

Malaysia's Fluctuating Engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative: Leveraging Asymmetry, Legitimizing Authority

Cheng-Chwee Kuik

Using an asymmetry-authority framework, this article analyzes Malaysia's engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and, more broadly, Malaysia's relations with China. Relations between the two countries were initially hostile, but changing external and internal conditions induced Malaysia to leverage power asymmetry to enhance and legitimize its ruling elites' political authority. Thus, despite ongoing claims in the South China Sea and domestic discontent about China's growing economic presence, successive Malaysian leaders have embraced China-backed infrastructure connectivity projects. Mahathir's renegotiation of selected controversial projects in 2018–2019 and another change in federal government in March 2020 did not change this approach. I argue that this persistent (albeit fluctuating) embrace is a result of converging pathways of elite legitimation in Malaysia—that is, both development-based and identity-based legitimation, alongside patronage politics—that requires the Malay-dominated ruling elites to pragmatically embrace such foreign-backed infrastructure partnerships as China's BRI. While democracy-based legitimation following the May 2018 elections necessitated Mahathir's Pakatan Harapan (PH) government to suspend some projects and recalibrate Malaysia's BRI receptivity, these changes were adjustments, not a departure from Malaysia's pragmatic embrace.

Keywords: *Malaysia, China, Belt and Road Initiative, asymmetry, authority, legitimation, infrastructure, Mahathir.*

SINCE CHINA LAUNCHED ITS BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI) IN 2013, Malaysia has receptively embraced the initiative. Malaysia's engagement with BRI-related infrastructure and connectivity projects is the

Asian Perspective 45 (2021), 421–444

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widest in *scope* (ranging from rail construction to industrial parks and port cooperation, and to digital connectivity partnership), the largest in *scale* (in financial terms), and probably the fastest in *speed* (from initiation to negotiation and implementation).

Malaysia's receptivity, however, was recalibrated during the Mahathir Mohamad-led Pakatan Harapan (PH) administration from May 2018 to February 2020. Mahathir suspended several China-backed projects but allowed other ventures to continue, while pledging Malaysia's continued support for the BRI. After renegotiating with China for nine months over the cost and terms of the controversial East Coast Rail Link (ECRL), Mahathir agreed in April 2019 to resume the ECRL, while restoring another China-backed project, Bandar Malaysia, a joint venture that will house the terminus of the proposed Kuala Lumpur-Singapore High Speed Rail (HSR). Since then the restored ventures have been developed alongside such projects as the Kuantan Industrial Park, the Kuantan Port Expansion, and the rolling stock manufacturing center at Batu Gajah. These BRI-related projects had all been promoted by the previous administration, the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition led by Najib Razak (2009–2018), continued under not only the PH government (despite the recalibration), but also the current Perikatan Nasional (PN)-Plus ruling coalition led by Muhyiddin Yassin, who replaced Mahathir as prime minister on March 1, 2020. This continuity suggests an enduring persistence in Malaysia's BRI embrace.

Many observers have found Malaysia's persistent—albeit fluctuating—engagement with the BRI puzzling. Domestically, there is some concern about a perceived “debt-trap” and other risks associated with China-backed projects. Bilaterally, Malaysia-China relations have been overshadowed by their overlapping territorial claims in the South China Sea. (This situation is similar to Vietnam, the Philippines, and Brunei's relations with China.) Externally, Malaysia has options for connectivity partnerships other than China. All these reasons could have led Malaysia either to keep its distance (like Vietnam, the Philippines under Aquino III, and Myanmar under Thein Sein) or to engage with China's BRI selectively and gradually (like Indonesia and Thailand), as discussed by the respective articles in this special issue. Thus, Malaysia's persistent embrace of the BRI appears counterintuitive.

I argue that Malaysia's BRI engagement is how a smaller state leverages external power asymmetry to legitimize and enhance its ruling elites' political authority. It is this legitimization-driven imperative—specifically the desire to *balance* the three pathways of performance, particularistic, and procedural legitimation—that has led Malaysia's

elites in successive governments to embrace these foreign-funded ventures, albeit with recalibrations, brought about by interelite contestations and grassroots discontent.

This article proceeds in three sections. The first traces the dynamics of asymmetric power relations between Malaysia and China. It analyzes how the vast power gap with China led Malaysia to adopt an increasingly pragmatic approach, downplaying its apprehensions while prioritizing benefits. The second section unpacks the sources of Malaysian elites' authority to rule and examines how these sources shape key domestic and external policies, particularly foreign-funded infrastructure partnerships. The final part applies the asymmetry-authority model in explaining Malaysia's pragmatic and persistent BRI embrace, albeit one colored by cyclical recalibration.

Coping with Asymmetry: The Transformation of Malaysia-China Relations

Malaysia's relationship with China is one underpinned by an *asymmetrical* power structure, which has led Malaysia's perception of and policies toward China to be and continue to be ambivalent. That is, while Malaysia is *attracted to* the benefits it can gain from close ties with China, it is mindful and *apprehensive of* the potential and actual adverse consequences in the asymmetric relation (Kuik 2013). After all, power asymmetry means the stronger power can harm the weaker one in numerous ways, just as it can also help on numerous fronts. Thus, apprehensions and attractions always exist side by side. The degree, proportion, and manifestations of apprehensions and attractions may change, but their ambivalent nature remains. This is especially so when asymmetry overlaps with geographical proximity, which multiplies the ambivalent effects of power asymmetry (Ba and Kuik 2018). Because of geographical closeness, a neighboring giant's actions—intended or otherwise—tend to affect the smaller state's interests more.

