

# PERSPECTIVE

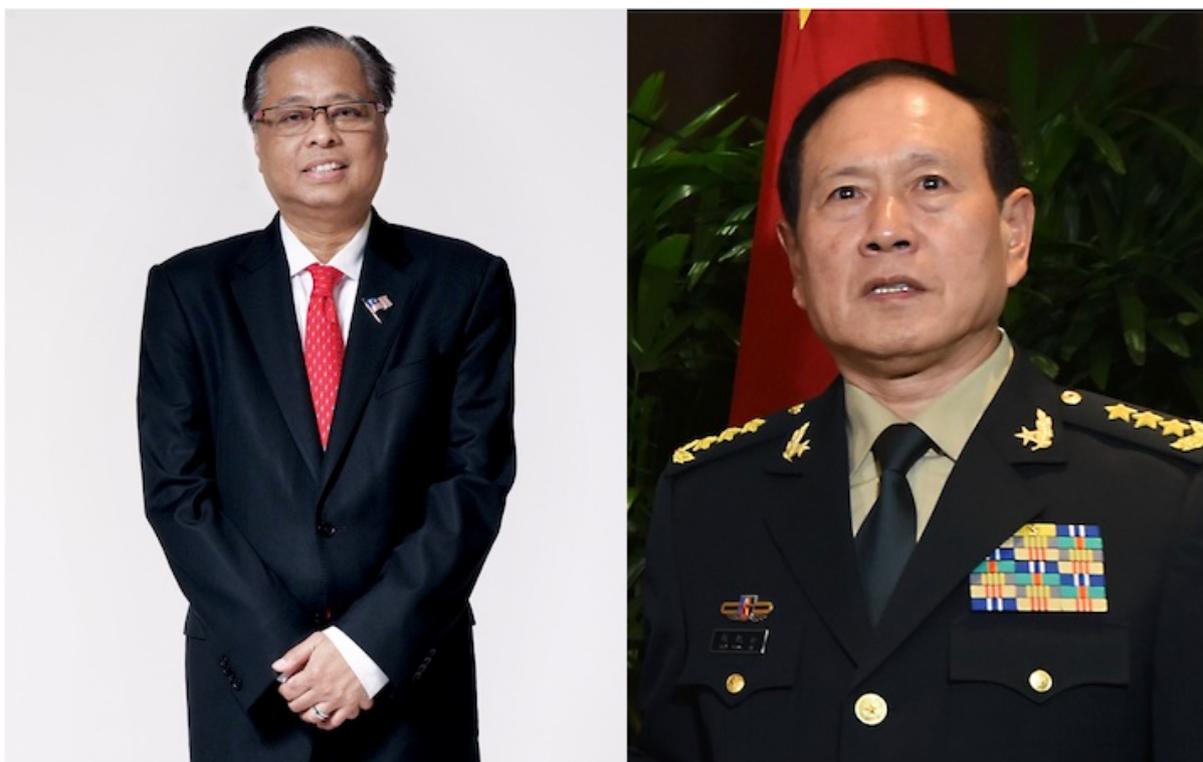
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## **Malaysia-China Defence Relations: Disruptions Amid Political Changes and Geopolitical Tensions**

*Ngeow Chow Bing\**



While domestic changes in Malaysia largely accounted for the slowing down of Malaysia-China defence interactions, China's actions in the South China Sea dispute contributed to the reduced enthusiasm and increased scepticism among the defence establishment on the efficacy of developing defence relations with China. In this picture, the Malaysian (left) and Chinese (right) Defence Ministers. Photos: Sophie ds15 for Defense Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob (left) and James N. Mattis for Defence Minister Wei Fenghe (right) via Wikimedia Commons.

\* *Ngeow Chow Bing is Director of the Institute of China Studies at the University of Malaya.*

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Malaysia's defence relations with China improved steadily in the early 1990s and especially since the 2005 MOU on Bilateral Defence Cooperation was signed.
- Under Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak, Malaysia's defence cooperation with China reached its height in 2017, with many top-level exchanges, large-scale bilateral exercises, a breakthrough in defence industry cooperation, growing naval visits, and continued military academic exchanges. These activities were overseen by Defence Minister Hishammuddin Hussein.
- With the change of government in Malaysia in 2018, Malaysia-China defence ties cooled. However, a bilateral combined military exercise took place and the contract to procure Littoral Mission Ships from China continued with modifications.
- The sudden change of government in Malaysia in 2020 and the pandemic further disrupted the momentum.
- China's actions in the South China Sea disputes further reduced enthusiasm and increased scepticism in the defence establishment in Malaysia on the value of Malaysia-China defence relations.

## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia-China defence relations began in the early 1990s with a series of top-level visits, which culminated in the landmark 2005 MOU on Bilateral Defence Cooperation. The MOU provided the basic framework for both sides to undertake various forms of cooperation and exchanges, including a strategic dialogue, exchanges of officer students in respective military academies, defence industry cooperation, and combined military exercises. In 2009, Malaysia procured 16 sets of China-made FN-6, a man-portable-air-defence-system (MANPADS). In December 2014, the first combined China-Malaysia military exercise, codenamed *Aman-Youyi 2014* (Peace and Friendship), took place as a table top exercise. Malaysia and China defence ties saw steady progress in the decade after the signing of the 2005 MOU, despite the ongoing South China Sea dispute in which both countries are claimants.<sup>1</sup>

The various aspects of Malaysia-China defence relations from 2015 to 2020 are reviewed here, including mutual visits, combined exercises, naval port calls, defence industry cooperation, and military-related think tank exchanges. It is found that Malaysia-China defence cooperation reached its height in 2017, and declined and stagnated afterwards. The progress was interrupted twice, first by the change of government following the 14<sup>th</sup> General Elections in May 2018, and second by the change of government again in late February 2020, which was further compounded by the pandemic crisis. The growing anxiety among Malaysia's defence establishment about China's rising assertiveness in the South China Sea could also result in greater reluctance in developing defence relations with China than before.

## JOINT STATEMENTS IN 2016 AND 2018

In late October 2016, then Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak paid a visit to China. In the Joint Statement signed during the visit, Article 15 stated that “both sides are pleased with the renewal of the ‘Memorandum of Understanding on Bilateral Defence Cooperation.’ Malaysia and China believed that the continuous and incremental engagements and close rapport between the defence establishments would further strengthen the existing relations. Realising the importance of expanding defence ties between Malaysia and China, both sides welcomed the signing of the ‘Framework of Cooperation on Joint Development and Construction of the Littoral Mission Ship for the Royal Malaysian Navy’ between the State Administration for Science, Technology and Industry for National Defence of China (SASTIND) and Ministry of Defence of Malaysia (MINDEF).”<sup>2</sup>

The visit took place roughly three months after the landmark South China Sea arbitral award brought by The Philippines against China, and the Najib government seemed determined to not let the arbitration case affect its pursuit of closer ties with China, including defence ties. The renewal of the MOU on Bilateral Defence Cooperation mentioned in the Joint Statement specifically referred to the foundational 2005 MOU, which had a ten-year expiration date.

Najib lost power in May 2018 and was replaced by the 94-year old Mahathir Mohamad, who strongly criticised Najib's China policy during and before the elections. In the Joint Statement issued during Mahathir's August 2018 visit to China, Article 11 stated that “both sides spoke positively of the sound and productive cooperation in defence, law enforcement and counter-terrorism, and agreed to advance cooperation in the above-mentioned areas, with a view to jointly maintaining regional security and stability. China and Malaysia encouraged high level engagement in defence, and reaffirmed the commitment to establish the Secured Defence

Telephone Link between both defence ministries. Both sides were satisfied with the progress of the Joint Development and Construction of the Littoral Mission Ship. Both sides agreed to hold the fourth joint working group meeting on combating transnational crime. Both sides shared the same aspiration of creating a society of high integrity, and agreed to promote cooperation in good governance and anti-corruption.”<sup>3</sup> Defence cooperation was lumped together with law enforcement cooperation in this Joint Statement, with added emphasis on good governance and anti-corruption.

## MUTUAL VISITS OF TOP DEFENCE OFFICIALS

Between 2015 to 2020, a total of 14 mutual visits of top-level defence officials took place (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Mutual Visits of Top Defence Officials (2015-2020)**

