

***China–Malaysia Relations and Foreign Policy.* By Abdul Razak Baginda. Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 2016. Hardcover: 255pp.**

China–Malaysia Relations and Foreign Policy combines theory with historical narrative to examine the decision-making process that led to the normalization of Malaysia–China relations on 31 May 1974, as well as the implications of this historic breakthrough on the evolution of bilateral relations thereafter. Located within the study of the foreign policies of developing states, Baginda’s doctoral thesis-turned-book adopts a multivariate levels-of-analysis approach — individual, state and systemic — and fuses it with the conception of linkage politics — how external variables affect internal politics as well as how internal variables impact the foreign policy of a state — to better comprehend Malaysia’s decision to establish diplomatic relations with China.

By emphasizing the interplay of internal and external factors, as well as the role of individual decision-makers, Baginda persuasively argues that it was the close linkage between Malaysia’s external (regional/global) environment and the domestic ethno-political situation (mostly relations between the Malays and Chinese) centring on the personalized leadership of Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak (Razak) that led to normalization. Brick by brick, Baginda discusses the shifts in external and internal environments, first from the evolution of Malaysia’s foreign policy towards China from independence in 1957 to the end of *Konfrontasi* (1963–66) in Chapter 3; and second from 1967 to 1969 (Chapter 4) when Malaysia’s China policy was influenced by the domestic communist insurgency, the Sino-Soviet dispute and the formation of ASEAN in 1967. The change in Malaysia’s China policy from hostile non-recognition under the first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, to cautious rapprochement under Razak, is attributed by Baginda to the decision-maker in Razak, especially his personality as the pivot by which foreign policy choices were made based on external and domestic considerations (pp. 88–89).

The most compelling chapter concerns the decision-making process and the road to normalization from 1972 to 1974 (Chapter 6), not least because Baginda managed to acquire letters, memos and transcripts of conversations, in addition to interviews of prominent officials, which are not in the public domain. These materials help provide an invaluable insight into the thinking of officials involved in the normalization process. Chronologically, Baginda lays out for

readers how Razak tested the viability of his normalization project by way of goodwill gestures, trade missions, sporting events and secret bilateral meetings. One such meeting was between Razak's economic advisor, Raja Tun Mohar and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in 1972, who then reported back to Razak. This had the effect of shifting the perception of China from an adversary to potential diplomatic partner, with "the road now clear for the two countries to establish formal relations" (p. 127).

Baginda reveals that although Malaysia was reluctant to "ASEANize" its bilateral relations with China in that "Kuala Lumpur (KL) should not disclose its timetable to any Asean state", it kept a close watch on the diplomatic moves of other ASEAN countries, even to the point of keeping them informed of its intentions towards China (pp. 141–44). Baginda outlines the correspondence between Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta regarding the shift in Malaysia's China policy, presumably because "Malaysia wanted some kind of 'blessing' from Indonesia so that its normalisation with China would not necessarily antagonise its giant neighbour" (p. 146). The author also contends that elite perceptions of China were also varied, with security planners taking a less sanguine view than political leaders, unsurprising given China's continued interference in Malaysia's domestic affairs via the Communist Party of Malaya (p. 151).

The author illustrates that while there is a propensity to couch normalization in terms of domestic benefits, particularly bolstering the survival of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)-led Barisan Nasional (BN) regime, he cautions against overplaying the domestic impacts of normalization (pp. 178–96). For example, Baginda suggests that although Razak capitalized on his China trip during the 1974 elections, the UMNO-led BN would still have achieved a landslide victory, not least because "the odds were stacked in favour of a win for Barisan Nasional" (p. 186) to begin with, given that BN was a colossal catch-all coalition of eleven political parties, resulting in there being "not much of an opposition to fight" (p. 181). In the main, however, Razak wanted to exploit a foreign policy move to further his domestic political objectives, and, in particular, to regain the support of the ethnic Chinese, which the Alliance (the precursor to BN) had lost in the 1969 elections.

Baginda refutes the myth that the other ASEAN countries allowed Malaysia to become the first member to normalize relations with China. So while "it is tempting to argue that KL's pioneering move was a green light for some of the others to establish formal

ties with Beijing”, the reality was that “there was a subtle degree of competition among a number of Asean countries in terms of trying to woo the Chinese” (p. 196). However, there was a recognition that Malaysia’s approach to normalization was a model for other ASEAN states to emulate, as evidenced by the joint communiqués signed between China and the Philippines in June 1975, and Thailand and China a month later, which resembled the Malaysia–China communiqué (p. 201). Moreover, although the normalization policy was expected to promote the neutralization of the region, it not only failed to achieve that goal but also “brought limited benefits to the larger question of regional security”, as evidenced by the Indochina conflict and Sino-Soviet rivalry (p. 202).

As regards some of the book’s shortcomings, the first pertains to the title. “China–Malaysia Relations” gives the impression that it is more about the Chinese perspective. Given that the study is about Malaysia’s normalization policy towards China, it would have been more appropriate to title the book “Malaysia–China relations”. The second relates to the author’s critique of foreign policy analysis (FPA) in Chapter 2. Lacking in his reformulation of FPA is the absence of any discussion of International Relations theories. Had the author done so, he would have come across neoclassical realism — a realist theory for the foreign policy analyst with its innovation of the intervening variable — which closely resembles the linkage politics approach adopted by the author. The third is the glaring absence of any discussion of the hedging concept. This is surprising given how the voluminous writings on Malaysia–China relations have employed some variation of hedging to examine the bilateral relationship. Was Malaysia exhibiting hedging behaviour in the course of normalizing its relations with China? The author does not say. The fourth concerns the conclusion. While the author should be credited for his attempt to update Malaysia–China relations to the present day, his evaluation in two short paragraphs is far too limited, given how more than forty years have passed since the establishment of diplomatic ties. Had the author compared and contrasted the different phases in Malaysia–China relations, it would have been beneficial for readers, given that bilateral relations have gone full circle from Razak to his son, Najib Abdul Razak, the current prime minister.

On balance, however, the academic strength and significance of the book outweigh its imperfections. The book not only contributes to the discourse on Malaysia’s foreign relations, which is sparse to begin with, but also to the literature on bilateralism between

individual Southeast Asian countries and China, given how most scholarly attention has been largely devoted to discussing relations between China and Southeast Asia as a region. Most importantly, Baginda's book is the only one of its kind, being a ground-breaking study of Malaysia–China relations based on primary resource material not easily accessible to the general public. Thus being the only such publication on the market, it is indeed a must-read for academicians and non-academicians alike.

MUSTAFA IZZUDDIN is a Fellow with ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute. Postal address: 30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace, Singapore 119614; email: mustafa@iseas.edu.sg.