

Malaysia's Diplomatic Choices, Dynamics and Mechanisms Towards Northeast Asia - An Explanation Based on Neoclassical Realism

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Abstract

Regional diplomacy serves as a foreign policy tool utilized by states towards specific regions. However, the regional diplomacy of small states within a particular region in International Relations (IR) has often received less attention and scholarly scrutiny. Drawing from neoclassical realism, this paper introduces "security needs" at the systemic level and "interest preferences" at the unitary level as primary explanatory variables. The findings reveal three main models of regional diplomacy for small states: "active regional diplomacy," "preventive regional diplomacy," and "composite regional diplomacy." Small states employ various modes of regional diplomacy to attain diverse objectives in foreign development. Analysis of the 1.0 and 2.0 periods of Mahathir's administration illustrates Malaysia's adoption of "active regional diplomacy" and "composite regional diplomacy" in cultivating relations with Northeast Asian countries. This foreign policy implementation not only fosters Malaysia's effective cooperation with nations like Japan and South Korea but also maximizes the advantageous resources of Northeast Asian countries to bolster its own development. Additionally, it steers Malaysia clear of taking sides in the intense competition among major powers, expands diplomatic avenues, and bolsters its diplomatic initiative. However, in the post-Mahathir era, the deterioration of Malaysia's relations with North Korea and tensions with China have somewhat impacted the overall stability and harmony of Malaysia's relations with Northeast Asian countries.

Keywords: neoclassical realism, security needs, interest preferences, regional diplomacy, Malaysia

1. Introduction

For countries in Southeast Asia, their foreign policy typically revolves around the Southeast Asian region and engagements with extraterritorial powers, with Northeast Asia less likely to emerge as a primary diplomatic focus for smaller nations in Southeast Asia. This is largely attributed to the Northeast Asian region having fewer countries compared to Southeast Asia, and the relatively greater geographic distance from Southeast Asian nations, which limits the allocation of diplomatic resources to Northeast Asia. Nonetheless, this does not imply a complete lack of attention from Southeast Asian countries towards Northeast Asia. Taking Malaysia as an example, Northeast Asia has consistently been among the focal points of Malaysia's foreign policy. Particularly, cooperation with Japan and South Korea in terms of economy and trade stands out as a cornerstone of Malaysia's foreign policy. Additionally, Malaysia's approach to Northeast Asia policy holds a unique position in its development of relations with North Korea. Given the unique nature of the North Korean issue, Malaysia has encountered challenges in fostering bilateral relations with North Korea. Despite maintaining relatively positive interactions to some extent, tense differences and confrontations persist. Consequently, owing to the diversity of countries in Northeast Asia, Malaysia's diplomatic choices in handling Northeast Asia exhibit distinct features.

Existing research predominantly centers on Malaysia as one of the small countries in Southeast Asia, emphasizing regional diplomacy to deepen ties and cooperation within the Southeast Asian region. Fewer studies concentrate on Malaysia's regional diplomacy considering its geographical distance. Therefore, this paper seeks to address the research questions: What are Malaysia's diplomatic choices in dealing with the Northeast Region, and what factors influence its strategic development towards this region?

This article consists of three core parts. The first part provides a literature review and overview of neoclassical realism and the development of Malaysian foreign policy. The second part utilizes neoclassical realism theory to explain Malaysia's diplomatic policy towards Northeast Asia and its formation mechanism. The third part involves a case study exploring the development of diplomatic relations between Malaysia and Northeast Asian countries during the Mahathir era to strengthen the explanatory power of the theoretical viewpoints in this paper.

2. Literature Review

In the development of modern life, various theories have emerged in the field of international relations. Different theories exhibit different vitality in explaining national diplomatic behavior and policies. Among them, neoclassical realism is one of the most typical theories. It provides a powerful analysis for the formation of post-Cold War national foreign policies by relying on the combined explanation of international politics and domestic politics.

2.1 *Neoclassical Realism in International Relations*

Realism, as one of the core theories in international relations, has given rise to various theoretical branches over the course of its historical development, including classical realism, structural realism, and neoclassical realism. While realism provides powerful explanations for

the evolution of power in international politics, it has encountered numerous crises and challenges in the post-Cold War era. Specifically, classical realism has long neglected the influence of the international system on state behavior, focusing excessively on the material power of states (Platias & Trigkas,2024), while structural realism has overemphasized explaining the impact of international politics but struggled to explain the interaction and patterns between internal state elements and state behavior (Williams et al.,2005; Liu,2010). Therefore, with the trend of increasingly close interaction between state behavior and the international system in the post-Cold War era, traditional classical realism and structural realism no longer possess sufficient explanatory power, while neoclassical realism plays a significant role during this time.

Gideon Rose (1988), as one of the earliest scholars to propose neoclassical realism, believes that the scope of a state's foreign policy is determined by its material power, but the formation of foreign policy is a complex process that requires the intervention of variables at the unit level. Prior to this, some scholars had criticized traditional realism, emphasizing the importance of international politics in cooperation and conflict and discussing how ideas in international relations influence policy formulation and formation, laying an important foundation for the development of neoclassical realism (Goldstein& Keohane,1993). After neoclassical realism was proposed, scholars applied it to real-world international politics to explore the mechanisms behind the formation of different countries' diplomatic behaviors, particularly in analyzing the path mechanisms of European countries and US foreign policies. For example, Moravia (1998) applied neoclassical realism to study the domestic political dynamics of European integration, explaining the cooperation and competition behaviors of European countries. Legro (1992) explored the internationalist tradition of the United States and analyzed the impact of domestic political factors on US international policy. Additionally, research has also focused on how different intermediary variables in NCR are formed and how they influence a state's external behavior. Moravcsik (1997) introduced the concept of "interest aggregation," emphasizing that the decisive factor in domestic politics is the convergence of domestic interest groups rather than systemic factors between states. Chen and Liu (2015), on the other hand, consider national strategic preferences as the main intermediary variable, believing that states will seek limited trade-offs among several strategic objectives, including autonomy, security, and welfare.

