

Factors Affecting Malaysia-Singapore Relations During the Mahathir Era

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Abstract

The relationship between Malaysia and Singapore tends to fluctuate from time to time. At times the relation is very good but at other times it seems to be rather fragile. Some terms that have often been used to characterise the relationship are 'Siamese twins', 'sibling rivalry' and 'family quarrel', implying a complex love-hate relationship that grows out of shared common history and cultural background, coloured by political differences, economic competition and interdependency. This paper analyses some of the underlying factors that influenced Malaysia-Singapore relations during the period of Mahathir Mohamad's rule as the Prime Minister of Malaysia (1981-2003). This study suggests that the bilateral tensions between Malaysia and Singapore were affected, to a large extent, by three factors, which are the burden of historical baggage from their acrimonious parting in 1965 after unification for just two years; the differences in their perceptions and approaches in handling bilateral relations; and the differences in the political cultures and leadership styles of their prime ministers, and for the purposes of the present study those of Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew. In our view, understanding the underlying factors behind the state of bilateral relations between Malaysia and Singapore during Mahathir's era is a very important key in seeing how the seemingly deadlock in many bilateral issues can be conclusively resolved. It is hoped that analysing these factors will pave the way toward improving bilateral relations between these countries.

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Introductory Background

The relationship between Malaysia and Singapore presents a rather distinctive interstate relationship, and yet is difficult to fathom if one has not fully understood the causal factors influencing this relationship. Separated only by a kilometre long Tebrau Straits, the uniqueness of this bilateral relationship is perhaps epitomized by a variety of expressions, such as 'Siamese twins', 'sibling rivalry' and 'family quarrel.' These frequently used expressions imply a rather complex love-hate relationship in Malaysia-Singapore bilateral relations that grown out of geographical proximity, a shared common history and cultural background, coloured by political differences, economic competition and interdependency.¹

Since their brief unification under the Federation of Malaysia (hereafter the Federation) from September 1963 to August 1965 and their subsequent separation, Malaysia-Singapore bilateral relations have never been free from functional tensions and antagonisms, albeit one may notice that both countries have the inclination to adopt 'pragmatic' and 'business-like' approach, that is reflected in numerous mutually beneficial collaboration in security, economy and political spheres.²

Singapore's unceremonious ejection from the Federation marks, in the opinion of several observers, was the beginning of a new and more prolonged phase of disagreements and confrontations over many issues between the two countries.³ Throughout the long history of their constant bilateral tension in the post-independence period, the scope and volume of animosity between the two countries arguably intensified during the tenure of the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr. Mahathir Mohamed, from 1981-2003, who has been the longest serving Prime Minister to date.⁴ A myriad of tense bilateral issues either resurfaced or fresh ones emerged during his years in office. Some of these issues remain unresolved until today, and, regrettably, worsened by exaggeration and extreme comments made by certain quarters imbued with the motivations of gaining political mileage. These included: disagreements over the low price of untreated water paid by Singapore to Malaysia (3 Malaysian cents [US\$0.008] per 1000 gallons); alleged adverse environmental impact on Malaysia's territorial waters emanating from Singapore's land reclamation work; and the access of Malaysian airspace by the Republic of Singapore Air Force fighter jets for over-flight and training.⁵ Other contentious issues

¹ See, for example, the works by N. Ganesan. (1998). "Malaysia - Singapore Relations: Some Recent Developments." *Asian Affairs: An American Review*. 25(1), particularly at p. 25, and by the same author in (1991). "Factors Affecting Singapore's Foreign Policy Towards Malaysia," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*. 45(2), p. 187; and Rusdi Omar, Mas Juliana Mukhtarudin & Mohamad Ainuddin Lee Abdullah. (2005). *Hubungan Malaysia-Singapura Era Mahathir*. Sintok: Penerbit Universiti Utara Malaysia, at p. 2.

² For detailed historical analysis, key determinant and political economy of Malaysia-Singapore bilateral relations, see K. S. Nathan, (August 2002). Malaysia-Singapore Relations: Retrospect and Prospect. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*. 24(2): 385-410.

