



Fundamental changes in Malaysia's foreign policy during the era of political instability (2018-2022)

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of domestic political instability on the effectiveness of Malaysia's foreign policy implementation during the period 2018 to 2022. Following the 14th General Election in 2018, Malaysia experienced prolonged political turmoil characterized by government factionalism, shifting parliamentary majorities, and episodic political crises. Such instability raised critical concerns regarding the continuity and coherence of Malaysia's foreign policy amid increasingly complex global challenges. Drawing on empirical analysis, this research examines how political uncertainty disrupted diplomatic institutional structures, hindered policy consistency, and diminished international strategic partners' confidence in Malaysia's credibility. Findings reveal that domestic political volatility significantly undermined the consistency of foreign policy execution, impeded the operational capacity of key diplomatic institutions, and affected Malaysia's role in regional collaborations such as ASEAN as well as bilateral relations with major powers like China and the United States. This study fills a gap in the literature by providing a systematic assessment of the interplay between internal political dynamics and foreign policy outcomes in Malaysia, contributing valuable insights for policymakers aiming to enhance diplomatic effectiveness in politically unstable contexts.

Keywords: Political instability, Foreign Policy implementation, Malaysia, Diplomatic institutions, International relations

Introduction

Political instability is a pervasive global phenomenon with direct and profound effects on international relations and the foreign policy orientations of states. Over the past decade, the global political landscape has undergone significant transformations characterized by the rise of populism, geopolitical uncertainties, and leadership changes in major powers such as the United States, China, and the European Union. These dynamics have shaped the direction of diplomatic relations worldwide, where countries experiencing political instability often face challenges in maintaining the credibility and effectiveness of their foreign policies. Internally, political instability may arise from ethnic conflicts, economic imbalances, and prolonged social crises, adversely impacting both domestic stability and broader international security and cooperation frameworks (Ostwald, 2022).

This phenomenon is not unique to Malaysia but is also evident in several Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. For instance, Thailand's prolonged political uncertainty caused by multiple military coups, mass protests, and conflicts between political elites and civil society

has impaired the consistency of its foreign policy, particularly regarding human rights issues and regional cooperation (Han, 2022). Myanmar's 2021 military coup triggered international condemnation, economic sanctions, and consequential strain on its position within ASEAN and relations with global powers. Sri Lanka has faced critical political and economic crises since 2018, culminating in government collapses and a restructuring of its foreign policy approaches (Yuniarti, 2024). These cases illustrate a recurring pattern wherein internal political instability significantly undermines a country's ability to sustain stable, consistent, and reputable foreign relations.

Since the 14th General Election in 2018, Malaysia has undergone considerable political volatility marked by frequent changes in government without general elections, party defections, and intra-party conflicts, culminating in an unstable political environment. The transitions among the Pakatan Harapan government, Perikatan Nasional coalition, and finally the Unity Government by 2022 have introduced disruption to administrative continuity (Wong, 2023). These developments have negatively affected Malaysia's foreign policy execution, notably in the frequent changes of foreign ministers and shifting

governmental priorities that challenge the sustainability of diplomatic policies formulated by preceding administrations. Consequently, there has been a diminution in international confidence regarding Malaysia's commitment to previously established foreign policy stances.

Political instability has also hampered Malaysia's capacity to assume a leadership role in regional platforms such as ASEAN, where political stability is foundational to effective multilateral diplomacy and regional cooperation (Caballero-Anthony, 2023). This situation exposes Malaysia to challenges in sustaining a consistent influence on regional and global agendas, sometimes relegating the country to a reactive rather than proactive stance on critical geopolitical issues. Persistent internal political instability often triggers fluctuations in foreign policy strategies related to diplomatic approaches, international economic engagements, and relations with regional organizations (Banerji, 2023).

Inconsistencies in diplomatic direction are among the most apparent consequences of Malaysia's political instability from 2018 to 2022. Multiple government changes within a brief timeframe have raised questions about the legitimacy of power transitions and caused suspensions or discontinuations of foreign policies initiated by previous administrations. Continuity in foreign policy is essential for maintaining Malaysia's international credibility and long-term commitments (JAMIL, 2023). The domestic political upheavals, albeit occurring through parliamentary processes without direct general elections, have impaired the nation's ability to uphold consistent policy implementation. For example, trade cooperation initiatives such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) experienced delays due to ministerial turnovers and changing governmental agendas (Lugg et al., 2024).