Month and Year	Visitor(s)	Remarks
May 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Malaysia’s Ministry of Defence Secretary General Abdul Rahim Mohamad Radzi</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Second Defence and Security Consultation (DSC) dialogue in Beijing</li> </ul>
October 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Malaysia’s Minister of Defence Hishammuddin Hussein</li> <li>Malaysia’s Chief of Armed Forces Zulkifeli Mohd Zin</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attending Xiangshan Forum, Beijing</li> <li>China-ASEAN Defence Minister Informal Meeting</li> <li>Meeting with China’s Minister of Defence Chang Qanquan</li> </ul>
4-5 November 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>China’s Minister of Defence Chang Wanquan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attending ADMM Plus</li> <li>Formal visit and meeting with Malaysia’s Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak and Minister of Defence Hishammuddin Hussein</li> </ul>
November 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PLA’s Chief of Navy Wu Shengli</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Formalising an agreement that permitted the PLA Navy to use a navy port in Sabah</li> </ul>
October 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Malaysia’s Deputy Minister of Defence Mohd Johari Bin Baharum</li> <li>Malaysia’s Chief of Armed Forces Zulkifeli Mohd Zin</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attending Xiangshan Forum</li> <li>Meeting with PLA’s Chief of Staff Fang Fenghui</li> </ul>
October-November 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Malaysia’s Minister of Defence Hishammuddin Hussein</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Part of Najib’s visit to China</li> <li>Renewal of Defence Cooperation MOU</li> <li>Preliminary procurement agreement on the Littoral Mission Ship (LMS)</li> </ul>
November 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PLA’s Chief of Staff Fang Fenghui</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attending Exercise <i>Aman-Youyi 2016</i></li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meeting with Malaysia's Chief of Armed Forces Zulkifeli Mohd Zin</li> </ul>
March 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vice Chairman of Central Military Commission (CMC) Xu Qiliang</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Formal visit at the invitation of Malaysia's Minister of Defence Hishammuddin Hussein</li> <li>Meeting with Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak and Minister of Defence Hishammuddin Hussein</li> </ul>
April 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Malaysia's Minister of Defence Hishammuddin Hussein</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Announcing the setting up of a high-level bilateral defence cooperation committee</li> <li>Witnessing the official signing of the LMS agreement</li> <li>MOU on academic cooperation between National Defence University of Malaysia and Peking University</li> </ul>
October 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Malaysia's Minister of Defence Mohammad Sabu</li> <li>Malaysia's Chief of Armed Forces Zulkifli Zainal Abidin</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attending Xiangshan Forum</li> <li>Meeting with China's Defence Minister, Wei Fenghe and Vice-Chairman of CMC Xu Qiliang</li> <li>Visiting the China Shipbuilding Industry Corporation (CSIC) shipyard in Wuhan to check on the progress of LMS construction</li> </ul>
April 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Malaysia's Chief of Navy Mohd Reza bin Mohd Sany</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Receiving the first LMS from China</li> </ul>
October 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Malaysia's Deputy Minister of Defence Liew Chin Tong</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attending Xiangshan Forum</li> </ul>
September 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>China's Minister of Defence Wei Fenghe</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Visit during the pandemic</li> <li>Meeting with Malaysia's Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin and Minister of Defence Ismail Sabri Yaakob</li> </ul>

*Source: Compiled by author from various published sources*

As can be seen in Table 1, before the change of government in May 2018, there were a lot more active top-level exchanges. While most visits were timed together with the attendance at other functions (Xiangshan Forum, ADMM Plus, Najib's visit to China, bilateral exercise), there was also a number of visits that were specifically aimed to enhance bilateral defence ties. The PLA Navy Chief Wu Shengli's visit in November 2015<sup>4</sup> was possibly a follow-up to an understanding reached back in October 2013 when Hishammuddin Hussein, in his first visit to China as Defence Minister, agreed to have a formal contact channel established between Malaysia's Naval Command Region 2 (overseeing the South China Sea) and the PLA South Sea Fleet and for the Sepanggar naval base in Sabah to be open to Chinese naval visits and supplies. Subsequent to Wu's visit, Chinese naval escort missions and submarines indeed visited the said naval base twice (see below).<sup>5</sup>

Between late 2016 and the first half of 2017, there was a flurry of mutual visits by top defence officials from both sides. In November 2016, PLA Chief of Staff Fang Fenghui visited Malaysia to officiate the bilateral Exercise *Aman-Youyi 2016*, which marked the only time that such a senior-ranked PLA officer officiated at this event. In March 2017, Vice Chairman of CMC Xu Qiliang visited Malaysia; he was the highest-ranked PLA officer to ever visit Malaysia (Xu outranked the Minister of Defence in China). Xu met with both Prime Minister Najib and Defence Minister Hishammuddin, and secured consensus to deepen and widen areas of defence cooperation.<sup>6</sup> Hishammuddin reciprocated with a visit in April 2017, where he finalised the LMS agreement, announced the agreement to set up a high-level bilateral defence committee chaired by the respective Defence Ministers, and witnessed the inking of an academic MOU between the National Defence University of Malaysia (UPNM in Malay abbreviation) and Peking University. The idea of a high-level bilateral defence committee was already mooted a few months back (during Fang Fenghui's visit to Malaysia), and it was suggested then that the committee would have four working groups, dealing with military-to-military interactions (such as bilateral exercises), defence industry, cyber defence and intelligence, and strategic defence consultation.<sup>7</sup>

After the change of government in May 2018, the number of bilateral visits dropped significantly. Throughout the two years of the Mahathir administration, the visits only consisted of attendance at Xiangshan Forum and the ceremony to receive the first LMS. Another change of government occurred in late February 2020, which coincided with the rapidly developing COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Understandably, activities related to defence diplomacy were scaled down. An exception was the September 2020 visit by China's Minister of Defence Wei Fenghe. This seemed to be a hastily arranged trip with an unusual itinerary. While most media reported that Malaysia was his first stop in a regional tour (he visited Indonesia, Brunei and The Philippines after Malaysia), Wei was actually in Moscow just a day before his trip to Kuala Lumpur, attending the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Defence Ministers Meeting, and meeting his Indian counterpart over the border crisis. In Kuala Lumpur, Wei met with both Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin and Defence Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob, discussed the South China Sea issue, pandemic cooperation, and the strengthening of defence cooperation.<sup>8</sup>

