

Beyond Western Paradigms: Malaysia-China Relations and the Practise of Humanistic Diplomacy

Melangkau Paradigma Barat: Hubungan Malaysia-China dan Amalan Diplomasi Humanistik

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ABSTRACT

Western-centric models have dominated the study and practice of international relations. The conduct of diplomacy between nations has been operated based on two paradigms – realism or liberalism. Often, both paradigms frame global politics as a zero-sum game of survival or a contest for ideological dominance. The fact that the world is shifting toward a more flattened, multipolar reality has also been ignored. As a result, diplomacy is not functioning according to its true purpose. This article examines how an approach grounded in a humanistic perspective can work in the real world by studying the making of Malaysia-China relations from a humanistic perspective. Perspectives, concepts, and policies related to the relations between both nations are examined by employing critical interpretivist methodology. Outcomes of these examinations show both nations managed to build a partnership that lasted for more than fifty years by engaging each other not as objects to subjugate or to win over. Both nations treated each other as friends and attempted to overcome challenges that may affect their relations by placing human dignity, empathy, and shared prosperity as their core. As a result, both nations enjoy great progress in their relations, and they are now reaping the benefits. Their relationship is a living example of how humanistic diplomacy is not an altruistic fantasy. It is hoped that the diplomatic model employed by both nations will become a blueprint for a more peaceful global order.

Keywords: Humanistic Diplomacy; Malaysia-China Relations; Malaysian Foreign Policy; Social Constructivism; Multipolarity

ABSTRAK

Model-model berteraskan Barat telah lama mendominasi kajian dan amalan hubungan antarabangsa. Pelaksanaan diplomasi antara negara sering kali bersandar atas dua paradigma utama: realisme atau liberalisme. Kedua-dua paradigma ini membingkakan politik global sebagai sebuah permainan sifar-mutlak (zero-sum game) atau persaingan untuk mendominasi ideologi dunia. Hakikat bahawa dunia kini sedang beralih ke arah realiti yang mendatar dan multipolar juga sering diabaikan. Sebuah pendekatan baharu untuk pengurusan hubungan diplomatik harus dipelopori. Bagi tujuan tersebut, artikel ini cuba meneliti kesesuaian pendekatan diplomasi humanistik. Kaedah interpretivis kritikal digunakan bagi menganalisis data-data yang relevan. Hasil kajian mendapati hubungan Malaysia-China merupakan satu hubungan yang unik memandangkan kedua-dua negara mempunyai sistem, sejarah, serta saiz ekonomi yang amat berbeza. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa kedua-dua negara berjaya membina rakan hubungan strategik yang bertahan selama lebih lima dekad menerusi interaksi yang tidak berteraskan penguasaan atau penundukan. Kedua-dua negara saling mengiktiraf sebagai rakan sekutu dan berusaha menangani cabaran yang boleh menjejaskan hubungan bilateral dengan meletakkan maruah kemanusiaan, empati, serta kemakmuran bersama sebagai paksi utama. Kini, kedua-dua negara menikmati kemajuan yang luar biasa dalam hubungan bilateral mereka dan sedang meraih manfaat daripadanya. Kejayaan ini menjadi bukti nyata bahawa diplomasi humanistik bukanlah sekadar suatu fantasi altruistik. Adalah diharapkan agar model diplomasi akan menjadi satu panduan bagi pembentukan orde global yang lebih aman.

Kata Kunci: Diplomasi Humanistik; Hubungan Malaysia-China; Dasar Luar Malaysia; Konstruktivisme Sosial. Multipolariti

INTRODUCTION

For a long time, the way we study and practice international relations has been driven by Western-centric models. When we look at global politics, we are usually taught to see things through one of two main lenses - realism or liberalism. While these ideas have shaped foreign policy for decades, a closer look shows they have serious limits. Instead of helping to prevent conflict, these approaches are either too utilitarian-centric or focused on lopsided goals. Consequently, these models will end up justifying dominance, unipolarity, and conflict rather than fostering genuine cooperation between nations.