Furthermore, Malaysia's foreign policy has demonstrated inconsistencies on human rights issues, exemplified by policy reversals like the withdrawal from ratifying the Rome Statute and the postponement of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) (Tiara & Surwandono, 2022). These inconsistencies reflect a governance challenge in

crafting principled and coherent foreign policies, projecting an ambiguous image to the international community regarding Malaysia's commitment to global agendas.

Moreover, domestic political instability has adversely influenced international perceptions of Malaysia as a dependable diplomatic partner and strategic investor destination (Azahar & Khan, 2024). In international relations, perceptions critically shape the confidence and trust other states place in a government's ability to uphold policy commitments. Sudden leadership changes particularly those outside the framework of democratic general elections raise concerns among strategic partners and foreign diplomats about Malaysia's policy continuity and the legitimacy of commitments. Foreign investors, specifically from the European Union, Japan, and the United States, have expressed apprehension regarding Malaysia's economic and trade policy uncertainties, especially when policy implementation is delayed or abruptly altered (Hao & Li, 2025). Hence, political stability and policy certainty are imperative to maintain investor confidence and reinforce Malaysia's position on the international stage.

Given these multifaceted challenges, this study aims to analyze how domestic political instability in Malaysia from 2018 to 2022 has impacted the effectiveness and consistency of the country's foreign policy implementation. The research investigates the main diplomatic challenges resulting from this political context and explores the diplomatic strategies employed by Malaysia to manage its foreign relations amid internal political turbulence. By examining these dimensions, the study intends to contribute to the scholarly discourse on institutional resilience in diplomacy within developing countries and offer practical insights for formulating resilient and consistent foreign policy strategies despite frequent political transitions.

The findings of this research are expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the intricate relationship between domestic political instability and foreign policy efficacy in Malaysia. This knowledge will aid policymakers, diplomats, and relevant stakeholders in enhancing Malaysia's diplomatic robustness and sustaining its international commitments in a politically volatile environment.

Neutrality and peace

Malaysia's foreign policy is fundamentally anchored in the principles of neutrality and peace, which have served as key strategic approaches for maintaining stable international relations. Historically, Malaysia adopted a non-aligned stance during the Cold War era, deliberately avoiding alignment with any major power blocs (Saravanamuttu, 2021). This neutral posture has enabled Malaysia to cultivate and sustain amicable relations with diverse countries worldwide while refraining from exclusive military alliances.

In addition to neutrality, Malaysia places significant emphasis on peace as a core element of its international relations framework (Hao & Li, 2025). This commitment is clearly demonstrated through Malaysia's active participation in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions. Since 1960, Malaysia has contributed troops and police personnel to over 38 UN peace operations across various global conflict zones, including notable deployments in Lebanon, Bosnia Herzegovina, and Sudan. Malaysia's ongoing involvement, such as the continuous presence in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and recent commitments for enhanced capabilities in peacekeeping forces, reinforces the nation's image as a supporter of global stability and enhances its diplomatic stature on the world stage (Cheng-Chwee, 2024a).

Through these peacekeeping efforts, Malaysia not only contributes to international security but also advances its foreign policy objectives by promoting regional and global peace. This research aims to analyze the role of Malaysia's neutrality and peacekeeping commitments in shaping its foreign relations and international standing.

Principle of non-intervention

The principle of non-intervention is a cornerstone of Malaysia's foreign policy and has been a significant reference point in shaping the country's international relations since the post-independence era. Rooted in Malaysia's commitment to the sovereignty of independent states, this principle rejects any external interference in the domestic affairs of nations. It is enshrined in the ASEAN Charter of 1967 and the ASEAN Declaration on the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), which emphasize that

ASEAN member states must respect sovereignty, territorial integrity, and refrain from meddling in one another's internal matters (Roscini, 2024).

Within the ASEAN framework, the non-intervention principle serves as a fundamental foundation for regional cooperation, prioritizing political stability and harmonious relations among member countries over external pressure on internal issues like human rights or democracy. Malaysia has consistently upheld this principle in its foreign policy, especially when addressing regional conflicts such as those in Southern Thailand, the Mindanao insurgency in the Philippines, and the political crisis in Myanmar (Sulaiman, 2024). Despite international and non-governmental organization pressures, Malaysia adopts a stance of non-interference in the internal affairs of its neighbors, opting instead for careful diplomacy focused on dialogue, mutual understanding, and appropriate regional mechanisms.

However, the implementation of the non-intervention principle is neither static nor absolute; it demonstrates pragmatic flexibility in light of evolving geopolitical realities. A notable example is Malaysia's approach to the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar. While generally adhering to non-intervention, under the administration of then Prime Minister Dato' Seri Najib Tun Razak, Malaysia openly criticized the Myanmar military's actions against the Rohingya people, organized solidarity demonstrations, and raised the issue in international platforms such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) (Setiani et al., 2024). This illustrates that the principle can be adapted when addressing humanitarian issues that impact national interests and international reputation.

This evolution confirms that Malaysia's non-intervention principle in foreign policy is contextually selective, shaped by regional political dynamics and national priorities. Malaysia balances this principle with protecting universal values such as human rights, regional security, and its global image. Such a nuanced approach can be understood as a form of "limited intervention" that maintains diplomatic propriety while recognizing moral responsibilities and international pressures.

Domestic political instability also challenges the

consistent application of this principle. Changes in national leadership often influence foreign policy orientations, including the adherence to non-intervention. Between 2018 and 2022, Malaysia's diplomatic tone towards Myanmar and other regional issues varied, reflecting how internal political shifts affect the practical enforcement of this principle.

Therefore, the principle of non-intervention in Malaysia's foreign policy should be perceived not only as a normative commitment to the sovereignty of other states but also as a strategic element adaptable to contemporary regional and global challenges. This study aims to examine in depth how this principle is applied and the extent of its consistency amid Malaysia's political uncertainties, particularly in managing regional issues such as the Myanmar crisis, ASEAN relations, and responses to

international pressure regarding human rights concerns.

Balanced economic relations and diplomacy

The third fundamental principle underpinning Malaysia's foreign policy is the continuous effort to maintain a balance between economic interests and diplomatic relations. Since independence, Malaysia has taken a pragmatic, economic-oriented approach to foreign policy, emphasizing trade and regional integration within organizations such as ASEAN. This approach became particularly evident during the premiership of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad in the 1980s and 1990s, where Malaysia actively adapted its foreign policy to reinforce its economic interests, as outlined in Table 1.1 below.

Table 1. Malaysia's foreign economic policy during the era of tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamed (1981–2003).

Year	Policy/Initiative	Brief Description	Impact/Objectives
1981	Look East Policy	Encouraged Malaysia to emulate the economic and industrial development models of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.	To accelerate Malaysia's industrialization process and economic transformation.
1981 – 1990s	Buy British Last	A policy aimed at reducing dependence on Britain, especially in trade and investment.	To promote products and investments from other countries, reducing British economic dominance. Economy.
1980s – 1990s	Establishment of East Asia Economic Group (later EAEC)	An effort to form a regional economic bloc as an alternative to Western economic blocs such as NAFTA and APEC.	To strengthen regional economic cooperation and enhance Malaysia's bargaining power in the global economy.
1990s	Vision 2020	A vision to make Malaysia a developed country by 2020 with an average GDP growth rate of 7%.	To boost economic development, stability, and Malaysia's influence regionally and globally.
1980s – 1990s	Strengthening economic relations with Islamic countries and the Middle East	Expanding cooperation in trade, investment, as well as social and educational relations.	To strengthen Malaysia's position as an active Islamic country in economic diplomacy.

Source: (Khadijah & Khalid, 2009)

Key initiatives during this era included the Look East policy, Buy British Last campaign, the establishment of the East Asia Economic Group, the Vision 2020 development plan, and the deepening of economic

and diplomatic ties with Islamic countries and the Middle East. These strategies were designed not only to strengthen Malaysia's position within the regional and global economy but also to serve as strategic

tools to enhance the country's diplomatic influence (Nor Azlina Endut, 2021). Economic relations were thus perceived as foundational elements that solidify bilateral relations and build mutual trust between nations.