## **DEFENCE INDUSTRY COOPERATION**

Interest in Chinese weaponry has always been there among Malaysia's political leadership, given its competitive prices, albeit somewhat less so among the professional military circles, which generally assesses China-made weapons as solid but not spectacular. In 2014, there was a preliminary agreement for Malaysia to procure the LY-80/Hongqi 16 Ground-to-Air missile system, but for unknown reasons this deal has not materialised (or is yet to materialise). Instead, somewhat more surprising was the Littoral Mission Ship (LMS) deal.

The LMS is part of the Malaysian Navy's modernisation programme known as "15-to-5" (namely, to reduce the current 15 classes of vessels to five classes). Accordingly, 18 LMSs are to be procured under this plan, of which the first four are contracted to be built by China Shipbuilding Industry Corporation (CSIC). In the original contract agreed to in 2017, two vessels would be constructed in China while the next two would be done in Malaysia, so that the Malaysian shipyard (Boustead Naval Shipyard) would benefit from skill and technology transfer. The total cost of the whole deal was RM1.17 billion. However, in March 2019, the

Mahathir government renegotiated the contract, so that all four of the ships would be constructed in the Chinese shipyard, at a reduced price tag of RM1.047 billion.<sup>9</sup> The new arrangement only reduced the cost slightly, and the main factor was probably the dissatisfaction of the Mahathir government with Boustead; the company had failed to deliver another major project on time.

As of March 2021, the construction of all four LMSs has been completed and two of them have been commissioned for service, with the last two expected to follow suit sometime in 2021.<sup>10</sup> In October 2020, a *Janes* article reported that a number of deficiencies of the first LMS (KD *Keris*) operated by the Royal Malaysian Navy, mainly involving “sensors and combat systems” were found and reported to the Chinese contractors for rectifying and for improvement in the remaining hulls.<sup>11</sup> Ironically, KD *Keris* was deployed to monitor the China Coast Guard vessel in Luconia Shoals when apparently a “stand-off” incident occurred in November 2020.<sup>12</sup>

For the second batch of LMS procurement, the government of Malaysia has decided to seek other foreign partners. For the time being, another major procurement from China remains unlikely, although China-made weapon systems remain in contention in some procurement programmes. For example, the JF-17 fighter, jointly produced by China and Pakistan, and the L-15B lead-in fighter-trainer, developed by China’s Hongdu Aviation, are both contenders in Malaysia’s Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) project.

## COMBINED EXERCISES

Malaysia and China undertook the first field exercise, codenamed *Aman-Youyi 2015 (Peace and Friendship 2015)* in September 2015, involving 2,200 troops from both sides, with the PLA contributing around 1,160 personnel from the ground force, navy and air force (see Table 2).<sup>13</sup> This marked a progression from the *Aman-Youyi* Table-top exercise in 2014.

The *Aman-Youyi 2015* was then the largest bilateral combined exercise between China and an ASEAN country.<sup>14</sup> Held for six days in the Strait of Malacca, the exercise focused on drill subjects such as counter-piracy, gunnery exercises, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations. Troops from both sides were grouped into four joint action groups (maritime, air, special operations, and disaster relief) under a bilateral joint command.<sup>15</sup>

Table 2: Past *Aman-Youyi* Exercises

Year	Location	Type of Exercise	Size	Notes
December 2014	Kuala Lumpur	Table-top	PLA: 20 personnel MAF: 20 personnel	
September 2015	Straits of Malacca	Humanitarian assistance disaster relief, MOOTW, joint escort, joint rescue of hijacked vessel,	PLA: 3 vessels, 4 transporters, 3 helicopters, 1160 personnel MAF: 2 vessels, 1040 personnel	Then the largest bilateral exercise between China and an ASEAN country

		counter-piracy, gunnery exercise		
November 2016	Paya Indah Westlands	Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, jungle warfare, combat tracking, indoor combat	PLA: 195 personnel MAF: 410 personnel	Participation from the soldiers of the PLA's HK and Macao Garrison
October 2018	Port Dickson, Port Klang	Joint enforced peacekeeping operations, hostage rescue, damage control, maritime exercise	PLA: 2 vessels, 2 helicopters, 693 personnel MAF: 2 vessels, 1 helicopter, 585 personnel RTAF: 54 personnel	

*Notes: MAF refers to Malaysian Armed Forces, RTAF refers to Royal Thai Armed Forces*