Power asymmetry and geographical proximity are among the structural factors that condition the space and capacity of Malaysia to pursue its security, prosperity, and/or autonomy. They underpin the transformation of Malaysia-China relations from mutual hostility (1957–1969) to limited normalization (1970–1989) and, since the 1990s, to increasingly cordial and mutually productive partnerships (see Leong 1987; Liow 2000; Baginda 2002; Lee and Lee 2005; Kuik 2013; Ngeow forthcoming).

From 1957, when Malaya gained its independence from the United Kingdom, to 1963, when Malaysia, the larger federation, was formed, and throughout the 1960s, relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) were confrontational and adversarial. Under the first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, the small nation declined the PRC's offer to establish official ties and instead opted to align with the Western powers—directly with the United Kingdom through the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement (AMDA) and indirectly with the United States and its other allies against the backdrop of Cold War bipolarity. From 1963 to 1966, when Sukarno's Indonesia launched *Konfrontasi*, a low-intensity military campaign against Malaysia, Beijing supported Jakarta. The mutual hostility between Malaysia and China was rooted in ideological differences, China's support for the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) insurgency (that aimed to overthrow the government in Kuala Lumpur), and China's ambiguous Overseas Chinese policy.

Major external and internal changes in the late 1960s, however, pushed Malaysia to reconsider its pro-West, anti-China posture. Structurally, the British announcement of its East of Suez policy in 1967–1968 and the US Guam Doctrine in 1969 to withdraw from Indochina made Malaysian elites realize they could no longer rely on Western allies for Malaysia's security. The elites—under Tun Abdul Razak Hussein's leadership—shifted Malaysia's external posture from pro-West to nonaligned and proregionalism. Malaysian leaders such as Razak and Tun Dr. Ismail Abdul Rahman began viewing establishing ties with China as a necessary move to reduce the threat of the MCP guerrillas.

These structural shifts coincided with the ruling elites' prevailing domestic political needs. Following the ruling Perikatan's electoral setback in 1969 and the ensuing ethnic riots between the Malays and the Chinese, the Razak government introduced the pro-Malay New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971, while consolidating the dominance of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) with the enlarging and renaming of Perikatan as Barisan Nasional (BN) in 1973. These developments dramatically reduced the role of non-Malays in Malaysia's political and economic life. In order to allay the fears of local Chinese voters, Prime Minister Razak decided that “a move towards rapprochement with China would help to pacify the ethnic Chinese” (Baginda 2002, 235). Malaysia normalized its relations with China in May 1974, becoming the first member state of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to establish diplomatic ties with the PRC.

In spite of the normalization, Malaysian leaders' apprehension of China continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s because of China's

“dual-track policy” of separating government-to-government relations from party-to-party ties, as well as Beijing’s policy of treating the ethnic Chinese as Overseas Chinese. Consequently, Malaysian leaders remained wary of China’s intentions, even after Mahathir’s first trip to China in 1985.

The turnaround took place in the 1990s. The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the MCP in 1989 removed the long-standing political barrier between Malaysia and China. Externally, the changing sources of threats in the post-Cold War era began to push Mahathir to view China as an indispensable partner. To cope with the twin challenges of economic globalization and strategic uncertainty, Mahathir started promoting multilayered international cooperation—bilateral, subregional, and ASEAN-plus—to augment ASEAN’s economic and diplomatic role in shaping regional affairs in the Asia-Pacific. China was viewed as a key partner in each of these layers of cooperation. Thus, in the 1990s, Malaysia played an instrumental role in initiating ASEAN-China dialogue relations, while partnering with China to promote East Asian integration (e.g., ASEAN Plus Three, APT) and Asian connectivity (e.g., Singapore-Kunming Rail Link, SKRL), as well as supporting each other on such issues as Asian values and Third World interests at the global level (Liow 2000; Baginda 2002; Lee and Lee 2005; Kuik 2013).

By the 1990s, power asymmetry with China had become a reality to be *leveraged upon*—rather than to resist—in order to pursue the Malaysian ruling elites’ prioritized “national” interests. Potential risks and threats associated with the power asymmetry—especially Malaysia and China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea—were to be managed and downplayed.

When Mahathir was succeeded by Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in late 2003, Malaysia-China relations had already been transformed into a stable and productive bilateral partnership. Bilateral trade was robust, bilateral investment was growing, and political trust was at an all-time high. In 2002, when Malaysia attempted to create an APT Secretariat in Kuala Lumpur, China supported the initiative. Although the attempt eventually failed, China’s support was an indicator of the mutually beneficial partnership throughout the post-Cold War era.

This cordial and pragmatic China policy deepened under Abdullah and Najib. Economic ties expanded and China became Malaysia’s largest trading partner in 2009. Investment flows multiplied, with China investing more in Malaysia than the other way around, reversing the earlier pattern of bilateral investment ties. Diplomatic partnership expanded, with the two countries joining hands in pushing for the

inaugural East Asia Summit (EAS) in Malaysia in 2005. People-to-people connectivity increased (a sharp contrast to the pre-1990 period when movement between the two peoples were controlled to insulate Chinese Malaysians from China's influence). Defense and strategic cooperation were upgraded, especially after Malaysia and China signed a defense MoU in 2005. Bilateral relations were elevated to a "comprehensive strategic partnership" in 2013.

The transformation of Malaysia-China relations from mutual hostility to a cordial and mutually beneficial partnership suggests that asymmetry and proximity have no inherent logic. The effects of these structural factors have been filtered by internal conditions, that is, the ruling elites' domestic political necessities, which prompt the elites to play up/down the perceived opportunities and/or risks. It is to this internal logic that we now turn.

