

NATIONAL INTEREST IN THE FOREIGN POLICY  
OF MALAYSIA: THE MAHATHIR ERA  
(1981 - 2003)

SYED HAMID BIN S. JAAFAR ALBAR

ASIA @ UNIVERSITY

2014



Asia e University Knowledge Centre

NATIONAL INTEREST IN THE FOREIGN POLICY  
OF MALAYSIA: THE MAHATHIR ERA  
(1981 – 2003)

SYED HAMID BIN S. JAAFAR ALBAR

A Thesis Submitted to Asia e University in  
Fulfilment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

July 2014

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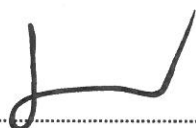
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## ABSTRACT

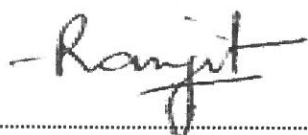
This research examined the relationship between the National Interest (NI) and the formulation and decision-making of the Foreign Policy (FP) of Malaysia. The study adopted a 'qualitative and descriptive' methodology by examining the postures, initiatives and outcomes, in the steady evolution of the FP of Malaysia since independence in 1957. Previous literature on the FP of Malaysia had primarily focussed on the administration, personality and character traits of Tun Mahathir, domestic factors and the international environment that shaped the policy. This study focused instead on the core values of the NI, as the independent variable that drove the FP, the dependent variable, to achieve positive FP outcomes for Malaysia. It also looked into the FP to the value of being principled, consistent and pragmatic. Both the NI and FP indicated change and continuity. In order to understand the NI and the outcomes of the FP, the criteria of relevance; domestic consensus and external acceptance as enunciated by Peter Drulák (2010) was also applied. The analysis pointed to the multifarious factors that influenced the FP premised on the NI that touched on the question of defence / security, economic, societal interests and ideological values as expounded by Nuechterlein (1978). The objectives of the NI in general term was to protect the independence, sovereignty, well-being of the citizens, the unity and harmony of the diverse society of Malaysia; hence the FP was determined accordingly. The FP during the period of Tun Mahathir was nationalistic, activist, assertive, and profiled; which had made Malaysia a leader of the South, Islamic *Ummah*, East Asia including ASEAN and placed Malaysia to be considered a middle power country and on the map of the world. The FP was also related to the beliefs of Tun Mahathir that the international system was lopsided and leaned too much to the developed countries, hence his continuous call for the global order to be fair and just. Finally the thesis concluded that FP was utilised as the tool to promote and defend the NI in the domain of economics, politic, security and societal interests and imperatives for the survival of Malaysia.

## APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised / read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in quality and scope, as a thesis for the fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.




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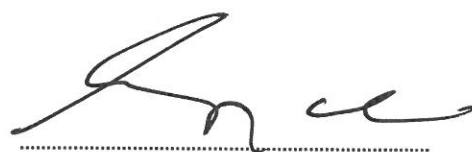
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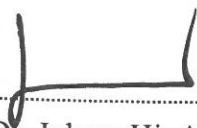


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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis submitted in fulfilment of the PhD degree is my own work and that all contributions from any other person or sources are properly and duly cited. I further declare that the material has not been submitted either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university. In making this declaration, I understand and acknowledge any breaches in this declaration constitute academic misconduct, which may conduct, which may result in my expulsion from the programme and / or exclusion from the award of the degree.\*

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Alhamdulillah by the grace of Allah at this age I was able to undertake and complete my PhD thesis, largely based on my experience in the Malaysian Cabinet for almost twenty years and of which I spent the most as Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1<sup>st</sup> January 1999 to March 2008. The difficulty, however, lies in putting these facts and information into one complete PhD thesis which demands discipline, perseverance and extensive research.

First of all, I owe my deep gratitude to Professor Dato' Ansary Ahmed for his encouragement for me to undertake this PhD degree. Professor Dr. Siow Heng Loke, who had guided me on what I needed to do as a PhD student. I also would like to thank Madam Meilina Puteh for her patience and encouragement that I could do it. Most of all I would like to thank my PhD advisor Professor Dr. Juhary Ali for supporting me during the past two years. Professor Dr. Juhary is someone who's calm, composed, soft spoken and is a source of inspiration. He was committed to guide me through, asking a lot of questions but most importantly never gave up on me. I hope I will have the same patience he does. He was willing to listen to my views and arguments as we go through my work. He has provided me insightful discussions and suggestions. He has been my primary source in getting my questions answered.

I would also like to thank the members of my PhD committee, Professor Dr. Mustapha Ishak and K. Nathan for the advice and suggestions, in general, to ensure this thesis is well articulated and argued. Most significantly, I am grateful to Assoc. Prof. Ishtiaq Hossain, from the Department of Political Science, IIUM for his invaluable comments and advise on the thesis. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Shifa Al-Attas for her critical views and suggestions on my draft thesis.

