



**AALBORG
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Embracing the Dragon's
Sphere? Malaysia's Diplomatic
Identity and Engagement with
China in the U.S.–China Rivalry

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Abstract

This thesis examines how Malaysia's foreign policy identity shapes its diplomatic engagement with China amidst the intensifying U.S.–China rivalry. It applies Constructivism and International Cooperation Theory (ICT) from a constructivist lens to understand Malaysia's identity-driven diplomacy and the cooperative mechanisms that maintain Malaysia–China relations. Utilizing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study analyzes political speeches, interviews, and official statements from Malaysia, China, and the United States between 2023 and 2025. The findings demonstrate that Malaysia's diplomatic behavior is not solely motivated by material interests or strategic hedging but is shaped by a constructed identity grounded in principles and values of Global South solidarity, non-alignment, and ASEAN norms. Furthermore, Malaysia's participation in initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and BRICS reflects cooperation mechanisms based on reciprocity, iteration, international regimes, and asymmetrical engagement. The thesis also explores how Malaysia's diplomatic identity and positioning is perceived externally, revealing that China views Malaysia as a reliable partner while U.S. perspectives remain more cautious and strategic. These findings contribute a deeper understanding of small non-Western state diplomacy, identity construction, and alternative cooperation pathways beyond binary alignment in global rivalries.

Keywords: Malaysia foreign policy, U.S.–China rivalry, Constructivism, International Cooperation Theory, Critical Discourse Analysis, Global South, ASEAN diplomacy, Belt and Road Initiative, BRICS

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Introduction

“I make very clear we are very strong relations in our relations with China. I do not subscribe to this Sinophobia.”

These words, spoken by the Prime Minister of Malaysia Anwar Ibrahim, reflect an assertive foreign policy identity that has becoming more visible in Malaysia’s diplomatic discourse in the intensifying U.S.-China rivalry. This statement signals Malaysia’s intention to maintain a balanced relations with both China and the U.S., while also giving signals to reject the Western narrative to portray China as a potential threat or adversary. Anwar’s remarks on the rivalry show a stronger focus on Malaysia’s identity, rooted in non-alignment, Global South Solidarity, and willingness to work with both sides. Anwar’s identity driven diplomacy builds on similar narratives from past leaders like Mahathir, but with a stronger consistency in rejecting U.S. pressure to isolate China. However, compared to other past leaders, Anwar has been more consistent on asserting Malaysia’s identity in rejecting Western pressure to label China as a threat (Ngeow, 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025).

The U.S.-China rivalry has shaped international politics since 2018, beginning with a trade war that later expanded into competition over critical technologies like the semiconductor and 5G network, military influence in contested regions in South China Sea, and attempts to shape the international order through forming alliances and alternative visions for global governance. In the rivalry, Southeast Asia has become a key theatre due to its geographic proximity to China, and strategic importance of the importance of the Malacca Strait in global shipping supply chains. The event like the U.S.-China rivalry has forced smaller states like Malaysia to navigate competing pressures while attempting to preserve their autonomy and wide diplomatic choices (Chin, 2023).

Under Anwar’s administration (2022-present), Malaysia has deepened its political and economic cooperation with China, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and its application for BRICS membership in 2024 but accepted as a partner state status (Krishnan, 2024). At the same time, Malaysia under Anwar’s administration have also continued its strategic engagement with the United States, particularly in the semiconductor industry, security cooperation, and regional economic frameworks like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). In the first

half of 2025, the U.S.-China rivalry escalated further with the return of President Donald Trump. His administration imposed renewed tariff on Chinese exports, along with broad tariffs targeting most countries, including its regional key partners like Malaysia (The White House, 2025). In April 2025, Chinese President Xi Jinping launched a Southeast Asia tour, with official visits to Malaysia, Vietnam, and Cambodia. In Kuala Lumpur, both Xi and Anwar had reaffirmed their commitment to “high-level strategic cooperation”, rejecting hegemonism, unilateralism and protectionism, and advocating for inclusive global development (Chew, 2025). These developments highlight how challenging for a state like Malaysia to express its foreign policy identity, through balancing great power interest, relations, and trying to protect its autonomy.

Much of the literature surrounding Malaysia’s foreign policy amid great power rivalry is focused on the concept of hedging, a strategy used by smaller states to balance economic and security ties and engagement with competing great powers like the United States and China. While this framework highlights how states like Malaysia make important strategic decisions, it tends to frame its foreign policy behavior is primarily guided by material interests and minimizing risks due to uncertainty conditions. Not just that, hedging also overlooks how Malaysia actively constructs its foreign policy identity and how this identity is expressed and exposed through discourse, institutional alignments, and participation in frameworks led by different great powers like the U.S. and China. Moreover, as the rivalry escalates, the space to hedge effectively become more increasingly constrained, raising questions how smaller states like Malaysia can make independent foreign policy choices beyond strategic risk management (Cheng & Lai, 2021). Currently, Malaysia has so far navigated the rivalry without clear alignment with either the U.S. or China, this suggest that hedging alone cannot fully explain Malaysia’s foreign policy behavior.

This thesis addresses the gap by utilizing constructivism to explore Malaysia’s diplomatic engagement with China, combining with international cooperation theory (ICT), from a constructivist angle for a better understanding of cooperation between the two countries. Rather than assuming that Malaysia’s foreign policy actions in the U.S.-China rivalry is solely driven by material interests or strategic calculations, this thesis examines how identity, norms, values and discourse shape influence its foreign policy decision and the broader relationship with China. Malaysia’s engagement with China is understood not only being pragmatic, but also it could be

reflected in its values and beliefs, such as support for multipolarity, Global South Solidarity, and an identity shared by the ASEAN-style of diplomacy (Katsumata, 2003; Tan, 2023; Meena, 2025).

In this thesis, I apply critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyze how Malaysia frames its engagement with China, and how is this relationship perceived by the United States and China. The analysis draws on political speeches, high-level interviews from leaders, press statements and media narratives between 2022 and April 2025. This approach will provide a more holistic understanding on the topic, how small states like Malaysia navigate in great power rivalries, not being a passive actor, but as an identity-driven actor whose foreign policy behavior is shaped and driven by identity, norms, and cooperation strategies.

1.1 Problem Formulation

How can constructivism and international cooperation theory explain Malaysia's diplomatic engagement with China amidst of the U.S. – China rivalry, and how is this relationship is perceived by the United States and China?

This research question is developed to the theoretical limitations identified in the literature. While the hedging theory explains how Malaysia navigates great power rivalry through material considerations, it overlooks how identity, norms, and values discursively affect diplomatic behavior. Therefore, by using constructivism and international cooperation theory, this thesis focuses on how Malaysia's diplomatic engagement with China is shaped by identity, norms, and discourse through constructivism, and how cooperation mechanisms such as reciprocity, iteration, regime participation, and power asymmetry, from international cooperation theory through a constructivist framework. Moreover, constructivism is also used to examined how this engagement is perceived by the United States and China. Since identity is constructed through interaction, beliefs and recognition, it will be important to analyze how both powers interpret Malaysia's diplomatic identity within the context of a great power rivalry. Each actor's perceptions can either approve or disapprove Malaysia's diplomatic behavior, giving insights how its foreign policy is acknowledged, reinforced or questioned in the rivalry.

1.2 Structural Overview of the paper

This thesis will be divided into seven different chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the problem formulation and provides a review of relevant academic literature surrounding the topic. Chapter 2 presents the chosen theoretical framework, which is constructivism and international cooperation theory from a constructivist lens. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology, including the hermeneutic perspective, qualitative and deductive approach, and the justification for the case selection, case design, and the use of critical discourse analysis (CDA) as the main method. Chapter 4 presents and justifies the chosen data sources for this thesis. Chapter 5 explains the coding strategy and analytical framework, including the use of In Vivo coding, the development and presentation of themes, and how the theory is applied in the analysis. Chapter 6 will be the critical discourse analysis, guided by the chosen theories to examine how Malaysia discursively constructs its engagement with China and how is this identity perceived by the U.S. and China. Chapter 7 discusses the findings based on the theoretical framework, reevaluate the hypotheses, reflect on the study's limitations, and concludes with broader implications and suggestions for future research.

1.3 Literature Review

1.3.1 The Hedging theory and Malaysia's Foreign Policy

The fundamental principle of hedging theory refers to a state's alignment strategy, where a state would interact with stronger powers, using a mix of cooperative and confrontational elements (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019, p. 367). The authors argued that the hedging theory gained prominence after the post-Cold war period, as early studies were focused on the Asia-Pacific region, starting with the U.S. – China relations. As China's influence is becoming stronger, scholars have shifted on how to use the theory on Southeast Asian states navigate great power competition between the U.S. and China. The authors have further described hedging in their article as:

“Hedging is arguably one of the most influential concepts to emerge from scholarship on the international relations of the Asia-Pacific in the 21st century.” (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019, p. 368)

Despite the increasing use of the theory, Ciorciari & Haacke (2019) have further argued that the hedging theory has been loosely by other scholars, leading to inconsistencies for the theory and its application. Some argued that hedging is a mixed strategy, where government from weaker countries, engage economically and diplomatically with major powers, while also having a fallback security strategy as a form of insurance (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019, p. 368). Meanwhile, scholars like Goh (2005) and Roy (2005) have interpreted hedging primarily as a security strategy for smaller states, trying to navigate in triangular relations with multiple major powers, such as Southeast Asian states managing its relationship between China and the United States.

However, Ciorciari & Haacke (2019) have challenged the hedging security centric views, arguing that states do not only hedge for security reasons, but also for economic, trade and investment opportunities from major powers. They argued that hedging should not be equated with an insurance policy, as having insurance implies guaranteed protection on certain conditions, where hedging is more about costs and benefits management before the security threat arises. Furthermore, Ciorciari & Haacke digs into Korolev's (2019) work on hedging, which suggests that the ongoing systemic pressure from the U.S. – China tensions could reduce the options for small states like Malaysia, and Singapore to hedge effectively. As the great power rivalry intensifies, weaker states like Malaysia will face a greater pressure to align either with one of the great powers, rather than continuing to hedge.

Next, building on Ciorciari & Haacke (2019) discussion of hedging as a strategic balancing act, Cheng & Lai (2021) argued that how the existing structural conditions created by great powers limits the ability for a small country to hedge effectively. The authors used Malaysia's hedging strategy on the South China Sea as a case, arguing that how power asymmetry, rivalry, and uncertainties shape Malaysia's foreign policy decision. Structural conditions refer to the geopolitical constraints and opportunities that influence a country's ability to engage in hedging. The concept of hedging is further refined by the authors, as they argued that hedging is not merely a midpoint between balancing and band wagoning, but to serve as a strategic act for offsetting multiple risks (Cheng & Lai, 2021, p. 280). Unlike previous authors like Goh (2005) and Roy (2005), who conceptualized hedging primarily as a security strategy,

Cheng & Lai further conceptualize that hedging involves both defiance and deference towards major powers to navigate the geopolitical uncertainty.

Furthermore, the authors distinguished the two forms of hedging, which are ‘light’ and ‘heavy’ hedging (Cheng & Lai, 2021, p. 280). Light hedging is characterized by open deference with selective defiance. The purpose is to prioritize diplomatic and economic engagement with great power while avoiding direct confrontations. Light hedging consists of economic pragmatism, diplomatic deference, avoiding open condemnation, and select defiance through security cooperation with other great powers. Meanwhile, heavy hedging is characterized by open defiance with selective deference. Small states that engage in heavy hedging would use confrontational methods on great powers, such as military posturing, public condemnation, and legal challenges to protect their sovereignty.

Malaysia’s hedging behavior is shaped by the existing structural conditions, particularly the South China Sea (SCS) dispute, where it balance its relationship with the U.S. and China while safeguarding its territorial integrity and economic interests (Cheng & Lai, 2021, p. 284). Malaysia openly avoids alignment with either China or the U.S. on the SCS dispute, maintaining its independent decision making to strategic neutrality to preserve its ability to continue in hedging. This is reflected in its combination of open deference and selective defiance, balancing its relationship with China through economic cooperation while quietly asserting its sovereignty over contested waters through diplomatic channels between the two countries without open confrontation.

This approach is evident on Malaysia’s diplomatic protests against Chinese territorial violation into its exclusive economic zone in SCS, choosing a low-profile confrontation to maintain the stability of the relationship between both countries (Cheng & Lai, 2021). At the same time, to ensure that Malaysia has a strategic fallback option if China is growing its assertiveness, Malaysia has strengthened its defense ties with the U.S. and its allies, such as Australia and Japan through joint military exercises. This approach of light hedging allows Malaysia to build strong economic relations with China while protecting their autonomy in foreign policy (Cheng & Lai, 2021). Therefore, Malaysia’s light hedging strategy is influenced by careful engagements with major powers, with the aim to reduce security risks while also gaining economic benefits.

The concept of hedging is further explained by Cheng (2021), argued that hedging is distinct from band wagoning, to counter the claims from other scholars like Waltz (1985) and Schweller (1994) have argued that small states are engaged in hedging is just like a soft form of alignment. Unlike band wagoning, where weaker states align with a dominant power in international politics for economic and security benefits, hedging involves both engaging and resisting multiple great powers to minimize risks (Cheng, Getting hedging right: a small-state perspective, 2021).

Malaysia's hedging approach is not considered as band wagoning because the country does not fully align with China or the U.S., allowing them to maintain a strategic neutrality in a great power rivalry. One of the important factors for small states like Malaysia to hedge is the geopolitical uncertainty in the Indo-Pacific region. For example, the shift in U.S. foreign policies across different administrations create unpredictable regional dynamics. During president's Trump presidency from 2017 to 2021, The U.S. abandoned former president Obama's 'Pivot to Asia' strategy and withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, reducing American influence in the region (Cheng, 2021, p. 309).

The reduction of American influence allowed China to expand its regional influence, leading Southeast Asian states to hedge to be closer to China with new economic opportunities while remain cautious on China's intention that could affect their economic dependence and territorial integrity (Cheng, 2021, p. 311). However, the author further argued that a small country like Malaysia's ability to hedge could diminish as U.S. – China rivalry intensifies. If a great power competition escalates further, Malaysia and other smaller states in the region may be forced to take a clearer stance, as major powers tend to disapprove of hedging behavior. Great powers prefer alignment more than strategic neutrality, applying pressure for smaller states to take sides which limits their ability to maintain flexibility through hedging.

While hedging is widely used to explain Malaysia and other ASEAN states' foreign policy in the U.S. – China rivalry, scholars are still debating if it should be qualified as a fully developed theory or a strategic approach based on risk assessments (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019). Its incorporation of realism and liberalism creates inconsistencies for the concept. On one hand, hedging from a realist perspective assumes that uncertainty in the international system due to its anarchic nature and security, but on the other hand, the liberal aspect of hedging promotes

economic cooperation with multiple great powers without ideological commitments. This theoretical vagueness offered by hedging raises the question on how does Malaysia frame its diplomatic engagement with China in the U.S. – China rivalry beyond strategic calculations?

Given the limitations of hedging to explain Malaysia's foreign policy, constructivism offers a theoretical alternative. Constructivism shifts the focus away from materialist and realist concern with state survival, and instead explores how identity, norms, and leadership narratives shape a country's foreign policy behavior. Unlike hedging, which is based on pragmatic risk managements, constructivism provides a different understanding, such as Malaysia's historical ties with China, its own Malaysian identity, and domestic leadership discourses that can influence its engagement with China. Moving beyond the hedging narrative, this study adopts a constructivist approach to explain how Malaysia frames its diplomatic engagement with China, emphasizing on norms, values, national identity as a key influence.

Hedging argues that the state tries to minimize sovereignty losses and security risks while maximizing strategic flexibility, avoiding full alignment with any major powers. However, its blending of ideas from realism and liberalism elements, creating internal contradictions, where on the one hand, it is driven by great power politics but on the other hand, it promotes economic cooperation without clear ideological commitments. Therefore, this situational and flexible approach of hedging makes it pragmatic but not a fully explanatory theory. Unlike using realism or liberalism to explain a state's behavior, hedging serves more as a strategic tool than offering a comprehensive framework.