Preserving Authority: Legitimation in a Multiethnic Quasi-Democracy

Legitimation is central to all politics, particularly for Malaysia, a multiethnic, middle-income, parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarchy. The complexity of Malaysian politics stems primarily from its heterogeneity in ethnicity, religion, class, historical memories, federal-state relations, rural-urban divide, physical separation of territories (Peninsular Malaysia is separated from Sabah and Sarawak on Borneo by sea), and other internal attributes. This multidimensional heterogeneity is reflected in the Malaysian people's diverse—and divided—political beliefs, values, and demands on nearly all issues (Milner et al. 2014; Saravanamuttu 2016).

Governing Malaysia necessitates its ruling elites to pursue not one but *multiple* pathways of legitimation to appeal to the different demands of different segments of Malaysian society (Zakaria 1989; Alagappa 1995; Hilley 2001).

Three pathways of inner justification lie at the center of Malaysian politics. They are (a) *performance* legitimation—justifying authority through economic growth and wellbeing; (b) *particularistic* legitimation—maximizing authority and garnering support through identity-based political mobilization (chiefly through the articulation of "Malay rights"); and (c) *procedural* legitimation—acquiring political mandate and authority through elections and conformity to democratic values and social justice. All three pathways have been pursued

concurrently, albeit with different emphasis, and in different combinations, depending on the elites' prevailing political needs.¹

The concurrent adoption of all three pathways is inevitable, in part because of the diverse demands of the heterogeneous Malaysian population, and in part because of the nature of the pathways. Some aspects of the triple pathways are mutually complementary, while others are more competitive and even conflicting (e.g., protecting Malay rights versus promoting socioeconomic justice across the ethnic groups).

Finding an optimal balance across these pathways is thus the most critical but contentious part of the Malaysian elites' quest to enhancing their authority to rule. They are the fault lines where interelite contestations, state-society interactions, and narrative mobilization take place. Development, ethnoreligious identity, and democracy have been the three most powerful mobilizing narratives in Malaysian politics.

Since Malaysia gained its independence in 1957, pursuing development and delivering growth has been the principal pathway of legitimation for successive governments. The pursuit of development for all—as a *performance*-based legitimation—has been undertaken side by side with an identity-based *particularistic* pathway for the ethnic majority, that is, protecting Malay interests. These combined pathways—and the associated discourse—have driven politics and shaped policies, allowing BN to acquire procedural legitimacy by winning its mandate through elections uninterrupted, until May 2018.

Development is about politics as much as economics in Malaysia (and elsewhere in Southeast Asia). For BN, PH, and now PN elites, development serves domestic legitimation via three functions: redistribution, reassurance, and reform. Each function targets different constituencies, respectively: “Bumiputera” (sons of the soil) ethnic Malay Muslims and other indigenous groups (about 69 percent of the population of 32 million), ethnic minorities (especially Chinese and Indian, 23 percent and 7 percent, respectively), and all Malaysians, particularly the young and urban voters. The country's key development policies—most notably the promajority affirmative action program, the NEP, implemented since 1971 after the May 1969 Malay-Chinese sectarian violence—are aimed at *redistributing* the wealth of the nation, in ways that eradicate poverty, reduce interethnic income inequality, and increase Malay economic participation. Other development programs are designed to *reassure* the non-Malays—ethnic Chinese, Indians, and other ethnic minorities—about the government's commitment, despite its pro-Malay policy, to ensure opportunities for the non-Malays in Malaysia. Yet other development pronouncements involving the projection

of *reforms*, with an emphasis on restructuring Malaysia's direction and enlarging Malaysia's economic pie, are intended to inject hope and win the support of voters across ethnic groups, classes, and localities (e.g., "Vision 2020" under Mahathir 1.0, "2050 National Transformation" under Najib, "Shared Prosperity Vision 2030" under Mahathir 2.0, and the current Muhyiddin's PN-Plus regime).

Each of these political economy functions—redistributive, reassurance, and reform—is aimed at persuading the respective targeted audiences that their interests are being protected. Together, they are hoped to cover the elites' core political bases, thereby maximizing and legitimizing their authority to rule at home. In practice, however, horizontal and vertical power diffusion *intervene* in the pursuit of these functions. These take the forms of interelite contestation and collusion, patronage politics (including cronyism and corruption), federal-state relations, as well as bottom-up demands by the diverse sociopolitical groups.

One of the major implications of such intervening processes is the *primacy* of the "redistributive" rationale over reassurance and reforms, a recurring theme in Malaysia's political economy, especially with lucrative state-backed projects.

The theme entails several characteristics. First, the initiation of development projects is often driven more by political motives than economic rationales. Second, the implementation of these projects is juggled between participation by all stakeholders across communities and the protection of certain privileged groups. Finally, the process is colored by intense interelite struggles, permeated by a discourse of portraying a *class* phenomenon (the politically well-connected classes versus the have-nots) as a *race or identity* problem (redistributing economic fruits in favor of the Malays, "Bumiputera versus non-Bumiputera").

These intervening processes have affected Malaysia's developmental programs, including foreign-funded infrastructure and connectivity partnerships, directly and indirectly. Politically connected elites, more often the Malays, are the principals of the big-ticket projects. Their control over these projects, however, is subject to power diffusion, contested by competing interests, values, and preferences at the elite and societal levels. These contestation processes filter the developmental and political logic of a project constrain the government's maneuverability, while conditioning the elites' choices in *selectively* pursuing, mobilizing, and balancing their prioritized pathways of legitimation, which in due course reshape the pace and prospects of the project.