As my study is on NI as a determinant of FP in the Mahathir's era as the Prime Minister (PM) of Malaysia from 1981 – 2003, I had used the many conversations and interactions with him whether in private discussions or when accompanying him to regional and international meetings. I had many formal and informal engagements with Tun, one on the 13<sup>th</sup> of March 2013 and finally on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2013 specifically on FP issues and events during his premiership. I posed many questions including on Five Power Defense Arrangement (FPDA), The FP and NI

motivations of Malaysia, his FP priorities, terrorisms, OIC and Islam and outlook on western hegemony. He was candid and direct in answers. His views on regional and international issues or events covering international trade, the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the issues of fairness and justice, double standards and hypocrisy of the international system, his priority in relations with small and developing (South-South) and Islamic countries, his stand on weapons of mass destructions and other vital interests. I find his answers and responses confirmed my conclusion and findings that in the final analysis the FP formulation and decision-making was shaped by NI. I would like to thank Tun Mahathir for affording me the opportunity to serve in his government from 1990 – 2003 and for giving me time to interview him.

On the completion of the draft of the thesis I was fortunate to have the expert and professional advice of Dr. Prodyut Dutt who gave me comments and useful tips on how I could further refine my thesis, which I think added value to the completion of the thesis. Similarly, I engaged Suresh Kumar, who just completed his Master's degree with the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). I found my interactions with him most useful.

As a former cabinet minister I had the opportunity to exchange views with my former colleagues which was useful in this work. Not forgetting my heartfelt thanks to the various officials in the relevant ministries with whom I had the opportunity to interact with in the preparation of this thesis; to name a few-Mokhtar Ahmad, Tan Sri Fuzi, Hasymi Agam, Napsiah Salleh, and one who preferred not to be named. I would also like to express my appreciation to Professor Dr. Mohammad Hashim Kamali, Allahyarhamah Dato' Dr. Mahani Zainal Abidin and Dr. Tang Siew Mun for their views on the subject of NI.

I would like to thank my research assistants Khairunisa Matasim and Philip Mathews who assisted and discussed with me to ensure the thesis is completed. Philip was exceptionally productive in giving his views and comments as well as assisting me in the initial stage of compilation. Khairunisa is an example of a good researcher, who helped a great deal in formatting the submission of my work and to organise my research. My thanks also go to Cik Wan Faizah Wan Yusoff who has assisted in proof-reading my paper.

Now that I completed my study it would be an amiss if I did not mention that I owed it all to my beloved parents, the late Syed Jaafar Albar who had served the



nation admirably till his demise on 14th January 1977 and my ever loving mother the late Sharifah Fatimah Albar who departed in March 2008. She had without fail faithfully supported my father and took care of our big family of twelve siblings. May Allah bless both of them and place them amongst the pious in heaven.

I owe a lot to my wife who has been supportive, patient and understanding; and all my children Thuraya, Sadiq, Naqib, Nora, Badriah and Ali for their love and understanding. I also like to make special mention of Nora for untiringly helping me with the research and typing, Thuraya for some of the editing work and Haidar my son in law, for proof reading and giving valuable comments on the thesis. All of them indeed have extended their support in their own special way. I gained a lot from their encouragement and understanding and their longing to see this achievement come true.

I would like to thank Annur Hadi Hashim for assisting me with my notes preparation, Mariza Maarof in the same way and Ahmad Tarmizi Mukhtar for some of the research on the economic issues; Harris Pardi for reading through the initial chapters of my thesis and giving his comments. I thank every respondent of this study for their cooperation and inputs which enabled me to complete this work. There are others that I have not named but contribute in one way or another to my work; I thank all of them the same way.

I owe it all to Allah for granting me the patience, mind, health and strength to persevere in undertaking this research work to its final completion.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AMDA	Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement
APEC	Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation
ASA	Association of South East Asia
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BN	Barisan Nasional Party
CBM	Confidence Building Measures
CPF	Central Provident Funds
DAP	Democratic Action Party (Malaysia)
EAEC	East Asia Economic Caucus
EU	European Union
ESCAP	Economic and Social Commission for Asian and the Pacific
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FM	Foreign Minister
FP	Foreign Policy
FPDA	Five Power Defence Arrangements
ICB	Islamic Consultative Body
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IIV	Inculcation of Islamic Values
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IR	International Relations
LID	Langkawi International Dialogue
LKY	Lee Kuan Yew
LSE	London Stock Exchange
MAF	Malaysian Armed Forces
MAPHILINDO	Acronym for <i>Malaya, the Philippines, and Indonesia</i>
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
CPM	Communist Party of Malaya
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NI	National Interest
NIC	Newly Industrialised Country
NPT	Non-Proliferation Treaty
OIC	Organisation of the Islamic Conference
PAP	People's Action Party of Singapore
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party)
P 5	Permanent Members of the Security Council
PM	Prime Minister of Malaysia
SEANWFZ	Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty
SEARCCT	Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism
TAC	Treaty of Amity and Cooperation
TPPA	Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement
TUN HUSSEIN	The Third Prime Minister of Malaysia
TUNKU	Tunku Abdul Rahman; The First Prime Minister of Malaysia
TUN MAHATHIR	The Fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia (1981-2003)
TUN RAZAK	The Second Prime Minister of Malaysia
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UN	United Nations
WTO	World Trade Organization
ZOPFAN	Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality



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*Keywords: Foreign Policy, National Interest, Mahathir's era (1981-2000), formulation and decision-making in FP, idiosyncrasy, iconoclasm, domestic factors and international environment, bilateral, multilateral, principled, consistent, pragmatic, regionalism, South-South Cooperation, Islamic Ummah, East Asia (including ASEAN), realism, neo-realism, constructivism, liberalism, idealism, survival, and anarchy.*

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Many studies on the formulation of the Foreign Policy (FP) of Malaysia showed that the FP was influenced by domestic and external factors in the pursuit of this survival, security and economic development. They also described that in the era of Tun Mahathir, the FP was peculiar to himself (idiosyncratic) and at times there was a tendency to be iconoclastic; that is a desire to establish a name for his own or to seek recognition. This thesis aims to show that during the era of Tun Mahathir (1981-2003), the FP of Malaysia was driven by his sense of NI in a very principled, consistent and pragmatic manner.

During the era of Tun Mahathir, the FP of Malaysia was viewed as nationalistic, active, assertive and profiled. FP was at the centre of his public policy to make Malaysia a fully developed Muslim country. What motivated Tun Mahathir to make a shift of the policies of Malaysia domestically and externally, some studies have considered as drastic and radical. Many different studies had assigned multifarious reasons for this shift. Was it the cognitive factors or economics, political, security, or societal? It could be for any one of these; but to borrow the words of Tun Mahathir himself, to serve the National Interest (NI) of Malaysia pursuant to Vision 2020. The shift of the FP from political to economics was the inevitable outcome of this aim. The study was to reveal that NI as the motivations of Tun Mahathir's FP that encompassed the economics, political, security and societal interests and imperatives. Yet at the same time ensuring that it continued to be

guided by principle, consistency and pragmatism. Thus this study would show that the NI was the significant and is the overarching motivation that underscored the FP.

The term NI has been defined and used in multifaceted ways by politicians, academics and diplomats. It also suffered from the lack of consensus and common definition, thus described by some scholars as illusive and so on and so forth. However, what was crystal clear, it has never been out of any discussion on foreign policies and international relations as well as diplomacy. For the purpose of this study, the term NI was used to refer to the basic human material and spiritual needs and desires for independence, sovereignty, thus security and survival of the nation states to attain the well-being of their citizens. FP, as an extension of domestic policy, was designed with the purpose to defend and promote the national security of the country, economic and other vital interests. Despite the diversity of views, regarding the perception and explanation of FP, no FP could be formulated in a vacuum. It must serve to function in a dynamic environment. The FP of Malaysia was no exception. Various geographical, historical, social and political determinants contribute to shaping the nature of the FP of Malaysia and the conduct of the international relations of the country. Added to this was the external aspect, which becomes increasingly important with the advent of globalisation and in the wake of information and communication technology. However, the basic objective remains the same, which is the pursuit of the NI of Malaysia at the international level.

### **1.1.1 Steady Evolution**

An examination of the FP of Malaysia since 1957 would show her steady evolution characterised by notable changes in emphasis, which took place with the change in the political stewardship of Malaysia. Malaysia during the era of Tun



Mahathir was entering into a new phase of the FP and IR with dynamic economic growth and development together with political stability. She transformed herself from an agro-based economy to a manufacturing and industrial country. With those achievements, Malaysia developed self-confidence and recognition to play a leadership role as a middle power country amongst the South-South countries, Islamic *Ummah* and East Asia (including ASEAN). The FP stance of Malaysia began to take a much greater economic orientation than ever before, coupled with a strong and nationalistic defence of the rights, interests and aspirations of developing countries. Tun Mahathir was concerned for Malaysia to showcase her success through sound economic policies to demonstrate independence as well as to be at par with other nations, big or small through the FP initiatives and outcomes. In order to do this, he needed to obtain the consensus of the Malaysians through political support; the policies must have relevance for the well-being of all Malaysians and finally acceptance at the international arena. It would not be possible for him to succeed without justifying the FP to be in line with the NI of Malaysia. Many academic studies had rejected reliance on NI as the motivation for the state FP behaviour. Hence, either there was outright rejection, discard or just a mere alluding to the significance of the concept or the term but only accepted the term as given facts without getting into the depth of it as a significant independent variable of the FP. A review of the literature would show that this was due to the underlying assumption made in many studies about the NI as the motivation. Some of the studies considered the motivation other than security, domestic and international factors, the factors of idiosyncrasy and iconoclasm as the driver of the FP. Most studies would ascribe the motivation of the FP to the economic factors. In the case of Malaysia during the Mahathir era, she aspired to be a developed Muslim nation by