The hedging theory also relies on a two-power dynamic, requiring a state to navigate at least between two rival actors, usually two opposing great powers like the U.S. and China. Within this framework, a state does not hedge against one power but must constantly assess whom to hedge against and what to hedge for. In Malaysia's case, hedging suggests that a state maneuvers between economic opportunities with China and security cooperation with the U.S. to avoid overdependence on either side. However, this framework is limiting because it primarily only explains how Malaysia positioned itself between these two powers, rather than understanding how Malaysia constructs its independent foreign policy identity.

Additionally, international cooperation theory (ICT), influenced by both neoliberal institutionalism, realism and constructivism, provides various forms of cooperation, such as

reciprocity, international regimes, iteration, and others to explain Malaysia's cooperation strategy with China. Malaysia's engagement with China is not solely about managing risks but also about institutionalized cooperation through BRICS, and the BRI, reciprocity in economic and security relations, and iteration strategies that allow Malaysia to engage China economically while de-escalating the South China Sea territorial dispute. These mechanisms also help to downplay the "China threat" narrative by emphasizing cooperation over confrontation in the context of the U.S.-China rivalry. These mechanisms shows that Malaysia's foreign policy is not purely reactive towards the great power rivalry but is actively shaped through with different options of diplomatic strategies and structured engagements that ICT can provide.

1.3.2 Malaysia's Identity

Gilley (2024) argued that Malaysia's economic growth and democratization have elevated it to the status of a middle-power nation. Middle powers are usually defined when a state has sufficient economic and diplomatic capacity to exert influence in the international system. According to the author, middle powers occupy a unique position:

"Exposed neither to violence by their weakness nor to envy by their greatness, and their wealth and power being moderate, passions are less violent, ambition finds less support, and license less provocation than in large states". (Gilley, 2024, p. 2)

Middle powers are usually expected to play a counter-hegemonic or pro-multipolarity role, promoting dialogue, engaging in regional diplomacy, peace initiatives, and international norm-building (Gilley, 2024, p. 5). Unlike great powers, which seeks to dominate global politics, middle powers act as stabilizing actors engaging in mediation, multilateral diplomacy, and advocacy for smaller states. However, their ability to exert influence on global affairs is limited by structural factors within the international system created by great power dynamics. From a structural realist perspective, middle powers only actively engage in diplomacy when the benefits outweigh the risks of challenging great powers.

Despite Malaysia's potential to play a greater role in regional governance, its leaders remain divided if the state is ready to be a middle power nation. Past and present leaders have expressed conflicting views on this stance. Former Prime Minister Mahathir (2018) argued that Malaysia should adopt a cautious approach, stating that small state like Malaysia should seek to

maximize opportunities within great power politics rather than changing them. On the other hand, current Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim had stated that Malaysia is ready to embrace its middle power status and engage more actively in global affairs. Anwar promoted the idea of ‘creative-diplomacy’ as a tool for diffusing tensions, including in the U.S. – China rivalry (Gilley, 2024, p. 7).

Scholars continue to debate whether Malaysia, as a middle power, actively shapes regional diplomacy or remains as a passive actor navigating in a great power competition. This debate over Malaysia’s active or passive power status under the administration of Anwar Ibrahim is central to understanding how the state frames its diplomatic identity and justifies its engagement with China amidst of the rivalry. While middle powers, described by scholars that it’s expected to play a stabilizing role, engages in multilateralism, and promoting regional order, Malaysia’s foreign policy approach remains unclear. Some scholars described in Gilley (2024) article that Malaysia’s diplomatic engagements reflect a more reserved and pragmatic role due inconsistent leadership view like Mahathir, who is more reserved, while other suggested it is evolving towards a more active role under Anwar Ibrahim’s leadership.

However, one of the limitations for the middle power status is that it largely remains descriptive and lacks theoretical framework (Gilley, 2024). While it defines middle power based on their economic, diplomatic influence, and strategic positioning in the international system, it does not provide a clear explanatory model on how and why these states engage with great powers in specific ways. Unlike liberalism, realism or constructivism, which offers foundational approaches to explain state behavior, middle power status mostly describes what middle powers do on foreign policy rather than how they construct their strategies. Gilley (2024) also notes that the concept tends to generalize state behavior based on their capabilities without considering the role of domestic politics, values, historical experiences, and regional norms, especially for non-Western states like Malaysia. Therefore, this limitation has led some researchers to consider alternative frameworks, like constructivism and international cooperation theory (ICT), which offers a better understanding of identity-driven diplomacy and different cooperation mechanisms in small or middle states like Malaysia.

Alatas (2021) critiques the dominant use of hedging theory in analyzing Malaysia’s foreign policy when dealing with great powers. She argues that such Westphalian-centric

frameworks tend to overlook the deeper political traditions and historical narratives that shape Malaysia's foreign policy behavior. Therefore, Alatas introduced non-Western concepts from Malay political culture, particularly *kerajaan* (rule) and *nama* (prestige), to offer a more identity-based framework in understanding Malaysia's engagement with great powers like China (Alatas, 2021, p. 2). *Kerajaan* frames diplomacy as a personalized, leader-to-leader relationship, emphasizing respect, hierarchy, and cultural ties over material interests. *Nama* refers to reputation and legitimacy within a hierarchical relationship, highlighting Malaysia's preference for stable and respectful relationship over confrontation (p. 5). Through this lens, Malaysia's engagement with China is not only being pragmatic, but also it is deeply rooted in historical traditions aimed at securing political legitimacy through stable, maintaining respectful relationships with great powers.

While these Malay political concepts provide valuable information about Malaysia's diplomatic behavior, they can be further examined through existing theoretical frameworks to deepen the analysis of Malaysia's diplomatic engagement with China beyond strategic calculations or material interests. International Cooperation (IC) theory and constructivism support this perspective to understand Malaysia's foreign policy and cooperative strategies with great powers. IC theory explains how Malaysia selects different types of cooperation to engage diplomatically, identifying whether its engagement with China is based on reciprocity or other mechanisms. This allows a better understanding on Malaysia's diplomatic strategy in managing its relations with China with different types of cooperative frameworks. Meanwhile, constructivism highlights how historical narratives, norms, values, and leadership discourse can Malaysia's foreign policy decisions, emphasizing on stability, hierarchy, and relational diplomacy, including with China.

By integrating these perspectives, this research will provide a more holistic understanding of Malaysia's foreign policy behavior, moving beyond strategic calculation approach to examine how constructivism explains Malaysia's engagement with China in the U.S. China rivalry and how the IC theory identifies the different types of cooperation used by Malaysia in this relationship.

Liu (2021) critiques the strategic hedging framework, arguing that Malaysia's foreign policy cannot be fully understood as a risk-containment strategy. He emphasized that

constructivism offers a more comprehensive lens through understanding how identity, norms, values, and domestic political narratives to understand Malaysia's engagement with great power like China (Liu, 2021, p. 160). Scholars continue to debate whether Malaysia's foreign policy is acting on pure pragmatism or influenced by its historical, political, and ideological factors. Liu (2021) used the case of Mahathir Mohammad's second administration from (2018-2020) to show how Malaysia frames its diplomatic engagement with China, information which remains relevant under Anwar Ibrahim's leadership.

Liu provides an example, how Mahathir's anti-China rhetoric during the 2018 election campaign was used to discredit political opponents, a move that is shaped by domestic politics over geopolitical concerns. However, once in power, Mahathir's administration renegotiated the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) to reengage with China through economic pragmatism while also maintaining national sovereignty. This shows that Malaysia's foreign policy is not just about strategic balancing but also consider on national identity, economic development and domestic legitimacy.

The 2019 Foreign Policy Framework under Mahathir reinforced this idea by framing Malaysia's foreign policy around three broad categories of national interests, which are security, economy, and identity (Liu, 2021, p. 164). Mahathir's diplomacy reflected a constructivist perspective, positioned the state that embraced Asian values, Global South cooperation and non-alignment (Liu, 2021, p. 165). His administration sought to balance great power engagements not through only hedging, but by projecting Malaysia's diplomatic identity, influenced by historical narrative of being non-alignment, sovereignty and pragmatism. This shift away from strategic calculations to an identity-driven foreign policy provides a useful framework for analyzing Anwar Ibrahim's approach to foreign policy.

Under the administration of Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysia's diplomatic engagement with China continues the reflection of pragmatism and identity-based positioning. For example, Anwar has emphasized Malaysia's role in great power politics through Global South cooperation, economic diplomacy, and assertion on national sovereignty. He also highlighted Malaysia's deep cultural ties with China as a foundation for bilateral relations. While Mahathir was initially skeptical about China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Anwar has embraced deeper engagement with China, signing multiple memoranda of understandings (MoUs) and applying to

join BRICS to deepen economic engagement while maintaining Malaysia's strategic autonomy (Tan, 2023). This continuity of relations suggests that Malaysia's engagement with China is not simply a hedging strategy driven by uncertainty emphasized in hedging theory, but rather a long-standing diplomatic approach rooted in national identity and historical ties.

Liu (2021) emphasizes that Malaysia actively constructs its diplomatic identity, rather than passively navigating in great power competition. This aligns with Anwar's administration, which Malaysia's foreign policy has been framed through Global South Solidarity, regional cooperation, pragmatism, reinforcing its long-standing diplomatic identity. Therefore, constructivism can provide a valuable lens for analyzing how historical narratives, identity, and normative values shape Malaysia's foreign policy behavior.

The transition from Mahathir's second term to Anwar's administration shows the importance of identity in Malaysia's engagement with China amidst of the U.S. – China rivalry. While material interests and strategic considerations such as hedging remains relevant, Malaysia's current approach under Anwar emphasizes on sovereignty and identity-based diplomacy. By incorporating constructivist perspectives and moving beyond the logic of the hedging framework, scholars can get a deeper understanding of how Malaysia actively shapes its diplomatic behavior through discourse and values.

These limitations across the literature, from the concept of hedging theory to the descriptive nature of the middle power concept, shows there is a gap in explaining how identity, norms, and discourse shape Malaysia's foreign policy behavior. While these concept and studies offer valuable insights, they tend to miss how countries define and express their foreign policy identity in the context of great power tensions, like the U.S.-China rivalry. This study addresses this gap by using a constructivism and international cooperation theory, from a constructivist approach, to examine how Malaysia discursively frames its engagement with China.

2.0 Theory and Application

2.1 Theoretical approach and understanding

This section introduces the two theoretical approaches that guide the analysis: Constructivism and International Cooperation Theory (ICT). These theories are applied from a

constructivist perspective to examine how norms, values, and cooperation mechanisms shape Malaysia's diplomatic engagement with China in within the broader U.S.-China rivalry.

2.1.1 Constructivism Theory

Constructivism gained its relevance in the post-Cold War period as a challenge to dominant IR theories like realism or liberalism, which prioritize material factors such as military and economic power, and institutional structures (Barnett, 2020, p. 195). On the other hand, constructivism emphasizes how ideas, identity, norms and values shape a state's behavior. This makes constructivism especially relevant for this thesis, which to explore how Malaysia constructs its foreign policy identity in the U.S. – China rivalry (Barnett, 2020, p. 196).

A core idea in constructivism is the concept of 'norms', where there are shared standards of appropriate or acceptable behavior tied to specific identities (Barnett, 2020, p. 196). These norms will influence how states perceive themselves and other states, in the process of shaping foreign policy individually. For example, Malaysia perceives its foreign policy as non-aligned, as a Global South state, non-confrontational approach in international forums and shapes its diplomatic narrative around the idea and values of peaceful coexistence, sovereign independence, and an advocate for a multipolar world.

Constructivists argue that the international system is socially constructed through shared ideas, norms, and interactions, rather than by pre-determined laws of international politics (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013, p. 212). This means that concepts such as diplomacy, borders of states, and alliances depend on collective recognition and expression in diplomatic behavior. Malaysia's use of ASEAN-led mechanisms and its preference for regional driven dialogue reflects how norms influence its foreign policy. Foreign policy, from this point, is not only a response to material conditions and factors but also the influence of identity.

Scholars like Alexander Wendt gave an example of socially constructed nature of threats with the example of '500 British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the United States than 5 North Korean nuclear weapons' because the U.S. sees Britain or the United Kingdom as a friend while North Korea as an adversary. This shows how identity and historical relationship can shape threat perception. In this case, Malaysia's relatively cooperative and friendly behavior toward China, despite having territorial disputes in South China Sea, can be understood from its historical identity as a non-confrontational and a state that prioritize peaceful development.

The following concept of constructivism is identity, where it refers to “the social understanding of oneself in relations to others” (Barnett, 2020, p. 196). In the context of this thesis, identity is key to understand how Malaysia positions itself in the U.S. – China rivalry. Constructivism argues that identity shapes a state’s interests, where foreign policy behaviors are based on how states perceive themselves and how they want others to perceive it. This is particularly relevant for Malaysia, which frames itself as a non-aligned, Global South-oriented state, and independent from great power blocs (Tan, 2023). Malaysia often adopts a moral and ethical tone in its foreign policy, emphasizing on values such as justice, sovereignty, and non-intervention, which aligns with Global South orientation.

This identity is reinforced through Malaysia’s discourse and engagement with international institutions, such as participating the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and its application for BRICS membership and being accepted as a partner state in 2024 and embracing a multipolar world. These choices that Malaysia chose to be in is not just strategic, but also it could be reflected on how Malaysia wants to be seen, as a non-aligned, norm and values driven state advocating for a multipolar world.

The following concept of constructivism is normative power of international organizations (IOs), where are not merely platforms for cooperation, but also serve as arenas for states to express concerns or identity the problems, negotiate shared interests, and shape collective understandings of global issues (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013, p. 219). Institutions like BRI, BRICS, and ASEAN provide Malaysia with venues to perform and reinforce its identity as an independent actor, aligned with Global South values. These alignments are not only instrumental but also reflect on Malaysia’s constructed self-image as a state that seeks inclusive development and balanced diplomacy.

2.1.2 Application of Constructivism

This thesis will apply constructivism to understand how Malaysia’s diplomatic engagement with China is shaped by its constructed foreign policy, in the context of the U.S.-China rivalry. Constructivism is chosen for this thesis because it focuses on how states construct their interests and identities through norms, values, discourse, and aligning with certain international institutions, rather than having an assumption on fixed preferences or material factors.

The theory allows to interpret Malaysia not being a passive actor just reacting to external events like the U.S. – China rivalry, but as an identity-driven state presenting its own diplomatic self-image on the international stage (Barnett, 2020). Concepts such as non-alignment, Global South Solidarity, non-Western governance system and multilateral cooperation are not just policy choices but it's also part of how Malaysia see itself and wishes to be seen by other actors. This identity can also be reflected in Malaysia's stance on Sinophobia in the context of the rivalry. From a constructivist perspective, Malaysia's rejection of Sinophobic narratives can be understood as how China is perceived as a legitimate partner rather as a threat. This stance can reflect on Malaysia's constructed identity as a Global South actor that promotes multipolarity, inclusivity, and respect for non-Western powers like China in the international system.

Malaysia's participation in International Organizations (IOs), such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and BRICS, where China plays an important role in the organization can be understood through this lens. Using the constructivist approach, the participation in these IOs could be explained beyond material interests, but as venues where Malaysia's diplomatic identity is presented, performed, reinforced, and recognized by other members like China who are in the organization (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013). These institutions can provide a social environment where countries shared norms, such as multipolarity or Global South cooperation, are promoted and practiced, which will be further analyzed in the analysis section.

In addition, constructivism helps to explain regional norms, such as the 'ASEAN Way' of diplomacy, shape Malaysia's foreign policy behavior. The 'ASEAN Way' diplomacy, which emphasizes on non-confrontation, non-interference, and consensus building, become part of Malaysia's identity in regional affairs (Mahaseth, 2022). These norms also influence how Malaysia manage its relationship with China, especially dealing with sensitive issues in the South China Sea. Rather than adopting confrontational stance or military alliance building, Malaysia's preference is to utilize the ASEAN diplomatic culture to seek for dialogue and peaceful resolutions. This regional framework helps to reinforce Malaysia's identity as a neutral and independent state actor that is committed to regional stability and avoiding provocative postures in the U.S.-China rivalry (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013; Barnett, 2020).