³ Chandran Jeshurun, Kamarulzaman Askandar, and Syed Yusof Syed Kechik. (January-March 2003). "Malaysia-Singapore Relations: A Case Study of Conflict-Prone Bilateral Ties." *The Southeast Asia Conflict Studies Network Bulletin*. p. 8.

⁴ For details analysis of Dr. Mahathir's leadership styles in influencing Malaysia-Singapore relations, see Chapter 6.

⁵ Rusdi Omar. (2009). "Malaysia-Singapore Relations: Issues and Strategies", in David Martin Jones and Lili Yulyadi Arnakim (eds). *Regionalism and Political Development in Southeast Asia*. Kuala Lumpur: UM. p. 93-103.

which have now been fully or partially resolved by both countries include the proposed replacement of the Johor Causeway by a suspension bridge across the Tebrau Straits; the sovereignty status of Pedra Branca Island (or in Malay, Pulau Batu Putih); and the sovereignty of Keretapi Tanah Melayu (KTM) railway line crossing Singapore's heartland.⁶ The underlying reason triggering the above-mentioned long-standing issues between Malaysia and Singapore perhaps resided on the countries' adoption of non-compromising stand when dealing with the issues concerned, inevitably worsening their already strained bilateral relations.⁷

This paper will analyse some of the underlying factors that influenced Malaysia-Singapore relations during the period of Mahathir Mohamad's rule as the Prime Minister of Malaysia (1981-2003). This study suggests that the bilateral tensions between Malaysia and Singapore were affected, to a large extent, by three factors, which are the burden of historical baggage from their acrimonious parting in 1965 after unification for just two years; the differences in their perceptions and approaches in handling bilateral relations; and the differences in the political cultures and leadership styles of their prime ministers. The discussion on these factors will be highlighted after the theoretical/conceptual framework's subtitle.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Before elaborating theories that will be used in this research, it is important to see the nature of tensions between Malaysia and Singapore. Tensions that often took place between the two countries relate to economic resources and management of borders but do not involve military conflicts and tensions. Both states have tacit commitment and developed a mutual understanding to negotiate the disputes in peaceful ways. Despite this general understanding, however, the solution of the disputes seemed to be complicated since they were not only related to technical issues but also to history, style of leadership and culture in these two states.

Given the above nature of relationship, which on the one hand has elements of conflict but on the other hand contains continuity and mutual interests, liberal perspective in international relations is the most relevant perspective compared to other perspectives such as realist. Disputes between both states have been resolved by negotiations although they may take a long time. In liberal international theory, the negotiations attempt to achieve a win-win situation for both parties. This happened in the case of Malaysia-Singapore relationship.

The negotiations are made possible if there have been mutual understanding between states. In the context of Malaysia-Singapore relations, similarity of domestic political regime types has contributed to the mutual understanding between two countries. In liberal perspective, similarities in political system and regimes, such as being explained in the 'democratic peace theory', can bring peace or at least no war among countries that adopt the system. Similar political regimes also relate to a development of similar political cultures. We need to use also this 'political culture theory' to

⁶ Detailed discussion of above-mentioned issues can be found in Chapter 3.

⁷ K. S. Nathan. (2010). "Malaysia-Singapore Relations: A Bilateral Relationship Defying ASEAN-Style Multilateralist Approaches to Conflict Resolution," in N. Ganesan and Ramses Amer (eds). *International Relations in Southeast Asia: Between Bilateralism and Multilateralism*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. pp. 263-281.

explain the development of mutual understanding between Malaysia and Singapore in solving their disputes. In addition to this, 'interdependency theory' can help explain why the conflicts between two countries did not escalate to war.

The Burden of Historical Baggage Following the Separation

History operates to provide perspective, continuity, and appreciation of past trends that condition current thinking, performance, and future behaviour. Indeed, it is this historical factor that binds these two nations together, and yet injects differential approaches to problem-solving within a national as well as regional context. But, the rows between Malaysia and Singapore have never been allowed to escalate into violence by both sides. Wide-ranging economic, political and social ties continue to develop between the two countries. Nonetheless, the bilateral relationship continues to be encumbered by the inability of Malaysia and Singapore to set aside mutual mistrust and misgiving, which is largely due to the burden of historical baggage of their separation. This is an important crosscutting factor that acts to frame and intensify ethnic, geopolitical, economic and other sources of conflict between Malaysia and Singapore.

Mutual mistrust derived from the ordeal of separation continues to linger in the consciousness of many Malaysians and Singaporeans. This mistrust continues to linger despite leadership and generational change, and the development of significant bilateral economic and social linkages, because both sides have tended to use the traumatic history of separation for nation-building or regime consolidation. Moreover, the lingering mistrust between Malaysia and Singapore from the merger and separation period was politicised in contemporary times especially during the Mahathir era by politicians, media and community leaders from the both countries. They use these events for tackling present-day problems.

Malaysia-Singapore relations are as equal as Malay-Chinese relations. Thus, the burden of historical baggage after the separation of Singapore from Malaysia is one of the main factors in influencing the state of Malaysia-Singapore relations. The ordeal of disengagement continues to influence the present-day Malaysia-Singapore relationship. As Chan Heng Chee noted, bilateral relations are still very much encumbered "by the bitterness of historical past borne out of merger and separation".⁸ Lee Kuan Yew continues to remember how he was treated while Singapore was in Malaysia, whilst Mahathir always views Singapore as a troublemaker. On several occasions in the 1990s and 2000s, Lee Kuan Yew would remark that separation was one of the "saddest moments" in his life. Clearly, Lee Kuan Yew cannot forget it and he still feel aggrieved. Hence, the older generations of both countries still remember these events because the former leaders, Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew have put their differences into the public domain. It influenced them in making decisions when they were dealing with the issues between the two countries.

The historical baggage that was seen as the barrier in the relations between the two countries will still linger for as long as the leaders that were in power during and after the period of separation are still alive and politically active. These leaders will still

⁸ Chan Heng Chee. (1992). Singapore 1991: Dealing With a Post-Cold War World. *Singapore: The Year in Review 1991*. Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies. p. 9.

continue to evoke the memories and the bitter after taste of separation to influence the governments of both sides in their dealing with the other party. This phenomenon is however slowly eroding. Mahathir is now retired though still active politically but his obsession is more focused towards domestic politics. Lee Kuan Yew is also retired and in the past has rarely made any controversial political statements that would undermine the relations between the two countries. On the other hand, the younger generations on both sides the causeway has already accepted that Malaysia and Singapore are two separate nations with different political agendas. Due to their geographical proximity and economic interdependency need each other. Some of the earlier political and economic rivalries were rather trivial but could not be resolved due to the pressure of this unnecessary baggage. The way forward for the two nations in order to move ahead is foster stronger bilateral relations that would benefit both countries based on pragmatic consideration taking into account that both countries can mutually benefit from each other's strength.

Handling Bilateral Relations: Differences in Perceptions and Approaches

In discussions on matters relating to resolving bilateral disputes between the two countries, there exists a marked difference in the manner both sides see how the problems ought to be resolved. Malaysia appears to be seeing the issues from the diplomatic perspective whilst Singapore, perhaps influenced by their pragmatic outlook is more inclined to be more legalistic in dealing with similar issues.

Despite the rather strained relations, both Malaysia and Singapore were acutely aware of the mutual importance of each other and continually look for ways and means to improve relations between the two countries. The differences of opinions are likely to continue for as long as both countries continue to adopt differing approaches in dealing with bilateral issues. In this respect, it might be a good idea for Malaysia to adopt the legalistic approach taken by Singapore, where the governing principles were more clearly defined and the issues can be dealt with devoid of emotional influence.

