Chapter 5
Malaysia–China Relations During the Movement Control Order Period and Beyond: Assessment from the Mutual Trust Variable

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5.1 Introduction

In Malaysia, the COVID-19 pandemic occurred in tandem with the unexpected regime change in the country’s political landscape. Following the unprecedented and historic general election in May 2018 that ended the 61-year rule of Barisan Nasional (BN) government and installed Pakatan Harapan (PH) as the new federal government of Malaysia, the PH administration was abruptly came to an end with the resignation of former prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad on 24 February 2020.\(^1\) The second regime change emerged when a new federal government under a new coalition named Perikatan Nasional (PN) came into being after six days of political impasse in Malaysia. In the context of such political situation in Malaysia, this chapter adopts a longitudinal approach in its assessment of Malaysia–China relations for the COVID-19 period and beyond, with the demarcation line taken as the date the Movement Control Order (MCO) was imposed—the Malaysian government’s overarching response against the COVID-19 pandemic—and the period after the termination of the order. Also, the authors for this chapter center their assessments on the variable, namely, the bilateral mutual trust, and seek to uncover the dynamics

\(^1\)Lim (2020).

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surrounding such variable in the development of Malaysia–China relations during the MCO period and beyond.

Thus, this chapter is organized into three sections. The first section presents Malaysia’s COVID-19 as an evolutionary process in which respective public health-economic responses of PH and PN governments to different stages of outbreak, made up the overarching pandemic response for the country. The second section then, discusses the immediate impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the bilateral relations during the MCO period. Finally, the third section looks at the prospect of Malaysia–China relations in the post-MCO period. In this particular section, the authors provide their assessments based on multi-dimensional factors that continue to build bilateral mutual trust as well as with potential to erode it.

5.2 Malaysia’s Responses to COVID-19 During Pre-MCO and MCO Periods

From January 25 until May 3, there are two periods of Malaysia’s overarching response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This former was the date in which Malaysia was confronting the global pandemic that started from the first imported case from Singapore while the latter was the date of the country’s reopening of its economy. Spanned across the previous PH administration and the current PN government, this first major section is devoted into dissecting the country’s public health and economic responses from the two different political regimes.

5.2.1 Public Health Responses

Malaysia’s public health responses evolved from early onset and early containment phases into late containment and mitigation phases. It is divided into two periods: pre-MCO period that occurred between January 25 and March 14; and MCO period which started from March 15 until May 3. The former referred to the period of which the PH administration was the federal government responding to the COVID-19 pandemic since the first imported case in late January. The latter, meanwhile, occurred during the leadership of current prime minister, Muhyiddin Yassin, who subsequently become Malaysia’s paramount leader following the country’s power crisis from late February to early March. Following the formal announcement of Malaysia’s success in flattening the epidemic curve on April 24, the Muhyiddin administration ended the MCO and restarted the country’s economy through the new conditional MCO since May 4.  

2Since June 9, Malaysia has entered into the Recovery MCO (RMCO) phase which is expected to last until August 31, 2020. Unlike the CMCO, interstate travel within Malaysia is allowed.
Pre-MCO Period (January 25–March 18)

From January 25 to February 28, Malaysia reported relatively limited number of COVID-19 cases compared to China which saw the pandemic at its peak in the same period. The first three COVID-19 patients were confirmed to have travelled from Wuhan to Singapore before crossing into Malaysia. These patients were subsequently quarantined in the Sungai Buloh Hospital on January 25. By this time, airports and entry points across Malaysia activated an emergency plan by installing thermal scanners at immigration checkpoints as part of tracking the coronavirus outbreak. At the same time on January 27, the PH government imposed its first temporary travel ban on individuals originating from Wuhan city and the Hubei province in China.

It was on February 3 that the first local case in which a Malaysian was confirmed as a COVID-19 patient after making a recent conference trip to Singapore which was attended by a delegation from China. Due to the risk of local transmission, the case prompted the Malaysian government to embark on extensive contact tracing and quarantine measures. Throughout February 2020, the PH administration was confronted with the manageable rise of COVID-19 cases, from Chinese tourists arriving from other provinces, those residing in Malaysia as well as 107 Malaysians evacuated from Wuhan on a special flight. With the Chinese government’s imposition of new lockdowns in five cities in Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces, the Malaysian government imposed a travel ban on February 9 onto individuals travelling from these two provinces. But despite all these challenges, the PH administration embarked on an early containment strategy that was geared toward responding to limited COVID-19 cases in the first two months of 2020.

Less than two weeks after the new PN administration was installed in March, Malaysians were stunned with the unexpected large number of COVID-19 cases within a short period of time involving a religious event as revealed by the Ministry of Health (MOH). The MOH was not aware of the *ijtima tabligh* event in a Sri Petaling mosque in the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur until the Bruneian Ministry of Health confirmed that its first COVID-19 patient had attended the religious event. The director-general of MOH, Datuk Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah expressed difficulties in tracing and identifying 16,000 attendees of the event. This forced the Malaysian government to systematically conduct contact tracing of all those who attended and were exposed to the Bruneian during the religious gathering. Consequently, in order to contain the spread of COVID-19 pandemic before it became unmanageable for the authorities, the Prime Minister Muhyiddin was compelled to impose a sudden MCO in Malaysia.

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3 First coronavirus cases in Malaysia: 3 Chinese nationals confirmed infected, quarantined in Sungai Buloh Hospital (2020).
4 Malaysia imposes ban on Chinese tourists from Wuhan (2020).
5 First case of Malaysian positive for coronavirus (2020), Ahmad (2020).
6 Father and son on Wuhan flight tested positive for coronavirus (2020).
7 Coronavirus: After Hubei, Malaysia blocks travellers from Zhejiang, Jiangsu provinces (2020).
8 Palansamy (2020).
9 Arumugam (2020); Tong (2020).
From March 18 until May 3, Malaysia underwent the most critical period in its pandemic response. On March 16, the MCO was announced to the public, which was intended to flatten the infection curve as its final goal. In other words, it was an all-out measure to reduce the widespread COVID-19 transmission into a level that was controllable for the country’s health authorities. The MCO imposed various measures, mainly including the full ban of mass movements and gatherings across the country, prohibition of overseas travel among Malaysians, entry ban for foreign tourists or visitors into Malaysia, closure of all schools, kindergartens and Montessori centres, all higher education institutions and vocational institutes; and all public and private premises except those involving in essential services.  