Although there have been some achievements in the exploration of NCR theory, current research still overly focuses on the United States and European countries, while the diplomatic policies and behaviors of most small countries in the international system are relatively ignored. Therefore, interpreting the formation path of small countries' diplomatic policies from the perspective of NCR would be a significant contribution to understanding and enriching existing literature. Furthermore, regarding influencing variables, it is still difficult to identify a universally applicable variable to analyze countries of specific natures. This article also hopes to shape an analysis model that can be applied to most small countries to promote the application and interpretation of NCR in the diplomatic behaviors of small and medium-sized countries.

2.2 Small States' Foreign Policy and Malaysia

And reviewing the existing literature on the development of Malaysia's foreign policy, there are two main research perspectives as follows. The first research perspective is based on the geographical location of Malaysia, focusing on Malaysia's foreign policy with its Southeast Asian neighbors and other ASEAN member states, and it is generally believed that Malaysia adopts a friendly and pragmatic regional foreign policy to consolidate and develop relations with its neighbors and puts the development of bilateral relations with its neighbors as the first priority of its foreign policy and foreign strategy, especially through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to deepen political and foreign interactions with regional neighbors. According to Nathan (2002), for example, he analyzes the development of bilateral relations between Malaysia and Singapore from a political realist perspective, arguing that the relationship between the two countries is characterized by functional tensions and cooperation, while Malaysia has made the country's political, economic, and security interests the goal of its foreign policy. Omar (2009), on the other hand, argues that the relationship between Malaysia and Singapore is extremely special, with the two countries enjoying many shared values in terms of history, politics, and culture, and that the Malaysian leadership plays an important role in determining the relationship with Singapore. Apart from Singapore, Thailand is also one of the most important countries in Malaysia's diplomatic neighborhood. Despite the conflicts and struggles between Thailand and Malaysia, the history of the two countries against communism and pro-Westernism has strengthened the ties and cooperation between the two countries, especially as they are both ASEAN founding members, and the outbreak of Islamist separatism in the south of Thailand will also further strengthen the cooperation between the two countries in the area of anti-extremism. Cooperation between the two countries on counter-extremism will prompt Malaysia to embrace cooperation with Thailand by adopting a proactive and enthusiastic foreign policy (Ganesan, 2010; Yusof & Jaes, 2020). In addition to Thailand and Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines are also important neighbors of Malaysia, and despite the existence of certain territorial disputes and conflicts with these countries, Malaysia still upholds a pragmatic foreign policy to develop bilateral relations with these countries, with pragmatic cooperation with neighboring countries and stability as the primary goals of foreign policy (Liow, 2022; Andrew & Chin, 2022). In addition to its own stability and development, the common external demand is also an important impetus for Malaysia to strengthen cooperation with neighboring countries. Chen (1994) proposes that Malaysia and the Philippines, Vietnam, and other neighboring countries have a common interest in the maintenance of the territory and resources in the South China Sea, which leads them to intense strategic competition with China in the South China Sea (Ganesan & Amer, 2010). From the above literature, it can be seen that Malaysia has different degrees of differences and conflicts with its neighbors but based on the security interests of the community of small states, Malaysia's foreign policy will focus on the development of multilateral relations with its neighbors in the form of reducing differences and deepening cooperation.

The second research perspective, on the other hand, emphasizes how Malaysia develops bilateral and even multilateral relations with extra-territorial powers and diplomatic manners, with a particular focus on strategic choices in the face of increasing competition from major

powers such as China and the United States. Realist scholars, such as Mearsheimer (2021), argue that small states with large power gaps are forced to resort to dependence and other means of maintaining their own security in the face of conflict and strife among the great powers. And balancing and bandwagoning this dichotomy of choice is also the common perception of most realists, that small countries, when in the collision of great powers, either follow the regional strategy of the great powers and in this way safeguard their own security interests or choose to balance with the great powers, but this kind of behavior will give the small countries a great deal of strategic risks and crises. Once the degree of balancing on the big powers is limited and cannot play a role in restricting the big powers' foreign actions, it will threaten the security of the small countries themselves (Kuik & Daniel, 2022).

In addition to the traditional realist view of balancing, some scholars have observed that some small states have adopted relatively flexible means to deal with the relationship with the big powers and do not advocate openly taking sides but rather using a neutral way to seek their own survival space in the competition among the big powers, which is often referred to as hedging (Goh, 2005). The most important purpose of hedging is to help small countries develop bilateral relations with great powers in a non-directive diplomatic strategy and to maintain their own security and realize their own interests in the fierce geopolitical competition among great powers. Hedging strategy is also widely recognized by scholars as one of the specific means for small states to implement "great power balanced diplomacy", and balanced diplomacy is also a diplomatic tactic often used by small states in foreign affairs (Denemark et al., 2019). "Balanced diplomacy" refers to the international politics of small and medium-sized countries when faced with fierce confrontation and competition from the big powers, the use of a variety of ways to offset the adverse effects of competition between the big powers on small and medium-sized countries (Strakes, 2013), and the use of a variety of means to promote positive interaction with the big powers, avoiding direct conflict and collision, in order to better meet the security interests of the small and medium-sized countries (Yang, 2022; Sun & Jin, 2017).

In addition to hedging, bandwagoning, engaging, distancing, and balancing are also specific means for small states to use in the balanced diplomacy of the great powers, and small states will use one or more of these means in accordance with domestic and international realities in order to better promote their own development (Sun & Jin, 2017). With regard to Malaysia's confrontation with the competition and conflict among the great powers, some studies have taken a historical perspective and argued that Malaysia briefly used the bandwagoning strategy as its foreign stance at the time of its independence, adopting policies in favor of the capitalist camp, such as the United States, and firmly opposing the establishment of diplomatic relations with the socialist camp, such as the Soviet Union or China (Zhou & Hu, 2010; Luo, 2012).