It also could be argued that Malaysia should be more willing to compromise in its dealing with Singapore regarding the resolution of outstanding bilateral issues. It should however be implemented based on the principles that would lead to a 'win-win situation' and adhering to the rules of international law. Singapore's well-being was important to Malaysia, as Singapore was one of its largest trading partners. The establishment of good relations with Singapore was therefore economically vital to Malaysia. The 'win-win situation' could only be achieved if both parties were willing to accept the fact that the key to solving the outstanding bilateral issues was their willingness to compromise. Malaysia would argue that this was something that has been commonly practiced by Malaysia and therefore an act that was not difficult to get into. Singapore, on the other hand, was begun to realize its economic and social vulnerability. It was aware of the importance of regional goodwill and cooperation in combating issues such as the recent outbreak of SARS. The realisation by both nations that compromise was the key to better relations could eventually lead to its adoption and therefore better relations.

To date, numerous bilateral issues have not been resolved by the two countries. If this was to be seen as an indicator of the state of relations between the two countries, then much was to be desired. However, seen from the broader overall perspective of the

bilateral relations, one would agree that the states of relations were still good, though there was plenty of room for improvement. Unlike the period immediately after the separation, the leaders of both countries no longer carry the political baggage that makes it difficult for outstanding bilateral issues to be dealt with in an unemotional manner. The leaders of both countries were known to have good personal relations between them. This was a very positive factor and should be further strengthened to facilitate a better state of official relations. Similar efforts must also be made to ensure that the same state of relations exists between the civil servants of both countries. Both countries were acutely aware of this and realise that economically, socially and politically both countries were mutually dependant of each other.

Political Culture and the Leadership Styles of Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew

Political culture and idiosyncratic factors of ruling elites have a strong influence in determining the foreign policy direction of a country and how foreign policy issues are approached by those particular nations. We believe that the emergence of two separate political cultures in Malaysia and Singapore have strengthened dominant and significant roles of elites in the bilateral relations between the two countries. The political culture during the period Singapore was in Malaysia revolved around the issue of the Malay-Chinese political rivalry and the quest by Lee Kuan Yew's party to seek equal rights for ethnic Chinese in Malaysia. The relations between Malaysia and Singapore during the period after the separation continued to be influenced by this culture with Singapore seen as a Chinese dominated nation and Malaysia as Malay dominated nation. The rivalry between the two countries continued to be along ethnic lines. Over the decades, Malaysia and Singapore have grown into two separate nations with two distinct political cultures. With the fading of the older generation leaders and the emergence of new generation leaders the political baggage that bogged down the relations between the two countries began to diminish. The trend is going to continue and this augurs well for both countries.

The above issues have come up and become contexts of many statements made by leaders of both states. Leaders, as social actors, also play an important part in determining the direction of conflict. Singaporean leaders, Goh Chok Tong and Lee Hsien Loong are widely perceived as merely continuing Lee Kuan Yew's policies, and as such there will not be major changes in the direction of Singapore's foreign policy towards Malaysia. Meanwhile Malaysia's foreign policy has been redirected to suit the priorities of the current leaders. Tunku Abdul Rahman was understanding and sympathetic towards Singapore. Tun Abdul Razak was more aggressive, while Tun Hussein Onn was just continuing the prevailing policies of the time. The biggest paradigm shift in Malaysia-Singapore relations could be seen during the tenure of Dr. Mahathir. His vision 2020 policy was more challenging to Singapore than other neighbouring countries.

In the case of Malaysia and Singapore, the leadership styles of Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew have been a strong influence in the bilateral issues between the two countries. Both leaders were aggressive in dealing with the issues. Both were also influenced by their past experience and the pre and post separation political baggage. Mahathir's view towards Singapore may have been coloured by his experience as a medical student in Singapore whilst Lee Kuan Yew's views towards Malaysia were mainly coloured by his involvement in Malaysian politics during the short period

Singapore was in the Malaysian Federation and relations with Malaysia during the period immediately after the separation.

Beside these underlying factors which affected this relations and although having the outstanding issues, both countries will be able to remain friendly and cordial. According to *Democratic Peace Theory*, this states that democratic countries do not go to war with other democratic countries. According to this theory, democratic countries would refrain from using force against each other, because they are accountable to their citizens. In the context of Malaysia-Singapore relations, both countries do not go to war because they are democratic countries and prefers to resolve the outstanding issues either through diplomacy talks or the third parties involvement.

In case of bilateral relations between Malaysia and Singapore, although these two states do not implement complete aspects of liberal democracy such as full freedom of speech and freedom to form organizations, they also do not use military force to settle their problems. They use dialogs and other peaceful measures to negotiate their bilateral issues. Therefore, despite the many bilateral issues that have surfaced in the course of Malaysia and Singapore relations, armed conflict is very unlikely to be a possibility, and certainly not when both countries are practising democratic forms of governance.

Given this situation, we need to search for additional factors to explain the no war situation between Malaysia and Singapore. As in many newly independent countries, the role of leadership is one factor that can bring a country to be a war-prone or peace-prone state. The new regimes of leadership will play important roles in fostering the relationship of both countries in relation to democratic peacekeeping. If Malaysia and Singapore did become engaged in a full scale war, we would have to discount the popular argument that democracies are not likely to go into war against each other, given the fact that both Malaysia and Singapore are governed on democratic principles. It may be argued that the apparent flaws in their brands of democratic system of government would be given as the reasons. However, both governments are led by rational and pragmatic leaders who understand the extent of the negative consequences of war to both countries, and therefore this worst-case situation is not possible.

In connection with improving Malaysia-Singapore relationship, economic interdependence is very significant for both countries in terms of their development process. With the importance of Singapore as a centre of commerce for most of Southeast Asia region, and in particular Malaysia, has much to gain in terms of trade and commerce. Similarly, Singapore, because of its own lack economic resources, will look towards Malaysia for its economic needs, such as investment in Malaysia, water and labour supplies etcetera. Such economic interdependence has long been recognized as important by both states as being important, and is arguably a reason that trade and investment between them remained substantial for several decades. The volume of bilateral trade between them has increased remarkably over the years. As it stands today, Singapore and Malaysia have somewhat established themselves as largest trading partners in ASEAN.

Conclusion

Malaysia and Singapore have a complex and uneasy relationship. Common sources of tension between proximate countries, such as economic rivalry and military insecurity, are not sufficient to explain the 'love-hate' relationship between Malaysia and Singapore. This research examined the deep-seated underlying factors that significantly have contributed to the current state of relations between these two countries. In our view, understanding the underlying factors that formed the state of bilateral relations, between Malaysia and Singapore, during Mahathir's era, is the key to seeing how the apparent deadlock in the many bilateral issues can be resolved. It is hoped that by analysing these factors, it may show ways to improve bilateral relations between the two countries.

In this research, we have shown some underlying factors that influence Malaysia and Singapore relationships. The first factor is the burden of historical baggage following the separation. Relations between Malaysia and Singapore are very fragile and are very much influenced by their historical backgrounds. Old problems continue to exist, often appearing in a more delicate manner and later compounded by a host of new issues and associated problems which compete for the attention of both countries leaders and the public. Moreover, the politicization of history, the rekindling of the past for contemporary political goals, has had the effect of reopening old wounds and imbuing a younger generation of Malaysians and Singaporeans with the prejudices and resentments of their ancestors. After 48 years of separate and independent existence, and regardless of the growth of extensive political and economic linkages, there is still a great deal of mistrust and resentment in both countries arising from the experience of separation. Many of the grievances accruing from the disengagement of August 1965 continue to ruin bilateral relations.

Related to the first factor, the second factor is the countries' perceptions of each other. All along, the bilateral relations have always been based on suspicion and distrust. This was clearly seen when Singapore in searching for her own identity had to rely greatly on the West for security purposes, allowing its military bases to be used by the British and US. Malaysia viewed this as an unfriendly act towards a friendly nation. Although the relationship between the two nations is special, conflicts arise from how the two states, through their political leaders, interpret the action of the other party. To what extent this mutual suspicion and mutual distrust between the two sides will be sustained in the future is uncertain.