With the imposition of MCO, it took around 6 weeks for Malaysia to flatten the infection curve which was formally announced by Noor Hisham on April 26. Despite this, Prime Minister Muhyiddin carried on with the MCO with the help of the Royal Malaysian police and military. On May 1, the Malaysian government announced the Conditional MCO where most activities were allowed, with the exception of team sports activities, religious gatherings, face-to-face learning in educational institutions and interstate travel (even for Muslim religious holidays/Eid celebration).

5.2.2 Economic Responses

Following the limited outbreak in late January, the Malaysian government had foreseen the COVID-19 impacts on its economy as businesses in the tourism, hotelling and airline industries were affected by China’s travel ban for its citizens from January 25 onwards. Given the urgency to respond immediately before its collapse in late February, the PH administration announced an economic stimulus package comprising income tax deferment, tax exemptions for the travel industry and special lending facilities for both small and medium enterprises as well as micro-businesses. Apart from that, those in the COVID-19 response frontline and affected individuals who relied on tourists for their income, were also given payments-special monthly critical allowances for the former while one-off assistance for the latter. Altogether,

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10 COVID-19: Movement control order imposed with only essential sectors (2020).
11 Rashid and Reduan (2020).
12 Malaysian military to help enforce movement curbs to contain COVID-19 (2020), COVID-19: PKPD Dikuat Kuasa Di Dua Kawasan di Simpang Renggam (COVID-19: Enhanced MCO Enforced in Two Ares in Simpang Renggam) (2020). Enhanced MCO involved full isolation of specific areas and cessation of all activities within the areas. Food and other supplies would be delivered to the residents while medical bases were also established in the areas.
13 Essence of conditional movement control order (2020).
14 Perrett (2020).
15 2020 Economic stimulus package—full speech text (In English) (2020).
this first economic stimulus package was worth US$ 4.6 billion (RM 20 billion) but it was never implemented as the PH government collapsed in late February.

With the pandemic’s sudden surge leading to the MCO’s implementation in mid-May, almost all economic sectors were greatly affected by the pandemic. In response to the unprecedented economic impact from the MCO, the new PN government unveiled a massive stimulus package worth about US$ 57.4 billion (RM 250 billion) on March 27. Known as the Pakej Prihatin (Caring Package), it included the previous stimulus package as announced by Mahathir while at the same time, providing significant monetary aid to the low-income section of the population to support their livelihood and stimulate the economy. Almost every B40 (bottom income earners) and M40 (middle-income earners) individual/family received monetary aid (between US$ 115 and US$ 368) whereas employers (especially the SMEs) gained 3-month wage subsidy for their employees at a monthly rate of US$ 138 (RM 600).16 Other assistance rolled out were free 1 GB internet daily, exemptions of 6-month rental for businesses and one-off payment to students and government pensioners.17

On April 6, the PN government once again, announced another special stimulus package (US$ 2.3 billion or RM 10 billion) that was focused on supporting the enterprises and micro-businesses. In order to avoid massive retrenchment, three measures were ironed out: wage subsidy scheme extended to 6 months; the number of employees covered under the scheme increased according to the categories of workforce; and amount of wage subsidy to be adjusted at higher rate.18 For the employers, a special grant of US$ 6,895 (RM 3,000) was given to each registered SME while micro-businesses could access to additional US$ 2,298 (RM 10,000) loan from the Tekun Nasional scheme. These were on top of additional tax deductions for owners of private premises who willingly reduced at least 30% their rental from April to June.19 In total, the Malaysian government spent a total of US$ 60 billion (RM 260 billion) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.3 Immediate Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Malaysia–China Relations

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were two immediate impacts that showcased the prevalence of long-standing mutual trust between Malaysia and China. In this sense, recognition has to be given to past administrations, especially to the Najib administration (2008–2018) that saw wide-ranging intensification of Malaysia–China economic, socio-cultural and military cooperation.20 Equally important is that the previous PH administration under Mahathir’s leadership, had

16Muhyiddin unveils RM250bil economic stimulus package (2020).
17Ibid.
18Muhyiddin unveils RM10bil stimulus package for SMEs (Updated) (2020).
19Ibid.
20Malaysian PM aims ‘New Heights’ in bilateral relations for China visit (2016), Tan (2017).
also demonstrated its non-confrontational approach in re-negotiating controversial projects such as the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) and gas pipelines with its Chinese counterpart\textsuperscript{21}, an approach that elevated existing mutual trust between the two countries. In both cases, mutual trust remained a measuring variable for evaluation of long-term Malaysia–China relations. The following section, therefore, examines the COVID-19 pandemic’s immediate impacts to the bilateral relations by unveiling the dynamics of such mutual trust.

### 5.3.1 Reciprocal COVID-19 Medical Assistance

The most significant impact of COVID-19 to Malaysia–China relations is reciprocal COVID-19 medical assistance to overcome the pandemic. This was displayed in two fronts. When the pandemic struck China between December 2019 and February 2020, Malaysians provided medical assistance to the country in a show of solidarity with the Chinese people.