*Aman-Youyi 2016*, held for five days in November, was scaled down from its previous edition (involving around 600 troops from both sides) but shifted its exercise focus to land-based warfare such as jungle survival, tracking mission and indoor combat. Notably, it was the first foreign exercise involving soldiers from the PLA Hong Kong Garrison. A small group of Thai officers were also invited to attend as observers.<sup>16</sup> In October 2018, China and Malaysia held the fourth *Aman-Youyi*. Eight days long with more than 1,300 troops from China, Malaysia and Thailand, the exercise had both land-based and maritime segments. *Aman-Youyi 2018* took place under the Mahathir government, but certainly was planned by the preceding government. There was a plan to hold *Aman-Youyi* in China in 2020, but due to the pandemic, this exercise was postponed.<sup>17</sup>

Other than bilateral exercises, China also conducted multilateral exercises with the navies from ASEAN member-states, in October 2018 and April 2019. In both exercises, however, Malaysia was either an observer (2018)<sup>18</sup> or an absentee (2019).<sup>19</sup>

## NAVAL VISITS

Table 3 lists all the publicly known visits by PLA Navy to Malaysian ports between 2015 and 2019. Most visits were part of returning trips made by the PLA Navy's escort missions to the Gulf of Aden. These escort missions offered the PLA Navy an excellent opportunity to engage in goodwill visits to different countries after the completion of their missions, and Malaysia was a frequently visited place.

Table 3: PLA's Naval Visits to Malaysia

Date	Details	Port of visit	Ships
June 2015	PLAN 19th Escort Mission	Port Klang	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Weifang 550</i> (Type 54A frigate)</li> <li>• <i>Linyi 547</i> (Type 54A frigate)</li> <li>• <i>Weishanhu 887</i> (Type 903 replenishment ship)</li> </ul>
August 2015	PLAN <i>Jingganshan</i> visits Penang, after attending ASEAN Disaster Relief collective exercise.	Penang	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Jingganshan 999</i> (Type 071 amphibious transport dock)</li> </ul>
October 2016	PLAN 23rd Escort Mission	Port Klang	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Xiangtan 531</i> (Type 54A frigate)</li> <li>• <i>Zhoushan 529</i> (Type 54A frigate)</li> <li>• <i>Chaohu 890</i> (Type 903A replenishment ship)</li> </ul>
January 2017	Task Force 861 of PLAN 24th Escort Mission	Sepanggar naval base (Kota Kinabalu)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Changcheng 217</i> (Type 39A submarine)</li> <li>• <i>Changxingdao 861</i> (Type 925 submarine support ship)</li> </ul>
May 2017	Three PLAN ships on a regional friendly tour	Penang	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Changchun 150</i> (Type 52C destroyer)</li> <li>• <i>Jingzhou 532</i> (Type 54A frigate)</li> <li>• <i>Chaohu 890</i> (Type 903A replenishment ship)</li> </ul>
September 2017	Unidentified Task Force of a PLAN Escort Mission	Sepanggar naval base (Kota Kinabalu)	
March 2019	LIMA 2019		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Yueyang 575</i> (Type 54A frigate)</li> </ul>
October 2019	PLAN 32nd Escort Mission	Port Klang	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Xian 153</i> (Type 52C destroyer)</li> <li>• <i>Anyang 599</i> (Type 54A frigate)</li> <li>• <i>Gaoyouhu 966</i> (Type 903A replenishment ship)</li> </ul>

Source: Compiled by author from various public sources

The more interesting and extraordinary developments were the two submarine visits to the sensitive Sepanggar naval base in Kota Kinabalu. The first occurred in January 2017, with the visit by a submarine and a submarine support ship. A Chinese official source claimed that they

belonged to the 24<sup>th</sup> escort mission to the Gulf of Aden.<sup>20</sup> It was not disclosed publicly before that these Chinese Navy's escort missions would sometimes have a submarine detachment, and the official itinerary of the 24<sup>th</sup> escort mission indeed did not show Malaysia as part of the fleet's visit.<sup>21</sup> This visit was followed by a second submarine visit in September 2017. It was reported that the submarine (accompanied by a submarine support ship as well) visited, again, after completing the escort mission to the Gulf of Aden.<sup>22</sup>

## **ACADEMIC, THINK TANK, COVID-19 EXCHANGES AND COOPERATION**

Exchanges of military students continued between 2015 and 2020, but it was an asymmetrical pattern with the Malaysian military students attending Chinese military institutions of higher education numbering at a total of around a hundred by 2020, vastly outnumbering their Chinese counterparts, which accumulatively only sent about a dozen military students to Malaysia's Armed Forces Staff College and Defence College.