However, most studies have focused on Malaysia's use of hedging strategies as a primary means of coping with great power competition and have analyzed the conditions, purposes, and implications of hedging strategies. The reasons for the implementation of Malaysia's hedging strategy have been explored from the perspectives of domestic elite political legitimization, risk transformation, and security interests. For example, Evelyn Goh (2007) emphasizes that Southeast Asian countries have adopted a hedging strategy in the hope of

promoting broader engagement between China and Southeast Asian countries at the political, economic, and strategic levels, especially in a way that complies with international rules and norms, and promoting the interaction of multiple great powers in Southeast Asia in order to avoid the emergence of a single-control China, the withdrawal of the US, or the formation of a destabilized regional order. Cheng-Chwee Kuik (2008;2021b) argues that Malaysia's main criterion in hedging its bets against China lies in whether domestic political elites see China's rise as a positive opportunity or a serious threat, and that if it is a positive opportunity, then it will advocate that Malaysia endeavor to engage in all sorts of beneficial co-operation and interactions with China, whereas a threat will reduce Malaysia's goodwill towards a rising China and deepen its mistrust of it. Therefore, the perceptions of Malaysia's domestic political elites influence the implementation of hedging strategies (Kuik, 2008;2021a). Scholars such as Shi Tianyi, from the perspective of risk transformation, emphasize that the main reason for Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries to adopt the hedging strategy is to transform the multiple risks brought by the original Sino-US competition and conflict to the small countries into acceptable ranges for the small countries through a variety of ways in order to enhance the ability of the small countries to bear the risks (Shi, 2016; Nie, 2022). In short, the hedging strategy has become the general consensus among scholars studying the response of Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia to the rise of great powers and conflicts. Centered around the Northeast Asian region, Japan and South Korea are also crucial diplomatic targets for Malaysia. Since Mahathir proposed the "Look East Policy," Malaysia has regarded Japan and South Korea as models for learning and emulation (Furuoka, 2007). This is aimed at strengthening Malaysia's extensive interactions and cooperation with Japan and South Korea in economic and trade aspects (Ismail & Yaakob, 2024). Simultaneously, Malaysia actively expands its multilateral diplomacy with Northeast Asian countries.

2.3 Research Summary

Combining the aforementioned research perspectives reveals that Malaysia's foreign diplomacy exhibits a distinct hierarchical structure. Primarily, neighboring countries and extraterritorial powers form the first tier of Malaysia's foreign strategy development. Malaysia adopts a friendly and pragmatic diplomatic approach to foster stability and harmony with neighboring countries, while also promoting solidarity and interaction within the ASEAN multilateral framework. In response to major powers, Malaysia tends to employ a hedging strategy as its primary means of engagement, refraining from aligning with any particular power bloc and maintaining a relatively neutral stance. Secondly, countries with significant economic and trade relations constitute the second tier of Malaysia's foreign strategy. Japan, for instance, falls into this category. Malaysia adopts a diplomatic strategy that blends rationalism and pragmatism to consolidate existing cooperative achievements and facilitate the sustainable development of bilateral relations. While some studies have examined Malaysia's foreign strategies with closely tied countries, most focus on individual Northeast Asian nations such as Japan, South Korea, or North Korea. Fewer studies delve into Malaysia's foreign policy and strategic decisions regarding the entire Northeast Asian region, particularly its overarching foreign strategy towards a specific region. Furthermore, concerning small state diplomacy, traditional perspectives, while emphasizing the use of

hedging strategies, often focus more on small states' responses to individual major powers and less on the applicability and explanatory power of hedging strategies for regional diplomacy as a whole.

This paper, leveraging neoclassical realism theory, constructs theoretical models and frameworks to examine Malaysia's diplomatic strategic choices in responding to specific regions. It aims to fill gaps in diplomatic theory concerning how small countries engage with particular regions. From a practical perspective, it aims to elucidate the driving mechanisms of Malaysia's foreign strategy towards specific regions, offering valuable insights and lessons for China to enhance and realize prosperous bilateral relations with Malaysia, particularly within the framework of the 10th anniversary of the "Belt Road Initiative (BRI)."

3. Analysis of Small and Medium-sized States' Behavior in International Politics: The Explanatory Path of Neoclassical Realism

3.1 Main Methodology and Data Sources

The main research method of this article is qualitative research, specifically including case studies and process tracing. As one of the sub-methods of qualitative research, case studies have several advantages. They allow researchers to gain a deep understanding of the development and evolution of specific processes, acquiring profound insights into the essence and dynamics of the process. Additionally, they can better reflect the development of real-world situations (Yin,2009). On the other hand, process tracing emphasizes tracking and recording the development and evolution of specific processes or events. It helps researchers understand potential turning points, unexpected events, and trends in the process, thereby revealing the complexity and diversity of process development (Collier,2011).

In this article, the main approach involves describing and analyzing cases from Mahathir's two terms in office to track and explore how Mahathir, as the leader of Malaysia, adopted different regional diplomatic approaches to develop interactive relationships with Northeast Asian countries. This aims to better promote Malaysia's national interests. The main sources of data for this article include relevant literature, government reports, think tank documents, and other related interviews.