Among the first initiative was the Malaysian Non-governmental Organization (NGO), #OpsHarapan, which sent 2.4 tonnes of medical supplies including medical masks, rubber gloves and safety goggles to China after embarking on a four day campaign to collect these materials locally.\textsuperscript{22} Other governmental and corporate organizations also joined in. For instance, the Sabah government and several local Chinese associations donated US$ 464,000 (RM 2 million) to China from after the state-wide fund-raising campaign. In addition, the Malaysian Rubber Export Promotion Council (MREPC) as well as rubber gloves manufacturers, also dispatched an estimated 18 million medical gloves for healthcare workers in Wuhan.\textsuperscript{23} Last but not least, a group of multi-racial Malaysian singers also showed their solidarity with the Chinese people by offering psychological and emotional support through a locally-composed Mandarin song, **Ni cong bushi yigeren** (You Are Not Alone).\textsuperscript{24}

When Malaysia began to experience COVID-19 pandemic from February onwards, China too extended a helping hand. With Malaysia urgently in need of

\textsuperscript{21}After months of re-negotiation with the Chinese counterpart for the ECRL project, the new deal was eventually signed in April 2019 and it included reduction of project costs (US$ 5 billion), increase local participation, and the 50% sharing of risk by the Chinese project delivery partner, China Communications Construction Company (CCCC). As for the gas pipeline projects (Multi-Product Pipeline (MPP) and Trans-Sabah Gas Pipeline (TSGP)), bilateral re-negotiations are reportedly ongoing as of September 2019 and in which the former PH government was in favour of terminating the two projects. For further information, see: ECRL salient points: RM 1B refund, more locals and CCCC to share risk (2019), and Gov’t still negotiating with China to resolve issue on pipeline projects (2019).

\textsuperscript{22}NGO #OpsHarapan sends 2.4 tonnes of medical supplies to Wuhan (2020).

\textsuperscript{23}Sabah govt raised RM 2 million for Wuhan fund (2020), Kaos Jr (2020).

\textsuperscript{24}Da ma geshou MV xian chang kang yi da qi (MV of Malaysian Singers Singing in Support of Pandemic Battle) (2020).
masks and medical Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), both the Chinese government and business communities supplied 11 batches of medical PPE to both West and East Malaysia. The Chinese embassy in Kuala Lumpur donated 15,000 masks to Sungai Buloh Hospital. Moreover, an estimated 20,000 masks and medical PPE were dispatched by China to the Malaysian police force as well as to Sabah and Sarawak. Chinese business organizations and NGOs such as the China–Asia Economic Development Association also donated 100,000 masks while medical PPE and test kits were also distributed to four ASEAN countries (including Malaysia) by both Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation.25

Meanwhile, Malaysia is also one of the countries that welcomed Chinese medical experts to share their experiences in containing the COVID-19 pandemic.26 After having exchanges with the Chinese medical experts via video conferencing on March 26, the Malaysian government hosted the medical team from Guangdong 23 days later.27 During their stay in Malaysia, the medical team praised the professionalism and dedication of the Malaysian medical establishment. The team was also informed by the Malaysian MOH on the contribution of Dr. Wu Lien-Teh (Wu Liande), a Penang-born Malayan plague fighter who was known for his prominent role in containing the Manchurian Plague in 1910–1 through his development of modern surgical masks as well as the unprecedented quarantine and movement control measures (as adapted by China today).28 Last but not least, the Chinese medical team also welcomed Malaysia’s participation in China’s COVID-19 third-stage vaccine testing and highlighted the possibility of the vaccine being used earlier in Malaysian hospitals to combat the pandemic.29 From the reciprocal COVID-19 medical assistance during MCO period, it is obvious that the pandemic contributed to the strengthening of mutual trust not just at the governmental level but also, business and grassroots segments of the society.

5.3.2 Online Stigmatization of Chinese Nationals by Malaysian Netizens

Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic brought reciprocal medical assistance between Malaysia and China, it also stirred online stigmatization of Chinese nationals among

25 Chinese embassy, companies donate medical supplies to Malaysian hospitals against COVID-19 (2020), Lai (2020), Malaysia receives medical devices from China for police (2020), Jack Ma foundation and Alibaba foundation announce donations to four Southeast Asian Countries. (2020), Chan (2020), and China’s consulate general donates 30,000 face masks to Sarawak (2020).

26 Chinese experts to exchange experiences on COVID-19: Health DG (2020). The Malaysian health ministry’s director-general, Noor Hisham emphasized that the Chinese medical team would not come to Malaysia to run its health services.

27 China docs to aid in virus fight (2020), Medical experts from China touch down at KLIA (2020).

28 Zhongguo fangyi zhuanjia chengzan da ma weisheng bu nimen Boleh! (Chinese Epidemic Expert Praises Malaysia’s Health Ministry You All Boleh!) (2020), and Liew (2020).

29 Sin Chew Jit Poh (2020).
Malaysian netizens. This was evident in the early months of pre-MCO period (January and February) in which Chinese tourists became the source of COVID-19 outbreak in Malaysia. Two days after the first COVID-19 case in the country was announced, some netizens started an online petition demanding the tourism ministry to prioritize the health of Malaysian citizens and ban Chinese citizens from entering the country. Within two days, the petition garnered more than 400,000 signatures as the idea projected within the website was a message of protecting family and children of Malaysia. At this point in time, the former tourism minister, Mohamaddin Ketapi pleaded with Malaysian citizens not to discriminate Chinese tourists. Unfortunately, online netizens who feared the risk of COVID-19 transmission from this group of foreign visitors ignored his plea. The online stigmatization of Chinese tourists in Malaysia continued unabated.

At the same time, there were also incidents of online fake news associated with political messages against Chinese tourists. As pointed out by Zainal Ariffin Omar, President of the Malaysian Public Health Medicine Specialist Association, netizens posing as ‘experts’ were spreading political messages in their Facebook or other social media platforms, with the goal of creating panic among the local online community. As an example, Kauthar Rozmal, a prominent netizen compared the Malaysian and the Philippines’ governments’ treatment of Chinese tourists. While the Filipino government sent back 500 Chinese tourists from Wuhan, the former PH administration refused to do the same. By the time Kauthar Rozmal deleted his post, it was shared 3,000 times and several copycat posts had resurfaced with thousands of shares being recorded. That said, such online stigmatization of Chinese nationals in Malaysia remained in the virtual world and not on the ground. By magnitude, it was too trivial to erode long-standing mutual trust between Malaysia and China during the pandemic period. With the exceptions of Sabah and Sarawak, Chinese tourists who were not from Hubei, Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces as well as those already in Malaysia, were still allowed to visit Malaysia. Moreover, their presence was largely tolerated by Malaysia’s multi-racial society. Chinese tourists to Malaysia were welcomed until a full travel ban was imposed on foreign travellers by the government on March 18.