Due to the internal political logic, as discussed, ensuring a productive bilateral relationship with China has been a central component of

Malaysia's pragmatic external posture. This pragmatism is due to the Malaysian elites' continuing need for performance legitimation and to China's growing economic and geopolitical clout. Given Malaysia's limited domestic market and resources, embracing external trade and leveraging external partnerships are essential elements of its external pragmatism. Malaysia is trade-dependent and vulnerable to cyclical economic downturns and unfair practices in the global economy. In the late 1980s, Mahathir nearly lost power as an economic recession sparked political turmoil.

Significantly, Malaysia's external pragmatism has been facilitated by internal changes, including the creation of a sizeable Malay middle class after decades-long implementation of the NEP, growing national confidence associated with sustained growth and socioeconomic transformation, as well as changes in how younger Chinese Malaysians view themselves. Presently, third- and fourth-generation Chinese Malaysians are much more conscious of their *national* identity as Malaysians, viewing their ties with China as *cultural* and not political ones. The net effects of these internal changes mean that present-day Malaysia's China policy is driven more by interstate relations than interethnic considerations (Lee and Lee 2005; Kuik 2013).

Embracing the BRI (Malaysia Style): Enthusiastically with Recalibrations

Driven by both external power asymmetry and its elite's quest for domestic authority, Malaysia has pragmatically embraced such rewarding economic partnerships as China's BRI (albeit with recalibrations after 2018, elaborated below). This embrace has expanded the scope and strength of Malaysia-China economic ties, boosting bilateral trade and investment links while facilitating the movements of various factors of production between the two countries. Despite the unprecedented changes in government in recent years, Malaysian ruling elites have chosen to highlight the benefits that can be garnered from a strong partnership with China, while downplaying risks and managing problems.

China has been Malaysia's largest trading partner since 2009 (and Malaysia has been China's largest trading partner in the ASEAN region from 2008 to 2018). China has also emerged as one of the top investors in Malaysia since 2014. Since Xi's announcement of the BRI in 2013, Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in Malaysia has grown by over 1,000 percent between 2012 and 2015, spreading over almost every

state in the country (Wan Saiful 2017; Ngeow forthcoming) and covering diverse sectors of the economy (Tham 2018; Gomez et al. 2020).

This trend is sustained by internal political imperatives. Expanding economic engagement with China—including a closer BRI partnership—is politically important to Malaysian elites' development-based performance legitimation and patronage politics, as noted. Significantly, it also boosts the elites' identity-based particularistic legitimation. Although Malaysia's identity politics have long been contested along race-based grounds, their external manifestations are more complex. Malaysia-China economic interactions—especially Malaysia's engagement with the big-ticket BRI-related projects—are shaped less by a Malay-versus-Chinese equation and more by a political dynamic. That is, Malaysia-China infrastructure partnerships are driven by politically connected forces (mostly Malays) surrounding leader-centered interest coalitions (e.g., Najib's BN coalition, the Mahathir-led PH bloc, and now Muhyiddin PN-Plus regime). Accordingly, politically connected *Malay* elites are the principal beneficiaries of China-backed projects. The Chinese Malaysians are subordinates or executors of Malay-dominated ventures. Political contestations over the projects are being fought along interelite, not interethnic lines.

These recurring themes have played out under different leaderships (during the BN era) and different governments (from BN to PH and to PN-Plus).

Pre-BRI Malaysia-China Connectivity Partnerships

Malaysia-China infrastructure and connectivity partnerships predated the BRI. Three successive Malaysian leaders took the initiative to cooperate with China—Malaysia is an example of a small state pulling *before* a big power pushed. The infrastructure and connective partnerships launched by Malaysian leaders are as follows:

- *The Singapore-Kunming Rail Link (SKRL) under Mahathir 1.0.* When Mahathir first proposed the SKRL idea in December 1995, he already viewed China as an indispensable partner. The SKRL aimed to connect Southeast Asian countries directly with the huge China market, not just among each other. Hence, Malaysia has engaged China since the mid-1990s—in June 1996, Mahathir hosted a meeting attended by the transport ministers of seven Southeast Asian nations and China (see Lampton, Ho, and Kuik 2020, chap. 7). This meeting created the SKRL Special Working Group (SWG).

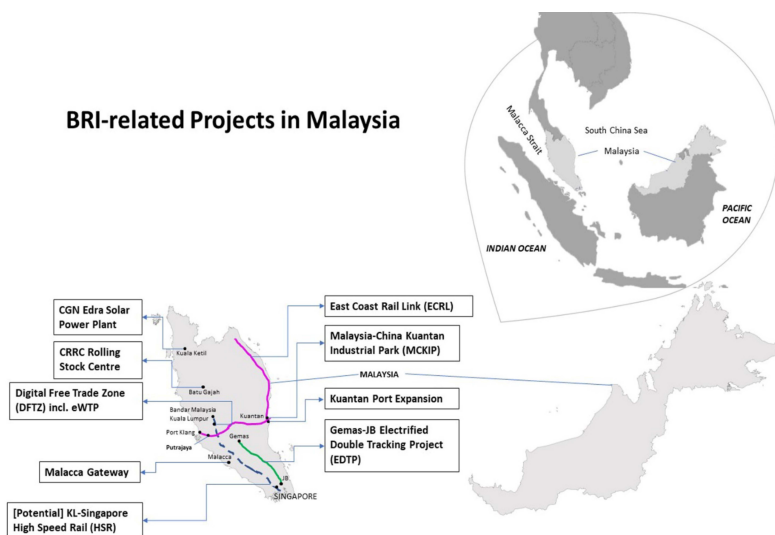
- *Second Penang Bridge under Abdullah Badawi.* In late 2006, during a closed-door meeting with Premier Wen Jiabao, Abdullah proposed that China help build a 23-kilometer bridge to further connect his home state of the island of Penang with mainland Malaysia. In just months, the two governments signed a deal paving the way to their first bilateral infrastructure cooperation. China provided a US\$800 million loan, reportedly the largest loan “for any single project given to a foreign country by China” at that time (Wong 2007). The interest rate was 3 percent for twenty years, and China waived the 7 percent insurance usually applied to loans to developing countries.²
- *Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park (MCKIP) and Kuantan Port Expansion (KPE) under Najib Razak.* In April 2012, when Najib was in China for the launch of the Qinzhou Industrial Park (QIP) in the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, he suggested establishing a “sister industrial park,” the MCKIP, in Kuantan, the capital of his home state Pahang, on the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia. The proposal came to fruition in less than a year, when the two governments officiated the launch in February 2013. The MCKIP and the QIP are probably the only BRI-linked “sister industrial parks” in the region. The opening of the 3,000-acre MCKIP catalyzed the expansion of Kuantan Port as MCKIP operators needed an upgraded deep-water port to import raw materials and export finished goods.