Being the backbone of Western strategic thinking, the realist approach is based on a rather instrumentalist view of human nature. This perspective traces its roots back to the philosopher Thomas Hobbes. He wrote a book entitled *Leviathan* (1651). In this book, he described the natural state of humanity as chaotic and anarchic. It is a place where life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." The people are locked in a constant "war of every man against every man". Classical realism took this idea and applied it to countries. Hans Morgenthau (1948), in *Politics Among Nations*, argued that international politics is simply a power struggle, driven by a natural human desire to dominate. In his view, countries have to act out of pure self-interest, putting military strength and material wealth ahead of morals or ethics.

Kenneth Waltz (1979) took this a step further with structural realism, or neorealism. In his book *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz moved away from blaming human nature. He argued that the global system itself is the problem. In his view, every nation is forced to be on the defensive since there is no world government to protect countries or enforce rules. This thought leads countries to build up their military power. However, their neighbours will see it as a threat. They will do the same thing. This eventually created a "security dilemma." These realist ideas did not just stay in textbooks. The thought guided real-world decisions. Often, the decisions lead to terrible results. The obsession with balancing power and forming military alliances was a major reason that plunged the world into the devastating First World War. Similar mistakes were made almost immediately. World War Two erupted due to the acts of realist politicians. Then the Cold War occurred. The root cause is the geopolitical game played by the United States and the Soviet Union. The consequences turned out in the form of proxy wars that erupted across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The result of such proxy wars was millions of lives. To counter the harshness of realism, the liberal approach (promoted by the United States) presents itself as an alternative. Liberalism argues that a chaotic world should be governed by rules and institutions. The formula will be international cooperation, economic ties, and the spread of democracy, which will keep the world in order (Keohane, 1984). However, is it so? When one takes a closer look at how liberal diplomacy actually works in practice, it often feels that it serves as a way to maintain American-led Western dominance.

The liberal model frequently demands that other countries adopt its specific political values. It assumes that Western political and economic systems are the perfect destination for everyone. This thought is promoted and, in fact, forced onto the world. Aggressive interventions that do more harm than good were launched against any nations that were seen as defying the Western model. For example, the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The Americans and their allies justified it by claiming the war was necessary to bring democracy to Iraq and to remove Iraq's capability to generate nuclear weapons. It is an act that clearly shows how liberal ideals can be used as an excuse to start wars and destabilize entire regions.

On the economic side, institutions backed by Washington, like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), have often tied their financial help to strict conditions. Developing countries have been forced to change their economic plans to suit Western corporate interests. Often, the changes demanded by these institutions would have implications for their own people's welfare (International Monetary Fund, 2003). This shows a diplomacy model that is utilitarian, top-down, but branded as ideals to correct the world. Hence, both realism and liberalism accept a world that is combative and unequal. These paradigms leave very little room for genuine relations nurtured through true cooperation. A truthful or genuine relation doesn't involve a clear winner and a loser. It is also egalitarian-centric and leaves no room for the dominant power telling a weaker one what to do.

In the flattening, multipolar world, the old utilitarian ways of dealing with other nations are no longer applicable. The utilitarian ways were not only outdated, but they are also risky. The world needs a more holistic diplomacy model. It should not neglect strategies to grow but the growth must not produce undesirable outcomes. The model itself respects differences and aims for harmonic relationships, an important feature of multipolarity. The world should stop treating international relations like a zero-sum game. It should also stop trying to force everyone into one mold. The core of this type of diplomacy looks toward shared human progress, win-win outcomes, and respect for civilizational pluralism.

This urgent need gives rise to an important question: What would be the paradigm or model that can replace the Western-centric paradigms? Beyond this question will be the question of whether there is any alternative model that can replace the Western-centric paradigms. To reply to these questions, this article will examine Malaysian foreign policy to see how an alternative model can work in the real world. To make the study more realistic, this article will look at how Malaysia-China relations have been managed from a humanistic perspective. It is a unique relation since the two countries have very different systems, histories, and economic sizes. But the fact is, both nations managed to build a partnership that lasted for more than fifty years. It is hoped that the diplomatic model they used, which is based on mutual respect and a shared future, will offer a blueprint for a more peaceful global order.