Constructivism can also explain how states perceive threats from other states and how they respond to territorial disputes. This could be explained through identity-based understanding

over material calculations and risk assessments (Barnett, 2020). This thesis uses Constructivism to examine how Malaysia's diplomatic identity shapes its behavior in territorial disputes with China, especially in the South China Sea, where historical experience and regional norms guide its preference for dialogue over confrontation. Rather than assuming states will respond with confrontational behavior, or strategic alignment with other great powers, constructivism allows states like Malaysia to interpret such disputes with China through their own normative frameworks. This approach shows that Malaysia's response to the geopolitical tensions like the U.S.-China rivalry through its own constructed identity, emphasizing on stability, dialogue, and regional diplomacy over escalation through confrontation.

Constructivism provides a framework for analyzing how identity-based and norm-driven behavior shapes Malaysia's engagement with China. Through discourse and institutional participation, Malaysia's diplomatic identity is based on non-aligned, cooperative, and influenced by Global South values. This identity-driven approach provides an understanding how Malaysia discursively engages with China, not just as a partner, but also to reinforce its identity amidst of the rivalry.

Based on this logic, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: *Malaysia's foreign policy identity is discursively constructed and plays a central role in shaping its engagement with China within the context of the U.S.–China rivalry.*

Finally, constructivism will be used to analyze how Malaysia's diplomatic identity is perceived by external actors, especially the U.S. and China. These perceptions are not just shaped solely by material alignments, but also shaped by shared understandings, identity narratives, and signals of shared values that emerge from Malaysia's foreign policy discourse under the Anwar administration.

2.2.1 International Cooperation Theory

During the 1980s and 1990s, scholars began to develop new ideas on how and why states cooperate with one another in an anarchic international system, which is known as international cooperation theory (ICT). Oye (1985) argued that despite the lack of central authority to enforce agreements between states, cooperation still occurs because of the potential of mutual interests

and shared benefits (p. 1). Oye stated that governments often bind themselves to mutually advantageous courses of action. The author further added that despite there is the lack of international governing bodies to enforce the terms of agreement on cooperation, states can use their common interests through tacit cooperation, multilateral negotiations, and the creation of international regimes.

While traditional international cooperation theory is based on material interests and calculations to serve as the basis for cooperation, this thesis will adopt a constructivist interpretation of the theory. From a constructivist perspective, cooperation is not only driven by rational intentions but also how shared norms, identities, and values can influence cooperation. States do not enter into cooperative agreements with one another due to cost-benefits calculations, but because these engagements can be reflected in their constructed identities and values (O'Neill, Balsiger, & Vandever, 2004). International Institutions like the UN, ASEAN, BRICS or the BRI become more than a platform for material benefits, but they can serve as a social environments to allow countries like Malaysia to perform and reinforce its diplomatic identity, such as being a Global South nation and a norm-driven actor that advocate or support of a certain cause, such as a multipolar world. This can show that Malaysia's cooperation with China is not only about material gains, but also about shared values and identity (p. 150).

Scholars like Oye (1986) and Milner (1992) have presented different forms of cooperation that still can occur between states. Milner (1992) additionally contributed to Oye's original theory, such as power asymmetry form of cooperation, where there is a power dynamic between a stronger state and a weaker state. In this type of cooperation, powerful states could impose coordination or unfavorable terms on weaker states. Despite the type of cooperation is more one sided where powerful states could get more benefits, cooperation still occurs as countries will coordinate on certain policies that seem cooperation can still occur (Milner, 1992, p. 469). This form of cooperation can still be used as a useful tool for analyzing how cooperation still can occur in asymmetric relationship, such as between Malaysia and China during the U.S.-China rivalry.

The first form of cooperation that Oye is 'strategies of reciprocity and conditions of play,' where states would cooperate with one another through reciprocating actions to minimize the consequences of a state backing out from cooperation or losses. Reciprocity form of cooperation

is important because it encourages states to engage in cooperation with one another to maximize gains that are mutually beneficial while reducing or minimizing potential losses. (Oye, 1985, p. 15). For example, if Malaysia increase their trade or infrastructure agreement with China under the BRI, China might respond with favorable investment terms or providing diplomatic support to Malaysia. However, the success of the reciprocal cooperation will depend on how clearly the intentions of both states are being understood and whether both sides are committed to reciprocate (p. 15).

The second form of cooperation is iteration, which focuses on the expectation of long-term cooperation (Milner, 1992, p. 474). This form of cooperation suggests that a state's motivation to cooperate with another state is not for immediate gains or benefits, but also an expectation of having long-term benefits that could potentially occur through continuous cooperation. This form of cooperation can be helpful to understand how states like Malaysia continue engaging in cooperative ventures that may not immediately gain benefits, such as infrastructure projects, joining blocs or diplomatic agreements. However, it's expected to yield strategic or economic benefits over time. Iteration can also reflect from the identity as a reliable partner for being consistent, especially in its efforts to engage major powers while maintaining diplomatic balance.

The third form of international cooperation according to Milner (1992), known as international regimes. This form focuses on how existing cooperative frameworks can shape the behavior of states when it comes to cooperation (Milner, 1992, p. 475). Milner defined regimes as a set of norms, principles, rules, or appropriate procedures that guide how states expect each other to act or behave. These regimes can help to facilitate cooperation by providing structure and reduce uncertainty. However, from a constructivist perspective, international regimes such as the UN, BRICS, and the BRI are more than just formal institutions or platforms that exist out of nowhere for cooperation, but they are built upon shared norms, values, and principles. These regimes only function when states believe in it and if they act according to the ideas that the regimes promote. Without this acknowledgement to the actors, the regime will lose legitimacy and its capacity to shape cooperation.

At the same time, these regimes shape how states understand appropriate behavior and reinforce identity through participation. Engagement in such frameworks is not only strategic,

but it is also symbolic. When states join or align themselves with certain regimes, they are expressing how they see themselves in the international system and what kind of global order they support. In the context of a great power rivalry, Malaysia's choice to participate in certain regimes becomes a way to align with other states that share similar norms and values, and to engage in cooperation that align within the frameworks and principles of the regime.

The fourth form of international cooperation is the power asymmetry cooperation. According to Milner (1992), the presence of power imbalances, particularly the existence of hierarchies, can actually promote cooperation (p. 480). This form of cooperation aligns with the hegemonic stability theory, where stronger states usually take the lead in creating the conditions and organizing cooperation. Through this dynamic, stronger states tend to secure a more favorable term, while weaker states engage in cooperation to gain influence, financial assistance, political recognition or long-term benefits despite the cooperation is asymmetrical.

From a constructivist perspective, power asymmetric cooperation can still be meaningful for weaker states if it aligns with their identity goals. For the case of Malaysia, cooperation with China under unequal terms does not mean Malaysia's passivity or lack of alternatives, but a deliberate expression of diplomatic identity. This identity-driven method allows Malaysia to pursue cooperation that reinforces its core values. In this sense, asymmetrical cooperation is not about material calculations or risk management, it also reflects why Malaysia position itself in this way and how it sees its role in the cooperation.

2.2.2 Application of International Cooperation Theory

This thesis applies international cooperation theory (ICT) to examine how Malaysia engages in various forms of cooperation with China, particularly in the U.S. – China rivalry. ICT is applied from a constructivist perspective, focusing not only on material incentives, but also on how norms, values, identity and diplomatic discourse can shape the different forms of cooperation. The four cooperation mechanisms will be utilized in the analysis section, such as reciprocity, iteration, international regimes and power asymmetry. These different forms of cooperation provide a structured framework to understand how and why Malaysia engage in different forms of cooperation with China not only in bilateral terms but also its participation in international organizations and platforms such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and BRICS, where China plays an important role.

The reciprocity cooperation will be utilized to explore whether Malaysia's cooperation with China is based on mutual beneficial exchanges in areas like trade, infrastructure, and political legitimacy. Reciprocity helps to explain whether cooperation is sustained through ongoing mutual exchanges and balanced benefits, rather than being one-sided.

Next, iteration whether Malaysia's cooperation with China is based on having expectations of long-term, repeated interactions, which can promote trusts and predictability overtime. This form of cooperation will be relevant in the context through repeated diplomatic, economic, and institutional engagements that build trust and shared interests over time, which the cooperation could be successful through these repeated diplomatic interactions between the two countries.

After that, another important mechanism is international regime-based cooperation, which helps to examine how institutional frameworks that Malaysia participates in, such as the BRI and BRICS to promote cooperation through shared norms, rules, values (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013; Milner, 1992). These regimes offer Malaysia a platform to engage with China in ways that it reflects on alternative governance model and multipolar orientation. This form of cooperation can help to understand how Malaysia's participation in these regimes where China plays a huge role can align with or reinforce its broader normative commitments, such as Global South solidarity and non-Western values.

The final mechanism is power asymmetry cooperation, which is used to examine how differences in capacity between Malaysia and China influence the terms and dynamics of cooperation (Milner, 1992). In this thesis, China will be categorized as the more powerful actor due to its economic strength, political influence, and global standing. This categorization and framework will provide insights on how Malaysia navigates cooperation and partnership with a more dominant state, and how it will adjust its diplomatic discourse and strategies within this asymmetric relationship. It also allows the analysis to consider how the asymmetric cooperation can affect Malaysia's approach in managing sensitive issues through cooperation, such as territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea, where the difference in power can influence both discourse and diplomatic behavior.

The second hypothesis is proposed based on the four cooperation mechanisms from international cooperation theory:

Hypothesis 2: Malaysia's cooperation with China is shaped by discursively constructed mechanisms of reciprocity, long-term interaction, regime participation, and power asymmetry that enable sustained cooperation.

2.3 Background: Malaysia-China and Malaysia-U.S. Relations

2.3.1 Malaysia-China relations

In 1974, Malaysia established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC). The establishment of the relationship between the two countries was historically significant, As Malaysia became the first ASEAN state to recognize the PRC, despite the ongoing Cold War tensions (Lai, De Silva, & Wang, 2023). Although Malaysia was anti-communist at that period, the decision to form the relationship was driven by pragmatism and a desire in having stable bilateral relations between the two countries. The foundation in this relationship was built on shared principles, such as economic cooperation, respect for sovereignty, peaceful co-existence, non-alignment, and Malaysia's acknowledgement of the 'One China' policy. Historically, even before having modern diplomatic ties between the two countries, historical interactions between the two civilizations were mostly peaceful, with the focus on trade, diplomacy, coexistence, but not war (Lai, De Silva, & Wang, 2023).

The following administrations in Malaysia continued this pragmatic approach. For example, During the 1990s, Malaysia under Mahathir Mohamad, had never view China's potential rise as a potential threat. This view gained huge traction especially an incident that occurred over the Mischief Reef due to territorial disputes. Instead of viewing China as a threat, Mahathir stated that China's rise would serve as an opportunity for Malaysia due to its potential, where this statement gained praise and approval from the political elites back in Beijing. This approach is symbolic as it helps Malaysia to strengthen its relations with China significantly that is present today (Lai, De Silva, & Wang, 2023).

Economically, China has become an increasingly important trade partner for Malaysia. Initially, Malaysia viewed China as a market for exporting raw materials and agricultural products. China's economic reform in the late 1970s and 1980s transformed it into a major economic power (Lai, De Silva, & Wang, 2023, p. 97). In 2009, China replaced Japan as Malaysia's largest trading partner. In 2023, Malaysia's export to China was worth over \$79.7

billion USD, while imports from China was worth over \$65.5 billion USD (OEC, 2023). These goods and products include crude oil, integrated circuits, palm oil, electric vehicles, machines, chemicals, and others. Comparing from the past in 1996, Malaysia's export to China was only worth over \$2.46 billion USD, while imports valued at \$1.77 billion USD, highlighting the expansion in trade over time between the two countries. Malaysia also plays a key role in the global supply chain, particularly in the semiconductor industry, ranking sixth globally in exports (MIDA, 2024). Malaysia's role in the industry is usually concentrated in lower value-added tasks, such as testing, packaging, and manufacturing. However, Malaysia aspires to move up the value chain to become a regional design and innovation hub, aiming to attract more investments for research and development, from countries like the U.S., China, Europe, and others.

Besides trade, Malaysia's participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 further deepened their economic cooperation. The Belt and Road Initiative was a global infrastructure project, where the goal is to build infrastructures like railways, ports, airports, and others that could facilitate the transport of goods, services, and travel. One of the key projects in Malaysia is the East Coast Railway Link (ECRL), a \$10.5 USD billion dollars railway project to improve connectivity in the Malay peninsula, potentially boosting economic activity (Mahmud, 2025). Malaysia sees that these Chinese-led initiatives as long-term economic and infrastructure investments, and has engaged with them pragmatically, utilizing the opportunities on the broader context of the U.S.-China rivalry.

Under the leadership of Anwar Ibrahim (2022 – present), Malaysia's engagement with China has become more assertive and identity driven tone (Chin, Opportunities and Challenges of China's Economic and Political Development Under the Third Term of Xi Leadership: A Viewpoint of Malaysia, 2025, p. 106). While Anwar has continued the principles of cooperation and non-alignment, he has also openly defended China's rise against Sinophobic narratives, calling China an important neighbor and rejecting Washington's tone to paint China as an adversary (p. 106). He has also promoted a Global South identity in solidarity with China, describing China to be the "new voice for the Global South". In 2024, His government had applied to join BRICS and got accepted as a partner state (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). The developments have marked a notable shift in tone for Malaysia under Anwar's

administration, signaling a more proactive and identity-based foreign policy approach despite officially maintaining a non-aligned position.

Despite these ties, tensions between the two countries over the South China Sea dispute remains. Anwar's government have continued Malaysia's approach of asserting its sovereignty within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), separating economic cooperations from territorial disputes, and supporting ASEAN style mechanisms for conflict management (Storey, 2024; Chin, Opportunities and Challenges of China's Economic and Political Development Under the Third Term of Xi Leadership: A Viewpoint of Malaysia, 2025). This issue did not originate from Anwar's administration as it has been inherited from the past administrations, which reflects on a consistent diplomatic approach and strategy toward the South China Sea dispute. Additionally, Malaysia has also formally rejected China's Nine-dash line claim, emphasizing to solve the issue through peaceful negotiations and diplomacy over public confrontation (Storey, 2024; Chin, Opportunities and Challenges of China's Economic and Political Development Under the Third Term of Xi Leadership: A Viewpoint of Malaysia, 2025).

The historical development of Malaysia-China relations provides an important discursive background how Malaysia under Anwar's administration frames its current engagement with China within the broader context of the U.S.-China rivalry. The absence of historical conflict, combined with Malaysia's consistent diplomatic and economic engagements with China, enabled Malaysia to view China not as a threat, but as a partner with a reliable partner. This perception supports a broader narrative on Malaysia's foreign policy towards China that emphasizes on mutual respect, development, and multipolarity. These historical experiences influence the way that Malaysia's engagement with China today under Anwar's administration, maintaining a similar stance to justify its closer engagement and cooperation with China while maintaining Malaysia's autonomy and aligning with Global South values.

2.3.2 Malaysia-U.S. Relations

The United States was one of the first nation who supported Malaysia's independence in 1957. Since then, Malaysia has maintained cooperative ties with the U.S. in areas like trade, investments, national development, and security. During the cold war, Malaysia aligned economically with the West while avoiding any formal military alliance with the U.S., upholding their non-alignment policy. After the Cold War period, relationship between the two countries

have expanded to tackle on new issues and challenges, such as counter-terrorism, education, trade (Liptak, 2022).

In recent years, China's growing economic influence in the region of Southeast Asia have prompted the U.S. to revitalize its regional engagement, including Malaysia. In 2022, the U.S. launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), with the aim to strengthen cooperation in areas such as supply chain resilience, trade, clean economy, anti-corruption. The IPEF also serve as a strategic tool for countering China's influence in the region (Liptak, 2022). Malaysia's participation in IPEF can reflect on its intentions, to stay engaged with the U.S. while pursuing a Global-South approach, non-aligned position in the broader U.S.-China rivalry.

