Three Decades of Malaysia-Japan Relations (1981-2011): Crossed Interests and Missed Opportunities

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Abstract: Malaysia-Japan relations – since 1981 – can be broadly characterised by unrequited expectations leading to missed opportunities due to incompatible interests (domestic and external). Thus, it could be argued that bilateral relations have never reached their optimal potential (aka “high water mark”) – despite good intentions and mutual recognition even during the heyday of the Look East Policy (LEP) period. By the 1990s, domestic developments within and external pressure (gaietsu) on Japan and the changing geo-political & geo-economic dynamics matched by Malaysia’s developmental needs have contributed to the stagnation in bilateral relations. The reinvigoration of the Look East Policy (first enunciated by Mahathir Mohamad) under the current administration of Najib Razak (2009-__) signals a renewed commitment by Malaysia to strengthen bilateral cooperation based on a stronger and enhanced economic partnership. A fresh start for both countries to align their national interests much closer together and seize the opportunities presented in a different era.

Keywords: Malaysia-Japan bilateral relations, Look East Policy, regional diplomacy, international relations of the Asia Pacific, diplomatic lethargy

1. Introduction

As the leading Asian country, at least before the rise of China in the current 21st century, Japan has naturally been looked up to as the paragon and model of economic development particularly in East Asia as well as Southeast Asia including not least Malaysia. Thus, despite being occupied by the then Empire of Japan for three and a half years during the Second World War, Malaysia has since its independence in 1957 always gravitated towards Japan as an important bilateral partner. Malaysia was one of the