THE CHOICE WE MAKE: BEYOND THE FALSE DIVIDE OF REALISM AND ALTRUISM

We first have to examine the trap that has confined global leaders for generations to understand why the world desperately needs a new approach to international relations. In the study of diplomacy, there is a long-standing, often heated debate that forces nations into a false choice that foreign policy must either be strictly "realistic" in order to avoid being foolishly "altruistic." E.H. Carr (1939) and George Kennan (1951) were thinkers whose thoughts influenced the realists. They argue that the international arena is too dangerous to be altruistic. In their view, a government's first and only duty is to ensure the survival and prosperity of its own nation. We should expect the state to act altruistically, that is, willingly sacrificing its own power, wealth, or security for the benefit of another nation. For the realist, this is basically naïve. They saw it as a dangerous dereliction of duty, too. Realists argue that when nations try to be altruistic, they will end up causing more harm than good. This argument has caused most leaders to adopt realism. However, realism is essentially a system that runs on fear, suspicion, and transaction. It trains leaders to view the global stage as dangerous, and every other nation is a potential threat. If a country's foreign

policy is guided by the constant fear of being dominated, it will naturally act aggressively, and such a state will always aim to build up its own power at the expense of others.

This brings us to the theory of social constructivism. According to Alexander Wendt (1999), the international system is entirely an outcome of social construction. Wendt pointed out that the idea of nations constantly surviving in an anarchic world (what he called a "Hobbesian culture") is something we actively built. It is not something that is unavoidable. The conflicts and the distrust are socially constructed. We have built a hostile world because, for decades, powerful leaders acted as if realism and liberalism were the only two options available. The fact is that reality is something we created; it means humanity actually has the power to choose something different. We do not have to be trapped between ruthless self-interest and naive self-sacrifice.

In recent years, scholars have begun to define exactly why this shift is so critical. Humanistic diplomacy is not an extension of "soft power", a term coined by Joseph Nye (1990). Humanistic diplomacy is people centred. When it comes to implementation, it places human dignity, empathy, and shared prosperity as its core. Meanwhile, soft power is still a state-centric tool used to influence and manipulate others for national gain. As Dr. Ghazi Faisal Binzagr (2026) notes in his work on global connectivity, traditional diplomacy has evolved into a strategic tool. Nations become very good at managing positions and securing transactional agreements, but struggle to build real understanding or sustain long-term trust. However, he argues that diplomacy must evolve to include genuine cultural exchange and sincerity rather than just a strategic tool. A recent article written by the author of this article [published in the *Chinese Journal of International Review* (2025)] echoes this. The author argued that the world urgently needs to move away from limiting, state-centric assumptions. Foreign policies should be built on webs of historical, cultural, and civilizational ties rather than just rigid borders and state-centric interests. Such a policy lays the groundwork for the co-creation of international harmony.

Humanistic diplomacy recognizes that treating international relations like a zero-sum game is mathematically and socially unsustainable. You do not have to sacrifice your own country's well-being by being hypocritically altruistic to be a good neighbour. You should not build a secure home and be overly realistic by constantly threatening the houses around you, too. Humanistic diplomacy rejects both extremes. It strives to align a country's external behaviour with a genuine compassion for global well-being. It focuses on "win-win" outcomes and civilizational dialogue. In this context, diplomatic relations are not an object that can be measured through the lens of winning or losing. Contrary to this thought, diplomatic relations are seen from the lens of humanist aspirations (Constantinou, 2013). As such, diplomatic ties are constructed based on a long-term goal to form a workable relation that are built on human sentiments and moral obligations, much like the making of a friendship (Qin, 2018). It is this exact philosophy that has quietly guided the foreign policies of many nations offering a blueprint for a more peaceful, flattened global order that are beyond contemporary Western paradigms on diplomacy. The world does not need a hegemon to police the world and determine how they should conduct their relations with each other.