3.2 Malaysia Regional Diplomacy towards Northeast Asia

In international politics, the theoretical understanding of a state's external behavior often stems from analyses at either the unit level or system level. Classical realism scholars tend to focus on examining a state's external behavior or strategy in international politics from the perspective of the unit level. Conversely, structural realism scholars, such as Kenneth Waltz (1990), place greater emphasis on the system level, highlighting the significance of a state's external behavior within the broader international system. Waltz proposed that while states operate at both the unit and system levels, the extent to which they can pursue their goals varies based on their relative capabilities. Both classical realism and structural realism offer valuable insights into analyzing and explaining the diverse behaviors of states in international politics. However, as international politics grow increasingly complex, states exhibit varied manifestations of external behavior, often diverging even within the same system structure. This is where neoclassical realism assumes significance and value. Neoclassical realism bridges the unit level and system level, not only acknowledging the role of individual states

but also recognizing the importance of systemic factors (Lobel et al.,2009). It offers a fresh analytical approach to understanding the intricate behavior of states in international politics. The analytical model of neoclassical realism primarily comprises systemic and domestic variables. Systemic variables serve as independent variables that shape, but do not entirely determine, states' behavior (Liu & Chen, 2015). Conversely, domestic variables act as mediating factors with varying degrees of influence on a state's external behavior. Systemic variables often remain relatively fixed, such as power dynamics between countries, while domestic variables tend to be more fluid and uncertain. Given the complexity of states' foreign behavior in international politics, relying solely on fixed domestic variables may limit our ability to comprehensively analyze states' diverse performances in foreign affairs.

In light of this complexity and considering the specific focus of this paper, the author introduces the concepts of security needs and interest preferences as the main explanatory variables. Security needs serve as the core independent variable, while interest preferences act as specific mediating variables. Together, these variables shape the regional diplomacy patterns of small countries. The specific analytical framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

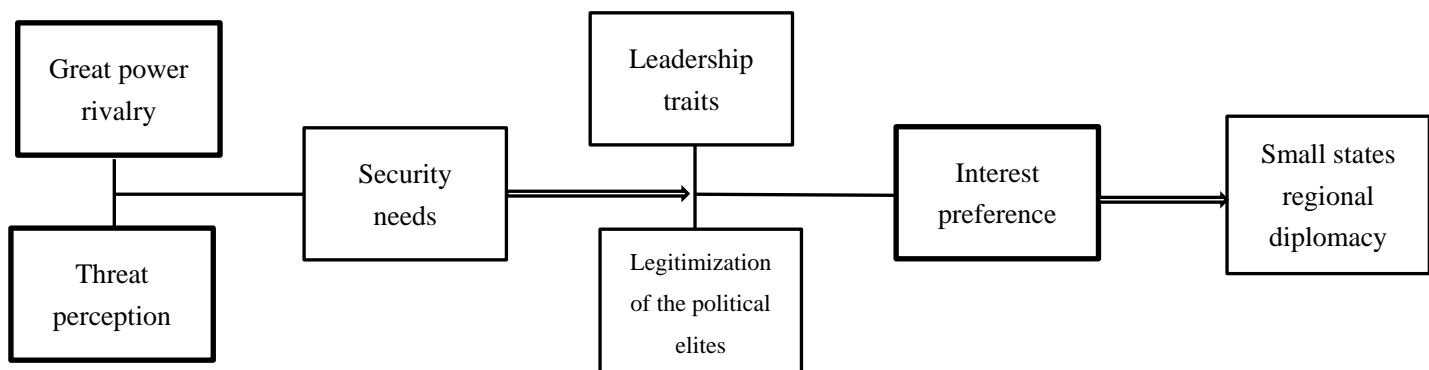


Figure 1. Regional Diplomacy of Small States from the Perspective of Neoclassical Realism

In this paper, security needs serve as the central variable at the system level. States, as rational actors, pursue various needs through appropriate means to promote their stable development (Olfers, 1952; Leffler, 1990). Security needs, defined as measures undertaken by state actors within the international political system in response to external or internal threats affecting their stability, aim to enhance security and mitigate negative impacts, thereby safeguarding survival and development. From a neorealist perspective, system-level variables tend to shape a state's external behavior. States respond to varying degrees of pressure within the system, necessitating adaptive measures to maintain stability. The intensity of pressure experienced by a state reflects two main elements: the great power rivalry and threat perception. The rivalry among major powers in international relations often profoundly influences the foreign policy of small countries. Major powers, driven by their political goals and interests, employ various means to achieve them, inevitably leading to disputes and conflicts with other major powers. Such conflicts and power struggles invariably impact small and medium-sized countries. Given the substantial power disparity between

small and large countries, small countries are often unable to effectively respond to the conflicts and struggles with major powers or bear the costs and consequences of deteriorating relations. Consequently, small countries are forced to navigate the dilemma of choosing sides or maintaining neutrality (Onea, 2014). This power play among major powers significantly impacts the security of small countries, subjecting them to serious risks and pressures. Small countries also face concerns regarding potential conflicts with major powers resulting from their diplomatic positioning and choices, prompting the urgent need to adapt their external behavior to better safeguard their security and interests (Einsiedel et al., 2015). If conflicts and competition among major powers regarding political interests significantly impact the longstanding security and stability maintained by small countries, threat perception becomes crucial in helping small countries assess the strength of their own security (Mearsheimer, 2021). Threat perception entails the recognition that state actors in international politics possess cognitive and perceptual abilities akin to real political individuals. When the capabilities of other states within the same international system undergo changes, states respond cognitively to perceived threats by adopting corresponding means or policies to bolster their own strength, such as military and economic capabilities, to ensure a relative balance of power and safeguard their security (Singer, 1958; Stein, 2013).

As external powers pursue conflicts and competition driven by various interests, they develop multidimensional power, including military capabilities, intensifying the impact on small countries. Small countries perceive threats from the military might of major powers, prompting them to assess that their security is seriously endangered and necessitates measures to enhance their security capacity. Small countries may concentrate resources on developing military capabilities for better defense or rely on other powerful countries for collective protection, akin to larger nations. However, the core challenge lies in the limited resources of small countries, where unilaterally focusing on enhancing certain aspects, such as military power, may prove costly if it fails to enhance their sense of security. Hence, threat perception significantly influences the security needs of small states. Under the combined effects of the great power game and threat perception, small states establish specific security needs and goals, implementing various diplomatic measures to realize and meet these needs. Regional diplomacy offers small states a new development path, broadening their diplomatic reach and activity space, enhancing diplomatic initiative, gaining support from external countries, and bolstering their influence in the international arena.

In addition to core variables, neoclassical realism emphasizes the influence of mediating variables on a state's diplomatic behavior. The author examines interest preferences as a mediating variable affecting small states' regional diplomatic activities. Interest preference refers to a state's prioritization of different interests based on actual circumstances (Wildavsky, 1987). It influences a state's diplomatic forms to adapt to changing international environments and is shaped by leadership traits, the legitimization of political elites, and national interests. Leadership qualities encompass a leader's character, temperament, or charisma, influencing foreign relations and policies. Excellent leaders effectively govern and promote cooperation with other countries, while poor leadership may lead to authoritarianism. Political elites seek to legitimize their governance, influencing foreign policy to maximize

interests. Political systems with multiple parties foster intense interest group competition, impacting foreign policy decisions (Pang & Chen, 2008; Kuik et al., 2022). At the same time, legitimacy can be pursued through different approaches, with political elites seeking various paths to enhance their legitimacy foundation, primarily including performance legitimation and particularistic legitimation.

Firstly, performance legitimation refers to the demonstration of authority by a state or government through economic growth and welfare, with substantial economic benefits serving as specific indicators to clarify their legitimacy status. For small countries, the performance of a small country significantly influences whether elite groups can win the support and trust of the people. When leaders implement robust economic policies that achieve overall external economic growth and development, the people are also affected by the interconnectedness of national economic development. For instance, as people's income rises, job opportunities increase, and public welfare improves, they perceive the economic measures of leaders or governments as effective and correct, contributing to the long-term prosperity and development of the country (Dagher,2018). Consequently, people generate more support and trust for elite groups, and the governance foundation of the country or government is further consolidated. Conversely, when a country's elite groups fail to adopt effective economic measures to achieve positive economic growth, the country cannot fundamentally provide broader economic benefits and public welfare for the people (Cha&Lv,2022). As a result, the people protest against the decisions of the government or political elites, demanding that elite groups implement feasible policy solutions to promote the country's economic development. If the domestic decision-making group fails to achieve the expected goals of the people or there is a significant disparity between their expectations, it exacerbates distrust among the people towards the government, leading to more severe social unrest.

As an important approach to legitimacy, particularistic legitimation mainly emphasizes political mobilization based on identity recognition. That is, the state selectively implements corresponding political mobilization and propaganda based on the identity characteristics of its internal population, satisfying the interests of specific groups through specific measures, stimulating the specific group's goodwill and trust in the country, thereby enhancing its legitimacy (Kuik,2021c). For some small and medium-sized countries, one of their obvious internal political characteristics is multi-ethnicity, with the state composed of different ethnic groups. The state can adopt specific measures to cater to the needs of different ethnic groups, thereby enhancing their trust and support for the government. However, this is often a relatively complex and challenging decision-making process because the political characteristics of multiple ethnic groups lead to strong conflicts of interest among them (Ahmad &Kadir,2005). When the state selectively formulates corresponding policies to meet the needs of individual ethnic groups, although it can satisfy the special needs of the individual ethnic group, it does so at the expense of harming other ethnic groups. This not only fails to achieve dynamic balance among different ethnic groups but also exacerbates intense conflicts and confrontations among ethnic groups, which is detrimental to the long-term stability of the country's governance. Nonetheless, for the state or leadership

groups, particularistic legitimation remains an important path to legitimacy.

States adopt different external strategies to maximize national interests, balancing various levels of interests when formulating foreign policies. Despite complexities, states aim to satisfy specific interests rationally, considering actual circumstances to maximize benefits. While states prioritize optimal interests, they also consider other levels of interest, adjusting expectations to meet actual circumstances effectively. Security needs and interest preferences simultaneously shape the foreign affairs patterns of small states toward specific regions. Security needs define the overall foreign policy of small states, while interest preferences guide the implementation of directives derived from security needs and determine the form of foreign engagement adopted by small states. Moreover, it's crucial to note that a small state's adoption of a particular regional diplomacy is not only influenced by its interest preferences and security needs but also by the relationships between states within that region. The quality of relations between the small state and others in the region indirectly impacts its regional diplomacy mode.

Based on the analysis above, as illustrated in Table 1, there are three main types of regional diplomacy for small states: active regional diplomacy, preventive regional diplomacy, and composite regional diplomacy.

Table 1. Different patterns of regional diplomacy of small States

Regional diplomacy model	Features	Security needs	Interest preference
Active regional diplomacy	Friendly, enthusiastic and proactive, maintaining close contact and interaction with countries in the region	Low	Strong
Composite regional diplomacy	Predominantly friendly and pragmatic policies, but accompanied by a certain suspicion and caution, and both positive interactions and certain contradictions with the countries of the region	Medium	Medium
Preventive regional diplomacy	Relatively cautious and conservative, with certain contradictions and differences with countries in the region and contentious bilateral relations	High	Weak

Source: Designed by author

Based on the theoretical explanations provided in Table 1, the main research hypotheses of this study include the following two scenarios.

H1: When the systemic level imposes weaker security pressures on small countries, they will have lower security demands. Meanwhile, internal interest preferences within the small country are relatively strong, and different levels of interests can be satisfied accordingly. At this time, interest preferences are the main influencing factors, and the small country exhibits an active regional diplomacy, maintaining a friendly and stable cooperative relationship with countries in the region, resulting in relatively high diplomatic benefits.

H2: When the systemic level imposes relatively moderate security pressures on small countries, they will have moderate security demands. Internal interest preferences can be partially satisfied and supported to some extent. Security demands and interest preferences play equally important roles. The small country will adopt a composite regional diplomacy, maintaining both certain tensions and connections with countries in the region. The small country's perception of different countries in the region is relatively complex.

The following two periods of Mahathir's administration are taken as specific cases to test the reasonableness of the above research hypotheses by analyzing how Malaysia during Mahathir's administration implemented and adjusted its regional foreign policy in response to Northeast Asia according to the actual situation.

4. Case Study: Malaysia's Regional Diplomacy Toward Northeast Asia

The selection of two different periods of Mahathir's administration as specific cases in this article is based on two main reasons. On the one hand, Mahathir's government represented the period when Malaysia, as a small Southeast Asian country, had the most frequent interactions with Northeast Asian countries. Especially during Mahathir's first term, the introduction of the "Look East" policy significantly strengthened exchanges and interactions with Northeast Asian countries, greatly expanding Malaysia's external development. Therefore, selecting this period helps to examine the specific formation and application of Malaysia's diplomatic methods towards Northeast Asia. On the other hand, due to changes in both domestic and international political environments, Malaysia's diplomatic policy towards Northeast Asian countries underwent corresponding adjustments during Mahathir's second term. Analyzing the government during this period will enhance a deeper understanding and recognition of the dynamic changes in Malaysia's foreign policy.

(i) Case 1: The Mahathir 1.0 Period

Geographically, Northeast Asia may appear relatively distant from Southeast Asian countries, which are predominantly characterized by their small size. However, despite this geographical separation, Southeast Asian nations maintain close ties and interactions with Northeast Asia. For instance, Malaysia has sustained robust relations with countries in Northeast Asia since gaining independence, thereby expanding the scope for Malaysia's diplomatic endeavors and providing a broader platform for its development. If any leader deserves recognition for their significant contributions to the development of Malaysia and its relations with Northeast Asian countries, it is Mahathir Mohamad. Since assuming office as Prime Minister of Malaysia in 1981, Mahathir has implemented a positive and pragmatic economic policy aimed at attracting foreign investment, fostering domestic economic growth, and facilitating the steady development of the nation. Additionally, Mahathir has been a driving force behind the construction of Malaysia's infrastructure, including landmark projects such as the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, the North-South Boulevard, and the iconic Petronas Twin Towers. Furthermore, Mahathir has been a vocal advocate for "Asian values," promoting the cultural and philosophical principles that define the region. His efforts have aimed to strengthen the sense of identity and pride within Malaysia and across Southeast Asia, while also fostering closer ties with Northeast Asian nations. Overall, Mahathir

Mohamad's leadership has played a pivotal role in shaping Malaysia's development trajectory and its engagement with Northeast Asia. His vision, policies, and diplomatic initiatives have not only bolstered Malaysia's standing on the global stage but have also contributed to enhancing regional cooperation and understanding between Southeast and Northeast Asia. In 1982, Mahathir Mohamad introduced the "Look East Policy," which became a pivotal initiative fostering cooperation and communication between Malaysia and Northeast Asian countries. The Look East Policy aimed to emulate Japan and South Korea's development models, departing from the Western paradigm. Malaysia sought to absorb the syndicalism and diligence theory policies, industrialization management practices, and work ethic prevalent in Japan and South Korea. The implementation of the Look East Policy catalyzed Malaysia's economic growth, with the nation experiencing a rapid take-off. The average annual growth rate exceeded 8%, and per capita income surged from \$1,830 in 1986 to nearly \$4,000 in 1996 (Pandian et al., 2021). Japan was a primary focus of Malaysia's learning under the Look East Policy. Mahathir admired Japan's patriotism, discipline, and strong work ethic, which played pivotal roles in Japan's post-World War II economic ascension (Furuoka, 2007). Mahathir envisioned imbuing Malaysian society with Japanese values to elevate Malaysia's global standing akin to Japan's. To realize this vision, Mahathir implemented various measures to promote the Look East Policy. These included sending Malaysian students to Japan, introducing preferential policies to attract Japanese investment, and signing cooperation agreements. These efforts laid a robust foundation for enhancing Malaysia's relations with Japan (Freedman, 2005). One of the most significant outcomes of the Look East Policy was its success in attracting foreign investment from Japan. Mahathir aimed to harness the financial and technological prowess of Japanese companies to drive Malaysia's national development agenda. He advocated for the establishment of joint ventures between Japanese firms and Malaysian companies, resulting in over 1,000 Japanese companies or joint ventures operating in Malaysia by 2006.

These ventures not only provided crucial capital and technology for local economic development but also generated numerous job opportunities, thereby fostering Malaysia's economic growth. Similarly, South Korea emerged as another important target of Malaysia's Look East Policy. While South Korea may not have held the same level of significance and priority as Japan, Mahathir actively sought to bolster relations with South Korea. He introduced preferential policies to incentivize South Korean companies to invest in Malaysia, thus contributing to the country's economic development (Hyungjong, 2023). Mahathir's Look East Policy underscored Malaysia's significance for Northeast Asian countries in economic and trade cooperation. It also highlighted the imperative for small Southeast Asian nations, led by Malaysia, to expand their diplomatic horizons. Beyond broadening diplomatic space, Mahathir actively encouraged and advocated for the development of ties with other Northeast Asian countries such as North Korea and China. Mahathir also placed considerable emphasis on enhancing relations with China. He implemented positive measures to promote economic and trade cooperation, including relaxing visa restrictions and extending the duration of stays for Chinese visitors. Moreover, Mahathir recognized the economic strength and capital of Malaysian Chinese groups, many of whom sought investment opportunities in mainland China. This coincided with China's reform and opening-up policies, leading to a

substantial number of Malaysian Chinese groups investing in China and contributing significantly to China's economic development. Consequently, these initiatives significantly bolstered pragmatic cooperation and interaction between Malaysia and China (Zheng, 2009).