It is interesting to note that the Malaysian government has never propagated any anti-China discourse during the COVID-19 period, unlike what was happening in the Trump administration later on. While some Malaysians denounced the government for not banning Chinese tourists early on, Putrajaya refused to entertain such notion simply because it valued the long-standing mutual trust that Kuala Lumpur and Beijing had already established. The government’s priority was to overcome the pandemic with internal and external assistance from various countries (including China). As such, it was not surprising that the Malaysian government was willing to

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30 Racist? Malaysians want all Chinese visitors banned (2020).
31 Arumugam (2020).
32 “Racist? Malaysians Want All Chinese Visitors Banned.”
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
learn from as well as share experiences with Chinese medical experts in combating the spread of COVID-19. As for online stigmatization of Chinese nationals in the Malaysian social media, it was subsequently played down by Putrajaya-indicating the government’s preference for working towards combating a global crisis instead of playing the blame game as embarked by some countries.

5.4 Prospect of Malaysia–China Relations in the Post-MCO Era

Given the two narrow impacts during the MCO period, any forecasting of Malaysia–China relations in the post-MCO era should not be confined to these two developments as occurred during the short period of time. Instead, as explained in the Introduction section, evaluation should be made based on the bilateral mutual trust variable and in which in turn, such trust is affected by the multi-dimensional factors coming from political, economy, people-to-people ties and security areas. In total, there are four multi-dimensional factors involved: continuing political ties; enduring economic and people-to-people ties; potential fallout from the SCS dispute; and possible support pressure exerted by the US.

5.4.1 Continuing Political Ties

The first mutual trust-building factor for future Malaysia–China relations is the continuing political ties between the two countries. Despite such ties are confined to the small circle of political elites between Malaysia and China, they remained vital for the development of bilateral relations since it is the Malaysian ruling parties and their leaders that traditionally set the priorities of the country’s China policy. As such, their relationships with the Chinese leaders would influence the continuity of mutual trust-building between the political establishment of both countries.

After normalization of ties in 1974, the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) support for the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) remained a thorny issue for Malaysia–China bilateral relations. In addition to Malaysia’s prioritization of its foreign relations with the United Kingdom (UK) and Western nations in its early years of independence, the country’s political ties with China remained contentious until the end of the demise of the MCP in 1989. From the 1990s onwards, political engagements between the CCP and the BN coalition headed by United Malays National Organization (UMNO), began with the first ever visit by a CCP delegation led by Jiang Guanghua, the then Deputy Director of International Department. The CCP delegation met with a number of prominent UMNO leaders at that time: Prime Minister,

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35Jiang (2002, pp. 21–22), and Akhir (2009, pp. 53–54).
Mahathir, Finance Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, Secretary-General and Minister of Information, Mohamed Rahmat and Foreign Minister, Abdullah Badawi.  

Mutual trust between both sides began to develop through political exchanges, with UMNO members visiting CCP six times between 1994 and 2016, either individually or in the context of a visiting BN delegation. In contrast, the CCP, visited the Malaysian ruling party almost on annual basis-attending the annual UMNO General Assembly, conducting special meetings with top UMNO leaders (especially former prime ministers, Abdullah Badawi and Najib Razak) and signing of Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on party-to-party cooperation. Political mutual trust was cemented between UMNO and CCP when both parties agreed to adhere to a list of principles in the MOU (signed on August 2010) such as jointly working towards a strategic partnership based on mutual respect, equality, and non-interference in internal affairs. Despite UMNO losing power in the May 2018 elections, the party-to-party relations continued under the PH government with the CCP delegation paying a high-profile visit to the BN headquarters in June 2019. Therefore, it was not surprising that the CCP delegation visited the BN headquarters at a time when former Prime Minister Mahathir was bent on renegotiating megaprojects with the Chinese companies as signed during the tenure of the BN administration.

The other BN’s component party which has long-standing relations with the CCP is the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA). MCA was relatively a late-comer in institutionalizing ties as only in July 2014 did the party sign its own MOU with the CCP. The MOU detailed the sharing of governing experiences, party cadre training and think tank-media organization exchanges between both parties. But more importantly, when President Xi Jinping articulated the BRI in late 2013, MCA took the opportunity to play the key role of being a mediator between the government and China to actively promote the initiative in Malaysia. According to Ngeow, the Director of the Institute of China Studies at the University of Malaya, in order to be relevant, MCA took part actively in BRI negotiations. This was because MCA’s position in BN was relatively weak after the 13th general elections as a result of declining support among Chinese Malaysian voters. With regular interactions between MCA and CCP for party cadre training and promotion of BRI activities, the strengthened relationship between the two political parties not only made MCA relevant but also

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36 Jiang, “Remembering the ‘Ice-Breaking Trip’ that Established the Relationship between the Ruling Parties of China and Malaysia,” p. 22.

37 Ngeow (2017, p. 69).

38 BN Hargai Sokongan Berterusan Parti Pemerintah China (BN Appreciates the Support by the Chinese Ruling Party) (2019).

39 Two former BN’s Chinese-majority parties, Parti Gerakan Malaysia (Gerakan) and Sarawak United Peoples’ Party (SUPP) also have political ties with the CCP.

40 Huang jiaquan: mahua zhonggong qian beiwanglu, shenhua jiaoliu li hui liang guo (Ong Ka Chuan: MCA and CCP Signed MOU, Deepening Exchanges and Benefitting Two Countries) (2014).