While China has overtaken the U.S. as Malaysia's largest trading partner, the U.S. still remains as Malaysia's top source of foreign direct investment (FDI), worth over USD \$21.5 billion in 2023, especially in areas like semiconductor and other high-tech sectors (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Additionally, Malaysia also enjoyed a trade surplus of USD \$24.8 billion with the U.S. Despite the rise of China, the U.S. continues to play an important role in developing Malaysia's economy.

Security cooperation between the U.S. and Malaysia includes naval exercises, military dills, and army training related programs. Malaysia participates in these cooperations with the purpose of promoting regional security, such as on counterterrorism and maritime security in the South China Sea region. The Malaysian military, especially the officers, receive their training under U.S. military education programs. Despite these security cooperations, Malaysia continues to take a neutral approach in its foreign policy, avoid taking sides in major power rivalries (U.S. Department of State, 2024; Dolven, 2025).

However, the relationship between the two countries has faced challenges, particularly due to Malaysia's criticism of perceived U.S. double standards in foreign policy, especially with ongoing issues in the Middle East. U.S. supports for Israel, military interventions, and issues on human rights have strained bilateral ties. In addition, Malaysian officials have at times expressed their frustration over what they view as limited U.S. engagement with Southeast Asia. While the U.S. remains a key economic and security partner for Malaysia, these recurring issues have prevented both nations from achieving deeper strategic alignment (Dolven, 2025).

This cautious relationship is also reflected in Malaysia's view on U.S. led security initiatives. While Malaysia supports the principle of freedom of navigation, officials were concerned about these security initiatives like AUKUS, a trilateral security pact between Australia, the U.K., and the U.S., focusing on improving military and nuclear submarine presence in the Indo-Pacific region, and reinforcing the Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) risk escalating tensions in South China Sea (Khoo, 2023). Rather than supporting these military focused approaches, Malaysia prefers using dialogue and multilateralism through ASEAN mechanisms to deal with the disputes.

This historical development of Malaysia-U.S. relation helps explaining Malaysia's cautious engagement with the U.S. in the context of the U.S.-China rivalry. While Malaysia appreciates its security and economic ties with the U.S., they often avoid full strategic alignment. This behavior could be reflected in Malaysia's foreign policy identity, based on non-alignment, independence, and balance. These historical interactions continue to shape how Malaysia, especially under Anwar Ibrahim, frame its engagement with both powers, emphasizing on a flexible and balanced diplomatic approach in the context of the rivalry. This careful approach has sometimes led to U.S. officials and analyst to view Malaysia is not committed to share the same strategy with the U.S., especially in the issues on containing China.

3.0 Methodology

This thesis applies to a qualitative research design based on deductive logic, guided by a constructivist and hermeneutic epistemology. The primary method will be utilized is critical discourse analysis (CDA), which will be utilized to understand how Malaysia discursively constructs its diplomatic identity and how this identity influences its engagement with China in the context of the U.S.-China rivalry.

3.1 Hermeneutics – Researcher's understanding of the world

This thesis adopts a hermeneutic approach, where its philosophical tradition is based on interpretation, as the *hermeneutical circle*, *the art of interpretation*, *language as a medium of truth*, and *understanding*, as outlined in Theodore (2020). Hermeneutics provides a framework on interpreting foreign policy discourses based on leadership speeches, official state statements, and media narratives on certain topics not as transparent communication, but a message or

narrative with produced meanings that are shaped by historical, cultural, and geopolitical contexts.

One of the key concepts in this approach is the hermeneutic circle, which emphasizes the understanding is shaped by a constant back and forth between the parts and the larger whole. The process of interpretation of words involves the ongoing relationship between the individual parts of a text and the larger context they fit into (Theodore, 2021). Therefore, through this process, knowledge is created through a back-and-forth process, where ideas and interpretations will change as engagement with the subject and material deepens. Theodore (2021) stated that ‘the pursuit of understanding does not build higher and higher, it goes deeper and deeper, gets fuller and fuller, or perhaps, richer and richer.’

The following important hermeneutic concept is the art of interpretation. This concept highlights the two core elements of hermeneutic interpretation, the grammatical and psychological dimensions of discourse or text. The grammatical side focuses on the structure of the language and discourse, while the psychological side focuses on the leader’s intentions behind the choice of words, as well as how the researcher will interpret those intentions that are shaped by their own understanding (Theodore, 2021; Bryman, 2012, p. 28). The art of interpretation is not only concerned with what is said, but also with how and why it was said.

Additionally, the concept of understanding is important in the hermeneutic context as it goes hand in hand with the concept of interpretation. Understanding is viewed as an interpretive event, something that is continually evolving, and it is not the outcome of the process. The process is dynamic and educational, where engaging with the subject matter creates not only insights but also the interpreter’s awareness and assumptions. Through this process, understanding will never remain static but always open to reinterpretation as new perspectives will emerge.

The concept of language in hermeneutics is not just a tool for communicating facts, but it also serves as a means through where meaning is created and understood (Theodore, 2021; Bryman, 2012, p. 28). Language can shape how an individual interprets the world, text, or the subjects they engage in, and this paves the way to create and construct meaning. The concept of meaning is interlinked with language. The meaning is not fixed or universal, but it is created through interpretation and understanding, which can vary among different individuals. It

involves being based on human engagement with language and can change as individuals interpret and reinterpret text.

These four concepts are all interconnected and by utilizing the hermeneutic approach, the research will begin with the individual parts and connect them to the whole that creates interpretations to generate understanding. This interpretive approach helps the researcher to discover the meanings in discourse, while also encourages the researcher to reflect their own assumptions and positional perspective.

The reason for utilizing a hermeneutic approach in this research is to reflect the role of a researcher. This approach provides a framework to allow an understanding on how a researcher engages with Malaysia's diplomatic identity, particularly in its engagement with China in the U.S.-China rivalry. This framework clarifies the role of the researcher, equipping with appropriate tools for a continuous self-reflection throughout the research process. This continuous interaction with the material and subject promotes a clearer understanding of assumptions and interpretations as Malaysia's diplomatic relation with China evolves.

3.2 Qualitative Research and the deductive approach

This section outlines the approach of qualitative research and how it aligns with the objectives of this thesis. Qualitative research emphasizes meaning, context, and the researcher's interpretive role in understanding complex phenomena (Bryman, 2012, p. 380). It provides a detailed approach to understand contexts, allowing for a deeper exploration of Malaysia's diplomatic identity and engagement with China, in the broader context of the U.S.-China rivalry, and how this relationship is also perceived by both the U.S. and China. Unlike quantitative approaches, which rely on numerical data and measurable variables, qualitative methods allow the researcher to explore subjective experiences, perspectives, and the changing in Malaysia's foreign policy, particularly engaging with China in the U.S.-China rivalry (Bryman, 2012, pp. 380-381).

One of the key strengths of qualitative research is how it encourages researchers to reflect on their own perspective. When conducting research using a qualitative approach, it is important for the researcher to be aware of their pre-existing understanding of the subject or topic. Through careful reflection and planning, biases can be minimized, and the researcher's understanding

with the subject matter becomes an analytical advantage. This thesis research follows a qualitative methodology, where the researcher will set the objectives, collect relevant data for the subject and assess the feasibility of the research. The data analysis will be split into three phases. The first phase of data collection will consist of decontextualization, where the data will be examined on its own to understand the core meanings. The second phase will be recontextualization, where the data will be placed in a broader context. The third phase will be categorization and summarization, where data expressing similar ideas is organized into themes and interpreted (Bryman, 2012, pp. 380-381).

A key strength of this approach is its ability to generate an in-depth analysis on the phenomena, allowing for a detailed exploration of complex issues, such as for Malaysia's evolving diplomatic engagement with China. This thesis uses a deductive approach, starting with hypotheses developed from existing theories, such as constructivism and international cooperation theory through a constructivist lens (Bryman, 2012, p. 24). Following a deductive strategy, this thesis begins with theoretical assumptions from the chosen theories, and hypotheses are formulated and tested through the analysis of the discourse data (p. 24). To ensure consistency, the data was coded in an organized way, with repeated coding to refine and organize key data into themes aligned with the chosen theoretical framework.

Unlike the inductive approach, which builds theories from observations drawn from the data, this approach will use chosen theories in a top-down manner (Bryman, 2012, p. 24). Hypotheses are developed from chosen theories and tested through the analysis.

3.3 Case Selection Justification and Design

Malaysia offers a valuable case for examining how small, semi-democratic developing states construct their foreign identity and engage in diplomatic cooperation amidst great power rivalry. Strategically located in Southeast Asia and historically non-aligned, Malaysia engages with both American and Chinese led initiatives, such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and its application for BRICS membership in 2024, where it was granted as partner status (Krishnan, 2024). These engagements reflect not only economic pragmatism, but also deeper normative commitments such as multipolarity, Global South Solidarity, and pragmatic multilateralism.

Unlike authoritarian and structurally dependent developing states such as Cambodia, Iran or Russia, whose alignment with China is often driven by regime survival or geopolitical constraints, Malaysia exercise greater autonomy in foreign policymaking. For example, while states like Cambodia maintain trade relations with the U.S. and the West, the government has increasingly leaned towards China due to its non-interference approach, infrastructure financing through initiatives like the BRI, and broader political alignment. This result has resulted in closer relations and growing dependence on Beijing. Meanwhile, Iran and Russia's engagement with China is due to geopolitical isolation with U.S. sanctions and hostile relations with the West, leaving it with limited alternatives and show how some states align with China due to external constraints (Green & Roth, 2021; Blackwill & Fontaine, 2024; Cheng & Lai, 2021).

Unlike countries that lean heavily towards one great power, Malaysia engages both with the U.S. and China by maintaining diplomatic flexibility and an independent foreign policy. It has managed to secure Chinese-led infrastructure investments while also bringing in high-tech investment firms from the U.S. like Nvidia and Texas Instruments. The intensifying U.S.-China rivalry has given Malaysia the potential to enhance its role in the global semiconductor chain (Theam, 2025). In 2023, Malaysia became an attractive destination for semiconductor-related FDI, approving over \$69.5 billion USD, from companies like Intel, Xfusion, Texas-Instruments, and Huatian.

This case is especially relevant now because of Malaysia's rising role in the global semiconductor supply chain, as well as its active participation in multilateral initiatives like the BRI, BRICS, and IPEF. It also reflects on Malaysia's growing focus on strategic independence under Anwar's administration. By applying constructivism and international cooperation theory (ICT) from a constructivist lens, this thesis uses Malaysia as a case to understand how identity and cooperation mechanisms are performed discursively. Therefore, the single case study design allows a focused and in-depth analysis of a Global South state, navigating great power rivalry without aligning exclusively with China or the U.S. This approach allows for theory-building by examining how identity-based diplomacy and cooperation strategies through mechanisms are constructed, practiced and interpreted within the current rivalry (Bhatta, 2019, p. 77).

This has been a key factor for choosing the case study design in this thesis. Other qualitative approaches, such as using services or the thematic analysis of datasets, might have

missed out complex details of Malaysia's diplomatic identity and cooperation strategies in its engagement with China. The case study method enables focused attention on specific diplomatic interactions, providing deeper insights into analyzing Malaysia's diplomatic identity in the context of the U.S.-China rivalry.

Meyer (2001) highlights that one of the strengths of using a case study method is its ability to create rich insights by focusing on a single case. In this thesis, analyzing Malaysia's diplomatic engagement with China allows a close examination of how identity, norms, values, and different cooperation mechanisms shed light in foreign policy discourse. Additionally, case studies can be useful in exploring "how" and "why" type questions, allowing researchers to explore different aspects of complex details within its broader political or social context (Meyer, 2001, p. 330). This flexibility approach is relevant for the purpose of this thesis, to understand how a small, semi-democratic developing state like Malaysia presents expresses its diplomatic identity in a great power rivalry.

Meyer (2001) also warns that researchers using a case design analysis must be conscious of their pre-existing knowledge on the subject and assumptions might shape the analysis. In the context of this thesis, my prior understanding of Malaysia's diplomatic identity and its engagement with China creates both an advantage and a risk of researcher bias (p. 331). It enables a quicker understanding of the case, but also regular ongoing self-reflection on my own perspective. Therefore, my interpretation in this thesis will be reassessed continuously to have a balanced approach throughout the case (p. 311).

Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that case studies are useful not because they confirm theory, but because they can also test, challenge, or even falsify theoretical claims through deep interaction with the subject (p. 234). To reduce the influence of bias in this thesis, this research critically engages with the discourse data to ensure that the analysis aligns with the chosen theoretical framework. By focusing on important diplomatic acts or speeches related to the topic, I aim to test, rather than just accepting its assumptions about Malaysia's identity-driven foreign policy.

Widdowson (2011) notes that case study design face internal validity issues due to the lack of experimental control (p. 27). However, I chose to embrace the strengths of external validity and contextual richness, which are important for interpretive research and case studies. While the findings in this thesis may not apply for every country, they still provide meaningful

insights into how Malaysia, navigates great power rivalry through identity performance and discursive cooperation.

3.4 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used as the main method for analyzing how Malaysia constructs and expresses its diplomatic identity in the U.S.-China rivalry. Rooted in qualitative and interpretive tradition, CDA is applied to understand how language constructs identity, challenge power structures, and cooperation patterns in foreign policy discourse. In this thesis, CDA is applied to examine how Malaysia discursively frames its engagement with China, how Malaysia presents itself diplomatically, and how is this identity is perceived by China and the United States. CDA is a tool that links language to power, viewing it not just a way of describing political reality, but also as a means of actively shaping and constructing it. It highlights how language reflects and reinforces structures of dominance, inequality, discourse, and ideology, especially in how it is used by governments and institutions to produce meaning and maintain authority (Sabido, 2019, pp. 23-24).

CDA views language and discourse as non-neutral, especially in the context of international politics, where it is marked by power imbalances. As Sabido (2019) explains, the distribution of power is created through linguistic manipulation, constructing ‘an apparent natural world’, where unequal relationships and systems are made to seem normal, natural, and unquestionable (p. 24). This process involves not just using language to communicate, but also strategically shaping narratives to legitimize specific identities, positions, or behaviors.

Therefore, CDA is particularly relevant for understanding how smaller states attempt to assert their identity through strategic discourse within an international system dominated by larger powers. In this context, discourse becomes a key tool for smaller countries like Malaysia to assert its diplomatic identity, navigate asymmetrical relationships with China, and project values such as multipolarity, ASEAN norms, and Global South solidarity. This discursive approach aligns with the chosen theoretical framework, such as constructivism and international cooperation theory, which emphasize how language is used to construct identity, shaping shared meanings and framing different forms of cooperation.

The data chosen for this thesis is guided by the CDA framework. The analysis focuses on discourse surrounding Malaysia's engagement with China within the broader context of the U.S.-China rivalry. Building on Sabido's (2019) concept on critical discourse moments (CDMs), this thesis considers key events within the U.S.-China rivalry that trigger heightened discourse involving Malaysia, making diplomatic identity, power asymmetries, and cooperation more discursively visible (p. 37). Based on this approach, the data includes statements made by high-ranking Malaysian representatives, including the prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, as well as media coverage, think tank publications and press statements from Malaysian, Chinese, and American sources. The selected timeframe includes moments when Malaysia's engagement with China became especially visible within the U.S.-China rivalry. These moments include Malaysia's 2024 BRICS application and its acceptance as a partner state, Xi Jinping's 2025 official visit to Malaysia, and the recent escalation of U.S. tariffs imposing on China in 2025, which also indirectly affected Malaysia and drew attention to its position in the rivalry.

Additionally, prime minister Anwar Ibrahim's public comments on Malaysia's position in the U.S.-China rivalry in media interviews, and international forums from 2022 to April 2025, offer further insight into how Malaysia use language to express and shape its foreign policy position. These discursive moments serve as a foundation for analyzing how Malaysia's identity is constructed and interpreted within the ongoing great power rivalry. Besides examining Malaysia's own discourse, CDA is also applied to analyze how Malaysia's engagement with China is perceived and represented by external actors, which is China and the United States through their media coverage, press and official statements.

