

COMPLETION REPORT

Malaysia's Japan Policy in the context of a rising China : A Re-Interpretation of 'The Look East Policy'

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Malaysia and Japan have enjoyed a smooth relationship for over six decades. When Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad first became the leader of Malaysia in 1981, he reoriented Malaysia foreign policy from the west to the east. Japan became his experiment in introducing Malaysians to East Asia. In doing so, he highlighted the determination and power of Japan as an economic powerhouse and as an example of representing the essence of Asian values. Six months into being the Prime Minister, Mahathir started the Look East Policy which allowed Malaysians to be exposed to the technical know-how and work ethics as well as discipline of the Japanese people. However, while Japan-Malaysia relations flourished, the Look East Policy (LEP) floundered under subsequent prime ministers who neglected it. For example, Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak from Barisan Nasional favoured China over Japan. His policy coincided very much with China's Belt and Road initiative, which provided tremendous benefits to developing countries like Malaysia. However an unexpected regime change and personality driven foreign policy in Malaysia made a huge difference to the development of the LEP. In the aftermath of Malaysia's historic 14th general election, the country witnessed the return of Malaysia's longest-serving premier, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and the regime change from the former Barisan Nasional (National Front) to a new party coalition, the Pakatan Harapan (People's Pact/People's Alliance). I began the investigation with the assumption that as part of fulfilling his election manifesto, Mahathir gestured a foreign policy shift from China to Japan amid doubts over existing Malaysian debts and dependence on Chinese investments. However, I found that Mahathir's foreign policy did not show a massive shift from Japan to China but rather he re-orientated his policy to diversifying his strategic economic partners, providing a chance for the Look East Policy (LEP) to be reinvigorated under Pakatan Harapan. By leaning towards Japan, but not abandoning China, Malaysia managed the rise of China and at the same time invited back Japanese influence to bolster the country's development policies in the aftermath of corruption scandals and a weakened economy. Unfortunately, Mahathir's second term as a Prime Minister ended after 22 months in government. The regime shift resulted in the LEP being sidelined again. Japan needs to reinvigorate its relations with Malaysia in order to strengthen the free and open international order in the face of a rising China. The LEP should not only concentrate on education and economic relations but also be expanded to include security and maritime cooperation as a way to enhance the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and the 'ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)'. More future research needs to be conducted to encourage such a rebranding of the LEP.

Publication of the Results of Research Project:

Verbal Presentation (Date, Venue, Name of Conference, Title of Presentation, Presenter, etc.)

- 1) Dr. Geetha Govindasamy, Regime Change and Malaysia-Japan Relations: Explaining Shifts and Continuity in Foreign Policy, MAJAS Member Lecture Series 2020, Webinar (KL), 17 December 2020, sponsored by Japan Foundation, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- 2) Dr. Muhammad Danial Azman, Another Case of Look East Policy? Malaysia Response towards China's and Japan's Infrastructural Investment and Economic Arrangements, MAJAS Member Lecture Series 2020, Webinar (KL), 17 December 2020, sponsored by Japan Foundation, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

• Link: <https://www.jfkl.org.my/events/majas-member-lecture-series-december-2020/>

Thesis (Name of Journal and its Date, Title and Author of Thesis, etc.)

Govindasamy, G. & Azman, M. D. (2020), Regime Change and Malaysia-Japan Relations: Explaining Shifts and Continuity in Foreign Policy. *International Journal of East Asian Studies*, 9(1), 47-66.

· Govindasamy, G. (2022), A Re-Interpretation of the Look East Policy in the Context of a Rising China, Japan Foundation Book project, (pending in 2022).

· Govindasamy, G. (2022), Look East Policy and New Southern Policy: Convergence of interests between Malaysia and South Korea, Japan Foundation Book project, (pending in 2022).

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Public dissemination of Research: