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The Influence of Nusantara Concept in Malaysia's Foreign Policy and ASEAN.

By; Khairun Niswah Binti Alias

INTRODUCTION

The Southeast Asia region consists of 11 countries with a similar geographical location but diverse cultural heritage and history. This part of the globe is roughly divided into 2 dissimilar portions, the mainland (continental projection) and the insular of Southeast Asia (a string of archipelagoes to the south and east of the mainland *(Southeast Asia | Map, Islands, Countries, Culture, & Facts, n.d.)*. Nusantara on the other hand was an ancient name to indicate a maritime place in Southeast Asia that was under the administration of Majapahit that contains several islands. It is commonly found in many sources that Nusantara was the land of Indonesia, which as the name 'Nusantara' comes from an old Javanese term that initially means 'outer islands'. However, not all academicians agreed on so. Anwar (2016) wrote in the Journal of Nusantara Studies (JONUS), that most of the scholars even from the natives often defined the meaning of Nusantara by logical thinking instead of its definite meaning. According to him, scholars defined the term 'Nusantara' by the separation of the word *'nusa'* and *'antara* which by combining them, defined - *'between the island'*, or *'between the nation'*. He also opposed the statement from Stanford Raffles that said Nusantara referred to an island in Indonesia named Madura. He further stated that the term Nusantara should be referred from the old sources such as *Nagara-Kertagama (1365), Pararaton,* and *Sejarah Melayu (1612)* which all of these sources have the same general idea of the term Nusantara. He strictly believed that Nusantara referred to a region which consists of ancient kingdoms elapsed from the northern, southern, eastern, and western of it that combined them and shape in one big circle - a Nusantara region *(M. Anwar, 2016).* As of the focus of this article, the Nusantara concept will be relating to Malaysia's foreign policy building in terms of how it could affect and absorb the policies into ASEAN's influence in this modern political ideology.

DISCUSSION

Initially, in the author's opinion, the Nusantara concept is a concept of having the Nusantara ideology and identity in which this kind of concept can be used as a bridge that connects countries and actors regardless of within the Southeast Asian region or not, into a peaceful and healthy cooperation. Southeast Asia also has its regional organization known as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that focuses on having a peaceful relation despite maintaining the neutrality and non-interference principle as its core principle.

Nevertheless, this regional organization is not functioning well to solve internal disputes largely because of the non-interference principle and due to some internal conflicts within the organization itself. Thus, it lacks many things. However, it is one of the most peaceful organizations that exist on Earth that successfully maintain peace within its member-states since its establishment.

Nusantara and ASEAN have a slight similarity in the sense of their resemblance to the Nusantara region. Indeed, it was found that the current ASEAN member-states such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore, Brunei, and Timor-Leste were the areas that was mentioned in an old Javanese literature found in 14th century, the *'Nagara-Kertagama'* (but with ancient names). In addition, the literature also mentioned the "friend-countries" that were stated as *'Dwipantra'* or the 'Nusantara's friends' that were referring to the other ASEAN member-states such as Thailand, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos (also India and China). The similarities mentioned is just a vision of how the ASEAN and Nusantara correspond to each other and this correspondence is the bridge that will bring all the countries together in the name of the Nusantara concept, if it is well used.

Reconnecting to the previous Malaysia's foreign policy

Malaysia is a country that is both mainland and insular in Southeast Asia. The Western part is on the Malay Peninsula and the eastern part is on Sabah and Sarawak - the island of Borneo shared with Kalimantan (Indonesia) and Brunei. As a country that is

located strategically in the middle of Indonesia, Philippines, and Thailand around it, the ideology of Nusantara concept could be a bridge to connect all these countries.

Malaysia's foreign policy approaches are changing from time to time according to the head of the government that rule the administration. From the independence until present, these policies approaches has been changed based on the country's interests and goals. For example, the first Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman was a pro-Westerner. He prioritized the diplomatic ties with the neighboring countries while making close relations with the Western countries. While his successor, Tun Abdul Razak's approach was more on a neutral part of foreign policy. On the other hand, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad when he was the 4th Prime Minister of Malaysia, he focused on accelerating economic growth rather than politics.

Several past premierships did vaguely demonstrate approaches that were similar to the Nusantara concept which is strengthening ties with the neighboring countries around Southeast Asia and beyond. However, it was done without exerting the Nusantara vision as the base of the policy. During Tunku Abdul Rahman's era (1957 – 1970), foreign policy in Tanah Melayu or Malaya (now Malaysia) was to prioritize diplomatic ties with neighboring countries since Malaya had just gained independence *(Jaafar & Abdul Rahman, 2020)*. It was indeed a necessary action as a country that was just free and self-standing. Malaya need a good support and the best to get them was from its neighborhood. However, as a pro-Westerner, Tunku did maintain his pro-Western principles by seeking international aids and financial support from colonial powers after Malaya faced challenges from Indonesia and the Philippines that threatened the sovereignty of the country.

While during Tun Abdul Razak's tenure, he neutralized the relations by established diplomatic ties will all countries except with certain countries but with different reasons from Tunku. Not just that, he also furthered the neutralization ideology at the regional level through the establishment of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and signed the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) in 1971.

22 years of administration under Tun Dr. Mahathir had witnessed a positive development towards new cooperation. Tun Dr. Mahathir opened Malaysia's foreign

policy ties beyond the previous areas.[1] He started to make close diplomatic ties with Japan and South Korea. Other than that, the foreign policy also expanded towards Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Implementing the influence of the Nusantara Concept towards ASEAN

Looking forward to all these relations in the name of diplomatic ties, previous Malaysia's Prime Ministers did a great job in ensuring Malaysia could reach the international level. Not only within the Southeast Asian region, but the vision of Malaysia achieved beyond the region shows that nothing is impossible. However, under the Nusantara concept which includes the existence of Nusantara identity, this vision could've to hold much longer than the previous one.

As the base of the foreign policy, the inclusion of the Nusantara concept within Malaysia's foreign policy could have been influenced by the ideology of how ASEAN used to be under one area before slowly separated into each country of what we have in the present. Southeast Asian countries are mostly very sentiment especially when comes to defending one's own identity. This part could have been used as the medium of collecting all the support from ASEAN members. Thus, this support can be used to expand the influence and power of ASEAN to Eurasia and beyond.

CONCLUSION

Conflicts happened all the time and it is inevitable. Malaysia had numerous conflicts with almost all ASEAN countries throughout the year since the first day of its establishment. Without a strong stand in one bold identity, these neighboring countries will be having crises till the end without knowing how and when to stop. Having a Nusantara ideology as the bridge that connects these misconceptions and differences in opinions could've built peaceful cooperation within ASEAN. As one of the countries that were first sitting on the table and established the ASEAN through the Bangkok Declaration, Malaysia's actions do have a strong impact in changing the

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[1] Beyond the area covered by the past premierships - from Tunku Abdul Rahman to Tun Hussein On.

relations towards a peaceful and long-term one. Moreover, the absorption of the Nusantara concept within Malaysia's foreign policy will eventually help the country together with ASEAN to spread all over Eurasia and beyond.

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