A key strength of CDA is that researchers can interpret text within their political and historical context where it is created. Sabido (2019) states that the researcher's understanding of these conditions is important to understand how the discourse operates (p. 39). This makes it necessary to clearly identify the context of the study and find the relevant political developments that can shape the function and meaning of the discourse being analyzed. Therefore, by utilizing the CDA approach, this thesis gains the tool to analyze Malaysia's diplomatic discourse with China amidst the U.S.-China rivalry within its historical and political context. This approach allows researchers to engage in a deeper engagement to understand how the use of language can reveal the underlying structures of power, identity, and its positioning in international politics.

While general discourse analysis can describe the content of Malaysia's foreign policy language, CDA is chosen in this thesis because it emphasizes the relationship between language, power, and identity construction. This is especially relevant in the context of Malaysia as a smaller state navigating in the U.S.-China rivalry. CDA provides the tools to examine how Malaysia uses discourse to perform its diplomatic identity, challenge power asymmetries and shape narratives of cooperation. Additionally, this approach also aligns with the chosen theoretical framework for this thesis, which is constructivism and international cooperation theory. Constructivism emphasizes that identity, norms, and meanings are produced through discourse and interactions. International cooperation theory, viewed from a constructivist lens, highlights how different cooperation mechanisms are not merely strategic tools, but can be discursively framed and practiced in different ways that reinforce Malaysia's diplomatic identity. Therefore, CDA enables this thesis to analyze how Malaysia frames its engagement with China, and how these narratives are perceived by the U.S. and China, showing how diplomatic identity is constructed and performed within the great power rivalry.

3.5 Use of AI Tools in the Research Process

Throughout the research process, ChatGPT and Epsilon AI were used as a supportive role to assist with idea development, literature exploration and reflection on the chosen problem formulation. Epsilon was used to find relevant peer-reviewed journals for the literature review section, and ChatGPT also helped to brainstorm ideas and reevaluate the problem formulation, especially in the early stages. While these core ideas and logic came from me, ChatGPT helped organize those thoughts and provided suggestions that made it easier to structure the formulation through multiple rounds of refinement. As a result, this accelerates the process of the early stages problem that researchers like me might face. However, all final decisions were made critically by me. Additionally, During the coding process and theme identifying phase, ChatGPT was also used occasionally to reflect whether specific quotes fit better under one theme or another theme, and providing explanation and reasoning. However, the final decision coding and analytical decision were based on my own judgement.

The use of AI should be approached carefully, especially in academic research because researchers should reflect on their critical engagement and thinking. Since AI provides responses

based on data and patterns found online, it does not contribute to the researcher's role in interpretation and evaluation, especially in a qualitative style research approach.

4.0 Choice of Data

The data for this thesis will consist of texts, interviews with political officials, press releases, mainly from Malaysia, China, and the United States, as well as analysis from U.S. based thinktanks, such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The rationale behind using data from the government, such as from the leaders, foreign ministry, or government agencies is that they have the influence on the ongoing issue or phenomena, as their speeches or statements about the U.S.-China rivalry can effect Malaysia's diplomatic relationship with China, and how those statements made by Malaysia are perceived by China and the United States may shape their response, influencing Malaysia's foreign policy decisions.

While this thesis focuses on Malaysia's diplomatic engagement with China under the leadership of Anwar Ibrahim (2022-2025), most of the data will be analyzed from 2023 to April 2025. This is because Anwar only became the prime minister in late November 2022, resulting in limited public discourse or data from that short period. Therefore, speeches from him or his administration from 2023 onwards will be utilized for coding and analysis. The speech and interviews made by Anwar in various interviews, Q&A from journalists and reporters, and public lectures in universities cover a wide range of topics, such as global political and economic issues, and as well as Malaysia's role in the U.S-China rivalry, and how his administration is handling the rivalry. In addition to his speech, I will also be utilizing press statements made by the ministry of foreign affairs Malaysia on its relationship with China in 2024, where they highlight a range of high-level strategic cooperation and commitments to improve the relationship between the two countries.

Besides using data from the Malaysian side, I will also be utilizing source from China and the United States to understand their perception on Malaysia. Most of these data points from China are in 2025, as they surround key events such as President Xi Jinping's official state visit to Malaysia on April 15-17, with the usage of press releases from Ministry of Foreign Affairs China and Xi Jinping op-ed on Malaysia prior to his visit to Malaysia on April 15. While these data and sources are concentrated in 2024 and 2025, this is not a limitation especially in 2025,

marks a very important moment for China-Malaysia relations due to these public diplomatic events and gestures.

For the U.S. side, the data will consist of a combination of official statements from the American government and analysis from U.S.-based research institutes such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP) and Congressional Research Service (CRS). Comparing to the Malaysian and Chinese data, there is a limited discussion or remarks from U.S. government sources that address on Malaysia's engagement with China or in the U.S.-China rivalry. Available official statements include Secretary Blinken's 2024 dialogue with Anwar Ibrahim and the Joint Statement on the 6th Malaysia-U.S. Senior Officials' Dialogue.

While these official statements rarely address Malaysia's diplomatic positioning in relation to China, they reflect how Malaysia is viewed generally as a strategic partner. To address this gap, this thesis includes analysis from institutions such as the CEIP and CRS. These sources offer perspective into how Malaysia's role is being understood and interprets Malaysia's role in the rivalry.

The CRS report provides an overview of U.S.-Malaysia relations, covering recent political developments, ongoing areas of cooperations, and concerns over China's increasing influence in Malaysia. Meanwhile, CEIP provides policy-related analysis on Malaysia's position in the rivalry, mainly focused on alignment, trade, and regional influence. Although these institutions do not have direct official decision-making power, they reflect and reinforce dominant U.S. foreign policy narratives, still providing analytical supports for government strategies. Rather than challenging these narratives, these reports stay within the government's narrative, providing policy recommendations to support U.S. strategic goals in the rivalry.

5.0 Analysis Strategy

Based on the methodological framework outlined in previous sections, this section will explain how the analysis will be conducted. The analytical process is guided by constructivism and international cooperation theory through qualitative and hermeneutic approach. NVivo software is used for the coding process, identifying patterns and important phrases across the selected data sources. The aim is to organize the selected data into six themes based on the chosen theories, and deductively to interpret Malaysia's foreign policy identity, its engagement

with China, and how this identity is perceived by China and the United States. Table 1 below presents the analysis strategy.

Table 1

Step	Description
1	Deductive coding is based on Constructivism and ICT.
2	Application of In Vivo coding in NVivo to preserve the original discourse.
3	Organizing quotes and codes into six main themes based on chosen theories.
4	Apply Constructivism to analyze how Malaysia's identity shapes its engagement with China.
5	Apply International Cooperation Theory to analyze Malaysia's cooperation mechanisms with China.
6	Apply Constructivism to analyze how Malaysia's identity is perceived by China and the United States
7	Test the proposed hypotheses using the results of the discourse analysis

5.1 Coding Cycles

In qualitative research, coding is an important tool for organizing, categorizing and making sense of complex data. It involves assigning short labels, phrases or part of a text to highlight the key ideas or underlying meanings. These codes can help to organize related data, making it easier to identify the patterns, develop themes, and interpret deeper meanings. Rather than dealing with values and numbers, the coding process in qualitative research focuses on interpreting mainly on language and meaning, allowing researchers to make sense of complex text and understand hidden patterns (Saldaña, 2013, p. 3).

In this thesis, coding served as the starting point for deeper interpretive analysis, rather than being the final product. The process began with the first cycle coding, using In Vivo method and theory-driven codes aligned with the chosen theories. The data was revisited to conduct a second cycle coding, to identify additional relevant material that was missing during the first cycle. New codes were then added to existing themes to strengthen the depth of the analysis.

Since coding in qualitative research is dependent on researcher's interpretation, the meanings found in the chosen data are influenced by the chosen theories and analytical perspective. While this raise questions about validity and reliability, these limitations are acknowledged as part of how meanings are constructed and interpreted in qualitative research within a hermeneutic approach.

5.1.2 In Vivo Coding

For this thesis, I applied In Vivo coding as the main method for analyzing the discourse data. This method of coding involves assigning the codes, either words or short phrases taken directly from the source material. The goal of In Vivo coding is to preserve and maintain the authenticity of the language used in discourse, which often reflects key ideas, values, or identities expressed by the participant (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

This approach helps identify repeated language in the data that reveals repeated recurring topics and similar meanings. Therefore, In Vivo coding was used to detect patterns in the discourse surrounding in Malaysia's role in the U.S.-China rivalry, focusing on how Malaysian officials, the U.S., China, and media actors use language to express how Malaysia's foreign policy identity is framed through its diplomatic engagement with China, and how is this positioning is perceived by the U.S. and China.

Table 2 below presents a set of examples showing how In Vivo coding was applied across six core themes. Each quote was selected for how well it fits the theme and shows a repeated pattern in the data.

Table 2

Theme	In Vivo Quote	Theoretical Interpretation
Global South Solidarity	"We do not have a problem with China so that's why I referred to the issue of China phobia in the West."	Rejects Western narratives of Sinophobia and aligns with Global South identity.
Sovereign Positioning	"Our policies will not waver, we are open, that is our stance..."	Emphasizes Malaysia's autonomy in diplomacy.

ASEAN-Influenced Diplomacy	“For Malaysia’s part, we have always advocated for the peaceful and constructive settlement of all disputes...”	Reflects Malaysia’s use of ASEAN norms and non-confrontational diplomacy.
Cooperation-Reciprocity	“China has always treated us as an equal country. We engage in mutual consultation and respect each other which means a lot to me.”	Emphasizes mutual goodwill as a form of reciprocal cooperation.
U.S. Perception	“Malaysia’s political upheaval and changes in U.S. Indo-Pacific policy...”	Shows how the U.S. views Malaysia as neutral and strategically limited.
China Perception	“China has sincerely helped Malaysia and stood together with Malaysia through thick and thin, and is a trusted friend of Malaysia.”	Highlights China’s perception of Malaysia as a cooperative, reliable partner.

5.1.3 Introduction of Themes and Discourse

In this thesis, six major discourse themes were developed based on coded data. The first theme, Global South Solidarity focuses on how Malaysian officials promotes non-Western narratives, support multipolarity, and reject Sinophobia, and positioning Malaysia as part of a broader Global South identity. The second theme, ASEAN-influenced diplomacy focuses on Malaysia’s emphasis on a non-alignment, consensus-focused diplomacy and peaceful engagement in issues like the South China Sea territorial dispute. The third theme, Sovereign Positioning highlights how Malaysia frames its engagement with China based on national priorities and developmental goals rather than as strategic alignment, reinforcing autonomy and independent foreign policy. The fourth, International Cooperation, based on international cooperation theory, focusing on discursive expressions of reciprocity, iteration, international regime, and power asymmetry in Malaysia’s engagement with China. The fifth theme, China’s perception of Malaysia’s identity, reflecting how Chinese state officials frame Malaysia’s diplomatic identity in the regional and global order. Finally, the sixth theme, U.S. perception of Malaysia, focusing on U.S. actors such as think tanks, and official sources to examine how Malaysia’s positioning in the rivalry is viewed and interpreted by the U.S. strategic discourse.

This also includes moments where Anwar reflect on how the U.S. perceives their diplomatic stance.

The logic behind the Global South Solidarity theme emerged during the coding process through ongoing discourse in which Malaysian officials, especially Prime Minister Anwar, aligned with non-Western actors, especially China, in promoting of a multipolar world order. Since coming to power in November 2022, Anwar and his administration have consistently rejected Western Sinophobia narratives and have framed China as a legitimate alternative partner in global affairs. This theme shows how Malaysia's engagement with China is situated within a Global South narrative that emphasizes inclusivity, fairness, and China's role as a reliable partner in multipolar global order. Through this discourse, Malaysia positions itself as a Global South actor that actively engages with China in the international system while asserting its own diplomatic values and identity in the international system.

The second theme, ASEAN-Influenced Diplomacy, focused on how Malaysian officials, especially Prime Minister Anwar, frame regional issues, like the South China Sea, using ASEAN diplomatic norms and values. These include non-confrontational, dialogue, and peaceful negotiation. Malaysia's diplomatic language shows its preference to use ASEAN-style approaches when dealing with territorial disputes with China, emphasizing on multilateralism and consensus building. This approach highlights Malaysia's regional identity and commitment to non-confrontation.

The third theme, Sovereign Positioning, emerged from a discursive pattern where Malaysian officials, especially Anwar, assert's Malaysia independence and autonomous foreign policy position. In speeches and interviews, Anwar repeatedly emphasizes The Malaysian that Malaysia's engagement with China, whether in trade, diplomacy, or investment, is based on its own national interest, rather than being a sign of alignment or subordination. These statements frame Malaysia's choice as independent, reinforcing the country's position as an independent actor navigating in great power rivalry in its own terms.

The fourth theme, Cooperation with China, is based on international cooperation theory (ICT), interpreted in a constructivist lens. It analyzes how Malaysia discursively frames its cooperation with China with the four mechanisms of cooperation, such as reciprocity, iteration, international regimes, and power asymmetry.

The reciprocity cooperation mechanism appears when Malaysian officials, especially Anwar Ibrahim, frequently emphasize mutual respect in speeches and interviews. Malaysia's cooperation with China is not just based on economic considerations but is framed as a relationship based on mutual respect, where reciprocal cooperation depends on how both sides treat one another. At the same time, the iteration cooperation mechanism appears in Malaysia's discourse, where emphasizes on having expectations of long-term cooperation with China, with the anticipation of futures benefits. Anwar often uses long-term focused language, stressing that the results of current cooperation may not be immediately visible, they will pay off in the future by reinforcing trust and deepening the relationship.

The international regime participation appears in the discourse when Malaysian officials frame cooperation through participation in initiatives such as the BRI and BRICS. These regimes are framed not only as platforms for economic growth and development, but also a place to express shared norms, such as inclusivity, non-Western values, and non-interference. Anwar Ibrahim often commented on Malaysia's participation in these frameworks signals its commitment to multipolarity and its preference for alternative, non-Western-led institutions. Projects like the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL), which is part of China's BRI, are not just framed as infrastructure developments, but as evidence of Malaysia's support for the broader values promoted through the BRI, such as alternative governance models and development cooperation.

The final cooperation mechanism, power asymmetry, appears in Malaysia's official discourse, especially in statements made by Anwar, acknowledges Malaysia as a small state operating within a major power rivalry. However, rather than presenting this power imbalance as a limitation, Malaysia framed its cooperation with China as a non-coercive partnership based on respectful engagement. This form of cooperation is presented as beneficial, and Malaysia does not deny the imbalance. Instead, it used diplomatic language to assert its voice and maintain its independence. This discursive framing shows how Malaysia, despite engaging with a more powerful state, highlights how Malaysia makes its own choices in the relationship.

The final two themes focus on how Malaysia's engagement with China is discursively perceived by China and the U.S. in the context of the rivalry. Chinese state officials and media consistently frame Malaysia as a reliable, cooperative partner that shares Global South values,

supports multipolarity, and respect long-standing traditional ties, such as being the first ASEAN state to recognize China in 1974.

On the other hand, U.S. think tanks, policy analysts, and media official statements tend to describe Malaysia as a pragmatic and low-profile. While they do not criticize Malaysia directly, some U.S. discourse raises some concerns about Malaysia's deepening ties with China, fearing of losing American influence over the country. Still, Malaysia is generally viewed as a neutral actor that maintains flexibility and avoids hard alignment.

Additionally, Prime Minister Anwar also acknowledged these external perceptions, especially from the U.S. he stated that Malaysia's relationship with the U.S. does not attract strategic attention as an important partner like the Philippines or Japan. This discourse reflects Malaysia's awareness of its non-aligned positioning in the rivalry, and signals Malaysia's choice to stay independent without aligning with any major power.

Analysis 6.1

6.1.1 Exploring Constructivism Theory and Discourse

“They should not preclude us from being friendly to one of our import neighbors, precisely China. That was the context, and if they have problems with China, they should not impose it upon us. We do not have a problem with China so that's why I referred to the issue of China phobia in the West.” – Prime Minister of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim, respond to an Australian journalist during a press conference in Australia, 2024.