Essentially, Mahathir 1.0 implemented a proactive regional diplomacy characterized by Malaysia's adoption of proactive and pragmatic diplomatic means, prioritizing economic cooperation and development with Northeast Asian countries. This diplomatic policy was also determined by both internal and external factors. On the one hand, as the pressure from great power competition and rivalry in Asia gradually diminished with the gradual end of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, Malaysia, as a small nation, perceived weaker security threats, leading to lower security needs. This enabled Malaysia to invest more resources in domestic economic development. Mahathir's actions affirmed this point (Saravanamuttu, 1996). The "Look East" policy not only signaled Malaysia's designation of Japan and South Korea as important targets in its diplomatic blueprint but also symbolized Malaysia's pursuit of diversified external development. This had strong practical significance for promoting Malaysia's economic externalization and establishing a diversified economic cooperation model. On the other hand, internal factors played a more critical role. Due to the relatively stable external environment, Mahathir focused his governance on external economic development. As Malaysia's leader, Mahathir deeply understood the changing trends in the international environment, and economic pragmatism deeply influenced his governance ideology. Mahathir believed that despite the existing tensions with some Northeast Asian countries, economic development should take precedence (Nossal & Stubbs, 1997). Therefore, he actively promoted economic cooperation with countries like South Korea and Japan, while correspondingly relaxing restrictions on economic interaction with China within certain limits. Particularly, under Mahathir's long-standing advocacy of "Asian values," he strongly opposed Western countries' political exploitation and oppression of Asian countries, believing that Asian countries should seek an independent and autonomous path, with Japan serving as the best example for current Asian countries (Robison, 1996). Guided by such understanding, Malaysia's relations with Japan and South Korea tended to be highly stable. Additionally, under Mahathir's leadership, the National Front also realized the significant importance of economic growth in consolidating its own governance legitimacy. Therefore, when Mahathir adopted the "Look East" policy, Malaysia's political elites expressed strong support domestically, not only strengthening the National Front's leadership in Malaysia but also winning the full support and trust of the people, effectively enhancing legitimacy through performance growth (Ping, 2008).

Despite some scholars' reservations about the efficacy of Mahathir's "Look East Policy," his nationalist aspirations to establish an Asian collective without Western dominance underscored his proactive regional diplomacy. While this stance risked strained relations with the West, Mahathir's efforts significantly contributed to realizing Malaysia's national interests and fostering economic development during the 1.0 period.

(ii) Case 2: The Mahathir 2.0 Period

On May 10, 2018, following Malaysia's 14th national election, the Mahathir-led Alliance of

Hope secured a majority of seats in Parliament, marking the beginning of Mahathir's 2.0 era of administration. Mahathir's second term differed from his first in two significant ways. Firstly, the system pressure increased notably, leading to tense relations with certain regional countries. Upon Mahathir's return to power in 2018, the international political landscape witnessed heightened competition and conflict between China, a rising power in East Asia, and the United States, particularly in the form of a great power rivalry. The onset of the "China-US trade war" in 2018 significantly impacted Malaysia's economic development, presenting Malaysia with difficult choices amid heightened security concerns. Malaysia found itself in a precarious position due to its inability to directly confront the strength gap between China and the United States, necessitating the pursuit of a suitable foreign policy path. Moreover, within Southeast Asia, the collision between China's "Belt and Road" initiative and Japan's "Indo-Pacific Strategy" intensified economic competition and exchanges, adding to Malaysia's security pressures. During Najib's tenure as Prime Minister, Malaysia maintained close ties with China, particularly evident in its participation in the "Belt and Road" initiative (Zakaria&Mohamedsha, 2020). However, Mahathir and some domestic political elites viewed this closeness as excessive pro-China behavior, inconsistent with Malaysia's traditional diplomatic principles. Mahathir criticized the perceived unfairness and lack of transparency in economic cooperation with China, expressing concerns about the threat posed to Malaysia's economic security by an influx of Chinese companies.

As a result, Mahathir called for a re-evaluation of economic and trade cooperation agreements with China, temporarily halting projects like the East Coast Railway project (ECRL). This stance drew the ire of China, leading to heightened tensions and deepened distrust between the two countries, significantly impacting Malaysia-China relations. Furthermore, Mahathir's second term saw a deterioration in relations with North Korea following the 2017 "Kim Jong-nam assassination incident." This incident strained bilateral relations, leading to the recall of ambassadors and triggering a "hostage crisis." Despite Mahathir's expressed support for the North Korea-US summit and efforts toward peace, fundamental differences persisted, ultimately resulting in the severance of diplomatic ties between Malaysia and North Korea in 2021.

Secondly, Mahathir's second term witnessed a nuanced hedging of interests among different levels within the country. While Mahathir continued to actively promote the "Look East Policy" and strengthen relations with South Korea and Japan, his approach toward China underwent adjustments. Malaysia's close economic ties with China, driven largely by the Chinese community's linguistic and cultural advantages, prompted Mahathir to reassess Malaysia's relationship with China in light of perceived economic imbalances and threats to national security (Chin,2022). Especially, there have been certain adjustments in the path of domestic political legitimation. While performance legitimation greatly assists Mahathir and the Pakatan Harapan coalition in enhancing domestic governance legitimacy, it is imperative to ensure the security of the small nation while also prioritizing the interests of the Malay ethnic group (Kuik,2021b). Due to the corruption issues during the tenure of the former Prime Minister Najib, it has sparked criticism and dissatisfaction among the Malaysian people regarding the long-standing corruption issues within UMNO(Abadi,2021). This has

also posed a serious test for the Pakatan Harapan coalition. How to address corruption issues and avoid doubts and tests on their own governance legitimacy by the people has become a crucial aspect of governance during Mahathir 2.0. Additionally, cooperation with China's "Belt and Road Initiative" needs to be re-evaluated to ensure that it will not pose security threats or risks to Malaysia (Ngeow & Jamil,2022).