The third factor that often disturb the relations of these two countries is the tendency for the countries, when dealing with issues affecting each other, to approach the problems at two distinctively negotiation approaches. From Singapore's standpoint, the relationship should be based on mutual respect, mutual benefit, and adherence to international law and agreements. Singapore will continue to seek new areas of cooperation to strengthen bilateral relations with Malaysia even further. From Malaysia's side, the relationship must be based on a 'win-win' situation approach, which means both countries will benefit from that relationship. In other words, Malaysia is more inclined to take the view that Singapore opts for a rather over-legalistic approach that conveys the impression that the city state is insensitive to the cultural milieu in which it finds itself. Malaysia tends to view such an approach as antagonistic and confrontational, and not in keeping with the general consensual

approach based on musyawarah (deliberation) and muafakat (consensus). Singapore, on the other hand, prefers to hold steadfastly to formal commitments that have issued from negotiations as its own survival and prosperity are firmly based on strategic planning to fulfil the aspirations of its citizenry and to remain competitive internationally.

The fourth and last factor that we saw as influential in influencing relations of both states is political cultures and the style of leadership of political leaders particularly with respect to Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew. It is during Mahathir as Malaysian Prime Minister the unsettled issues between both states became significant. During previous Prime Ministers, the longstanding issues such as water disputes and Malaysian railways had been there but were rarely seriously debated. Only after Mahathir took over the power, he started to renegotiate the issues. His style of leadership which was more direct and outspoken than previous Prime Ministers and his nationalistic character contribute to his efforts to resolve the longstanding issues between the two states. These attitudes had made public aware of the unresolved issues and pushed negotiations to take place. Statements made by Mahathir regarding Singapore's attitudes to the issues had often created uneasiness of relations with Singapore.

Despite the above problems, however, both countries have attempted to solve their conflict by peaceful measures such as negotiation. It is the trust of the study to also examine why this is so. This is, in particular, due to the closeness of both countries historically, politically and economically. History may cause problem but history also ties Malaysia and Singapore. On the one hand, it is clear that the history has been mentioned as barrier to develop relations because this may create suspicion and anger. However, on the other hand, they have to deal with the reality that they are two neighbours and need to overcome the politicization of history that may trap them in situation where they cannot cooperate. They learn from bad experiences in the past to mend the relationship.

Both countries also have rather similar approaches in political system and economic development which bring the countries to the same perceptions on how to deal with political and economic issues. These same perceptions make the leaders of both countries easier to deal one another. Both Malaysia and Singapore know the importance of political stability and their relationship towards the development and progress of their respective countries. Both countries realised that they are interdependent in terms of economic, security and social aspects. For example, in terms of the economic aspect, most Malaysians know Singapore is one of the biggest investors in Malaysia and vice versa. Furthermore, more than half of all visitor arrivals in Malaysia originate from Singapore. Singaporeans find Malaysia an attractive place to visit because of their shopping facilities, attractive holiday destinations and good food. It appears that the leaderships in Malaysia and Singapore have seen the benefit of cooperation and mutual understanding between them in economic, security and social aspects in order to realize their potential.

The tensions may continue to take place in relations between the two countries since there are still many unresolved issues between the two countries. There has been feeling in Malaysia that they always get disadvantaged when dealing with Singapore. This feeling casts a shadow over every administration in Malaysia when handling

negotiations with Singapore. As far as this research is concerned, Mahathir had attempted to overcome this feeling by outspokenly stating Malaysia's position. His position and policy became the trigger to keep renegotiating the longstanding issues and he successfully represented the people's concerns. Malaysian leaders after him also have to face similar issues of how to deal with Singapore in a way that can overcome this disadvantaged feeling so that Malaysia can at least get equal benefit like Singapore.

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