Moreover, Malaysia's foreign policy has placed great importance on engaging in multilateral free trade agreements such as the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Participation in these agreements opens Malaysia's markets to global trade and fosters strategic ties with global powers like China, Japan, South Korea, the European Union, and the United States (Chong, 2021). This engagement is part of a broader diplomatic economic strategy designed to support national development, attract foreign direct investment, and enhance Malaysia's competitiveness in the global value chain.

Simultaneously, maintaining diplomatic balance among major powers has been a priority, with Malaysia avoiding alignment to any single bloc and instead fostering constructive relations with diverse actors including the U.S., China, Russia, the EU, and Middle Eastern countries (Cheng-Chwee, 2024). This balanced approach preserves Malaysia's autonomy in foreign policy decision-making and reflects its stance as a developing nation committed to sovereignty, justice, and multilateralism.

However, the political instability in Malaysia between 2018 and 2022, marked by multiple changes in government through parliamentary shifts rather than general elections, posed challenges to the consistent implementation of this balancing principle. Foreign policy and economic diplomacy priorities shifted according to the ruling coalition, affecting Malaysia's relationship dynamics with key partners such as China, especially regarding projects under the Belt and Road Initiative. The political uncertainty also triggered debates and reviews of trade and investment policies, which temporarily unsettled international partners and investors. Despite such challenges, Malaysia ultimately ratified RCEP and CPTPP, indicating its enduring commitment to these strategic economic agreements.

This scenario illustrates that while the principle of

balancing economic and diplomatic interests remains central to Malaysia's foreign policy, domestic political volatility can disrupt its coherent and predictable application. It underscores the need for Malaysia to reinforce institutional capacities to sustain the continuity of this principle amidst political transitions, which is crucial for preserving the country's credibility and strategic standing in an increasingly complex global environment.

Research methodology

Research design

This study employs a systematic research design aimed at addressing the research questions and fulfilling the objectives related to Malaysia's foreign policy shifts during the period of political instability between 2018 and 2022. This study integrates the selection of research type, approach, data collection methods, and sampling techniques appropriate to examining the impact of domestic political instability on Malaysia's foreign policy.

A qualitative approach was adopted to gain in-depth insight into how internal political instability including government transitions without elections, frequent leadership changes, and internal political conflicts affected the formulation and implementation of Malaysia's foreign policy. This qualitative methodology allows for detailed analyses of diplomatic challenges and strategic responses employed by the government to maintain consistent and effective international relations throughout the specified period.

Data collection procedures

The primary data collection technique involved semi-structured interviews with government officials directly engaged in foreign policy formulation and implementation. The respondents were drawn from three principal government entities: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia (Wisma Putra), the National Security Council (Majlis Keselamatan Negara, MKN), and the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI). Purposive sampling was utilized to ensure that participants possessed relevant experience and expertise pertinent to the study's context.

In addition to interviews, secondary data sources

were extensively analyzed, including official foreign policy reports, government statements, policy documents, academic publications, and relevant media coverage. This document analysis provided a comprehensive understanding of the nexus between political instability and Malaysia's foreign policy adjustments.

Analytical framework

This study is underpinned by the Rational Actor Model (Allison et al., 1953), which posits that foreign policy decisions are made through rational analysis that weighs costs and benefits. This theoretical perspective facilitates a critical evaluation of how political leaders during 2018–2022 adapted foreign policy directions amid domestic political turbulence.

Interview implementation

Semi-structured interviews were conducted both face-to-face and online, depending on feasibility and permissions from relevant authorities. An interview guide was developed to maintain consistency while allowing flexibility to explore respondents' experiences and views extensively. All interviews were audio-recorded (with respondent consent), transcribed verbatim, and subjected to thematic analysis. Key themes were identified concerning challenges in policy implementation, diplomatic strategies, and the repercussions of political instability on Malaysia's international relations.

Document analysis

Complementing interview data, content analysis was applied to official documents and media sources to extract narratives, policy shifts, and diplomatic approaches in response to domestic political challenges. This multifaceted document scrutiny aids in tracking foreign policy continuity and changes over the study period.