However, the longstanding cooperation with China has failed to benefit the local Malay community, who perceive the integration of Chinese enterprises as a threat to their interests and security. Consequently, Malay-dominated domestic political elites exerted significant pressure on Mahathir. To consolidate his ruling base, Mahathir had to carefully consider the sentiments of the local Malay population. Despite China being Malaysia's largest trading partner for an extended period, Malaysia has indeed reaped the rewards of China's economic growth, utilizing it as a catalyst for its own economic development. This underscores Malaysia's reliance on China as a cornerstone of its economic progress, highlighting the country's inability to bear the substantial costs of deteriorating relations with China. Nevertheless, Mahathir's approach toward China has strained relations between the two countries. Fundamentally, Mahathir did not seek to worsen ties with China but rather aimed for economic cooperation that aligned more closely with Malaysia's national security and interests (Zhao,2022). In navigating this complex landscape, Mahathir's political expectations, the interests of various domestic political elites, and Malaysia's national security concerns intersected, often resulting in friction. In response, Mahathir adopted a hedging strategy to navigate the evolving domestic and international environment. On one hand, he maintained close ties and interaction with Japan, South Korea, and other Northeast Asian countries, bolstering bilateral partnerships and cooperation. On the other hand, he pursued cooperation with major powers like the United States and China without aligning strongly with either side, opting for an equidistant foreign policy (Zhao,2022). In dealings with China, Mahathir exercised caution and vigilance, refusing to take sides while maintaining a prudent stance.

Consequently, Mahathir's 2.0 era exemplifies Malaysia's adoption of a composite regional diplomacy. Malaysia pursues friendly and pragmatic diplomacy to cultivate bilateral relations with Northeast Asian countries, actively promoting stable relations with Japan and South Korea. However, tensions and suspicions characterize Malaysia's relations with regional counterparts such as China and North Korea. Mahathir's relatively cautious approach toward China reflects Malaysia's commitment to safeguarding its national security and interests (Bussinessinsider,2018).

Table 2. Comparison of Malaysia's Economic and Trade Relations with Major Northeast Asian Countries in 2023 (Unit: USD)

country	import trade	Export trade	Total Trade
China	56.71 billion	42.15 billion	98.86 billion
Japan	15.56 billion	16.46 billion	32.02 billion
South Korea	11.47 billion	12.25 billion	23.72 billion
North Korea	None	1.57 thousand	1.57thousand

Source: Trading Economics, <https://tradingeconomics.com/malaysia/imports/china>

In summary, the transition from Mahathir 1.0 to 2.0 reflects the adaptive changes in Malaysia's foreign policy vis-à-vis the Northeast Asian region. Both the security needs at the systemic level and the interest preferences at the unit level shape the trajectory of Malaysia's regional diplomatic approach. When external systemic pressures are relatively weak, Malaysia's security needs are lower, and domestic interests across various levels are generally satisfied, leading to the adoption of active regional diplomacy. However, when external systemic pressures intensify, Malaysia's security needs become heightened, and the satisfaction of domestic interests becomes more challenging, prompting Malaysia to resort to preventive diplomacy.

Following the 2018 domestic election, Malaysia has embraced a composite regional diplomacy strategy to address the complexities within Northeast Asia. This approach enables Malaysia to better align with domestic interest preferences and external security imperatives, thereby facilitating its development in the international arena. This adaptive approach underscores Malaysia's ability to navigate the shifting dynamics of regional politics while safeguarding its national interests and promoting its external development agenda.

Table 3. Malaysia's Diplomatic Patterns Toward Northeast Asia

Regional diplomacy model	Terms	Features	Purpose	Influence
Active regional diplomacy	Mahathir 1.0 period (1981-2003)	A warm and friendly attitude centered on a pragmatic policy	Developing the broadest possible partnerships, especially with a focus on Japan and the Republic of Korea, and enhancing linkages and interactions with countries in the North-East Asian region	Expanded Malaysia's diplomatic space and increased its own diplomatic initiative, especially in obtaining financial and technical support from Japan and South Korea, which has given a strong impetus to economic development.
composite regional diplomacy	Mahathir 2.0 period (2018-2022)	Adoption of a relatively proactive diplomatic stance centered on achieving and promoting economic cooperation and interaction, while maintaining a relatively cautious approach towards some countries in the region	Continue to maintain close interaction and ties with Japan and South Korea, but exercise caution when dealing with China, requiring cooperation with China to meet Malaysia's national security and expectations.	Strengthening the foundation of cooperation with Japan and South Korea and deepening bilateral relations with them, while effectively reducing economic dependence on a single country and enhancing its own risk-tolerance capacity

Source: Designed by author

5. Conclusion

This paper adopts a neoclassical realist perspective to delineate the dynamics of small states'

diplomacy within specific regions, focusing on the interplay between "security needs" and "interest preferences" as the primary explanatory variables. At the system level, factors such as the great power rivalry and threat perception influence small states' external security needs, while at the unit level, the interests of various political entities within small states shape their "interest preferences."

In response to varying levels of external systemic pressure, small states adopt different regional diplomacy modes, including active regional diplomacy, preventive regional diplomacy, and composite regional diplomacy. These modes are contingent upon the balance between security needs and interest preferences. The analysis of Mahathir's two administrations illustrates how Malaysia transitioned from active regional diplomacy to composite regional diplomacy. This shift reflects the dynamic interplay between systemic security needs and unitary interest preferences. Malaysia's rational adaptation to changing internal and external circumstances underscores its diplomatic pragmatism as a small state actor. In addition, Malaysia's case also provides valuable experience for other small Southeast Asian countries in promoting diplomatic interactions with countries from different regions. It also offers a new path for understanding the diversified diplomatic behaviors of small nations.

Furthermore, the paper suggests that China can draw valuable insights from Malaysia's diplomatic experiences, especially in the context of ongoing geopolitical conflicts such as the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and its implications for China's Belt and Road Initiative. By actively promoting regional diplomacy and fostering sincere cooperation with countries across different regions, China can enhance its diplomatic footprint and advance the Belt and Road Initiative's objectives. In conclusion, Malaysia's diplomatic evolution serves as a model for small states seeking to navigate complex regional dynamics, while also providing valuable lessons for major powers like China in advancing their strategic initiatives through effective regional diplomacy.

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