WHAT WILL MALAYSIA CHOOSE?

Opinion

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The 47th ASEAN Summit was a re-telling of dynamics with Malaysia in the centre of this transition. Malaysia's role as host and chair had all eyes on the country as they welcomed ASEAN and other world leaders for diplomatic talks, and most noticeably a visit of the sitting President of the United States, signaling a shifting perspective. With the uncertainty that has plagued the world stage and scrutiny of ever changing dynamics, the visit of the President and the current Secretary of Defense, Peter Hegseth offers a different political theatre.

Malaysia's bilateral ties with the United States have stretched back to 1957, forming one of the country's oldest partnerships. For decades, relations were rooted in steady economic cooperation and mutual strategic interest. Yet in recent years, that goodwill has been tested. Washington's support for Israel has clashed openly with Malaysia's unwavering position on Palestine, while the U.S. tariff measures and broader trade tensions have produced tangible repercussions for Malaysia's export-driven economy. At the same time, defence cooperation and joint exercises have increased, giving way to a paradox.

This places Malaysia in a precarious position as strategic alignment continues to deepen even though political friction grows. Under the MADANI government, the country has managed to navigate the competing expectations of two global giants, each exerting their own ways of pressure across economic, political, and security domains.

An expanded U.S. military presence in the region adds both opportunity and risk, raising questions about sovereignty, intent, and long-term strategic posture. After all, American interventionism is hardly unfamiliar in global geopolitics over the past seventy years. The challenge now is determining what this evolving landscape truly means for Malaysia, and how the nation should interpret the signals emerging from this moment in ASEAN's story.

The ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) has been going on for the better part of 20 years. First being in 2006, held in Kuala Lumpur, it was set up to promote regional trust and transparency in security and defence. With how ambiguous countries are with their own defence systems and the nuance offered in different bilateral ties and geopolitical situations, the meeting stands as a bridge to connect South East Asia with each other. The first ADMM Plus, which included dialogue partners and big power players was conducted in 2010, and since then, there has only been a handful of times where the U.S. Secretary of Defence has come officially.

Historically, the United States has not been concurrent in Asia. That changed with the second term of Barack Obama and his administration's pivot that led to a foreign policy shift in the Asia-Pacific Region. In subsequent terms however, the focus has moved to become singular rather than an overarching attempt.

Hegseth coming to Malaysia for ADMM Plus is not out of the ordinary, considering Malaysia's position this year, but it does offer an insight to the moves the United States is making when it comes to defence. His visit marked a shift in political leaning and how the United States would probably want to further conduct themselves in one of the fastest growing economic blocs in the world. South East Asia, outside of its own local military parameters, is a region that is increasingly becoming a chess piece in political ploys between the two superpowers. Hegseth's Asia tour this year has taken him from the Philippines to Singapore, signaling that South East Asia is already on the radar. It can be said that even though strengthening diplomatic ties was the forefront of many of these visits, it is concurrent with the soft power usually shown in geopolitics. A strength in the light of China having such a large influence in this region.

Malaysia has experienced a noticeable rise in U.S. defence engagement, marked by consistent bilateral exercises and a substantial expansion in complexity, scope, and political weight. Many of these exercises are coordinated under the United States Indo Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) which is the United States unified command in charge of the Indo-Pacific region. Exercises such as Bersama Warrior have grown deeper in integration, with the 2025 edition being sponsored by the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command and hosted by the Malaysian Armed Forces. Exercise Keris Strike 2025 involved Malaysia, the United States, and Australia. Military exercises are not out of the ordinary, but the heightened amount parallels the political conjunction that happened in October with the historic signing of a Memorandum of Understanding of Defence Cooperation at ADMM Plus and the Agreement between the United States of America and Malaysia on Reciprocal Trade.

The expansion of these trainings show a specific picture of an increasing presence happening.

With these factors, there is much to be said about how U.S. influence will fare itself out in the country. The involvement ramps up understanding to treat Malaysia of significant importance to U.S. foreign policy; ASEAN is a vessel and with Malaysia's good standing within the bloc - their infrastructure, economy and inherent political stability in comparison, it seems more likely there is a clear steering. The U.S. engages through rotational deployments, combined exercises and logistics/sustainment initiatives: things that will gain them deeper access, without backlash compared to a more permanent involvement. For Malaysia, this engagement enhances training, technology exposure and maritime readiness, whilst allowing the country to maintain their stance of non alignment. By sustaining this tempo, strategic ties can be used in collaboration for domestic or regional shifts in the future. The increase in U.S. military activity in Malaysia reflects Washington's broader aim of strengthening its position in ASEAN as competition with China intensifies.

There is tangible merit in the uncertainty of the current Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), such as how this agreement is one-sided and is protectionist of the American economy, doing more to benefit their own interests. What is missing however, or buried under analysis of the economic front, are the palatable reasons to what the signing of the defence MOU actually means. There can only be speculation, but speculation that takes from years of complicated history in the dealings of other countries and the United States respectively. From there, it is understandable that this engagement provides opportunity but also tension in an environment where Malaysia has ventured to stay neutral in the face of any adversity. Defence Minister Mohamed Khaled Nordin noted that the newly signed defence pact was a new position for both countries, citing that "Previously, we did not have a specific, formal, or structured framework, although we have long conducted joint exercises, officer exchanges, and received support from the US under its capacity-building programmes in the defence sector," confirming that there is alignment within U.S. cooperation and Malaysia's national priorities. Even without the full scope of the MOU, a positive tie has been formed regardless. Using defence as a key step to hold a level of influence is not only smart, but satisfies the South China Sea dispute on two fronts.

In actuality, Malaysia is wedged between two competing pressures; they are hedging. The country has to try and appease everyone with the limited range of flexibility they do have; a difficult feat when infighting, outfighting and external developments that challenge them not to be pawns within the limits of their own sovereignty. The interpretations of agreements and implementation fall on same lines when it comes to what is on paper, however what is being done becomes a different scope entirely. With multiple external actors exerting themselves on the country, there is very little room for mistake in what parameters they define. The difficulty is not in choosing one side, but maintaining enough strategic space that no side can claim ownership - public or not - over Malaysia's decisions.

Malaysia will have to make a decision, regardless if they publicly claim neutrality. That non-alignment will be tested and the outcome of that, depends on Malaysia itself. Whilst there is much that the country and current government have done, in light of such political strife within the world, there is always a strand of paranoia when it comes to involving the United States in affairs. Once again, even with fruitful ties to polish off a beginning, there are pressing questions about what the signing of these MOUs really uphold and how they will come into effect.

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