Data triangulation and analysis

The study employs data triangulation by cross-verifying information obtained from interviews and document analyses to enhance credibility and validity. Qualitative data analysis software, such as NVivo, was used to assist in coding, theme development, and mapping relationships among key

issues identified. This comprehensive analysis enabled the identification of significant patterns and implications relating to Malaysia's foreign policy within the context of political instability from 2018 to 2022.

Population and sample

The population for this study comprises government officials with direct expertise and experience in the formulation and implementation of Malaysia's foreign policy, particularly in the context of domestic political instability occurring between 2018 and 2022. The selection of this population aligns with the study's objectives, which focus on analyzing the impact of political instability on the country's foreign policy and the diplomatic strategies employed by Malaysia in response to these challenges.

A purposive sampling method was employed to ensure that only individuals who are highly relevant to the research context were included as respondents (Turner, 2020). Respondents were selected based on their expertise in foreign policy and national security, as well as their direct involvement in decision-making processes and the implementation of policies related to Malaysia's international relations.

A total of thirteen (13) respondents participated in this study, consisting of:

Five (5) officers from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia (Wisma Putra) with experience in diplomatic affairs and foreign policy management.

Three (3) officers from the National Security Council (Majlis Keselamatan Negara, MKN) involved in coordinating national security policies directly linked to international relations.

Five (5) officers from relevant ministries, such as the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), engaged in implementing foreign trade policies and international economic relations.

The selection of this sample allowed the researcher to obtain rich, contextual, and in-depth data regarding how internal political instability affected the consistency and effectiveness of Malaysia's foreign policy during the period under study. Furthermore, it facilitated an understanding of the diplomatic

strategies adopted by the government to address political transitions.
challenges in international relations amidst domestic

Table 2. Document analysis

No.	Respondent Code	Gender	Ministry / Agency	Years of Service
1	R1	Male	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Wisma Putra)	12
2	R2	Female	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Wisma Putra)	10
3	R3	Male	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Wisma Putra)	15
4	R4	Male	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Wisma Putra)	8
5	R5	Female	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Wisma Putra)	9
6	R6	Male	National Security Council (MKN)	11
7	R7	Female	National Security Council (MKN)	13
8	R8	Male	National Security Council (MKN)	7
9	R9	Male	Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI)	14
10	R10	Female	Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI)	10
11	R11	Male	Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI)	9
12	R12	Female	Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI)	6
13	R13	Male	Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI)	12

Data collection

Document analysis

Document analysis serves as a core method for obtaining relevant and comprehensive secondary data. This approach enables the researcher to examine patterns, narratives, and shifts enacted or revised in response to changes in Malaysia’s political leadership. Through systematic document analysis, the study traces the historical development of foreign policy, identifies significant diplomatic shifts, and analyzes institutional responses to periods of political uncertainty.

The documents analyzed in this study include multiple authoritative and credible sources:

Official government reports and policy statements, such as Malaysia’s Foreign Policy statements, Reports from the Ministry of foreign Affairs (Wisma Putra), Annual Reports of the

Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), and official releases from the National Security Council (MKN). These documents outline the strategic direction of foreign policy, including

emphasis on economic diplomacy, regional security, and bilateral or multilateral relationships.

Official speeches and public statements by key national leaders, including the Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and other senior policymakers.

These are analyzed to detect discourse changes in foreign policy before and after changes in government not arising from general elections, and to observe the articulation of national interests in a dynamic international context.

International cooperation documents, reflecting Malaysia’s commitments in regional and global forums such as the ASEAN Summit, the United Nations General Assembly, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). These documents provide insights into Malaysia’s position on global issues such as humanitarian crises, climate change, maritime security, and geopolitical conflicts.

Academic literature and research reports

Sourced from scholarly journals, think tanks, and research bodies (both local and international) that

focus on international relations, political instability, and Malaysia's foreign policy. Prior studies are utilized to support empirical findings and supply a broader conceptual framework.

Selected media reports from reputable outlets such as Bernama, The Star, Malaysiakini, Al Jazeera, and Reuters, providing perspectives on public perceptions and reactions to foreign policy announcements during political transitions.