2020 in order to gain respect and recognition. This was considered as the NI of the country. In a nutshell, there seemed to be a disconnection between the FP behaviour of Malaysia and the attempt to explain these with specific reference to the NI.

### **1.1.2 The Debates on National Interest**

The concept of NI, though closely associated with the studies and analysis of FP, was subject to unending debates and disagreements due to the absence of a common or universal definition of the term. The analysis of the processes of FP of Malaysia would show that primarily leaders and policy elites make decisions based on what was perceived as the wants and needs of the country at a particular point of time. This thesis addresses the issue of the relationship between the NI and FP during Tun Mahathir's premiership and examined the concepts, methodologies and the objects, postures, initiatives and the policy outcomes.

For the purpose of identifying the NI, the study would apply the criteria of relevance, domestic consensus and external acceptance as enunciated by Peter Drulák (2010). The term 'national role concentration' was used by Drulák (2010) to describe the role of the FP in furthering the NI of the country. The FP of Malaysia took into consideration multifarious factors affecting political, economic, security and societal interests encompassing her NI, which can be summarised as follows:

- i. To maintain the independence and sovereignty of the country without external interference;
- ii. To maintain the well-being of her citizens as enumerated under Vision 2020 and be a developed nation based on her own values;
- iii. To create national identity and integration through unity and harmony of her multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious society;

- iv. To adhere to the UN Charter as a responsible member of the international community;
- v. To maintain friendly inter-state relations with all countries irrespective of political beliefs and ideologies; and
- vi. To act in a principled, consistent and pragmatic manner to achieve the FP objectives;

Within the above stated paradigms, Tun Mahathir as the PM steered the country and crystallized the FP of Malaysia with increasing consciousness of her identity, nationalism, assertiveness, and activism underpinned by the political, economic, security and societal interests and imperatives for the survival of the nation, government and her political regime.

### **1.1.3 Contribution to Existing Literature**

The thesis would contribute to the existing corpus of knowledge and literature on the subject of FP, as it would touch on the issue of NI in the conduct of diplomacy and international relations by Malaysia. Much of the current literature on the FP of Malaysia by scholars and political writers had focused on recognition such as idiosyncrasy/iconoclastic variables, other than domestic dictate and external factors. For the purposes of analysing the FP and NI, references were made to the various theoretical concepts of international politics and international relations developed by the realists, neo-realists, liberalists, English school, idealists and constructivists. Based on the analysis of the FP issues and events, this study found that Tun Mahathir was not acting in an idiosyncratic / iconoclastic way in determining the FP of Malaysia, but acted on the NI outlined in the nine objectives

of Vision 2020, to achieve the status of a fully developed nation as her intended outcome. She therefore, pursued the well-being of her economic development, political and security of the country to attain societal well-being, internally and externally, in the implementations of the FP in concordance with those goals. This deliberated move to focus on the economy; made the FP of Malaysia profiled, internationalist, assertive, nationalistic, with activism to place Malaysia on the map of the world, to act as a spokesperson of the South-South, Islamic countries and East Asian regionalism (including ASEAN). The call by Malaysia at the multilateral fora for justice and fairness in the international system, including the restructuring of the UN as well as the international financial architecture was well justified. Hence, Malaysia was acknowledged as a leader and champion of these causes. Most importantly through appropriate policy, Malaysia achieved economic development, political stability and national integration. Thus, hitherto ensure the security and survival of the nation. As a middle power nation, she also contributed ideas through her active participation without being tied up to any specific alliance; which showed that Malaysia had constructed the FP based on her NI. It was because he conducted the FP postures and initiatives of the country premised on the NI that Tun Mahathir was able to justify and obtain the support of the domestic constituents, which enabled him to enjoy political and regime sustainability.

#### **1.1.4 Outline of the Determination of Foreign Policy**

The study would indicate the FP of Malaysia under Tun Mahathir was motivated by the interests and needs of Malaysia within the bind of her domestic structures and the international system. It would be apparent in this research that cooperation with the South-South countries, Islamic *Ummah*, East Asian countries