From the quote above, it represents a critical discourse moment, where Malaysia performs a discursive resistance against U.S. narratives of Sinophobia. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim directly challenging the Western narrative of “*China phobia*”, a discourse often used by the U.S. to frame China as a threat. This narrative frequently portrays China as an authoritarian state, trying to challenge or replace the U.S.-led international order, discursively influencing how smaller or non-western states like Malaysia, are expected to interpret and respond to China's rise.

In the same statement, Anwar has asserted Malaysia to have the rights to maintain friendly and cooperative relations with China, despite the growing geopolitical tensions. His outright rejection of *China phobia* can reflect a broader diplomatic stance that is based on

Malaysia's identity, as a non-aligned, Global South actor that supports multipolarity and inclusivity. Through the constructivist lens, Anwar's choice of words shows that how Malaysia constructs and perform its foreign policy identity by asserting its autonomy and choosing its own foreign policy direction. This discursive moment also highlights how Malaysia is actively resisting Western efforts to frame China as an adversary and trying to project its position as a Global South actor in navigating the rivalry.

The following quote by the prime minister of Malaysia in an interview with CGTN in 2025, stated that *'there are no issues between us, and I don't want to treat other people's problems as if they were ours. We believe that our relationship with China should not only continue but also be further elevated.'* In the response to U.S. concerns over Malaysia's friendly ties with China, Anwar openly rejects the framing of China as a threat. Rather than accepting outside narratives that frames China as a threat, Malaysia engages in counter-framing, by framing its relationship with China in its own terms, emphasizing respect, peaceful coexistence, and independence in foreign policy. From a constructivist lens, Malaysia is not just automatically responding to the rising pressure in the U.S.-China rivalry, but actively constructing and performing its own diplomatic identity rooted in the values of non-alignment, and support for Global South solidarity.

The statement where Anwar expressed Malaysia's relationship with China should "not only continued but also further elevated", signals Malaysia's intention to strengthen its engagement, not as alignment with China, but as a continuation of practicing its independent foreign policy, reaffirming its rejection from outside pressure not to engage in China in the U.S.-China rivalry. Therefore, through this discourse, Malaysia rejects the idea that its engagement with China should not be viewed through the lens of the great power rivalry, but it should be guided by its own terms through national interests, and diplomacy autonomy. This statement also shows that how Malaysia, through a constructivist lens, discursively navigates in the rivalry by distancing itself from the U.S. narrative on China as a threat, reinforcing its identity based on peaceful coexistence, multipolarity, development cooperation rather than supporting containment strategies promoted by the U.S. against China.

"We see this new the present attitude of the leadership in China, contrary to you know protectionism arrogance of power, unilateralism so you see this willingness to engage

other understand other cultures other values other civilization, but the fundamental is the commitment to human values and justice.” – Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, interview with CGTN in 2024.

From this statement, Anwar engages in a discursive framing by highlighting China’s openness to engage in dialogue, cultural understanding, and shared human values. He contrasts this in the same statement with *“protectionism, arrogance of power, and unilateralism”*, where these traits are implicitly associated with the United States, especially within the context of great power rivalries. Anwar’s indirect critique on the a broader disagreement with the U.S. approaches that emphasizes on dominance over other nations, unilateral decision making, which Malaysia views it as incompatible as it values on inclusiveness and multipolarity. By understanding these differences, Anwar presents China as a nation who is more willing to engage with other states through dialogue, emphasizing respect and understanding for different civilizations, positioning it as a cooperative and value influenced actor in global affairs.

From a constructivist lens, this framing is important because it helps to understand how Malaysia to understand China. These lenses are based on mutual respect, inclusivity, and values that aligns with Malaysia’s Global South orientation. Rather than seeing China as a threat and should be contained, Malaysia sees these shared values and beliefs with China can help to legitimize their actions to have a deeper engagement. This moment helps to reinforce Malaysia’s diplomatic identity and engagement with China is not only shaped by material interests, but also by how it interprets and understand China’s actions and behavior through its own diplomatic values and worldview.

“The strategic significance of bilateral relations has been further highlighted, which is crucial to not only their peoples but also the future of this region, enhancing the unity and cooperation of the “Global South”. The two leaders will commit to promoting an equal and orderly multipolar world and a universally beneficial and inclusive economic globalization.” - Joint Statement between the People’s Republic of China and Malaysia on Deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership towards China-Malaysia Community with a Shared Future (2024).

This statement shows how Malaysia’s engagement with China is not only bilateral, but also symbolically part of the broader the idea of projecting Global South identity. Malaysia discursively positions along with China through supporting alternative vision of international

order, through advocacy for a multipolarity and inclusivism. Additionally, Anwar stated, *“China has the moral high ground to advocate the principle of a shared future”*, emphasizing Malaysia’s support and view of China as a legitimate state in promoting global values from the Global South. By supporting China has the *“moral high ground”*, Malaysia indirectly challenges the U.S.-led narrative that China is a threat or authoritarian adversary. This moment a discursive challenge based on values where Malaysia’s engages with China’s moral framing to challenge dominant Western discursive order, reinforcing Malaysia’s identity rooted in Global South values and postcolonial perspectives.

From a constructivist perspective, this discourse reflects Malaysia’s diplomatic identity performance, reinforce its position as a Global South actor that supports efforts to promote the idea of inclusivity and multipolarity in the international order. Instead of responding to great power rivalry, Malaysia put forward its own values and vision for international politics, framing its engagement with China as part of the broader identity, not strategic alignment.

“Is the South China Sea issue caused by China? No? As a maritime nation our maritime border issue with Thailand remains unresolved, we are currently engaged in negotiations with Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia and the Philippines, why does this issue seem to become more serious only when it involves China, it's as if the South China Sea issue is only about China?” – Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, interview with South China Morning Post in 2024.

Anwar’s response above shows a challenge to U.S.-driven narratives that frame China as the sole aggressor. By pointing out that Malaysia also has ongoing maritime disputes with other ASEAN nations, such as Singapore, Brunei, Thailand, and others, he reframes the issue as a broader regional issues rather than being a China-specific issue. His statement pushes back against the narrative that points out China as the sole aggressor in the region that are engaging in territorial expansion. Additionally, Anwar indirectly criticizes how the U.S. and the Western media framing that *‘South China Sea issue is only about China’*, thereby selectively escalating tensions in the region that could lead to an arms race in the region.

From a constructivist lens, this discourse reflects Malaysia’s attempt to reshape the narrative on the regional security issues by resisting externally influenced perceptions by the U.S. on China as the only aggressor or threat in the dispute. Rather than subscribing to the U.S. led “China threat” narrative, Malaysia maintains its foreign policy identity, which is grounded in

regional diplomacy, Global South Solidarity through rejecting the narrative that its engagement with China should be militarized or adversarial. In doing so, Malaysia signals that it does not view China through a threat-based perspective, but through normative frameworks that utilize dialogues, peaceful cooperation and multipolar cooperation. From a constructivist perspective, this also reflects Malaysia's belief that Global South partners, like China, does not need to engage with one another through military build-ups and confrontations over maritime disputes, but through mutual respect and shared development goals.

Therefore, the analysis above reflects on the Global South Solidarity Theme, where Malaysia's engagement with China is justified through not alignment or submission, but through values of multipolarity, mutual respect, and rejection of the 'Sinophobia' narratives from the U.S. that portrays China as a threat. Through a constructivist lens, this theme shows that how Malaysia discursively constructs and performs its diplomatic identity when engaging with China, while resisting the Western threat narratives.

"Without detracting from the contentions of the age of uncertainty, an objective overview of the current geopolitical landscape projects the Global South as showing signs of greater strategic independence. In any event, this development shouldn't be a cause for concern." – Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, 36th Asia-Pacific Roundtable (APR), 2023.

Anwar's statement reflects Malaysia broader diplomatic approach, especially with China, within the context of the Global South, signaling a clear message of its independent foreign policy stance amidst of the intensifying great power rivalry. By emphasizing on "*strategic independence*", Anwar frames that Malaysia's foreign policy that avoids dependency on any single major powers, especially in relation with its ties to China. Rather than aligning with China out of pressure or necessity, Malaysia engages with China on its own terms, influenced by values of non-alignment principles, mutual development, and historical continuity. From a constructivist perspective, this framing reflects how Malaysia actively constructs and performs its diplomatic identity, positioning itself as an independent actor rather than being passive recipient from great powers influence. Malaysia's long-standing peaceful ties with China help legitimize its current engagement, reinforcing an identity based on autonomy, neutrality and shared Global South norms.

In the same quote, Anwar indirectly dismisses U.S. concerns over Malaysia's engagement with China *"such development shouldn't be a cause for concern."* This response rejects the assumption that closer relationship between Malaysia and China represents alignment in geopolitics, instead reaffirming Malaysia's sovereign right to pursue an independent foreign policy. This statement reinforces Malaysia's discursive identity as a strategic flexible actor, resisting hard alignment pressures and instead asserts its independence in the U.S.-China rivalry.

"This should not come at our expense because Malaysia is a free independent and sovereign nation. Our policies will not waver, we are open, that is our stance and ASEAN countries happen to share the same view. That is why we stand with the Chinese government for the well-being of our people, and for our national economic interests as well as for the overall development and stability of our country." – Anwar Ibrahim, interview with CGTN, 2025

In this statement, Anwar performs Malaysia's diplomatic identity as a sovereign and independent actor, engaging with China based on not coercion or pressure to form alliance, but based on national development goals and mutual respect. The expression that *"our policies will not waiver"* shows that Malaysia's dedication to act independently, an identity trait that can be traced in its non-aligned history. While Malaysia emphasizes partnership with China, Anwar frames it as not an alignment but as an independent decision, focusing on pursuing economic stability and regional development. From a constructivist perspective, this framing reinforces Malaysia's sovereign diplomatic identity, one that resists external pressure and avoids alliance building in the U.S.-China rivalry. Instead, it signals Malaysia's commitment to continue its foreign policy that is based on neutrality, regional consensus, and strategic autonomy. Anwar indirectly reject the United States' views that see Malaysia's growing ties with China as a shifting in alignment and instead emphasizes that Malaysia makes foreign policy decisions based on its own goals and values.

The analysis above reflects on the sovereign positioning theme, where Malaysia performs its foreign policy identity as an independent actor making decisions based on its own terms. Rather than picking sides in the U.S.-China rivalry, Malaysia engages with China that is based on its longstanding principles of non-alignment, strategic flexibility, and pragmatic cooperation. Malaysia's approach also reflects the beliefs that cooperating and engaging with China can offer

more benefits than confrontation, reinforcing its preference to engage with China rather than seeing them as a threat.

“In the South China Sea, we are seeing elements of major power rivalry seeping into the territorial disputes, intentionally or otherwise. For Malaysia’s part, we have always advocated for the peaceful and constructive settlement of all disputes, in accordance with the universally recognised norms and principles” – Anwar Ibrahim, Asia-Pacific Roundtable, 2023.

This quote reflects Malaysia’s preference for utilizing ASEAN-style diplomacy in managing regional tensions or disputes, especially in the South China Sea. Rather than escalating the issue by aligning with the U.S. to confront China, Malaysia under Anwar advocates for peaceful resolution aligned with international norm, based on non-interference, multilateral dialogue, and non-confrontation. These are core ASEAN diplomacy values that align with Malaysia’s identity as a non-aligned and consensus-seeking actor. From a constructivist perspective, Malaysia use ASEAN frameworks not only to promote regional stability, but also to assert strategic independence while engaging with China.

In the same statement, Malaysia’s emphasis on the *“peaceful and constructive settlement of all disputes”* discursively performs its diplomatic identity based on ASEAN-led frameworks. From a constructivist perspective, this shows that how Malaysia uses regional norms not only to maintain strategic independence but also to navigate the great power rivalry with China. This normative framework enables Malaysia to cooperate with China and indirectly resisting external pressure to treat the issue as a military threat. By relying on ASEAN influenced mechanisms, Additionally, Anwar also signals confidence in utilizing its regional diplomacy for managing disputes with China without the need for intervention from external powers.

“We have never felt threatened although there are problems, we have always resolved them through consultation and friendly negotiations.” – Anwar Ibrahim, interview with CGTN, 2025.

Building from the previous quote, this statement reinforces Malaysia’s preference for quiet diplomacy as a key feature in its engagement style. It shows how Malaysia’s consistent diplomatic posture towards China when it comes to disputes, based on utilizing dialogues and mutual respect rather than confrontation. Anwar emphasizes that the solution for the dispute is addressed with consultation and negotiations, which are core elements of the ASEAN-style

diplomacy. His focus on resolving disputes quietly reflects Malaysia's practice of quiet diplomacy, a key part of ASEAN's non-confrontational diplomacy method. This approach avoids public escalation and favors private communication to resolve the issue or raise concerns. Such an approach allows Malaysia to maintain stable relations with China without antagonizing them in the U.S.-China rivalry.

From a constructivist perspective, this reveals how Malaysia's diplomatic identity is shaped by established regional habits, emphasizing quiet diplomacy as a preferred method of diffuse tensions. Rather than reacting to major power tensions, Malaysia engages with China through familiar diplomatic methods. This reinforces that Malaysia's approach is based on its habits and regional principles, where they felt not in pressure to align with the U.S. and its allies to confront China over the maritime dispute.

Even if it's not always effective, Malaysia remains committed to using ASEAN-led methods to manage regional disputes in the long term. This is further shown in the following quote made by Anwar Ibrahim during an interview with the South China Morning Post in 2024:

"Do we have a problem? Yes. Have we encountered any serious clashes or problems? No. Do we think this is going to be easily resolved? No. But what is the mechanism? Discussions, dialogue. Will we then concede? No." – Anwar Ibrahim, interview with South China Morning Post, 2024.

The quote above captures Malaysia's consistent approach on solving regional disputes, especially in the South China Sea with China. Anwar emphasizes dialogue and discussion as the main mechanism for addressing disputes, rather than adopting confrontational postures or framing the issue as a security threat. This approach reflects Malaysia's consistent use of ASEAN diplomatic norms, which were discursively expressed through repeated emphasis on dialogues, non-interference, and regional consensus, shaping how Malaysia performs its diplomatic identity. In the same quote, although Anwar acknowledged that the dispute *'will not going to be easily resolved'*, he reinforces Malaysia's commitment to use diplomacy as a primary method. This also highlight how Malaysia, despite recognizing the limitations of ASEAN diplomacy mechanisms, continues to rely on them in managing regional tensions and disputes.

This quote also shows Malaysia's practice of quiet diplomacy, where its stance and concerns are communicated through private negotiations and diplomatic channels, with limited rhetoric rather than public confrontation. While Anwar clearly states that Malaysia will not 'concede' on territorial issues, he emphasizes that dialogue and discussion as the only acceptable mechanism for Malaysia to engage with China, maintaining the tone of non-confrontation, regional stability, and mutual respect rather than escalation. From a constructivist perspective, Malaysia discursively asserting its position, resisting pressure to join alliance blocs and performing a diplomatic identity based in regional norms. Malaysia's engagement with China on maritime disputes is shaped by its own decisions, not outside pressure, and influenced by long-standing regional values it continues to project. Through this discourse, Malaysia signals that its engagement with China, even in sensitive issues like maritime disputes, is guided by its normative commitments rather than geopolitical rivalry.

The analysis above reflects the ASEAN-influenced diplomacy theme, where Malaysia manages its tensions with China through regional norms and multilateral frameworks. Malaysia engages with China through ASEAN mechanisms of consultation, non-confrontation, and quiet diplomacy. This approach reinforces Malaysia's belief that regional disputes are best to be solved through dialogues and not escalation, and that these consultation and negotiations with China can offer more long-term benefits than confrontation.

6.1.2 Exploring International Cooperation Theory and Discourse

"China has always treated us as an equal country. We engage in mutual consultation and respect each other which means a lot to me. We engage in talks on everything, of course in any bilateral relationship, there will always be some points of agreement and some issues that may cause discontent, but we always resolve them through friendly consultation" – Anwar Ibrahim, interview with CGTN, 2025.

This quote highlights how the principle of reciprocity is discursively constructed in Malaysia's cooperation in China. Anwar highlights how 'mutual consultation' and 'respect', form part of the normative foundation for bilateral engagement. Additionally, Anwar stated that China has treated Malaysia as an 'equal country', shows that the relationship is being portrayed as fair and respectful, signaling that cooperation is built not based on hierarchy or dependency, but being seen and treated as equals.