41 Gong jian yidai yilu, gong hui hezuo yuanjing (Built the “Belt and Road” Together, Drawing a Vision of Cooperation) (2019); Ngeow, “Barisan Nasional and the Chinese Communist Party: A Case Study in China’s Party-based Diplomacy,” p. 74.
an essential conduit in developing Malaysia–China relations within the context of a rising China.

With the re-election of Mahathir as the seventh Malaysian Prime Minister following the watershed elections in May 2018, leaders of the PH’s component parties began building their own political ties with the Chinese counterparts. Although Mahathir was well connected with the Chinese leaderships during his previous premiership, other senior leaders of the PH coalition were not. Chinese leaders too had to re-establish relationship with the new PH government. Beijing spent time building political ties with senior leaders of the administration, including the then Deputy Prime Minister, Wan Azizah, Finance Minister, Lim Guan Eng and Minister of Economic Affairs, Azmin Ali. The Chinese ambassador to Malaysia, Bai Tian, actively sought meetings with these leaders and coordinated official visits of PH leaders to China. Also, particular attention has to be given to the CCP’s effort in building political ties with the Democratic Action Party (DAP)-the PH’s component party which is overwhelmingly dominated by Chinese Malaysian politicians. Therefore, it is not surprising DAP was the first PH’s component party to be invited to China right after the change in government.

As for the current PN government, political ties with China has been continued with the support of the foreign minister, Hishammuddin Hussein. As an experienced UMNO politician, Hishamuddin has served as full minister under the previous Mahathir, Badawi and Najib administrations. Having built his China ties over the years, his appointment as the Malaysian foreign minister is an advantage for Chinese leaders. In a press conference in March 2020, Hishamuddin indicated that China was perceived as a priority state in Malaysia’s foreign policy agenda, together with Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE). In combatting the COVID-19 pandemic, it is common knowledge that Hishamuddin has had close consultation with the Chinese ambassador, Bai Tian and foreign minister, Wang Yi. The close contact was evident when Hishammuddin posted his live phone call to Bai to thank him for the assistance given by the Chinese government, on his Facebook. Hishamuddin’s close relations with his Chinese counterparts, it is expected to continue in the foreseeable future for several reasons.

As the incumbent foreign minister, his influence is expected to increase compared to past administrations. The reason for this is closely related to Prime Minister Muhyiddin’s fragile government. The Muhyiddin administration is a coalition comprised of multiple parties with the prime minister’s party having the least number

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42 Chinese Embassy Holds National Day Reception in Malaysia (2019), Ambassador Bai Tian called on Minister Azmin Ali (2018), Fanghua chu jiaqiang liangguo guanxi, lin guanying: shouxiang ling jiaodai renwu (China Visit More than Strengthening Bilateral Ties, Lim Guan Eng: Prime Minister Delegated Special Tasks For Me) (2019), Malaixyia fu shouxiang shouci fanghua, quebao mazhong guanxi chixu jiaqiang (Malaysia’s Deputy Prime Minister’s First Visit to China, To Ensure Malaysia-China Relations Continued to be Strengthened) (2019), and Lin jixiang deng ba huojian guohui yiyuan fang hua (Lim Kit Siang and DAP’s Members of Parliament Visit China) (2018).

43 MGTV Live: Hari Pertama Datuk Seri Hishammuddin di Wisma Putra (MGTV Live: First Day of Datuk Seri Hishammuddin in Wisma Putra) (2020).

44 Hussein (2020).
of seats. Hence in reality, he has lesser control over the whole political partnership. Given this situation, Muhyiddin is constantly confronted with an array of internal and external challenges emanating from his coalition partners. In addition, the prime minister has his hands tied up with by health and economic related issues whereby he needs the support of his coalition partners. The Muhyiddin administration is also challenged by the opposition bloc which is attempting to change the government once again. As long as Prime Minister Muhyiddin is constantly challenged, the space is left open for Hishammuddin to play an unprecedented role in setting and implementing his foreign policy priorities without substantial interferences from the prime minister himself unlike past administrations. This bodes well for Malaysia–China relations as Hishamuddin has high regards for Beijing’s status in the current world order.

5.4.2 Enduring Economic and People-to-People Ties

The other mutual trust-building factor for future Malaysia–China relations is the enduring economic and people-to-people ties between the two nations. Unlike political ties which is confined to a small circle of top political elites, both economic and people-to-people ties are broader in nature. Whilst enduring economic ties has resulted in mutual trust-building aim at fulfilling collective economic visions of top leaders, the people-to-people ties here refers to continuous solidarity from the grassroots of both societies in dealing with humanitarian issues.

Economically, mutual trust between Malaysia and China has been inculcated through three major developments: the 1997 Asian financial crisis; the upgrading of ASEAN–China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) agreement; and domestic economic reforms of the PH administration under Prime Minister Mahathir. In the first financial crisis faced by Malaysia since the end of the Cold War, the 1997 Asian financial crisis contributed to the strengthening of mutual trust between Kuala Lumpur and Beijing. When confronted with the devaluation of major Asian currencies, the then Mahathir administration decided to tether the exchange rate of the ringgit to the rate of RM 3.80 to US$ 1. When such a move was criticised heavily by Western countries, China supported the action. Beijing perceived the policy as Malaysia’s show of self-determination in responding to the financial crisis. Later, when Mahathir proposed the East Asian Monetary Fund (EAMF) two years after the failure of Japan’s Asian Monetary Fund (AMF) proposal, China also perceived the idea as being in tandem with its own aspiration for the establishment of East Asian regionalism. The shared

