PUTRAJAYA: The presence of warships in the South China Sea and Straits of Malacca is sending the “wrong signal” which is not healthy for peace and stability in the area, says the Prime Minister.

While Malaysia could not enforce a “warship-free area” in the two areas, it was of the opinion that there should be no military vessels nearby, said Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

“This is because some countries, which see other countries having warships here, are already asking if they should also be sending theirs. That’s not healthy.

“We prefer if there are no warships around Malaysia,” he said at a press conference yesterday.
Malaysia is flanked by the South China Sea on the east coast of the peninsula and the Straits of Malacca – known as one of the most important shipping lanes in the world – on its west coast.

The South China Sea has been a contentious area, with disputes occurring over island and maritime claims among countries, namely Malaysia, China, Brunei, the Philippines and Vietnam.

An estimated US$5 trillion (RM19 trillion) worth of global trade passes through the South China Sea and many non-claimant states want the South China Sea to remain as international waters.

To promote this, several states, including the United States, conduct “freedom of navigation” operations.

Recently, however, China has been building up its military presence in the area.

US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis, at the recent Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, said China's military build-up in the South China Sea and its deployment of high-end weapons systems in the disputed waterway is designed to intimidate and coerce neighbours.

Beijing had deployed a range of military hardware, including anti-ship missiles, surface-to-air missiles and electronic jammers across the South China Sea, where it has built islets and other maritime features into hardened military facilities.

Assoc Prof Dr Jatswan Singh from the Department of International and Strategic Studies at Universiti Malaya said Malaysia is rightly opposed to the presence of foreign warships near its waters.

He said Malaysia and Asean had always maintained a neutral stance. But the South China Sea is now seeing a lot of Chinese military activity, which may affect freedom of navigation in the future.

“We have to look at whether the major powers can ensure freedom of navigation, which is vital to international trade,” he said.
Dr Jatswan said Dr Mahathir had a valid point in raising Malaysia’s concerns.

He added that when warships appeared close to the country’s territorial waters, it can turn South-East Asia into a theatre of major power rivalry, which was a problem during the Cold War.

Prof Dr Aruna Gopinath, a specialist on terrorism and counter-terrorism, said that the presence of warships near a country’s borders does not send a good signal.

It could indicate that the country is in trouble or that others are eyeing the country and its resources.

“No country wants to see the presence of foreign warships near its waters, because it raises the question of whether the foreign country has an agenda for being there,” she said.

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