METHODOLOGY

This article employs a critical interpretivist methodology to analyse diplomacy. It also examines Malaysian foreign policy and its specific relational dynamics with the People's Republic of China. Traditional analyses of Malaysia-China relations often rely on realist interpretations of "hedging" or "bandwagoning". These perspectives assess how a smaller state manoeuvres economically and militarily in the shadow of a hegemon. Such frameworks strip the relationship of its cultural, historical, and humanistic dimensions and push the foreign policies towards measures that will only invite countermeasures from other nations.

Instead of relying on realism or liberalism, this study utilizes critical discourse analysis and qualitative historical interpretation of Malaysia-China relations. It also critically evaluates realism and liberalism. The objective is to highlight the underlying problems of these dominant schools of thought. To reflect that diplomacy need not be based on such perspectives, this paper examines Malaysia-China relations. This paper reviewed past joint statements made by the Malaysian and the Chinese governments on their relations. Reports from Malaysian authorities on Malaysia-China relations were also scrutinized. Efforts were also made to review the journal and media coverage of both nations' relations. By doing so, this paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how small nations such as Malaysia and superpowers such as China can actively construct peaceful regional environments outside the parameters of Western strategic thought.

THE EVOLUTION OF MALAYSIAN FOREIGN POLICY: FROM INDEPENDENCE TO HUMANISITIC DIPLOMACY

Many international relations scholars view Malaysia's international relations policies from a strategic yet cold perspective. In their mind, they are observing a relatively small Southeast Asian nation trying to navigate the intense rivalries between major superpowers. The reactions are labelled as "hedging." But to reduce Malaysia's foreign policy to a calculated strategy to maximize benefits and minimize risks has ignored the country's diplomatic soul. A closer look at Malaysia's foreign policies reveals a richer narrative. Malaysia's primary objective of its foreign policy is not to hedge. Malaysia intends to develop genuine and lasting relations that are anchored on universal values. While strategic caution is naturally applied in specific, tense situations, the overarching philosophical drive of Malaysia's diplomacy is driven by a humanistic model. To understand this, we must trace the country's foreign policy development through four distinct stages.

STAGE 1: THE PRO-WESTERN SURVIVAL STANCE (1957–1970)

Following Malaya's independence in 1957, Malaysia's foreign policy under its first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, was pro-Western and staunchly anti-communist (Mitsuomi, 2015). It was not a rejection of the humanistic model. It was an outcome of the Malaya's historical baggage that Malaysia had to carry and endure during its decolonization period. For more than two decades (1948-1960), Malaysia was battling a violent internal communist insurgency (the Malayan Emergency). Not long after that, Malaysia had to face external aggression. Indonesia launched its aggressive operation against Malaysia. During this period known as the "Konfrontasi" (Confrontation), Malaysia had to depend on Western support and relied heavily on the Anglo-Malayan Défense Agreement (AMDA) for security (Mohd Rizal, 2007). Due to these troubles,

Malaysia virtually had no diplomatic ties with the Communist countries, including China. Diplomacy in this era was fundamentally driven by the immediate need to secure the borders and preserve the newly won sovereignty of the state. Such an approach should be summarized as a realist approach. There wasn't a choice.

STAGE 2: THE SHIFT TO NEUTRALITY AND NON-ALIGNMENT (1970–1981)

As the geopolitical landscape shifted and the internal communist threat subsided, Malaysia made a bold and defining move. Malaysia began laying the groundwork for a more independent, inclusive and principled approach under the leadership of the second Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak. Historical records show Malaysia expanded its diplomatic missions globally throughout the late 1960s and 1970s. Its guiding doctrine was to become a "friend to all" (Mitsuomi, 2015). Malaysia was on its way to building its own approach to managing its foreign relations.

This era was also marked by Malaysia's active entry into the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). It was a clear step away from its earlier pro-West policy. This shift became more prominent when Malaysia spearheaded the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) declaration within ASEAN in 1971 (Alagappa, 1991). By pushing for Southeast Asia to be free from the interference of outside powers, Malaysia was essentially demanding that the region be treated with dignity and not part of rivalries' game plan (Tarling, 2009). The move was a clear signal that Malaysia would no longer be pulled around by Western powers. This stage also saw the historic 1974 normalization of ties with Beijing. Recognizing China was a massive leap of faith and a humanistic choice. It signalled that dialogue, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence were more valuable than to be treated as a pawn.

