

# Malaysian prime minister forges closer military ties with China

Peter Symonds  
3 November 2016

In his visit this week to China, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak sealed a raft of agreements, including one on naval cooperation between the two countries, and used the opportunity to lash out at former colonial powers. Before his departure for Beijing, Najib declared himself to be “a true friend” of China, determined to take the two countries’ relations to “new heights.”

Writing in an editorial in the state-run *China Daily* on Tuesday, Najib said larger countries should treat smaller ones fairly. “This includes former colonial powers. It is not for them to lecture countries they once exploited on how to conduct their internal affairs today,” he stated. The remarks are clearly directed at the US and its European allies in particular, and mark a significant shift on the part of Najib toward Beijing.

President Barack Obama has carefully cultivated Najib as part of Washington’s “pivot to Asia” directed against China. Obama visited Malaysia in 2014, the first official trip by a US president since 1966, and again last November, to strengthen strategic and military ties. Obama has deliberately ignored both Najib’s repressive measures against political opponents and the rigged 2013 election that enabled his government to retain office.

In July, however, the US Justice Department launched a civil action to recover \$1 billion in funds that were looted from Malaysia’s state-owned investment fund, 1 Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB). This implied corruption by Najib—referred to in documents as “Malaysian Official 1.” The US case has compounded the political crisis surrounding Najib, who is under siege over the allegations.

By contrast, Beijing provided a significant boost to Najib last November when the state-owned China Nuclear Power Group announced a \$2.3 billion

purchase of 1MDB’s power assets, thus significantly relieving its heavy debt burdens.

In the *China Daily*, Najib signalled a shift in relation to Malaysia’s territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. “When it comes to the South China Sea,” he said, “we firmly believe that overlapping territorial and maritime disputes should be managed calmly and rationally through dialogue, in accordance with the rule of law and peaceful negotiations.”

Najib made no mention of July’s Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling in The Hague in favour of a US-backed Philippine legal challenge to Chinese maritime claims in the disputed waters. Malaysia has previously protested against Chinese incursions into what it regards as its territory, including by Chinese naval vessels in waters near the James Shoal in January last year.

Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin said on Tuesday that Malaysia had pledged to handle territorial disputes with China bilaterally. This is a significant concession to Beijing, which has always insisted on bilateral dialogue over the South China Sea, and objected to disputes being discussed in multinational forums such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summits—as the US and its allies have pressed for.

Najib met with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang on Tuesday and the two oversaw the signing of agreements worth a total of \$34.25 billion, including a memorandum of understanding on defence cooperation. Vice Foreign Minister Liu said: “We haven’t touched upon the details of our cooperation. Mostly we are focussing on naval cooperation.”

As part of the naval cooperation, Malaysia has agreed to buy four Chinese naval vessels, two of which will be built in Malaysia and two in China. The deal is the first

major purchase of Chinese arms by Malaysia, which has bought its armaments in the past largely from the US and Russia.

Other agreements included the building of a high-speed rail link between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, which is part of Beijing's massive One Belt, One Road plan to integrate the Eurasian landmass, including South East Asia, more closely via land and sea.

Undoubtedly Najib is engaged in a balancing act amid rising rivalry between the United States and China but his shift toward Beijing is a blow to Washington's efforts to ramp up pressure on China. Najib's visit comes in the wake of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's trip last month to Beijing, where he signed \$13.5 billion in deals and declared his country's "separation" from the US.

Reflecting concerns in Washington, Euan Graham, an analyst with the Sydney-based Lowy Institute, told the *Financial Times*: "Now Malaysia seems like a wobbly domino. It lends itself to the pessimistic reading that there is a broader accommodation with China across South East Asia."

Duterte, who has been far more strident in his anti-American posturing, has called for an end to joint US-Philippine military exercises and the withdrawal of American forces from the southern Philippine island of Mindanao.

The forging of closer defence ties between China might call into question Malaysia's military cooperation with the US. This has included permitting US Navy P-8A Poseidon aircraft to take off from Malaysian bases for surveillance operations over the South China Sea.

More broadly, the tilt by Manila and Kuala Lumpur toward Beijing has blunted US plans to escalate its confrontation with China over the South China Sea following the ruling in The Hague, and compounded concerns in the US and the region over the future of the "pivot."

The visits by Duterte and Najib occurred amid the intense uncertainty surrounding the American presidential elections and thus the future of US foreign policy. The opposition of both presidential candidates to the Trans-Pacific Partnership—the economic linchpin of the "pivot"—has called Washington's commitment to Asia into question.

The US, however, is not about to sit idly by while

China extends its influence. Just as the American press is ratcheting up its "exposure" of Duterte's brutal anti-drug war, which has already claimed the lives of more than 4,000 alleged drug dealers, the US will undoubtedly begin to highlight the "human rights" abuses and corruption of the Malaysian government, in order to put pressure on Najib to change his orientation to Beijing.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**