Malaysia’s Enthusiastic and Extensive BRI Engagement under Najib

These early projects laid the foundation for subsequent bilateral connectivity partnerships between Malaysia and China after the BRI was launched in late 2013. Prime Minister Najib repeatedly expressed Malaysia’s support for the BRI, first during Xi’s visit to Malaysia in October 2013, during his visit to China in 2014, and on other occasions. In 2014, Najib created a cross-ministerial committee, chaired by Najib himself, to coordinate, monitor, and follow up on China-related projects and bilateral cooperation.³ In July 2017, just two months after signing the BRI MoU in Beijing, the administration established the Belt and Road Initiative National Secretariat (BRINS Malaysia) at the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) to “coordinate, facilitate and monitor the implementation of all BRI projects in Malaysia and also to monitor Malaysian projects globally.”⁴

Under Najib, Malaysia engaged with China on a series of BRI-related projects, some of which were launched before 2013.⁵ The key projects, shown in Figure 1, are discussed below.

Figure 1. BRI-related Projects in Malaysia



Source: Author's compilation.

- *Gemas-Johor Bahru Electrified Double Tracking Project (EDTP)*. During President Hu Jintao's visit to Malaysia in 2009, Najib agreed for Chinese contractors to build the Gemas-Johor Bahru railway (*Edge Financial Daily* 2009), the last leg of rail line required to connect the entire west coast of Malaysia, as part of the electrified double-tracking projects under the SKRL. From 2009 to 2016, various partnerships of Chinese railway companies and local firms were reportedly bidding for the 191-kilometer rail project, reflecting shifting interest alignments.⁶ In October 2016, the Malaysian government awarded the contract to CRCC-CREC-CCCC Consortium Sdn Bhd. After a short delay due to land acquisition and other issues, a groundbreaking ceremony was held in April 2018 to kick off the RM9.55 billion project, with the Chinese consortium as the contractors and Malaysian firms SIPP and Syarikat Pembinaan YTL (SPYTL) as the subcontractors (Star Media Group Berhad 2018a; see also Chin 2020).⁷
- *CRRC Rolling Stock Centre*. The CSR ZhuZhou Electric Locomotive signed a memorandum in September 2012 to create a rolling stock manufacturing center in Batu Gajah, one of the earliest Chinese state-linked investment ventures in Malaysia. In 2015, the China Railway Rolling

Stock Corp's (CRRC) subsidiary, the Rolling Stock Centre (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd, began production. The facility, CRRC's first rolling stock plant outside China, is also the first and the only train manufacturing center in Southeast Asia. In 2016, CRRC announced plans to expand its Batu Gajah operation to explore the ASEAN market.

- *Kuala Lumpur-Singapore High-Speed Rail (HSR) and Bandar Malaysia*. In September 2010, Najib identified the 350-kilometer HSR linking Kuala Lumpur (KL) and Singapore as a high-impact program. In December 2016, Malaysia and Singapore signed the deal.⁸ Bandar Malaysia, announced by Najib in May 2011, is a public-private enterprise developed by state investment firm 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) to be a transport hub connecting the planned KL-Singapore HSR with the various urban rail systems in the Greater KL. In December 2015, 1MDB sold 60 percent stake of Bandar Malaysia to IWH-CREC Sdn Bhd, a Malaysia-China consortium, which consists of Lim Kang Hoo (a Malaysian businessman close to the Sultan of Johor)'s Iskandar Waterfront Holdings Bhd (IWH) and China's China Railway Engineering Co (CREC). The stake makes China an investor and a direct partner in Bandar Malaysia.
- *East Coast Rail Link (ECRL)*. The ECRL project was announced just days before Najib's October 2016 visit to China, where the engineering, procurement, construction, and commissioning (EPCC) contract and a financing framework were signed. The EPCC contract was awarded to China Communication Construction Company Ltd (CCCC), while the financing agreement was with the Export-Import Bank of China (EXIM). The project, Malaysia's largest infrastructure project to date, is also the most controversial foreign-backed project because of its exorbitant price tag, the perception that it is linked to Najib's 1MDB scandal, as well as its lack of transparency.

These China-backed projects, which have drawn attention in and beyond Malaysia, have been developed with different prospects of success. Both the MCKIP and the KPE projects have been making notable progress. The MCKIP has attracted additional investments and approved projects. Alliance Steel, the largest investor in the MCKIP, has begun production. The KPE completed Phase 1A construction in September 2018 and Phase 1B of the new deep-water terminal (NDWT) in June 2019.⁹ The Gemas-JB EDTP is set to be completed by October 2022, despite a delay caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The CRRC Rolling Stock Centre has expanded its operation, with three subsidiaries employing 90 percent local staff, cooperating with 600 local suppliers,

and facilitating technology transfer by training almost 1,000 local staff (Star Media Group Berhad 2020). These developments contrast highly with other projects. Bandar Malaysia stalled in 2017 and was restored only in April 2019. The ECRL and KL-Singapore HSR were suspended by Mahathir in 2018 (the former was reinstated by PH in April 2019 and the latter resumed by PN-Plus government in 2020 but canceled in January 2021).