STAGE 3: CHAMPIONING THE GLOBAL SOUTH (1981–2003)

The third stage was dominated by the tenure of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister). This period saw Malaysia active role in championing the rights and dignity of the developing world (what we now call the Global South). Various measures were taken, including the launching of Mahathir's "Look East Policy". The policy highlighted the fact that modernization should not be led or dominated by the West (Nor Azalina & Rohaini, 2021). Developing nations could look to Asian models like Japan and South Korea for inspiration, breaking the psychological dependence on former colonial masters.

Malaysia's diplomacy was also highly vocal against systemic global injustices. Wisma Putra archives and public addresses from this era show a consistent grouses raised against Western double standards. On many occasions, Malaysia led the charge against the apartheid regime in South Africa. It also fiercely criticized the inaction of Western powers during the Bosnian genocide. Malaysia also demanded a fairer global economic architecture. All these were critical steps toward humanistic diplomacy. It shows that Malaysia recognizes true global harmony is impossible if the international system is rigged against poorer, developing nations.

STAGE 4: THE EMBRACE OF HUMANISTIC DIPLOMACY (2003–PRESENT)

In the contemporary era, Malaysia has crystallized its foreign policy around universal humanistic values. Although Malaysia had gone through regime changes, particularly after the 2018 general election, Malaysia's foreign policies on various issues remained intact. All the Prime Ministers

who led Malaysia since 2003 have never let their guard down and have been consistent in their foreign policies. Malaysia continues to uphold its call to be “a friend for all”. Malaysia was also consistent in condemning any act of aggression. Today, Wisma Putra operates with a deep commitment to global justice. This current stage is best exemplified by Anwar Ibrahim’s Malaysia Madani (Civil Malaysia) concept. It directly projects domestic values of compassion, respect, and ethical governance onto the international stage (Karupannan, 2025). The many rounds of inter-civilizational dialogues and forums hosted by Malaysia are clear examples of such a policy. Malaysia deplores military alliances. It chooses humanistic ways to address global issues that affect our shared humanity, such as climate change, post-pandemic economic recovery, and food security.

THE EVOLUTION OF MALAYSIA-CHINA RELATIONS: A STEP-BY-STEP JOURNEY TOWARD HUMANISITIC DIPLOMACY

The above illustration on the evolution of Malaysia’s foreign policy reveals the fact that the thrust of the policy is not really realism. Malaysia has its own vision and ideals. Humanistic diplomacy forms the foundation of these visions and ideals. Since the beginning, Malaysia has realized the irrelevance of choosing sides. Choosing a side may generate certain forms of benefit, but it may have risks too. Hence, Malaysia chose a route to become a friend to all and not a friend to a selected some. To truly appreciate the power of humanistic diplomacy, we must look at how it develops over time. It is never an overnight miracle. It is a gradual and delicate process of building trust. The relationship between Malaysia and China provides a perfect roadmap of this journey. We can see a clear progression that can be divided into four key stages by tracking the historical and strategic shifts in their ties. Their bilateral 50-year journey reveals that international relations do not have to be trapped in zero-sum geopolitics. Both nations are willing to try out a long-term relationship, much like a human relationship that cannot be fruitful if the relationship starts with a transactional mindset.

STAGE 1: FROM COLD WAR CAUTION TO BREAKTHROUGH (1949–1970S)

In the early days following its independence, Malaysia's relationship with China was practically non-existent. The era was dominated by intense Cold War suspicions. Malaysia was heavily focused on surviving internal communist threats. To do so, Malaysia leaned toward Western powers for security. All these were occurring while China was relatively isolated internationally.

