

Event Report

**New Malaysia and its Foreign Policy:  
A Rising Star in a Dynamic Region**

EIAS Briefing Seminar

*31 October 2018*

The return to power of president Mahathir Mohamed earlier this year has been widely understood as a positive sign for both the national and foreign affairs of Malaysia. The new administration's term "*New Malaysia*", has been described as a subtle balancing between the maintenance of traditional values and the establishments of new policies and plans of action. With the motto "*a friend to all and enemy of none*", New Malaysia is hoping that its commitment to neutrality, non-alliance and mutual respects would lead to sustainability and prosperity. This principle is clearly perceived in Malaysia's relations with other regions including the Arab world, China and the EU, etc. Challenges however, inevitably remained, with the matter of the South China Sea, the palm oil issue and the Islamophobia in Europe remaining concerns. With an eye to the future, we may believe that Malaysia's foreign policy will make more auspicious progresses in this increasingly globalized world as it pursues its path towards sustainable peace and prosperity.

### ***Welcoming speech by***

#### ***Mr Axel Goethals, CEO, European Institute for Asian Studies***

Mr Goethals opened the event by complimenting the various potentials and perspectives of Malaysia. Thanks to the recent return-to-office of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed, a new and promising foreign policy has been put in place which is sure to have both a regional and international impact. Under Mahathir Mohamed, Malaysia claimed to maintain its principled neutrality approach in the field of foreign policy, by which the country expressed its will to maintain friendships with other nations, regardless of their political situations. Furthermore, the bilateral relationship between Malaysia and the EU has experienced flourishing development. In 2017, the EU was the third largest trading partner of Malaysia while the country was the EU's second greatest trading partner in Southeast Asia. Additionally, the cooperation between the two sides can be clearly noticed in other matters relating to well-being, human rights, and sustainable development.

When it comes to cultural and economic areas, Malaysia has been well known for its diversity of ethnicity, religion and culture. The country was also praised for its robust economy, with palm oil industry serving as one of the strongest driving forces in the export sector. In 2017, Malaysia was considered by the World Bank as one of the world's most open economies.

### ***Keynote Address by***

#### ***H.E. Dato' Saifuddin Abdullah, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia***

H.E. Dato' Saifuddin Abdullah began his speech by mentioning the most recent Malaysian General Election which took place on 9 May 2018. The election, which resulted in the comeback of the former Prime Minister of Malaysia Mahathir Mohamed, has spread a wave of optimism over the country. He stated that the recently-coined term "*New Malaysia*" was not simply about the change in the appearance of the country. It also refers to the "*new philosophy*" which concerns the principles of fairness, good governance, integrity and rule of law. "*New Malaysia*", he added, meant a more substantive and inclusive Malaysia which was to ensure that "*Malaysian citizens can enjoy equitable shares on the prosperity and wealth of the nation [and that] the gaps between East and West Malaysia as well as between social classes will be narrowed*". In addition to this, he stated that there is a need for reforms of the national agenda and some amendments of national policies. Amongst these were the abolishment of capital punishment and the establishment of laws against fake news.

When it comes to foreign policy, Malaysia follows the fundamental principle of neutrality, non-alliance, and mutual respect in cooperation and partnership with all states. This principle, according to the Minister, functions in support of Malaysia's stability and prosperity by emphasizing such issues as justice, human rights, accountability, sustainability and multiculturalism, etc. He stressed that the expression "*New Malaysia*" demonstrates the balance and continuity between previous and present policies, and the new approaches to foreign affairs. The ties between Malaysia and the Arab world are strong, with occasional visits paid from either side. The Minister also shared that Malaysia maintained its neutral stance concerning the South China Sea, stressing that the sea should be left "*non-militarized*" and remain unclaimed by any state. He also added that tensions would hopefully be alleviated due to ASEAN's work with China to establish further channels for constructive negotiation.

The Minister continued the speech by briefly speaking about the relationship between Malaysia and the EU as well as between ASEAN and the EU. From his point of view, policies between the EU, Malaysia and ASEAN must be developed in a more constructive manner in order to foster greater understanding between the two regions. He argued that this would also help to work towards combating terrorism and cyber-war, preventing Islamophobia in Europe, and promoting religious freedoms and human rights. Finally, he ended his presentation by sharing his opinion on the issue of the palm oil industry which is believed to be the greatest barrier to the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Malaysia and the EU. While negotiations on the FTA are still in progress, the signing of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) is expected to take place in January 2019.

## **Q&A**

When it comes to the question of how the Malaysian government makes sure that refugees could seek asylums and protection, the Minister outlined four main points that Malaysia, with the cooperation with ASEAN, has been dealing with. These include: more investment in humanitarian aid; more focus on raising funds for education migrant children; and paying more attention to the issue of migrant work permits to ensure them legal jobs. In addition, there must be "*an ASEAN project*" in which ASEAN member states should play a more proactive role in guaranteeing a higher level of security for migrants.

Having been asked about the issue of racial discrimination in the country, the Minister mentioned the controversy of Article 153 of the Constitution of Malaysia, which was believed to favour the Bumiputera over other ethnic groups. According to the Minister, thus understanding of Article 153 is not well founded due to the fact that the Bumiputera benefit

from affirmative action policies in only a few social areas. He also stressed the importance of the "*politics of race*" which has been embedded in society in diverse ways. In his opinion the amendment of Article 153 should be discouraged; however, changes should take place in relation to other laws and regulations in order to ease the tension and misinterpretation.

Finally, in response to a question about his expectations after the ASEM meeting taking place in October in Brussels, the Minister restated his concern about the issue of palm oil. Furthermore, he emphasized the importance of inter-religious dialogues in order to foster greater understanding about religions and peace, and above all, to ease the severity of Islamophobia and to combat terrorism in Europe. He acknowledged the fact that a number of Muslims still use their religion as an excuse for violating human rights. Thus, he encouraged taking tougher measures with these communities in order to improve people's awareness of the relationship between Islam and human rights. He also suggested that there should be a platform where politicians and officials could discuss problems relating to human rights. The Minister then concluded by expressing his optimism for the rule of law and democracy, which he hoped would bring out a brighter future for Malaysian citizens.

*Report prepared by Ngoc Diep Tran*