All documents are analyzed systematically using content analysis methods to identify key themes related to policy shifts, diplomatic approaches, and the direct and indirect effects of political instability on foreign policy implementation. This process enables the identification of continuity or inconsistency in Malaysia's foreign policy execution and sheds light on institutional adaptation to rapid political changes. Overall, document analysis forms a foundational component for data triangulation in conjunction with interview and case study findings, ensuring a thorough and credible understanding of the research problem.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews constitute another primary data collection method, designed to obtain firsthand perspectives from individuals actively involved in the formulation, execution, and monitoring of Malaysia's foreign policy.

This technique allows in-depth exploration of respondents' views, experiences, and professional considerations, while providing the flexibility to clarify issues arising spontaneously during discussion.

Research respondents comprise senior and mid-level officials from three key government entities:

Five (5) officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Wisma Putra), directly involved in bilateral and multilateral relations, diplomatic strategy, and the management of international affairs.

Three (3) officials from the National Security Council (MKN), with expertise in regional and international security and diplomatic cooperation in addressing non-traditional security threats.

Five (5) officials from the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), influential in economic diplomacy, international trade relations, and the negotiation of free trade agreements.

Respondent selection is carried out via purposive sampling, ensuring only those with substantive, relevant experience in foreign affairs are included. This is critical to guarantee the data's validity and to provide an accurate portrayal of the relationship between domestic political instability and foreign policy execution.

Interviews are conducted either face-to-face or online, as appropriate. The interview guide is developed based on research objectives, covering major questions related to:

The impact of domestic political instability (2018–2022), including government changes without general elections, on Malaysia's foreign policy implementation and adaptation.

Direct and indirect implications of government transition for diplomatic strategies and ongoing bilateral/multilateral relations.

Strategies adopted by ministries and agencies to sustain the effectiveness of foreign policy implementation amid political volatility.

Main challenges faced by diplomatic officials and policymakers in maintaining consistency, credibility, and policy continuity under internal political pressure and uncertain administrative structures.

Ethical protocols are strictly adhered to: written consent is obtained from all participants, interviews are recorded with consent, and all transcripts are coded for anonymity. The researcher respects and guarantees the confidentiality of all personal information in compliance with qualitative research ethics. This enables a comprehensive, contextualized understanding of the effects of political instability on Malaysia's foreign policy decisions and implementation.

Case study

The case study method allows for detailed, context-rich analysis of how domestic political instability influences Malaysia's foreign policy positions and

implementation between 2018 and 2022. This approach is well-suited to elucidating complex, real-world situations and tracing causative links between political upheavals and foreign policy shifts.

Notable case studies analyzed include:

Malaysia–china relations and the South China Sea issue:

This case assesses Malaysia's stance on the South China Sea dispute during periods of domestic political transition, analyzing how frequent changes in leadership affected policy consistency and how Malaysia adapted its diplomatic approach under pressure from major powers.

Malaysia's response to international humanitarian crises:

Focused on the official government reaction to the Palestine-Israel conflict and the Rohingya crisis, this analysis evaluates changes in government statements, participation in international forums, and Malaysia's commitment to global human rights and justice.

Changes in Malaysia's diplomatic relations with asean and major powers:

This case examines how shifts in domestic politics impacted Malaysia's bilateral and multilateral ties, particularly with ASEAN neighbours, the US, China, and Japan. Attention is given to the continuity of diplomatic engagement, economic and security cooperation, and perceptions of Malaysia's credibility among major powers.

Each case study is analyzed interpretatively using qualitative methods and reliable data sources, including official government documents, annual ministry reports, leader transcripts, and semi-structured interview data from key ministry personnel. Supplementary data from mainstream domestic and international media, as well as academic studies, enrich the perspective on public and international responses to Malaysia's foreign policy during periods of instability. This approach enables a holistic understanding of the correlation between domestic political factors and foreign policy shifts, and assesses the adaptability of Malaysia's diplomatic institutions.

Media and leaders' speech analysis

Media and speech analysis is a vital component of this study's methodology, helping to trace how foreign policy narratives are constructed and disseminated to the public during times of political instability (2018–2022). This approach systematically identifies both changes and continuities in official government communication and assesses how domestic political dynamics such as government changes without elections and frequent leadership transitions influence diplomatic communication.

Media and speech analysis focuses on three main areas:

Official Speeches and Statements of Senior Leaders:

The research examines content and rhetorical strategies of official speeches and media statements by the Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, and other senior officials concerning international affairs. Discourse framing is analyzed to detect changes in diplomatic approach, policy priorities, and political messaging corresponding with leadership changes.

