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## 'MAHATHIR DOCTRINE' KEEPS SOUTH CHINA SEA PEACEFUL

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OF late, much has been said by commentators and in policy circles about a Mahathir Doctrine. But does such a doctrine exist? If it does, how would it ensure that the South China Sea does not become a theatre of conflict?

It was in mid-2018 that Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad mooted deploying small patrol boats to keep the peace in the South China Sea, and ensure that the entire area is free of warships. This view has subsequently been echoed at various intervals by the defence minister and the foreign affairs minister.

Dr Mahathir had reasoned that the warships, by their very nature, are a precursor to war; therefore, what is needed are small boats equipped to keep the seas safe and free from pirates. While pirates may not be the only subject of concern, one may surmise that in the mind of the prime minister, adequately equipped small patrol boats would be sufficient to address an array of non-traditional security issues. Many of these issues would be non-military in nature yet transnational in scope and reach; warranting countries to work together to address common concerns in the South China Sea.

The above outlook certainly signals a more assertive stance. The views do not depart from the long-held position of Malaysia – indeed also by Dr Mahathir himself in earlier days – that, fundamentally, what is required in the South China Sea is stability, peace and prosperity; arguably, in that order.

So, in what way can the Mahathir Doctrine help ensure that the South China Sea does not become a theatre of conflict? To answer this, one should first scrutinise relevant aspects of the statement made by Dr Mahathir at the 73rd session of the United Nations General Assembly, and juxtapose them with some of his long-held views concerning the South China Sea. Modalities may then be identified and employed to translate words into action.

A number of principles highlighted by Dr Mahathir in the statement reignited a long-standing position of Malaysia on an array of issues: first, that Malaysia remains neutral and non-aligned; second, that Malaysia seeks mutual respect for mutual gain in any cooperative endeavour; third, the importance of the prosper-thy-neighbour philosophy, its meaning elaborated by him in a speech delivered in 1998 at the 4th Pacific Dialogue when Malaysia was soldiering on amidst a period of bad economic performance by countries on the Pacific western rim; and fourth, a formula for reforming the Security Council.

Dr Mahathir has long advocated a more equitable outlook on Security Council decisions. All said, the Mahathir Doctrine may thus be described as a refined and more direct and assertive statement of the long-standing principles upheld by Malaysia on matters impacting the international community, that is, as fairness and fair play through the rule of law in pursuit of peace, progress, and prosperity, with Asean playing a central role on matters concerning Southeast Asia.

The Mahathir Doctrine as described above does have the ingredients to ensure the South China Sea does not become a theatre of conflict, and exhibits a more refined and assertive outlook on matters Malaysia has championed since independence. There is continuity in its position on non-alignment, but there appears also to be a discernible change in the approach.

In short, the way forward, as I see it, is a contextualised adaptation of a combination of the following: an agreement reached in the Caspian Sea 1 (a landmark agreement signed between the Caspian Sea states of Russia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to manage the ownership of the Caspian Sea and its surrounding areas); the Ilulissat Declaration concerning the Arctic region (an agreement signed in May 2008 by coastal states bordering the Arctic Ocean to maintain the Arctic as a low-tension region, where disputes are resolved peacefully); the 1992 Asean Declaration on the South China Sea (adopted in Manila to, among others, promote peace and stability in the region); and principles from the Malaysia-Brunei commercial bilateral negotiation which saw both countries resolving their overlapping maritime claims.

<https://www.nst.com.my/opinion/columnists/2019/05/485931/mahathir-doctrine-keeps-south-china-sea-peaceful>

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