Both nations initially operated purely on state-centric survival instincts, viewing each other through the lens of defensive realism. However, leaders from both nations realized that remaining isolated would lead nowhere. The turning point began when Malaysia’s ping pong team was invited to participate in a Ping Pong tournament organized by China in 1971. The move paved the way for a breakthrough. Both nations started communication, and in that same year, Malaysia supported China’s bid to acquire a seat at the United Nations (UN). This was followed by Malaysia's second Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak, historic visit to Beijing. It was an ice-breaking visit, and he met with Chairman Mao Zedong, then China’s supreme leader. A joint communique was issued by both sides to officially formalize diplomatic ties between the two nations. It established mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-

aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality, and mutual benefit (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 2000).

Malaysia was ahead of others and was the first ASEAN country to formally normalize diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China (The Editor, 1974). This brave move indicated that both nations agreed to overcome their ideological differences to restart their relations. It also indicates Malaysia's genuine intention to become a friend to all.

STAGE 2: BUILDING TRUST THROUGH ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL CONSOLIDATION (1980S–1990S)

After the historic visits of the 1970s, the relationship developed into a phase of consolidation. The focus shifted from high-level political recognition to building everyday trust. China began its economic opening-up policy, a policy initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978. Malaysian businessmen took the opportunity and were among the first foreign investors to enter the Chinese market. They brought capital, business networks, and expertise when China needed it most (Wong, 2024).

In the 1990s, the ties blossomed into other areas of partnership. These partnerships were people-centric and driven mostly by cultural and educational connections. This era saw a significant increase in people-to-people diplomacy. A perfect example of this growing humanistic bond was the exchange of badminton coaches between China and Malaysia in 1994. Exchanges via sport were a brilliant way to bring the citizens of both nations closer together beyond the realm of politics.

STAGE 3: SYMBOLIC DIPLOMACY AND STRATEGIC ACCOMMODATION (2000S–2013)

The relations continue to blossom. By the year 2000, the relationship had matured into a highly comfortable and strategic partnership. Malaysia took remarkable steps in cultural accommodation, which is a core element of humanistic diplomacy. It became one of the first countries in the region to officially establish Confucius Institutes (Chang, Tien & Luen, 2025). There were collaborations in the education sector, too. Many Malaysians were sent to China to learn the Chinese language. During this stage, both nations also demonstrated a shared commitment to regional stability. Overlapping territorial claims in the South China Sea by both nations could trigger serious tension. However, neither Malaysia nor China allowed the issue to derail their broader relationship. They chose diplomacy over militarized posturing (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia, 2023). Both nations “compartmentalized” the dispute from affecting other areas of their collaboration. To compartmentalize here means both nations stressed their stands on their sovereignty over the claimed area. The Prime Minister, for example, stressed that Malaysia stands firm over its border as depicted on its 1979 map (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). On the other hand, China remains adamant over its claim, and this is reflected by the presence of its coast guard in the disputed waters. Nonetheless, such actions did not trigger repercussions in other areas of collaboration. Despite the dispute, both nations continue to trade, and China remains Malaysia's number one trading partner. In 2024, both nations celebrated the 50th anniversary of their diplomatic relations. While some scholars may conclude that such reactions were examples of “hedging”, this paper would like to conclude that Malaysia-China relations are beyond hedging. It is based on humanistic sentiments, the positioning of bilateral relations from a humane angle. If it is based on the principle of hedging, China, being in a better position to exert its influence, will certainly exploit its position. But the fact is, there isn't such a move from China. On the other hand, Malaysia can opt to invest in its relations with the US. The fact is, Malaysia isn't doing so either.

STAGE 4: THE INCLUSIVE STAGE AND SHARED GROWTH (2013–PRESENT)

Various activities that promoted the relationship between Malaysia and China continue to flourish. All these activities pushed the relationship to move to a deeper and more inclusive relation. By 2013, the bilateral relations were at a full flowering stage. This is reflected when both nations agreed to elevate their ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2013. In the same year, Malaysia participated in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Today, the relationship is rich with cultural connections. It goes far beyond elite, closed-door meetings. It has gone to the people-to-people level. This is reflected in the massive surges in tourism, the joint cultural festivals, and the educational exchanges at campuses. To build a closer relation, during the visit of China's Premier, Li Qiang, to Malaysia to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the establishment of Malaysia-China diplomatic relations, a joint communique was issued announcing the intention of both nations to work closely to build a China-Malaysia Community with A Shared Future. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia, 2024).