From an international cooperation theory, this discourse frames reciprocity not as transactional exchange, but a value-based interaction based on mutual recognition. Anwar's language discursively constructs Malaysia's diplomatic as one that values respect, fairness and symbolic equality. From a constructivist-ICT lens, this identity framing becomes a condition for reciprocal cooperation, where Malaysia engages with China not for strategic considerations, but because the relationship between the two countries reflects Malaysia's identity as a Global South actor that values fairness, equality and respectful partnerships.

"About our relationship with China, as neighboring countries, China and Malaysia enjoy smooth and trouble-free relations. China's economic development can bring benefits to Malaysia so I'm taking a pragmatic position, as long as the other country treats us with kindness, we should respond with even greater kindness." – Anwar Ibrahim, interview with CGTN, 2025.

In this quote, Malaysia frames reciprocity cooperation not just as a strategic calculation, but as a diplomatic value rooted in mutual goodwill. Anwar's emphasis on treating other countries with "even greater kindness", reflects a value-driven approach in Malaysia's foreign policy, where reciprocal cooperation is not only encouraged but it is also expected. From an international cooperation theory perspective, reciprocity refers to the expectation that cooperative gestures will be returned in the same kind when expressed to other states. In this statement, Malaysia acknowledges that the continuation of "smooth and trouble-free relations" with China to mutual respect. Even when there are disagreements between the two countries, the shared expectation of engaging in reciprocal cooperation with mutual respect and consultation can help to diffuse tensions in the relationship before it escalates, reinforcing stable bilateral relations.

From a constructivist-ICT perspective, this framing reflects Malaysia's identity as a value-driven actor. Malaysia's cooperation with China through reciprocal norms is reflected in its commitment to fairness and ethical diplomacy, rather than merely reacting to strategic necessity, it is a choice, not mandatory. Rather than seeing China as a threat and reacting hostile, Malaysia's foreign policy identity when cooperating with China through reciprocity allows them to engage with China confidently even within the broader context of the U.S.-China rivalry.

"I have popularized is important is of course also the principle of reciprocity oh that means, what you don't want to be happening to you, you should not do it to others. I mean that is a very

basic human principle, what is right, you know? That's why we reject injustice or preach hatred, or colonialism, or arrogance, or protectionism.”- Anwar Ibrahim, interview with CGTN, 2025.

This quote explores Malaysia’s conception of reciprocity cooperation that is beyond strategic calculations, based on moral principles. Anwar presents reciprocity as a basic ethical standard when it comes to diplomacy and cooperation, where he stated, “what you don’t want to be happening to you, you should not do it to others”. This framing shifts reciprocity as a valued-based practice and exchange based on fairness, empathy, and avoiding provocation. By utilizing moral reasoning into Malaysia’s foreign policy language, Anwar frames Malaysia as a principle and moral driven actor. Additionally, Anwar’s rejection of injustice, hatred, arrogance and protectionism behavior signals Malaysia’s commitment to engage in respectful and fair in international diplomacy. Through this, Malaysia’s reciprocal approach also reflects a deeper normative commitment, where Malaysia expects that respect and fairness should be mutual, and diplomacy should be conducted by these values. From a constructivist-ICT perspective, this shows how Malaysia’s idea of reciprocity cooperation is shaped by moral values and reflected how Malaysia engages cooperation with other countries.

In summary, Malaysia sees reciprocity is more just than returning a favor. It is framed as a diplomatic ethic based on fairness, respect, and mutual understanding. These values discursively shown in Malaysia’s engagement with China, reinforcing a cooperative relationship built on shared principles.

“You see, we in our generation have to think of the future, and what the seeds we plant now, will determine not necessarily that we can benefit from it immediately but then is to plan for the future.” – Anwar Ibrahim, interview with CGTN, 2024.

This quote captures Malaysia’s long-term approach in its cooperation with China, emphasizing that bilateral cooperation between the two countries is not about gaining immediate results or returns, but about laying the groundwork for sustained collaboration. From the lens of international cooperation theory, this reflects the mechanisms for iteration cooperation, where repeated interactions between the two countries over time build trust, commitment, and predictability. In the same quote, Anwar’s metaphor of “what the seeds we plant now”, highlights how Malaysia views its engagement and cooperation with China as an evolving process, one that grows through reinforcing trust, continuation of dialogues, and iterative cooperations. Anwar

also further states “we have to think of the future”, signaling that current decisions are made with future generations in mind. This also reflects an iterative approach, strengthening ties between both countries over time, not just for immediate gains, but to lay a foundation for a stable, consistent partnership that future leaders can continue.

“President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim reached an important consensus on jointly building a Malaysia-China community with a shared future, making a historic milestone that guides the development of bilateral relations, further expands strategic cooperation, and opens a new chapter in Malaysia-China relations.” - Joint Statement Between the People's Republic of China and Malaysia, 2025.

This quote reflects how Malaysia frames its cooperation with China as a deepening and evolving process rather than being as a single one-off engagement. The wording ‘shared future’ and ‘historic milestone’ in the statement, shows that the relationship is being portrayed as cumulative progress. This shows that the bilateral relationships were formed over time through trust and repeated engagement between the two countries. From the lens of international cooperation theory, this reflects the mechanisms of iteration cooperation, where repeated and structured interactions create predictability and sustaining partnerships. Viewing from a constructivist-ICT lens, Malaysia’s commitment on ‘community with a shared future’ and ‘a new chapter’, shows that how it performs its diplomatic identity through cooperation, based on long-term thinking, being consistent and reliable. Rather than reacting to short-term changes in the U.S.-China rivalry, Malaysia emphasizes consistency and shared goals as the foundation to engage with China.

The analysis above reflects the iteration theme, where Malaysia’s cooperation with China is shaped by repeated diplomatic interactions that build long-term trust, consistency and shared goals. Rather than reacting to short-term changes in the U.S.-China rivalry, Malaysia’s reinforce its diplomatic identity as a reliable partner while engaging with China.

“The Belt and Road Initiative has become central to our infrastructure and development landscape. Large-scale projects like the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) are set to be transformative, while stimulating regional economic growth and creating new opportunities for businesses and communities alike.” Anwar Ibrahim, speech at Peking University, 2024.

This quote highlights how Malaysia frames its participation in Chinese-led international regimes, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as being pragmatic and future focused. The BRI is not portrayed as an infrastructure plan, but also an opportunity for Malaysia's national development goals. Malaysia's participation reflects its support for alternative institutions and development frameworks, signaling its confidence that alternative non-Western initiatives like the BRI as credible options alongside existing international frameworks.

Anwar also mentioned in another interview that *"So you have seen measures, either the Belt and Road Initiative, or some other programs that's been introduced by the Chinese government and more importantly to be able to have you know frank exchange and new interaction internationally is amazing!"* This further shows that how Malaysia views its engagement with the BRI as part of its broader diplomatic identity, valuing openness in multipolar cooperation through regime participation like the BRI.

From an international cooperation theory perspective, Malaysia's participation in the BRI represents regime-based cooperation, where institutional frameworks provide shared norms and values for sustained cooperation. Viewing ICT from a constructivist lens, Malaysia's involvement in the BRI is not driven by short-term gains, such as securing infrastructure projects like the ECRL, but it reflects a broader diplomatic choice to expand its infrastructure development partnerships beyond traditional Western frameworks. Malaysia's engagement with the BRI signals trust in China, as a reliable development partner, aligning with its broader effort to pursue development through non-Western led frameworks.

"China welcomes Malaysia as a BRICS partner country. Its inclusion in the organization aligns with the historic trend of the Global South's pursuit of solidarity-driven collective advancement and serves the common interests of developing countries." – Chinese Foreign Ministry Press, 2025.

This quote highlights Malaysia's increasing alignment with alternative, non-Western international regimes like BRICS, signaling its participation was driven by Global South values and supports a shifting in global order. Malaysia's participation in BRICS is part of the larger movement towards polarity and shared progress among developing nations. From the perspective of international cooperation theory, Malaysia's participation in BRICS reflects a regime-based

cooperation, where nations participate in these institutions and frameworks with shared norms and values to promote opportunities for political and economic cooperation.

Viewing this from a constructivist-ICT lens, Malaysia's participation in BRICS performs a diplomatic identity that supports non-Western institutional frameworks to promote inclusive development and global fairness. Malaysia's participation in BRICS signals support for China's push to create a more inclusive global order where China will play an important role, signaling a preference for cooperation outside Western-led systems.

"The world was no longer unipolar, with BRICS providing a ray of hope that there are checks and balances in the world. We can no longer accept the scenario where the West wants to control the discourse because the fact is they are not colonial powers anymore and independent countries should be free to express themselves." - Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, quoted in Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024

This quote reflects Malaysia's discourse alignment with China through BRICS, where Anwar frames the organization as a counterbalance to Western-dominated institutions. His comments advocated for a more equal global governance system, allows countries like Malaysia and China to assert their voice through organizations like BRICS. In this context, BRICS becomes more than just an economic or diplomatic platform as it allows countries like Malaysia to perform its diplomatic identity as a sovereign and independent Global South actor.

From the international cooperation theory perspective, Malaysia's participation in BRICS signals international regime-based cooperation that advocates for shared values rather than strategic alignment from powerful countries like China. Malaysia engages with China through BRICS not because for material interests alone, but because the organization support norms of inclusivity and postcolonial identity. From a constructivist-ICT lens, Malaysia's participation is also performing its own identity, resisting Western discursive dominance and reinforcing its commitment to multipolarity and non-western value driven diplomacy aligns with its support for China's role in promoting an alternative global order.

The analysis above reflects the international-regime theme, where Malaysia's engagement in international regimes like the BRI and BRICS reflects more than a strategic calculation. It signals a value-driven approach that supports multipolarity, development

cooperation and postcolonial discourse, aligning with China's alternative vision on global governance.

"I must emphasize that although China is a major power with a strong economy and formidable military strength, we have never felt any sense of trouble or pressure from it." – Anwar Ibrahim, interview with CGTN, 2025

This quote highlights how Malaysia discursively manages its asymmetrical cooperation with China by emphasizing the lack of coercive actions. Anwar acknowledged that China possesses a stronger economy and military power, but reframes the relationship and cooperation as non-threatening, signaling that asymmetry does not automatically translate to being dominated. From the lens of international cooperation theory, this suggests that even in unequal relationships, cooperation is still possible for weaker states like Malaysia, perceive stronger partner as respectful and non-threatening.

From a constructivist-ICT perspective, this statement performs Malaysia's diplomatic identity as a smaller but independent actor, confident in engaging with major powers like China. Malaysia justified its continued cooperation with China by rejecting the narrative that power imbalance will undermine its own sovereignty. It maintains its independence and shows that cooperating with larger powers does not mean sacrificing its own interests or independence.

"We manage this as a small country. I can't change the world. I can at least assure them that we will continue with this relationship to the benefit of both." – Anwar Ibrahim, interview with Council of Foreign Relations, 2023.

This quote shows how Malaysia discursively managed its asymmetrical cooperation with China. Anwar acknowledges Malaysia's position as a smaller power but frame the relationship with China as mutually beneficial and not submissive. His comments that 'I can't change the world', signaling that Malaysia does not have sufficient influence or power to dictate the terms of cooperation, but yet still see the benefits in engaging with China. Despite the power imbalance, Malaysia exercises strategic agency, choosing cooperation not out of pressure, but because it aligns with national interests. This reflects a pragmatic approach, acknowledging its own influence and power limitations while still deciding how to engage cooperation on its own terms.

The following quote by Anwar “*We need to stop them in private, very forcibly on some of these contentious issues.*” Reflects how Malaysia manages its asymmetrical cooperation with China. Rather than using public criticisms or confrontations, Malaysia uses quiet diplomacy, a strategic approach for smaller states to deal with more powerful actors. In the context of power asymmetry, open confrontation might risk damaging its cooperation ties with China or risking retaliation, so Malaysia uses private channels to raise its concerns and protect its interests without harming cooperation. The use of quiet diplomacy to deal with China allows Malaysia to remain assertive despite having limited leverage, raising concerns privately while avoiding public escalation. This discursive strategy allows Malaysia to raise concerns to maintain diplomatic control on how cooperation happens, preserving a cooperative tone even in an asymmetrical condition.

From international cooperation theory perspective, given that Malaysia’s limited leverage in a power-imbalanced relationship, direct public confrontation with China is not strategic or feasible. Instead, one of Malaysia’s options is to voice its concerns through private diplomatic channels, a tactic that allows it to maintain its existing cooperation while still defending its national interests. From a constructivist-ICT lens, this behavior performs Malaysia’s diplomatic identity as a small but principled actor that values sovereignty. The use of quiet diplomacy becomes a discursive method to protect its sovereignty without damaging its cooperation with China. Despite the unequal cooperation, Malaysia signals to China that cooperation is not unconditional alignment.

The analysis above reflects the power asymmetry cooperation theme, where Malaysia engages with China not as a subordinate, but as a rational and sovereign state. Cooperation is maintained despite the power imbalance, through non-confrontational methods like quiet diplomacy, allowing Malaysia’s identity as a smaller power to remain independent, even when cooperating with a stronger states like China.

6.1.3 China’s Perception of Malaysia: A Constructivist Discourse Analysis

“In the next 50 years, the two countries must continue to seize the initiative, stay ahead of the times, and build a high-level strategic China-Malaysia community with a shared future, so as to

deliver more benefits for the two peoples and make a greater contribution to regional prosperity and stability.” – Chinese Foreign Ministry Press, 2025.

This quote reflects China’s long-term vision of its relationship with Malaysia not only as cooperative but strategic, inclusive and future-focused. By promoting a “sharing future” and promoting “regional prosperity”, China perceives Malaysia as a valued, trusted partner in shaping regional development and stability. The press statement referencing the next “50 years” signals a continuity and commitment to bilateral ties.

From a constructivist perspective, this statement discursively frames China’s approval of Malaysia’s diplomatic identity as a reliable regional Global South partner. Rather than framing Malaysia through hierarchical lens, China discursively recognizes Malaysia’s role as an equal partner in shaping and promoting regional norms and developments. This external validation reinforces Malaysia’s constructed identity as a non-aligned, inclusive, reliable and norm-driven actor. This highlights that recognition by powerful states like China is important in sustaining and legitimizing Malaysia’s identity in the U.S.-China rivalry.

“Throughout the years, China has sincerely helped Malaysia and stood together with Malaysia through thick and thin, and is a trusted friend of Malaysia.” – Chinese Foreign Ministry Press, 2025.

This quote reflects how China discursively affirms Malaysia’s identity as a reliable and longstanding partner. By emphasizing the shared history and mutual trust that both nations had shared, China frames the relationship deeply rooted in solidarity as Global South nations. Words like “through thick and thin” and “trusted friend” construct a relationship through historical bond and mutual trust, framing Malaysia as more than just an economically motivated partner. From a constructivist perspective, this discourse reinforces Malaysia’s identity as a reliable and stable Global South actor in China’s perspective. China acknowledges Malaysia’s consistent diplomatic behavior and its alignment with broader shared values, such as non-interference, peaceful development and multipolarity.

This narrative is further supported by China’s statement that “it will work with Malaysia and other ASEAN countries to combat the undercurrents of geopolitical and camp-based confrontation, as well as the countercurrents of unilateralism and protectionism.” From a

constructivist lens, this framing shows that Malaysia as an ideal partner in China's regional goals, rejecting bloc-based rivalries and supportive of a multipolar and cooperative regional order. It affirms Malaysia's identity as a partner committed to stability, rejection of protectionism and inclusive development in a great power rivalry.

6.1.4 The United States' Perception of Malaysia: A Constructivist Discourse Analysis

"It is perhaps understandable if Malaysia's relations with the United States do not capture the same kind of attention as those involving China, Japan, or the Philippines. Because it is neither an alliance nor particularly contentious, it often seems as if the relationship is destined to hide in plain sight." –Anwar Ibrahim, University of Berkeley, 2024

This quote reflects how the United States perceives Malaysia as a partner in the Indo-Pacific region. Anwar's statement acknowledges that Malaysia, comparing to other countries in the region, does not receive the same strategic attention as treaty allies or important security partners. In the U.S. perspective, Malaysia is seen as "neither an alliance nor particularly contentious" and therefore limiting its role to be a potential state to counterweight China's growing influence in the region. The comparison between Malaysia to the Philippines is especially revealing in the quote, as the U.S. views the Philippines as a more important partner in the region, due to the willingness to take a more confrontational stance against China, especially in the South China Sea. Meanwhile, Malaysia, maintains a more quiet, non-aligned position, which makes it less attractive to the U.S. in countering China.