In 2015, the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) and the Embassy of China in Malaysia co-organised the first reunion of the Malaysian alumni of Chinese National Defence University, and subsequently two more reunion celebrations were held in 2016 and 2017.<sup>23</sup> As mentioned earlier, UPNM also signed an academic MOU with Peking University in 2017, and a batch of 10 students was sent to Peking University. However, this exchange fizzled out after the change of government in May 2018.<sup>24</sup>

The Malaysian Institute of Defence and Security, the think tank affiliated with the Ministry of Defence, had had some preliminary exchanges with China's defence-related or strategic think tanks, but it failed to participate in the first China-ASEAN Defence Think Tanks Forum held on the sideline of the Xiangshan Forum in 2019. Although the pandemic crisis disrupted physical travel, it did not prevent exchanges and cooperation between the respective militaries. In May 2020, Wei Fenghe initiated a telephone call to his Malaysian counterpart Ismail Sabri and reportedly the focus of the conversation was the COVID-19 pandemic, among other issues.<sup>25</sup> During the September visit by Wei to Malaysia, he reportedly brought along medical supplies to donate to the MAF. The Health Service Division of the MAF also held virtual meetings with its PLA counterparts on medical cooperation in the defence sector.<sup>26</sup>

## **ASSESSING MALAYSIA-CHINA DEFENCE TIES**

The above discussions show that China-Malaysia defence relations "peaked" in 2017, and experienced a decline and stagnation with the inauguration of the Mahathir government in May 2018. Was the Mahathir government then living up to its reputation of being a more "anti-China" government?<sup>27</sup> Compared to its predecessor, the Mahathir government certainly was more guarded on China, given that both sides had clashed on the issue of Chinese infrastructure investment in Malaysia. The Mahathir government was also subtly more assertive on the South China Sea issue vis-à-vis China.<sup>28</sup> Despite Mahathir's "anti-US" rhetoric, the long established and robust (but lower profile) Malaysia-US defence relations did not suffer the kind of decline that was seen in Malaysia-China defence relations.

But other factors could have explained the phenomenon. Naturally a new government would take time to evaluate the policy legacy it inherited and sort out its preferred priorities, which would slow things down. Moreover, bureaucratic factors could be in play. Defence diplomacy was mainly coordinated and implemented through the Policy Planning Division of the Ministry

of Defence. During the Mahathir government, the Division was tasked with coming out with the first-ever *Defence White Paper*, a time-consuming and intensive work that diverted resources and attention from activities and engagements considered not of utmost priority. The Mahathir government was also more insistent on prudent management of resources and likely saw some activities as dispensable. Moreover, by 2019, relations between China and Malaysia had improved significantly, following the revival of a bilateral infrastructure project.<sup>29</sup> Had the Mahathir government stayed in power for a full term, more progress could have happened in Malaysia-China defence relations. But the collapse of the Mahathir government and the outbreak of the pandemic derailed the momentum again.

On paper, the Muhyiddin government, which appointed two veterans of the Najib cabinet to helm the Defence and Foreign Ministries, in particular the appointment of Hishammuddin (the former Defence Minister who oversaw the “peaking” of the Malaysia-China defence ties) as the Foreign Minister, should be an advantage in rekindling Malaysia-China defence ties. But the inherently unstable government was consumed and distracted by constant domestic politicking and the pandemic, and has not had the bandwidth to accord defence diplomacy with China a high priority.

Finally, while domestic changes in Malaysia largely accounted for the slowing down of Malaysia-China defence interactions, China’s actions in the South China Sea dispute also could very well contribute to the reduced enthusiasm and increased scepticism among the defence establishment on the efficacy of developing defence relations with China. The *West Capella* episode in April 2020 was especially alarming to this establishment. Bilateral defence interaction is still valued as a channel of trust and confidence building, but is now met with more doubts compared to the early 2010s.

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<sup>1</sup> An analysis of the defence relations between Malaysia and China from 1991 to 2015 can be found in Ngeow Chow Bing, “Comprehensive Strategic Partners but Prosaic Military Ties: The Development of Malaysia-China Defence Relations 1991-2015”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 37: 2 (August 2015), pp. 269-304.