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45 Azhar (2020). Of the 114 majority seats PN commanded in the Parliament, Muhyiddin’s party, Parti Pribumi Malaysia (PPBM) occupied lesser number of seats as compared to its coalition partner, BN. The latter is the major party alliance within the coalition with 43 seats (39 from UMNO).
46 Akhir (2000, pp. 81–102).
47 Ng (1999). It is important to note that China agreed to the East Asian Monetary Fund (EAMF) but expressed reservation in the Asian Monetary Fund (AMF) as proposed by Japan in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis.
regionalism agenda brought Malaysia and China closer. As a result of Beijing’s support for Malaysia during the financial crisis, Malaysia returned the favour by supporting China’s entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in December 2001. Following successful implementation of the ACFTA in 2010, Chinese Premier, Li Keqiang further proposed for the upgrading of the existing free trade agreement with ASEAN. In collective search for upgraded cooperation between ASEAN and China, both Prime Minister Najib and his counterpart, Premier Wen Jiabao leveraged on the established mutual trust to develop a new model of bilateral economic cooperation in April 2012. Known as “two countries, twin parks” (liang guo shuang yuan), the model of cooperation was first of its kind between China and ASEAN that was aimed to develop industrial clusters within designated industrial parks and zones. As a start, the Malaysia–China Kuantan Industrial Park (MCKIP) and its Chinese equivalent, China–Malaysia Qinzhou Industrial Park (CMQIP), were established by Kuala Lumpur and Beijing to begin attracting local and international investors. With the successful implementation of the new model of international cooperation, Thailand and Indonesia were strongly encouraged to form similar partnerships in establishing industrial parks with China in the foreseeable future. In short, the “two countries, twin parks” concept is relied upon by Malaysia and China as the new model of economic cooperation to realize the upgraded FTA between Beijing and its other ASEAN counterparts.

The third development in Malaysia–China relations, coincided with the domestic economic reforms undertaken during the PH administration (May 2018–February 2020). As one of Malaysia’s main foreign investors, China was particularly affected by Prime Minister’s Mahathir attempts to renegotiate projects involving China as a direct or partial stakeholder within the context of the BRI. The ECRL, Kuala Lumpur-Singapore High Speed Rail, Multi-Product Pipeline (MPP) and Trans-Sabah Gas Pipeline (TSGP) projects signed by the previous Najib administration, were subsequently reviewed by the PH government for their compatibility to Malaysia’s national interest and the administration’s call for transparency. However, the move by the PH administration ignited concern among the Chinese investors because almost all the megaprojects under review were related to the Chinese companies in Malaysia. As a result, many Chinese investors were quite reluctant to continue investing in Malaysia.

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48China, Malaysia sign WTO deal (2000).
49China, ASEAN to accelerate upgraded FTA negotiations (2014).
50Wen Jiabao meets with Malaysian Prime Minister Najib (2012).
51Malaysia-China kuantan industrial park on track to achieve investment target: Chairman (2017), and Qinzhou industrial park (Guangxi) development Co. Ltd. (2015).
52Dr. M: Harapan to review ‘Unbeneficial’ Foreign Projects, May Nix ECRL (2018), Akhir (2018), p. 5. The KL-Singapore HSR is temporarily postponed between Malaysia and Singapore in September 2018.
53Ximeng zhengfu xin zuofeng, mazhong zong shanghui: zhongzi guanwang (PH Government’s New Governance Style, Malaysia-China Chamber of Commerce: Chinese Investors Adopted Wait-and-See Attitude) (2018).
That said a few months later, Malaysia–China economic ties were revived after the PH administration explained that the reviewing of megaprojects were part of a reform agenda to clean up opaque business practices and not simply targeting of Chinese companies. To encourage more investments from China, the former Deputy Minister of International Trade and Industry, Ong Kian Ming welcomed China to invest in Malaysia’s newly established Industry 4.0 policy which aimed at attracting joint collaborations between Malaysian and international investors in new technological transfer partnerships and smart manufacturing processes. Ong pointed out that between 2016 and 2018, China has already become Malaysia’s largest investor in terms of approved manufacturing projects. By Ong acknowledging the situation, it was apparent that the PH government was very keen to continue collaborating with the Chinese companies.

Among all, the most vivid scene which left a strong impression among Chinese investors was the meeting between Prime Minister Mahathir and Alibaba’s founder, Jack Ma, in June 2018. The meeting, which took place in less than 2 months after the change of political regime in Malaysia, significantly dispelled the lingering concerns among Chinese investors, especially in regard to the PH administration’s stance on investments from China. In light of the uncertainty from Chinese investors, the presence of a technology giant like Jack Ma, in Malaysia was an affirmation that both countries trusted each other as economic partners and were willing to venture into the new area of high-technology cooperation. More significantly, in line with Malaysia’s new economic transformation priorities, Premier Li subsequently expressed China’s willingness to integrate Malaysia’s aim of initiating high-technology based cooperation in e-commerce, automotive industry, science and technology as well as financial sector into Beijing’s broader BRI framework. Instead of witnessing erosion of relations, the PH administration’s domestic economic reforms saw the government and business players of both countries willing to build a more trusted partnership in the new area of high-technology based economy.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, people-to-people ties was already robust in the context of Malaysia–China relations. For instance, natural disasters have become a common factor in bringing Chinese and Malaysians to jointly assist in relief efforts. During the 2008 Great Sichuan earthquake (or Wenchuan earthquake) in China, the deadliest of its kind since the 1976 Tangshan earthquake, Malaysians from all walks of life donated to China’s earthquake victims. The Penang Chinese Chamber of Commerce (PCCC) and Penang Chinese Assembly Hall immediately donated US$ 152,905 to the Chinese embassy in Kuala Lumpur four days after the natural disaster took place in Sichuan. Meanwhile, Malaysian singers also performed in

