Some people think and define pluralism as all religions are the same, which is not the case. Therefore, bringing people with different opinions, views and ideologies to dialogues becomes more crucial.

On the question of identity, Professor Azizan emphasised the need to reclaim common humanity before talking on identity. She pointed out that the title "human" comes first before racial and ethnic identification. Although people come from different races and ethnicities, all humans are inherently similar. The basic fundamental belief is that we are humans and imbued with certain traits which are empirically undeniable. In addition to this, she also added that identity is a complex situation because not only has society changed but the notion of family has also transformed in certain communities.

Peace is not only the notion of moral principle, but also a physical and scientific principle - not only between men and men, but also between men and nature. For example, Professor Azizan argued that not many understand the notion and issue of climate change that has become a critical issue worldwide. Citing the recent flash flood in Malaysia at the end of 2021, she suggested that it is time for dialogue of life where people from different backgrounds come together to talk about a certain issue i.e., climate change. This issue is equally important in the subject matter of peaceful coexistence because climate change does not only affect climate but human beings.

Professor Azizan concluded the session by highlighting that it is timely for people to also talk about the relationship with nature with more holistic approaches, in diplomatic narratives.

Tools of Modernity and Peaceful Coexistence

In his turn, Dr Farish A. Noor elaborated on how peaceful coexistence can be established when the history of nation states started with wars and conflicts. Taking the Southeast Asian region as the closest example, he highlighted that before colonisation, various polities in the region had lived in a state of peace, mutual recognition, and coexistence, thanks to mutual economic activities i.e., trade.

Dr Farish brought up an important point that wars are engineered and do not happen naturally. Wars are propagated not only by states, but also the mass media, social media and propaganda. These instruments are at the disposal of most modern nation states. He also added that 50 years ago the world would not be confronting the threat of war that is so amplified as today due to the inexistence

of tools of modernity. Today, the need to generate support for aggression is at a level the human history has never seen before. According to Dr Farish, to start a war is a very difficult and long process, as one needs to build a sense of animosity and antipathy towards other people and to inculcate the notion in ordinary people.

Agreeing with Professor Azizan, Dr Farish also recognised the importance of dialogue. Nevertheless, dialogue has become increasingly difficult. Dialogue at the level of state often does not represent the view of a community. As an example, conflicts in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and even East Asia, are more like confrontational rhetorics taken up by the state because communities living at the border zones often do not share the same sentiment. Therefore, the need for dialogues cannot be ignored but it must be realistic in the face of the challenges that the people experience.

Dr Farish emphasised that it is very easy to engineer conflicts and wars in the age of fake news, mass communication and instantaneous communication. Furthermore, the world has also witnessed in the past 20 to 30 years ago where riots, demonstrations, pogroms, and even ethnic violence were swiftly mobilised through dangerous alliances between political elites and invested in commercial and media interests. According to him, there are invested parties that want to maintain a state of animosity and violence. He also explained that wars can generate a huge sum of money from the whole military industrial complex because history has shown that selling arms is a lucrative business. In addition, today's post-colonial world also has witnessed that the arms race happens following conflicts for deterrence and prestige purposes. A state of constant tension, anxiety and hostility is maintained simply because it serves the economic interest of a specific group of people.

In addition to the obvious, Dr Farish quoted that it is easier to preach hate than to preach love. He concluded his remarks by highlighting that we are currently living in a jaded world where belief in political processes and common human goals seem waning. These have led to the absence of belief in the political process and absence of faith in dialogue.

Mohamad Ika Danial Abdullah is Assistant Director at the Centre for Political Studies and Economic Diplomacy, Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR).

Institute Of Diplomacy And Foreign Relations (IDFR)
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia
Jalan Wisma Putra, 50460 Kuala Lumpur
T +603 2149 1000 **W** www.idfr.gov.my

IDFRMalaysia

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