<sup>2</sup> See “Joint Press Statement”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia, 4 November 2016, at [https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/home?p\\_p\\_id=101&p\\_p\\_lifecycle=0&p\\_p\\_state=maximized&p\\_p\\_mode=view&\\_101\\_struts\\_action=%2Fasset\\_publisher%2Fview\\_content&\\_101\\_returnToFullPageURL=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.kln.gov.my%2Fweb%2Fguest%2Fhome%3Fp\\_p\\_id%3D3%26p\\_p\\_lifecycle%3D1%26p\\_p\\_state%3Dnormal%26p\\_p\\_state\\_rcv%3D1&\\_101\\_assetEntryId=8556564&\\_101\\_type=content&\\_101\\_urlTitle=joint-press-statement&redirect=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.kln.gov.my%2Fweb%2Fguest%2Fhome%3Fp\\_p\\_id%3D3%26p\\_p\\_lifecycle%3D0%26p\\_p\\_state%3Dmaximized%26p\\_p\\_mode%3Dview%26\\_3\\_cur%3D3%26\\_3\\_keywords%3Dsouth%2Bchina%2Bsea%26\\_3\\_advancedSearch%3Dfalse%26\\_3\\_delta%3D20%26\\_3\\_assetTagNames%3Dpr2016%26\\_3\\_resetCur%3Dfalse%26\\_3\\_andOperator%3Dtrue%26\\_3\\_struts\\_action%3D%252Fsearch%252Fsearch&inheritRedirect=true](https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/home?p_p_id=101&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_state=maximized&p_p_mode=view&_101_struts_action=%2Fasset_publisher%2Fview_content&_101_returnToFullPageURL=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.kln.gov.my%2Fweb%2Fguest%2Fhome%3Fp_p_id%3D3%26p_p_lifecycle%3D1%26p_p_state%3Dnormal%26p_p_state_rcv%3D1&_101_assetEntryId=8556564&_101_type=content&_101_urlTitle=joint-press-statement&redirect=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.kln.gov.my%2Fweb%2Fguest%2Fhome%3Fp_p_id%3D3%26p_p_lifecycle%3D0%26p_p_state%3Dmaximized%26p_p_mode%3Dview%26_3_cur%3D3%26_3_keywords%3Dsouth%2Bchina%2Bsea%26_3_advancedSearch%3Dfalse%26_3_delta%3D20%26_3_assetTagNames%3Dpr2016%26_3_resetCur%3Dfalse%26_3_andOperator%3Dtrue%26_3_struts_action%3D%252Fsearch%252Fsearch&inheritRedirect=true).

<sup>3</sup> See “Joint Statement between the Government of the People’s Republic of China and the Government of Malaysia”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia, 20 August 2018, at <https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/speeches-statements/>

[/asset\\_publisher/mN2jZPwqWjGA/content/joint-statement-between-the-government-of-the-people-s-republic-of-china-and-the-government-of-malaysia-20-august-2018-beijing?redirect=%2Fweb%2Fguest%2Fspeeches-statements&inheritRedirect=true.](#)

<sup>4</sup> “Kota Kinabalu offered as port of call to Chinese naval ships – RMN”, *Borneo Post*, 10 November 2015, at <https://www.theborneopost.com/2015/11/10/kota-kinabalu-offered-as-port-of-call-to-chinese-naval-ships-rmn/>; Geoff Wade, “Sabah, the PLA Navy and Northern Australia”, *The Strategist*, 18 November 2015, at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/sabah-the-pla-navy-and-northern-australia/>.

<sup>5</sup> “Zhongguo haijun 861 biandui jishu tingkao Gedajinabalu (Task Force 861 docks at Kota Kinabalu)”, Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Malaysia, 11 January 2017, at <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cemy/chn/sgxw/t1429687.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> “Zhongyang junwei fuzhuxi Xu Qiliang fangwen Malaixiya (CMC Deputy Chair Xu Qiliang Visits Malaysia)”, Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Malaysia, 31 March, 2017, at <http://my.china-embassy.org/chn/sgxw/t1450452.htm>; “Malaixiya zongli Najibu huijian Xu Qiliang (Malaysia’s PM Najib Meets with Xu Qiliang)”, *Xinhuanet*, 29 March 2017, at [http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2017-03/29/c\\_1120720395.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2017-03/29/c_1120720395.htm).

<sup>7</sup> “Military training with China won't affect ties with other countries”, *Malaysiakini*, 24 November 2016, at <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/364087>.

<sup>8</sup> Amy Chew, “South China Sea: China’s defence minister heads to Brunei, Philippines after visits to Malaysia and Indonesia”, *South China Morning Post*, 8 September 2020, at <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3100602/south-china-sea-chinese-defence-minister-wei-fenghe-turns>.

<sup>9</sup> “Defence Ministry: Nothing negative about building Littoral Mission Ships in China”, *New Straits Times*, 1 August 2019, at <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2019/08/509021/defence-ministry-nothing-negative-about-building-littoral-mission-ships>.

<sup>10</sup> “Fourth Malaysian Navy littoral mission ship ready, naming ceremony postponed to Nov 2021”, *The Malay Mail*, 16 December 2020, at <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/12/16/fourth-malaysian-navy-littoral-mission-ship-ready-naming-ceremony-postponed/1932578>.

<sup>11</sup> “Malaysia tallies deficiencies observed on first Keris-class littoral mission ship”, *Janes*, 22 October 2020, at <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/malaysia-tallies-deficiencies-observed-on-first-keris-class-littoral-mission-ship>. A Malaysian navy official whom the author spoke to, however said that this kind of situation was not unusual, as this was the first delivery of a new class of asset, and should not be read into too much.

<sup>12</sup> “Malaysian navy vessels, Chinese ship reported in South China Sea standoff”, *Free Malaysia Today*, 26 November 2020, at <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2020/11/26/malaysian-navy-vessels-chinese-ship-reported-in-south-china-sea-standoff/>.