The variations in progress and prospects result from such factors as composition of partnerships, economic viability, and political contestations.

Composition and terms of partnerships: Getting the “right” combination of local and foreign partners is crucial (Lim 2015). While the Chinese projects discussed here involve Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs, either at the central or the provincial level) as investor and/or builder (with the exception of Alibaba’s DFTZ), the composition of their local partnerships is mixed. Most of these projects’ Malaysian partners are influential, with powerful political connections and/or institutional governmental links (e.g., SIPP and SPYTL in Gemas-JB EDTP, IWH-CREC in Bandar Malaysia, Malaysia Rail Link Sdn Bhd [MRL] in ECRL, IJM and Sime Darby in MCKIP and KPE). However, one is a private firm, KAJ in Malacca Gateway, an offshore development project plagued by slow implementation and setbacks since 2017.

The composition of partnerships determines not only the degree of access to and support from the Malaysian government at federal and state/local levels but also the availability of required capital and know-how. For example, the Malacca Gateway has not materialized its ambitious plans because of a shortage of capital and a lack of government connection.¹⁰ In Malaysia, matters related to land, agriculture, forestry, and local government are the responsibilities of state governments. Take the Gemas-JB EDTP, for instance—one of the Chinese rail builders, the CREC, described its local partner, the SIPP Rail Sdn Bhd, a private company controlled by Sultan Ibrahim of Johor, as “a good partner to have on board as the project involves land acquisition” (Tan 2017). Other examples are MCKIP and KPE, where government-linked firms IJM and Sime Darby play prominent roles in their development, with such government bodies as the East Coast Economic Region (ECER) Development Council (ECERDC) and Pahang state government as facilitators.¹¹ The terms of partnerships are crucial too. The MCKIP, for instance, is a 51:49 joint venture between a Malaysian consortium

(Kuantan Pahang Holding Sdn Bhd) and a Chinese consortium (Guangxi Beibu Gulf ASEAN Investment Co). This ratio, with Malaysians holding the majority stake, is more politically acceptable.

Economic viability: Malaysian elites and their Chinese partners have emphasized the developmental and economic benefits associated with the China-backed projects. Some of these rationales are persuasive; others are questionable. The MCKIP, KPE, and CRRC plant are deemed mutually beneficial as they create jobs, transfer technology, mobilize resources, and bring other economic benefits, albeit unevenly, across sectors. The economic feasibility of other projects is more doubtful. The most controversial China-backed project is probably the ECRL. While its supporters have underscored the project's long-term benefits, skeptics such as economist Jomo Kwame Sundaram have warned that the ECRL is potentially a white elephant that "would impact the national economy for a long time," calling it a "permanent albatross" (*Sun Daily* 2019). The project's uncertain economic impact and other political problems have made it highly contested from the beginning.

Political contestations: The ECRL and two China-backed pipeline projects were viewed as quid pro quos for Beijing's help in bailing out Najib's scandal-plagued 1MDB. The three projects' perceived links with the troubled 1MDB, their lack of transparency, questionable financing arrangements, and unfavorable terms for the locals are the key factors that made them highly controversial. The ECRL was criticized by opposition groups, nongovernmental organizations, and members of parliament from different political parties. Mahathir was the harshest critic. In 2016, after quitting UMNO following his fallout with Najib over the 1MDB scandal, Mahathir criticized ECRL and other China-related projects in Malaysia. In 2017, he criticized the "Forest City" in Johor, a \$100 billion smart city project by Chinese developer Country Garden, warning that the project might lead to "foreign ownership of land" and an influx of property buyers "that could undermine sovereignty in the long run" (Star Media Group Berhad 2017). Later, Mahathir singled out the MCKIP, dubbed in the media as the "Great Wall of China in Kuantan," as "evidence" of Najib's "selling the country to China" (Lee 2018). Popular discontent about the presence of Chinese investment converged with interelite competition, leading Mahathir and other opposition leaders to intensify their attacks on China-backed projects during the election campaign. Mahathir vowed to review Chinese contracts if the PH coalition won (Lee 2018).

Politics of Recalibrations under Mahathir 2.0 and Beyond

Following the PH coalition's electoral victory in May 2018, Mahathir ordered the suspension of ECRL and two China-backed pipeline projects (i.e., the Multi-Product Pipeline [MPP] and Trans-Sabah Gas Pipeline [TSGP]), as well as the postponement of the KL-Singapore HSR, hence recalibrating Malaysia's BRI embrace.

Leveraging his electoral mandate and grass roots sentiments, Mahathir requested renegotiation of the ECRL to reduce costs, reset terms, and ensure that implementation would be favorable to Malaysia. In a media interview, Mahathir said, "If we get better terms, then of course we will continue." He criticized the previous terms as payments that had been made "without regard for the progress of the construction." He added, "Then there's the issue that they give the contract to a Chinese company, and they bring in workers and everything from China, so what is there for Malaysia? We must gain something for Malaysia" (Azim 2018; Star Media Group Berhad 2018c). After a monthslong renegotiation led by Mahathir confidante, Daim Zainuddin, on April 12, 2019, Malaysia and China declared their decision to resume the ECRL, with significantly reduced costs (from RM55 billion down to RM44 billion), slightly shortened track (from 688 km to 648 km), higher local participation, and a realigned southern route (Star Media Group Berhad 2019). Completion date was changed from 2024 to 2026. Both sides also restored the Bandar Malaysia project that had been shelved in mid-2017.

