**Talking Point**

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**Mahathir visits China**

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad visits China and calls on the Chinese leadership to help with his country’s fiscal problems. The 93-year-old Malaysian leader believes that China will be sympathetic and understanding towards his country’s situation where government debt is said to have reached RM1 trillion under the management of the previous Prime Minister Najib Razak.

Although Mahathir has questioned some of the biggest Chinese projects in Malaysia, such as the Malacca Gateway and the East Coast Railway Line (ECRL), overall Mahathir still wants to keep Sino-Malaysian ties in good shape and attract more high-end investment from China. Separately, he visited Chinese entrepreneur Jack Ma’s home city of Hangzhou where the headquarters of Alibaba is and reiterated his desire to enlist Ma’s help in developing the Malaysian economy. In addition, Mahathir has encouraged Malaysian businessmen to partner with Chinese companies and invited Chinese companies to invest in his country. On 18 August, Proton and Geely have signed an agreement to set up a joint venture that will pave the way for Proton to assemble and market its cars in China. The biggest highlight of Mahathir’s visit was the negotiations over the ECRL.

In retrospect, Sino-Malaysian ties go back a long way and were already developing rapidly during Mahathir’s tenure as fourth prime minister. These ties deepened under Mahathir’s successors, Abdullah Badawi and Najib Razak. However, Mahathir took issue with some of the biggest Chinese-funded infrastructural projects signed under Najib, questioning its hefty costs and whether those costs will land Malaysia in the “debt trap” faced by Sri Lanka. Mahathir is not against Chinese investments in general, only those that do not offer clear and immediate benefits to Malaysia. He still welcomes Chinese assistance in improving Malaysia’s economy and fiscal situation.

The contradiction is in Mahathir’s blocking of some of the biggest Chinese-backed projects in Malaysia while requesting for China’s help. Notably, Mahathir is not questioning Chinese projects in general as he has also questioned the High Speed Railway (HSR) project with Singapore. The past five decades of Mahathir’s participation in Malaysian politics and his promotion of Asian values when he was the fourth prime minister could shed light on the motivations behind.

Since 1964, Mahathir has consistently defended Malay supremacy in Malaysia, and his views are shared by many Malaysian leaders and Malays in the country who are wary of Chinese dominance in the local economy. This fear remains in Malaysia today. Mahathir is wary and critical of the West, partly influenced by his experience as a colonial subject in British Malaya and the anti-colonial sentiments of his generation. In this visit to China, Mahathir has even warned against the development of Chinese investment into new colonialism.
During his time as the fourth prime minister, Mahathir had actively promoted “Asian values” as an alternative to western values and pushed for an Asian-centric architecture in the region, such as the East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC). All these have influenced Mahathir’s desire to revive the “Look East” approach, first brought up in the 1980s with Japan as the role model. However, a revived “Look East” approach today may also include China and South Korea as economic role models.

From China’s point of view, Malaysia strategically important as it is right next to the chokepoint Malacca Straits where more than half of China’s oil supply, apart from trade cargo, passes through. Malaysia is also a claimant state in the South China Sea territorial disputes.

As a seasoned and shrewd politician, Mahathir is charting Malaysia down the middle road between all the big powers. He has told China that he supports free trade, as long it is fair. Mahathir does not want take sides in the US-China trade war and has also expressed support for China’s Belt and Road Initiative.

Mahathir is already 93 years old and has indicated that he may only stay on for a couple of years. The long-term trajectory of Sino-Malaysian ties will depend on Mahathir’s succession plans and the dynamics within his own coalition, the Pakatan Harapan.