THE OUTCOMES OF HUMANISITIC DIPLOMACY: NAVIGATING CONFLICT AND BUILDING SHARED PROSPERITY

Diplomacy moves beyond polished meeting agendas or picture-perfect photos of officials shaking hands after signing a memorandum or a treaty. It goes beyond meetings and press releases. Historically, a zero-sum approach has resulted in proxy wars, arms races, and divided societies (Rozzcka-Tran et.al. 2019). This has happened far too long. The world needs to go back to the initial purpose of diplomacy. It will be absurd if we think of diplomacy as a way to dominate others. The world needs to refocus and accept diplomacy based on humanistic values. Hence, what are the actual, lived results of choosing humanistic diplomacy?

While it is completely understandable that both Malaysia and China will occasionally take tactical steps to ensure their own national interests remain a top priority, such a move does not mean they have to jeopardize a relationship built on humanistic principles. For example, both nations are free to engage other nations to secure investments. They are free to introduce any measures deemed necessary. They are also free to sign any military pact with other nations. All these are in line with the principle that every nation has a fundamental duty to protect its sovereignty and its people. Prioritizing these domestic goals is a natural part of statecraft. However, the true strength of their partnership is shown in how these situations are managed. When tactical decisions are required, they can still be executed with a focus on the actions will in anyway created to jeopardize each other. By actively communicating and reassuring one another that these self-interested steps are never intended to harm the other party, both nations prove that it is entirely possible to defend national priorities while honouring their diplomatic relations. In other words, nations can work based on a zero-sum free framework.

Prominent Malaysian foreign policy scholars, such as Johan Saravanamuttu (2010), have long documented Malaysia's deliberate choice to avoid "megaphone diplomacy." Instead, as explained in the earlier section, the two nations practice what researchers call "quiet diplomacy" and "compartmentalization", (Storey, 2020). It is similar to when two friends argue on which football team to support, but the argument will not stop them from watching a movie together on the weekend. Malaysia and China have a clear, positive intention to solve the issue amicably. Malaysia is firm on its sovereign rights and continues its legitimate economic activities within its Exclusive Economic Zone. However, Malaysia does so without any provocation. Malaysia did not

throw any insults at China (Parameswaran, 2016). Conversely, China keeps communication channels open. The main goal is to avoid further escalation that would ruin the broader Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. They actively prevent these maritime frictions from escalating to the extent of disrupting their economic and cultural ties. This reflects maturity.

As a result, Malaysia-China relations flourish in other areas. The partnership brought positive outcomes economically. China has remained Malaysia's largest trading partner for more than one decade. Investments are designed to ensure both sides are able to reap benefits from the investments. In this context, Malaysia actively shapes China's investments to ensure they serve local needs by creating jobs, transferring crucial technological skills, and bridging the developmental gap between the richer west coast and the poorer east coast of Peninsular Malaysia (Norhidayat & Andrew Kam, 2023). At the same time, many of China's investments focus on the digital economy and green technology (MIDA, 2024), an important characteristic to have in the 21st century.

Beyond economics, the most enduring outcomes of this relationship are found in education and intellectual exchange. True partnership cannot happen if people do not understand one another's histories and worldviews. To foster this, the two nations implemented multiple programs via their education institutions. Academic exchange involving staff and students from various academic institutions organized forum, symposiums workshops and various other activities to bolster interaction. Physical spaces where young minds can learn together were also initiated. Xiamen University (Malaysia) is established for this purpose. In the context of Malaysia-China relations, the establishment of Xiamen University (Malaysia) is a historic milestone. It is the first time a major Chinese university has established a full overseas campus (Guo, 2018). This reflects China's sincerity and trust in Malaysia. At the point of the writing of this article, Xiamen University (Malaysia) operates as a vibrant hub for cultural exchange, offering courses in multiple languages and attracting students from across the region.