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54 Malaysia aims to draw high-tech Chinese investments (2019).
55 Ibid.
56 Alibaba founder Jack Ma meets Malaysian PM, ‘Surprised’ by Mahathir’s tech knowledge (2018).
57 China pledges to lift ties to Malaysia to new high (2018).
58 Tran et al. (2008).
59 Malaysia’s PCCC to donate to earthquake victims in China (2008).
a fund-raising charity night at Mines Resort City that was attended by local citizens in a show of solidarity with the earthquake victims in Sichuan Province. The concert alone managed to collect US$ 2.2 million which was later handed to the then Chinese ambassador, Cheng Yonghua by the charity event’s organizers.60 Following this event, Malaysian relief efforts continued with local companies and associations such as the Al-Bukhary Foundation, Lim Kok Wing University of Creative Technology, Cheng Ho Multi-Culture Education Trust, Berjaya Group, Parkson Co. Ltd., Perfect Co. Ltd. and Malaysia–China Friendship Association, donating a further US$ 1.5 million for the Sichuan Province earthquake victims.61

A similar natural disaster which occurred in the East Coast of Malaysia at the end of December 2014 saw China providing relief assistance to the affected Malaysians. In what was Malaysia’s worst floods in the 43 years, the heavy downpour affected as many as 200,000 people in the states of Terengganu, Kelantan and Pahang. Through the former Chinese ambassador, Huang Huikang, the Chinese government expressed its concerns and solidarity for the victims of the floods in the East Coast.62 While the Chinese embassy donated US$ 14,000 to the three affected East Coast states, the Red Cross Society of China too handed in a donation of US$ 100,000 to its counterpart, the Malaysian Red Crescent Society.63 In addition, Chinese companies in Malaysia such as the China South Locomotive and Rolling Stock Industry Group (CSRG), China Railway Construction Corporation (CRCC) and Beijing Urban Construction Group (BUCG) also donated US$ 253,000 and 10,000 candles for the flood victims in the affected areas. Last but not least, the China Enterprises Association in Malaysia and the Chinese organizer of ‘Dynamic Yunnan’ musical show forked out another US$ 14,000 and US$ 9,500 respectively, for the relief efforts in Malaysia’s East Coast states.64

Going beyond the COVID-19 pandemic era, there is little indication that such bilateral economic and people-to-people ties would deteriorate sharply in the near future. Without interference from other external factors, they will only become deeper as China is currently Malaysia’s largest trade partner, investor in the manufacturing sector and third largest source of tourists.65 Malaysia, on the other hand, is China’s second largest investor within ASEAN countries in 2018 and is home to the first

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60 Malaysia holds charity night for Sichuan earthquake victims (2008). The organizers of the charity night were the four Malaysian groups, namely, Associated Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Malaysia (ACCCIM), The Federation of Chinese Associations Malaysia (Huazong), Malaysia–China Friendship Association (PPMC) and Malaysia-China Business Council (MCBC).

61 Malaysia donates $1.5 Mln in materials to China Quake-hit zones (2008).

62 Huang Huikang dashi chuxi mahua gonghui dong haijian shuizai zhenji juankuan ji wuzi yijiao yishi (Ambassador Huang Huikang Attended MCA’s East Coast Flood Relief Fund and Supplies’ Handover Ceremony) (2014).

63 China stands by Malaysia to overcome flood disaster (2015).

64 Ibid.

65 Syahirah (2020), Approved Investments in the Manufacturing, Services and Primary Sectors in 2019 Totalled RM 207.9 Billion (2020), Tan (2020).
Chinese university campus outside of the mainland. That said, the projection of future Malaysia–China relations would be incomplete without accounting the two erosion factors that would threaten bilateral mutual trust in the post-MCO era.

5.4.3 Potential Tensions from the SCS Dispute

Besides the political, economic and people-to-people factors that have been explained above, there are also security factors that continue to impact Malaysia–China relations. The most critical is the potential tensions from the long-standing SCS dispute. From the Malaysian government’s perspective, its position is clear and consistent where Kuala Lumpur upholds the sovereignty and territorial integrity of what it claims in the SCS, believes all parties must resolve the dispute peacefully in line with principles of international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, 1982), and recognizes the freedom of navigation in the SCS as guaranteed by international law.

Coincidentally, the SCS dispute became a national headline in the midst of Malaysia trying to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. On April 16, it was reported that a Chinese maritime vessel tagged a Petronas-operated exploration vessel (West Capella) in an undisclosed site within Malaysian-claimed waters in the SCS. As confirmed by Zubil Mat Som, the Director-General of Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA), the Chinese survey ship (known as Haiyang Dizhi 8) was actively monitoring oil exploration works by the Malaysian national oil conglomerate, Petronas within Malaysia’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The news resulted in considerable responses from political as well as societal leaders in the country. It was perceived that China was taking advantage of Malaysia’s concentration on tackling the COVID-19 pandemic. There were mixed reactions from several quarters.

In a low-key response to the unexpected news, the Malaysian foreign minister, Hishammuddin Hussein called for calm from all quarters and reaffirmed the country’s commitment in peacefully handling the SCS dispute. In addition, he ensured the public that Malaysia’s communications with the Chinese and American counterparts remained open during this period despite the country being preoccupied with containing the COVID-19 pandemic. That assurance, however, did not resonate with several leaders. As an example, the former foreign minister, Anifah Aman,

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66 National bureau of statistics of China (2019), and Xiamen University Malaysia opens in Selangor for enrolment (2015).
67 Press statement on South China Sea by YB Dato’ Hishammuddin Tun Hussein (2020).
68 Latiff and Pearson (2020).
69 Noor and Hilmi (2020).
70 Tang (2020). In Hishammuddin’s remark, he highlighted that a non-issuance of public statement did not mean Malaysia had not been working to safeguard its interests and rights in the South China Sea as well as communicating with both the Chinese and American counterparts.
demanded the PN administration object via a diplomatic note to the Chinese counterpart. Similarly, the Parti Keadilan Rakyat’s youth leader, Nik Nazmi who is from the opposition camp claimed that the Chinese action was a form of opportunism in the middle of COVID-19 pandemic. Like Anifah Aman, he too demanded for an official protest against Beijing. As for societal responses, the most vocal one came from Ronald Benjamin, the Secretary for the Association for Community and Dialogue who criticized the PN administration’s low-key approach to the incident. He forewarned by not criticizing China, Beijing may one day use economic and military intimidation to dominate the SCS which is potentially rich with oil reserves.