Many observers opined that Malaysia under Mahathir 2.0 was "pushing back" against Beijing's BRI, "confronting" China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, and "resisting" Chinese hegemony in the region. However, these views are too simplistic; in reality, Mahathir's approach is more complex. Although Mahathir decided to suspend the three projects, he permitted many other China-related projects, such as the MCKIP, KPE, Gemas-JB EDTP, and Alibaba's Digital Free Trade Zone (DFTZ), to continue. He also stressed repeatedly Malaysia's support for both the BRI and Chinese investments (Chin 2020). To underscore these points, he chose to make an early visit to China, three months after assuming office. During the visit, Mahathir opted to visit the headquarters of the Chinese tech giants Alibaba and Zhejiang Geely (which owns a 49.9 percent stake in Proton, the Malaysian national car maker) in Hangzhou first before continuing onto Beijing. Mahathir raised the "unfair deals" and loan issues with the Chinese leaders but blamed Najib's BN government for Malaysia's debt (Jairpragas 2018).

Mahathir's moves were part of his wider "renegotiation" with China. This exercise of small state agency is an extension of, not a break in, Malaysia's long-standing pragmatic China policy. The moves were not about a maverick leader rejecting Chinese power, but about a smaller state's pragmatic renegotiation of its asymmetric relations with an increasingly assertive neighbor at a time of growing uncertainty. Mahathir viewed the BRI-related projects not as an isolated matter but as one of many issues impacting Malaysia's relations with China and, indeed, Malaysia's broader external interests. At a press conference on May 10, 2018, hours before he was sworn in as seventh prime minister, Mahathir raised the South China Sea issue while responding to a journalist's question about the fate of BRI projects in Malaysia. After expressing support for China's BRI, Mahathir quickly added, "Malaysia reserved the right to renegotiate terms of some agreements with Beijing, if necessary." He continued, "We have no problem with that [the BRI], except of course we would not like to see too many warships in this area [the South China Sea] because [a] warship attracts other warships" (Star Media Group Berhad 2018b). Mahathir's statements revealed not only his growing concern about China's military activities in the disputed waters but also Malaysia's outlook that the South China Sea situation has become a matter of big-power rivalry, primarily between China and the United States (Lai and Kuik 2020).

Keeping equidistant ties with all powers and leveraging them was central to Mahathir's approach in coping with external uncertainty and power rivalry. Hence, while cautiously managing China-related issues, Mahathir moved to upgrade Malaysia-Japan ties, securing Samurai Bonds and other assistance from Tokyo. During his 2019 tours to New York and London, Mahathir made efforts to woo American and European investors to Malaysia. At the same time, Mahathir came out in support of Huawei even though it was claimed that Huawei has been engaging in cyber espionage, saying Malaysia "will make *its own independent decisions* on China," and added that "we have to admit that China is a big power," "[we] need to understand their policies and strategies, and we have to make adjustments so that we can *gain some benefit* from China's policies" (Bernama 2019, emphasis added). On Xinjiang, Mahathir was publicly deferential but quietly defiant. While Mahathir admitted that Muslim countries had been silent about the persecution of Uyghurs, he added, "You don't just try and do something which would fail anyway, so it is better to find some other less violent ways not to antagonise China too much *because China is beneficial for us*" (Malaysiakini 2019, emphasis added). While this position contrasts sharply

with Mahathir's very vocal stances on the Rohingyas and Palestinians, Malaysia quietly defied China by declining Beijing's request to extradite Uyghur Muslims who had fled to Malaysia; instead, Putrajaya "allowed them to escape to other countries because we were concerned about their safety if they returned to China" (*Malaysiakini* 2019). The Uyghurs were enabled to travel to Turkey.

Hence, when dealing with China-related issues, Mahathir pragmatically calculated the risks and benefits, cultivated options, and chose policy trade-offs. This approach has been continued by the present Muhyiddin administration, as evidenced by its decision to continue work on the ECRL and other projects, despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

This continuing pragmatism reflects the Malaysian elites' efforts at legitimation optimization. Regardless of the leaders and coalitions in power, the Putrajaya elites seek *a balance* among the performance, particularistic, and procedural pathways of justification by leveraging such external conditions as Malaysia's asymmetric power relations with China (as well as Japan and other actors) in order to maintain the space, while cultivating opportunities to preserve and further legitimize their authority at home.

The resumption of the ECRL, after protracted contestation and renegotiation, reflects the salience of development-based performance legitimation in Malaysia. Indeed, there are developmental *and* political imperatives underpinning the elites' continuing support for the ECRL, its controversies notwithstanding. The ECRL is more than a "land bridge" connecting Port Klang, Malaysia's largest port along the Straits of Malacca, with Kuantan Port on the east coast, where a South China Sea-facing deep-sea port is being constructed; it has a wider significance. As an east-west passenger and freight rail network, the ECRL spans five states and two federal territories, linking expanding developmental hubs along the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia with Port Klang and other economic centers on the west coast. In sociopolitical terms, the ECRL will bridge the developmental gap between Malaysia's east and west coasts by linking the three less developed but ethnic Malay-predominant states (Kelantan, Terengganu, and Pahang) with the more developed areas around Greater KL (i.e., Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, KL, and Putrajaya) and introducing foreign and domestic investment to stimulate commercial, logistic, import and export, as well as tourism development activities along the proposed rail alignment.