<sup>13</sup> Peng Yining, “China and Malaysia mark end of first joint military drill”, *China Daily*, 22 September 2015, at [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015-09/22/content\\_21952389.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015-09/22/content_21952389.htm).

<sup>14</sup> It was only superseded in size by the 2019 edition of *Golden Dragon*, the bilateral combined exercise between China and Cambodia involving around 2,800 troops. But the size of the contingent dispatched by the PLA to participate in *Aman-Youyi 2015* (1160 personnel) probably remains the largest that China has ever sent to a bilateral exercise with an ASEAN country.

<sup>15</sup> “Shibing yanlian, hailugong chudong (Live fire exercise, with ground force, navy, air force)”, *Sinchew Daily*, 18 September 2015, at [https://www.sinchew.com.my/content/content\\_1468685.html](https://www.sinchew.com.my/content/content_1468685.html).

<sup>16</sup> “Malaysia, China begin joint aid and relief exercise”, *Straits Times*, 24 November 2016, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/malaysia-china-begin-joint-aid-and-relief-exercise>.

<sup>17</sup> Author’s conversation with relevant officials, place and date withheld to protect anonymity.

<sup>18</sup> Li Wenfang, “China, ASEAN begin joint naval drill”, *China Daily*, 23 October 2018, at <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201810/23/WS5bce80d7a310eff303283f68.html>. Five ASEAN countries dispatched their navy ships to participate in the drill (Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam, The

Philippines and Brunei), while four ASEAN countries only sent observers (Malaysia, Indonesia, Myanmar and Cambodia).

<sup>19</sup> “Opening Ceremony of ‘Joint Maritime Drill 2019’ Held in Qingdao”, *China Military Online*, 26 April 2019, at [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-04/26/content\\_9490179.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-04/26/content_9490179.htm). Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam and The Philippines again participated in the exercise, while Indonesia and Laos sent their observers.

<sup>20</sup> “Zhongguo haijun 861 biandui jishu tingkao Gedajinabalu (Task Force 861 docks at Kota Kinabalu)”, Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Malaysia, 11 January 2017, at <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cemy/chn/sgxw/t1429687.htm>.

<sup>21</sup> See [http://www.81.cn/2018zt/2018-12/14/content\\_9379057.htm](http://www.81.cn/2018zt/2018-12/14/content_9379057.htm).

<sup>22</sup> “Chinese sub docks at Malaysian port for second time this year”, *Reuters*, 13 September 2017, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-malaysia-southchinasea-idUSKCN1BO17P>. Scrutinizing the itineraries of the escort missions in 2017, the submarine and its support ship could be a detachment of the 26th escort mission.

<sup>23</sup> “Zhongguo zhuma dashiguan juban ‘disanci Malaixiya Zhongguo guofang daxue xueyuan zaichushou’ huodong (Chinese Embassy in Malaysia organizes ‘The Third Reunion of Malaysian Alumni of Chinese National Defence University’)”, Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Malaysia, 19 July 2017, at <http://my.china-embassy.org/chn/sgxw/t1478677.htm>. These activities could ensure that ties among the alumni and their relations with China remain vibrant, and reinforce the perception of a friendly relationship between the defence alumni of both sides.

<sup>24</sup> Author’s conversation with an academic of UPNM, 30 October 2020.

<sup>25</sup> “Telephone Conversation Between Honourable Dato’ Sri Ismail Sabri Bin Yaakob, Minister Of Defence Malaysia And His Excellency General Wei Fenghe, Minister Of National Defense Of The People’s Republic Of China”, Press release of the Ministry of Defence, Malaysia, 15 May 2020, at <http://www.mod.gov.my/en/mediamenu-2/press-release/720-telephone-conversation-between-honourable-dato-sri-ismail-sabri-bin-yaakob-minister-of-defence-malaysia-and-his-excellency-general-wei-fenghe-minister-of-national-defense-of-the-people-s-republic-of-china>.

<sup>26</sup> “Zhongguo fangzhang fangmashi wuzi jian jundui (Chinese Defence Minister donates to Malaysia during visit)”, *Oriental Daily News*, 2 December 2020, at <https://www.orientaldaily.com.my/news/nation/2020/12/02/378794>.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Javad Heydarian, “Malaysia as a New Vortex of Regional Resistance against China”, *Asian Maritime Transparency Initiative*, 17 September 2018, at <https://amti.csis.org/malaysia-new-vortex-regional-resistance-china/>.

<sup>28</sup> Ian Storey, “Malaysia and the South China Sea Dispute: Policy Continuity amid Domestic Political Change”, *ISEAS Perspectives*, no. 18, 20 March 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Ngeow Chow Bing, “A change of heart? Under Mahathir, Malaysia makes bold move to embrace China”, *Channel News Asia*, 30 August 2019, at <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/malaysia-china-relations-mahathir-pakatan-harapan-warming-ties-11833036>.

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