From a constructivist perspective, this perception arises because Malaysia's diplomatic approach, values, and its identity as a non-aligned actor does not align with the U.S. preference for a clear strategic alignment, especially in the broader context of the U.S.-China rivalry. Malaysia's non-aligned stance, rooted in ASEAN norms and Global South values, goes against the U.S. preference for partners who clearly take sides in the Indo-Pacific region.

"Malaysia's political upheaval and changes in U.S. Indo-Pacific policy have led to uncertainties about the future of the relationship. Many observers argue that Malaysian sensitivities about aligning with the United States constrain the establishment of a deeper strategic relationship." – Congressional Research Service, Malaysia, 2025.

This quote highlights how U.S. analysts perceive Malaysia as an uncertain and hesitant partner in the Indo-Pacific region due to its non-aligned diplomatic posture. Malaysian “sensitivities about aligning with the United States”, reflects a broader perception that Malaysia purposely keeps its distance to avoid major power alignment or provoking China, therefore limiting its potential to be a strategic partner for the U.S. From a constructivist perspective, this perception comes from Malaysia’s performance as an independent identity, guided by values such as sovereignty, non-interference, and non-confrontation posture. Rather than joining alliance out of strategic necessity, Malaysia prefers flexible approach, such as dialogue-based mechanisms within regional frameworks like ASEAN-influenced mechanisms to manage tension with China, rather than aligning through security alliances with the U.S.

“As a militarily weaker state in an increasingly uncertain external environment, Malaysia prioritizes the goals of preserving its sovereignty, exercising its agency to continue its energy exploration activities in the South China Sea, and concentrating on pressing domestic tasks while simultaneously avoiding armed conflict and big power entrapment.” - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024.

This quote reflects how the United States views Malaysia’s foreign policy as cautious but strategically calculated. Malaysia is seen as a state that carefully balance external pressures while protecting its sovereignty and autonomy. In the U.S. discourse, Malaysia is behaving pragmatically to avoid conflict and alliance entanglement while pursuing its national interests. From a constructivist perspective, this perception indirectly acknowledges that Malaysia’s identity as a non-align nation, committed to independence and regional stability.

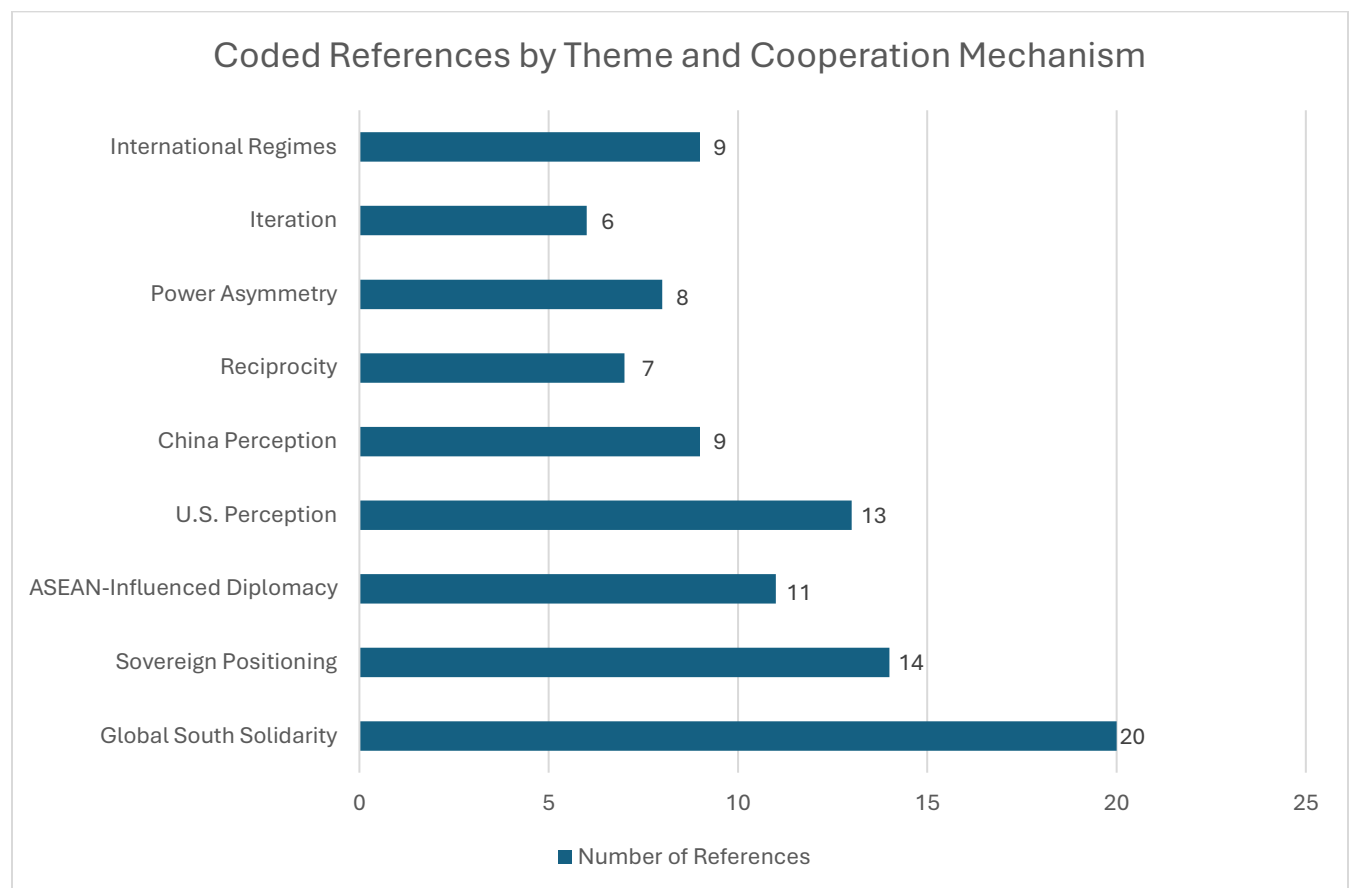
This view is also shaped by Malaysia’s status as a “militarily weaker state”, which reinforces the U.S. tendency to downplay its strategic importance despite its clear intentions to be neutral in the great power rivalry. However, the U.S. tends to favor states like the Philippines over Malaysia, even though both are militarily weak. The reason is that the Philippines have the willingness to confront China in the South China Sea dispute, while Malaysia does not view China as a direct threat, which lower its strategic value from the U.S. perspective.

7.0 Discussion and Conclusion

7.1 Summary of Key Findings

This thesis examined how constructivism and international cooperation theory can explain Malaysia's engagement with China amidst of the U.S.-China rivalry, and how this engagement is perceived by China and the United States. By using critical discourse analysis (CDA), this study used a theory-driven coding process to understand how power, identity, and cooperation are discursively constructed in political interviews, speeches, and official statements. The data was categorized into six main themes, including four cooperation mechanisms on the international cooperation theme based on the chosen theoretical framework.

Figure 1 below shows the distribution of coded references across these themes and cooperation mechanisms, showing that identity-based themes, such as Global South Solidarity and Sovereign Positioning, had the most codes, followed by cooperation and then perception based-themes.



As shown in the chart above, Global South Solidarity emerged as the most coded theme. This reflects Malaysia's positioning as a Global South actor, committed to multipolarity, inclusive development, and rejection of U.S. narrative of Sinophobia. The identity constructed through this discourse emphasizes Malaysia's engagement within the Global South, where China is framed not as a threat, but as a partner in both development and shared Global South values. The Sovereign Positioning Theme reinforced Malaysia's projection of autonomy as an independent, value-driven, and non-aligned. This was expressed through discourse, emphasizing openness, resisting major power pressure and mutual respect.

The ASEAN-Influenced Diplomacy theme was also strongly present during the coding process, highlighting how Malaysia's regional norms such as quiet diplomacy, non-confrontation posture and consensus-building approaches when it comes to managing disputes with China in the South China Sea. This shows that Malaysia utilized ASEAN values and principles to engage with China in the U.S.-China rivalry without escalating tensions.

Under International Cooperation Theory, mechanisms of cooperation like reciprocity, iteration, international regimes, and power asymmetry appeared in the discourse. This shows that Malaysia engages with China based on mutual benefits, long-term strategic cooperation, participation in Chinese-led frameworks such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and diplomatic engagement with broader multipolar platforms like BRICS, where Malaysia is currently a partner-status state. Additionally, despite the imbalance in economic and military power between the two states, the discourse also reflects Malaysia's ability to maintain a respectful and non-coercive cooperation with China, highlighting a pragmatic approach to managing cooperation within a power asymmetry setting.

Finally, the finding on perception themes shows that China sees Malaysia as a reliable and equal partner, helping to reinforce Malaysia's foreign policy identity. In contrast, the U.S. perception theme on Malaysia shows skepticism, portraying Malaysia as a lesser important partner due to its non-aligned and non-confrontational posture, especially towards China on the South China Sea issue, therefore downplaying its strategic importance.

Overall, these findings highlight how Malaysia uses discourse to maintain autonomy, align with Global South narrative and values, and avoid strategic alignment with either the U.S. or China in the ongoing rivalry.

7.2 Revisiting the Proposed Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Malaysia's foreign policy identity is discursively constructed and plays a central role in shaping its engagement with China within the context of the U.S.–China rivalry.

The findings in the analysis support Hypothesis 1. Malaysia's engagement with China is based on an identity rooted in Global South values, non-alignment, and regional norms such as ASEAN principles. Themes such as Global South Solidarity, Sovereign Positioning and ASEAN-influenced diplomacy highlights how Malaysia engages with China by projecting itself as an independent actor that supports multipolarity, quiet diplomacy, and emphasizing on shared values and development cooperation. This identity not only shows how Malaysia talks about China but also how it engages, avoiding confrontation while emphasizing on shared values and partnership. These findings are consistent with constructivism, where identity and norms shape foreign policy behavior.

Hypothesis 2: Malaysia's cooperation with China is shaped by discursively constructed mechanisms of reciprocity, long-term interaction, international regime participation, and power asymmetry.

The findings in the analysis supports Hypothesis 2. Malaysia's discourse reflects cooperation mechanisms based on international cooperation theory, interpreted through a constructivist lens. Reciprocity and iteration are evident in Malaysian officials, where they emphasize on mutual respect, continuous engagement for a long-term partnership and benefits with China. International regime participation also appears in Malaysia's involvement in Chinese-led initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and as well as its diplomatic engagement with broader multipolar platform like BRICS, where Malaysia holds a partner-state status. Additionally, Malaysia's discourse also reflects an awareness of power asymmetry by acknowledging China's greater economic and political influence but still emphasizing mutual benefits through cooperation. Malaysia's cooperation with China is not only guided by strategic interests, but also by identity and discourse that enable sustained engagement.

7.3 Reflection

The choice of using constructivism and international cooperation theory (ICT) provided a deeper understanding of Malaysia's diplomatic engagement with China. Constructivism allows

for a deeper understanding on how Malaysia performs and reinforces its diplomatic identity through discourse. This helped explained how Malaysia frames its engagement with China not for geopolitical alignment, but due to its diplomatic identity based on autonomy, shared global south norms and values, and preference for mutual cooperation. This theoretical lens allows me to analyze not only what Malaysia does, but also how it talks about its role and actions in the U.S.-China rivalry, and why the usage of language is important in projecting and sustaining its diplomatic position within the rivalry.

While international cooperation theory provided insights about Malaysia's engagement with China through cooperation, using it from a constructivist lens came with some challenges. The reason is that ICT traditionally focuses on material incentives and strategic behavior, which can make it difficult to explain Malaysia's cooperation that is also shaped by norms, identity and discourse. To address this issue, the cooperation mechanisms from ICT, such as reciprocity, iteration, international regimes and power asymmetry were interpreted as discursively constructed patterns, rather than being purely strategic calculations. This allowed the analysis on how Malaysia framed these cooperation mechanisms through language and identity claims. However, in cases like Malaysia's participation in the BRI and its discursive signaling around joining BRICS, strategic interests and normative alignment becomes closely related, showing that identity and cooperation often go hand in hand. This overlap shows how strategic interests and identity-driven discourse can reinforce each other, allowing more flexibility in applying ICT through a constructivist lens.

Not all coded material appears in the final analysis. Instead, quotes were selected because they matched the themes and showed how Malaysia talks about its foreign policy and cooperation. For instance, while official U.S. statements were coded, they offered limited direct engagement with Malaysia and were not used in the final write-up. However, their presence helped ensure analytical breadth during the coding process.

The use of critical discourse analysis in this thesis shaped the way on looking at Malaysia's foreign policy by looking at how meaning is constructed through language. This allows the analysis to highlight and understand how Malaysia perform its identity, frames cooperation, and presents itself as foreign policy independent in how it engages with China and as well the U.S.-China rivalry. However, one of the limitations of using CDA is that there is a

strong focus on the discourse that emphasizes what is being said over than what is being done. This could risk the role of economic interests or domestic political dynamics. Politicians like Anwar may talk about values, foreign policy preferences, or being a fiercely independent in their speeches, especially in how they position Malaysia in the U.S.-China rivalry, but these statements don't always reflect with the outcomes or actual behavior. Additionally, domestic politics may also influence foreign policy in ways that this thesis could not capture through official discourse. If this thesis would have used economic liberalism to analyze Malaysia's engagement with China in the U.S.-China rivalry, a more quantitative approach will be utilized, focusing on economic factors such as trade volumes and FDI to understand how these material factors shape engagement. This could not only involve a different methodology but also a different type of analysis, focusing on how material factors influence engagement over identity or discourse.

7.4 Conclusion and Further Research

In conclusion, this thesis is able to examine how constructivism and international cooperation theory, being utilized from a discourse-analytical lens, can explain Malaysia's diplomatic engagement with China amidst the U.S.-China rivalry, and how is this engagement perceived both by the United States and China. Through using critical discourse analysis, the finding is that Malaysia performs a diplomatic identity based on Global South values, non-alignment, and regional norms based on ASEAN values. This identity is expressed through language, rejecting U.S. based Sinophobia narratives, emphasizing cooperation, mutual respect, and its commitment to non-alignment values, especially how Malaysia engages with China while avoiding full alignment in the rivalry.

The analysis also showed that Malaysia's cooperation with China is shaped by discursively ICT mechanisms, such as reciprocity, iteration, international regimes, and power asymmetry. These mechanisms are not just different methods of cooperation, but also, they are embedded in identity claims and diplomatic narratives, reflecting a constructivist approach. The findings shows that identity and cooperation often go hand in hand, and the discourse plays an important role in reinforcing and legitimizing Malaysia's engagement strategies.

This thesis also recognizes that its focus on discourse of national leaders, does not fully account for material or domestic political factors that may influence Malaysia's foreign policy

and its engagement with China. Therefore, future research could be built from this thesis by utilizing economic data, such as trade volumes and foreign direct investment data, and applying different theoretical frameworks. Additionally, doing a comparative study across ASEAN countries, like Indonesia or Vietnam, could offer a better understanding on the broader ASEAN region, how their different states construct their diplomatic identity and engage with China. These countries have their own distinct historical interactions with China, which could potentially shape their foreign policy discourse in different ways in the context of the U.S.-China rivalry.

Finally, this thesis shows how using constructivism and international cooperation theory can explain how Malaysia construct and projects its diplomatic identity through discourse in the U.S.-China rivalry. This approach shows that foreign policy is not only shaped by material interests or strategic calculations, but also how states frame themselves and reinforce their position through language. Despite the limitations of using critical discourse analysis, it still provides valuable understanding how small or middle powers like Malaysia position themselves amidst the growing tension in the U.S.-China rivalry.

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