This interaction of youth is vital. Before the pandemic, student mobility between the two nations was massive, and it appears to be more extensive after the pandemic. In 2024, about 40 thousand China students were studying in Malaysia's higher education institutions (Mustapha, 2024). The number of Malaysian students studying in China in the same year is about 10 thousand (News Straits Times, 2024). This movement of young people carries important significance. It dismantles the "fear of the other." The prejudices that could be created if both nations hold on to realism in managing their relations are non-existent. These negative thoughts are replaced by shared generational empathy and trust.

Finally, the strength of this humanistic bond was proven during the darkest days of the COVID-19 pandemic. From a realist's perspective, countries should close themselves off and hoard vaccines for geopolitical leverage. This was what had actually happened. It was reported that developed countries hoarded vaccines, and this had caused shortages around the globe (Feinmann, 2021). Malaysia and China took a different approach. Both nations saw the pandemic as a shared threat to human life. They exchanged vital medical supplies, and China prioritized Malaysia for vaccine deliveries (Khairulanwar, 2021). This life-saving technological transfer permanently enhanced Malaysia's domestic healthcare resilience. The outcomes of Malaysia-China relations prove a very simple truth. Treating another nation with respect, managing controversies maturely, and focusing on shared growth are the most pragmatic ways to build sustainable peace. The bottom line is that Malaysia and China have constructed a model of international relations that actually works for their people.

CONCLUSION

OPTIMIZING HUMANISITIC GOALS FOR A FLATTENED WORLD

As we look at global politics today, it becomes increasingly obvious that the so-called old playbooks are failing us. For decades, global leaders have relied on the heavy-handed tactics of realism. To a huge extent, they had become accustomed to the coercive pressures of unipolar systems to manage international relations. These models were built for a different era, an era defined by empires. In such an era, hegemons thrived, but this has gone now. But as the case study of Malaysia-China relations clearly demonstrates, the 21st century demands something that is fundamentally different. If we want to survive in this new era, diplomacy must be radically changed to be one that centred around optimizing humanistic goals.

The reality of our current global landscape is that the world now gradually operates on a definitively multipolar platform. The days when one or two Western capitals could unilaterally dictate to the world are no longer. The world has flattened. Influence, technological capability, and economic power are no longer hoarded in the Global North. They are widely distributed across the Global South. Nations are finding their own voices and demanding the right to chart their own developmental paths.

In a flattened world, the traditional tools of unipolarity and realism can no longer work. When power is spread out, trying to force your will upon another nation through military intimidation or crushing economic sanctions does not result in obedience. These actions produced massive, destabilizing pushback. Realism teaches countries to build walls, hoard resources, and view every neighbour as a potential enemy. Such a strategy will not work in an era where our biggest challenges come from economic recessions, global pandemics and climate change.

This brings us to a common criticism. When scholars and policymakers suggest that we should place human dignity, mutual respect, and shared prosperity at the very centre of our diplomacy model, sceptics are quick to roll their eyes. They often dismiss this approach as being far too altruistic or hopelessly naive for the harsh realities of global politics. They argue that nations cannot afford to act like charities.

However, this criticism entirely misses the point. Humanistic diplomacy is not about self-sacrifice or naive charity. It is the realization that in a highly connected, multipolar world, your country cannot be truly safe if the region around you is burning. Helping to build a stable, thriving neighbourhood is the ultimate form of national security. While focusing on humanistic goals might seem altruistic on the surface, it is actually the most deeply pragmatic choice available to us. It is, in fact, the only viable way left for the world to uphold a just, fair, progressive, and peaceful international order.

As Malaysia and China have shown, it is entirely possible to navigate deep historical differences and complex territorial disputes when the underlying relationship is anchored in a genuine respect for human progress. We can continue clinging to the outdated, fear-based models of realism and unipolar dominance. However, such a decision will only lead to further division, endless proxy wars, and global inequality. By embracing a diplomacy model that places humanistic values at its core, we can finally begin to build an international system that works not just for the powerful few but for the shared future of humanity.

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