Apart from boosting development-based performance legitimation, the ECRL also enhances *identity*-based particularistic legitimation. As a long segment of the railway will pass through three predominantly

Malay states, the ECRL highlights a commitment to advancing Malay interests, thereby reinforcing the ruling elites' pro-Malay image (Liu and Lim 2019). Thus, Najib's BN, Mahathir's PH, and Muhyiddin's PN-Plus government's Malay-based particularistic legitimation have been boosted by the ECRL.¹² During the ECRL renegotiation period (August 2018–April 2019), the state authorities in the three east coast states expressed their preference for the project to be revived. Moreover, the infrastructure projects on the east coast are also significant for federal-state relations. For future federal governments in Putrajaya, projects such as the ECRL can serve as platforms to engage, cooperate, and bargain with state-level actors, a politically vital process especially when the May 2018 and March 2020 changes of government have brought unprecedented uncertainty to Malaysia.

The bureaucracy—the executor and stabilizer of Malaysian public policy—plays a key role in implementing the ECRL and other infrastructure projects, even after Muhyiddin's PN-Plus replaced Mahathir's PH as the federal government. As part of the renegotiated ECRL deal in April 2019, Malaysia (through the Malaysian Investment Development Authority, MIDA) and China (through CCCC) have been collaborating to facilitate, evaluate, and review the implementation of such economic accelerator projects (EAPs) as industrial parks, logistics hubs, and transit-oriented developments along the ECRL corridor. A national-level committee, the ECRL Steering Committee, chaired by the chief secretary to the government of Malaysia, the highest-ranking officer of the public service, was established to monitor and facilitate the interministerial coordination and implementation of the ECRL-related projects (interview with Dato' Abdul Majid Khan, chairman of MIDA, October 17, 2020). The committee is supported by five subcommittees.

Conclusion: Converging Pathways of Legitimation

Legitimation-driven political needs to enhance elite authority have motivated successive Malaysian governments since the 1990s to downplay and leverage Malaysia's power asymmetry with China. Malaysia has embraced China's BRI, albeit with recalibrations after 2018, for the same reasons. While the convergence of development-based performance legitimation (at both the federal and state levels), identity-based particularistic justification (across ethnic groups) and patronage politics explain Malaysia's BRI receptivity, the recalibrations and renegotiations

are attributable primarily to procedural legitimation amid interelite power struggle. Grassroots discontent and Mahathir's attacks on the ECRL and other China-related projects tainted by Najib's 1MDB scandal necessitated the PH government to suspend and renegotiate these projects. When the renegotiated ECRL deal was reached with reduced costs and other more favorable terms, Malaysia resumed its BRI receptivity. The recalibrated terms conferred some procedural legitimacy on BRI ventures in Malaysia. Thus, democratic sentiments can provide small states with leverage to exercise their agency when bargaining with a major power.

Notes

Cheng-Chwee Kuik is associate professor and head of the Centre for Asian Studies, Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS), National University of Malaysia (UKM). He was previously a postdoctoral research associate at the Princeton-Harvard China and the World Program. His research focuses on the foreign policy behavior of weaker states, Asian security, China-ASEAN relations, and Southeast Asian international relations. His latest book, with David M. Lampton and Selina Ho, is *Rivers of Iron: Railroads and Chinese Power in Southeast Asia* (2020). He can be reached at cckuik@gmail.com.

1. For an expanded comparative analysis of this theme involving Laos, Malaysia, and Thailand's BRI engagement, see Kuik (2021).

2. Author's personal communication with Abdullah Badawi's senior aide who was directly involved in Malaysia's dealing with China on the project, Kuala Lumpur, April 30, 2020.

3. Since 2014, the committee, which involves a two-tier structure (minister and deputy secretary general levels), met annually, until BN was replaced by PH in May 2018. Author's personal communication with a senior government officer, Kuala Lumpur, October 15, 2020.

4. Author's personal communication with a senior MITI officer, Kuala Lumpur, October 14, 2020.

5. It should be noted there is no consensus among researchers as to which of these projects are "BRI projects" and which are not, as the Chinese government has never made such categorizations (personal communication with Malaysian MITI leadership, January 22, 2020). In this article, the phrase "BRI-related projects" refers to those infrastructure connectivity projects that involve Chinese government-linked entities, especially state-owned enterprises (SOEs) at either the central or provincial level or projects described by authorities of the host country as "BRI projects."

6. For instance, in 2009, a local firm Global Rail Sdn Bhd, owned by Zulkifli Md Hussain, Fan Boon Heng, and Hau Choo Kiat, reportedly proposed to undertake

the project with China Infraglobe Consortium of China. Daim Zainuddin, former finance minister and close confidante of Mahathir, reportedly advised CRCC to team up with Gamuda to participate in the project. See *Edge Financial Daily* (2009) and *South China Morning Post* (2012).

7. The Johor State Public Works, Rural and Regional Development Committee chairman Datuk Hasni Mohammad said that, under the agreement with China's infrastructure firms, "50% of the contract value must be given to local contractors," and that out of this, 30 percent must be allocated to Bumiputera contractors. See Star Media Group Berhad (2018a).

8. In January 2021, the Malaysia and Singapore governments jointly announced the termination of the HSR project. Some observers, however, do not rule out the possibility that the project "may be revived once Malaysia sorts out its economic predicament brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and political chaos." See Star Media Group Berhad (2021).

9. Author's personal communication with a MITI officer, Kuala Lumpur, March 24, 2020.

10. Author's personal communication with a member of Malaysian policy elite, Kuala Lumpur, September 9, 2020.

11. Author's personal communication with a MITI officer, Kuala Lumpur, April 30, 2020.

12. Although the current PN-Plus government is reviewing the southern portion of the ECRL rail alignment, the review is about potential and partial realignment, not about termination or making drastic changes to the renegotiated deal.

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