These nationalistic responses clearly indicate that the SCS dispute is a contentious issue for the country as much as it is for China. The failure to manage the territorial dispute will certainly upset Malaysia–China relations as well as the mutual trust that has been built for decades since normalization of bilateral relations in 1974. The fact that the SCS dispute is a long-standing one shows that it is extremely difficult to deal with an issue which concerns sovereignty and territorial integrity of both countries. Moreover, there is also nationalistic sentiments which can easily be provoked among the local populace whenever an incident occurs in the disputed sea—a contentious issue that has been repeatedly downplayed by Putrajaya and Beijing. For Malaysia, the utility of maintaining a low-key approach in dealing with China on the SCS dispute is contingent upon the magnitude, type and timing of actions of Chinese maritime vessels in the contentious sea. Any amplification by China in the SCS will exert significant pressure on the Malaysian government to re-evaluate its long-standing low-key approach in dealing with maritime issues with Beijing.

### 5.4.4 Possible Support Pressure from the US

The other contentious external factor with potential to derail Malaysia–China relations is the American pressure for Putrajaya to support its Indo-Pacific vision. Despite the signing of the US-China Phase One trade deal in mid-January 2020, it failed to calm the bilateral ties as the COVID-19 pandemic struck the world less than two months later. As coined by Nikkei Asian Review, the global pandemic exposed the deep mistrust between the two powers to the extent that the Trump administration openly designated China as the party responsible for the global health crisis. In a myriad of factors involving the pandemic impact on the American economy, President Trump’s re-election strategy and China’s aggressive COVID-19 campaign against the US and the West at large (associating outbreak containment with different governance systems), what understood to be economic-technological frictions during

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71 Aman (2020).
72 Media statement by YB Nik Nazmi on the issue of Chinese vessels in the South China Seas: The government must take a stand on the Chinese provocation in the South China Sea (2020).
73 Benjamin (2020).
74 Akita (2020).
the trade war, have now been elevated into political and ideological tensions between the two powers.\textsuperscript{75}

As a founding member of ASEAN which is also the claimant in the South China Sea dispute, Malaysia is very much exposed to the pressures coming from the US in gaining third party’s support for its payback strategy against China.\textsuperscript{76} With the US–China rivalry likely to continue, it is entirely reasonable to expect Washington to keep up the pressure on Southeast Asian countries to go against China. Thus far, in terms of Malaysia–China relations, the Malaysian strategy is rightly perceived by the prominent Malaysian scholar, Kuik Cheng-Chwee, to be a ‘light hedging’ strategy unlike the ‘heavy hedges’ adopted by Indonesia and Singapore-characterized by low-key dominance-denial (political hedge) and indirect-balancing (military hedge).\textsuperscript{77} The dominance-denial refers to the extent to which Malaysian political elites perceived China as a ‘challenge’ instead of a ‘threat’ in which Beijing has to be engaged rather than balanced in accordance to ASEAN-based norms. As for indirect-balancing, the Malaysian political elites throughout successive administrations, have engaged in low-profile military cooperation with the US as part of its aim to mitigate the security risks posed by Beijing.\textsuperscript{78}

As far as political hedging is concerned, there exists mutual trust between Malaysia and China in responding to challenges in bilateral relations. Hishammuddin’s emphasis on open communications with Beijing during the SCS’s tagging incident,\textsuperscript{79} further confirms that Malaysian political elites continue to pursue low-key dominance-denial in their dealings with China. By viewing China as a state that prefers engagement instead of confrontation in managing the SCS dispute, Malaysia has successively maintained bilateral consultations. However, with Washington’s pressure for Malaysia to support its Indo-Pacific vision looked ever more probable in the near future, it remained to be seen if Malaysia can continue with its low-key indirect-balancing approach without any significant pressure from the US. By all means, any alteration to low-profile indirect-balancing to high-profile version, or conversion into direct-balancing altogether, would fundamentally erode mutual trust between Malaysia and China.

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\textsuperscript{75}Rushe (2020), Anita (2020), Croucher (2020), Waterson and Kuo (2020), Wu (2020), and Akita, “Coronavirus Pandemic Pushes US and China into New Cold War.”
\textsuperscript{76}Fang and Kawanami (2020).
\textsuperscript{77}Kuik (2015, pp. 18–20).
\textsuperscript{78}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{79}Ashley Tang, “Malaysia Calls for Calm and Stability in South China Sea after ‘Tagging’ Incident Involving Chinese, M’sian Vessels”.
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5.5 Conclusion

From the assessments of this book chapter, it is shown that the COVID-19 pandemic would not alter Malaysia–China relations during and beyond the outbreak period. During the pandemic period in Malaysia, the negative impact of online stigmatization of Chinese nationals among certain segments of Malaysian society, was far from being able to erode long-standing mutual trust between both countries. As opposed to that, bilateral mutual trust remained strong during the COVID-19 pandemic in which the unprecedented event resulted in reciprocal medical assistance between Malaysia and China to combat the outbreak.

The prospect of Malaysia–China relations, however, lied on the existing multi-dimensional factors that would continue in the post-MCO era. As shown from the past until today, continuing political ties as well as enduring economic and people-to-people ties, are the two building factors for Malaysia–China mutual trust that we witnessed today. That said, Malaysia–China relations could still face deterioration of ties despite having such strong foundation of mutual trust between both sides. The potential fallout from the South China Sea dispute and possible American pressure for Malaysia to support its Indo-Pacific vision, remained to be the two strong erosion factors which indisputably, had the capacity in eroding long-standing mutual trust between Malaysia and China. With the international order bracing for uncertainties in the foreseeable future, these two erosion factors are important yardsticks for future observations of the bilateral relations.

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