Mainstream domestic and international media coverage:

Reports from national newspapers (Utusan Malaysia, Berita Harian, The Star, New Straits Times), international outlets (Reuters, The Diplomat, Al Jazeera), and government news agencies (Bernama) are assessed. The study identifies dominant narratives in reportage on Malaysia's foreign policy, including themes such as bilateral relations, regional conflicts, Malaysia's role within ASEAN, and the country's standing in the international arena during domestic political transitions.

Official social media content and public discourse:

Beyond traditional media, the content of official social media channels (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) managed by Wisma Putra, MITI, and MKN is reviewed. Emphasis is placed on the delivery and public reception of diplomatic messages, and the study analyzes public responses and comments to gauge perceptions and acceptance of Malaysia's foreign policy amid political uncertainty.

Data is analyzed thematically using content analysis and coded systematically, with the aid of qualitative analysis software such as NVivo to ensure reliability and validity in interpretation. This approach allows the researcher to link official government narratives with the actual implementation of foreign policy and to assess the effectiveness of government communication strategies in shaping perceptions. All data utilized in this analysis is drawn from legitimate, authoritative, and relevant sources, aligning with ethical and objective academic standards.

Results

The findings of this study demonstrate that domestic political instability in Malaysia during the period 2018 to 2022 significantly impacted the effectiveness of Malaysia's foreign policy implementation. The data reveal several interrelated consequences that affected both the formulation and administration of foreign policy, challenging the principles of the Rational Actor Model, which emphasizes systematic, consistent, and objective decision-making aligned with long-term national interests.

Firstly, the frequent changes of government occurring three times within five years led to marked inconsistencies in Malaysia's diplomatic direction. This political volatility resulted in abrupt shifts in policy approaches towards key international issues such as Malaysia's stance on Palestine, its bilateral relations with China and the United States, and its role within ASEAN. Officials from Wisma Putra confirmed that foreign policy directives changed with each change in administration, hindering the continuity and coherence essential for effective policy implementation. These findings underscore a violation of the Rational Actor Model's premise, as foreign policy decisions appeared to be influenced predominantly by short-term political considerations aimed at regime survival rather than objective, long-term strategic analysis.

Secondly, international perceptions of Malaysia were adversely affected by the domestic political instability. Interviewed diplomatic and trade officers consistently reported concerns about Malaysia being viewed as an unstable partner lacking commitment to its international obligations. Such perceptions were exacerbated by policy reversals including the withdrawal from international agreements like

ICERD and the Rome Statute, as well as delays in ratifying trade agreements such as CPTPP. Foreign investors expressed apprehension about the unpredictability of Malaysia's trade policies, which undermined investor confidence and increased perceived investment risks. Furthermore, regional neighbors questioned Malaysia's commitment to critical regional security issues, such as the South China Sea dispute, contributing to a diminished moral leadership role within ASEAN.

Thirdly, institutional weaknesses within Malaysia's foreign policy apparatus were exposed by the politically driven shifts in priority areas. The study found fluctuations in policy emphases ranging from engagement with major powers, ASEAN cooperation, to fostering ties within the Islamic world and economic diplomacy dependent largely on the incumbent political leadership. Such inconsistency evidences institutional immaturity, lacking the stable, data-driven policy foundation advocated by the Rational Actor Model. The absence of a continuous strategic thread in foreign policy not only reduced Malaysia's credibility as a long-term strategic partner but also undermined its capacity to act decisively on the international stage.

Moreover, political instability disrupted the administrative and communicative mechanism necessary for effective foreign policy execution. Delays in appointing senior diplomatic officials and politically motivated staffing changes weakened Malaysia's diplomatic presence internationally. Communication breakdowns between key agencies such as Wisma Putra, the National Security Council (MKN), and the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) led to conflicting messages and policy overlaps, further impairing policy coherence. These operational challenges, demonstrated in the study's causal diagrams, exhibit a cumulative effect where administrative disturbance and poor inter-agency communication compounded to reduce policy effectiveness drastically.

Finally, this political volatility undermined Malaysia's strategic capability as a global diplomatic actor. Compared to neighboring countries exhibiting greater policy consistency, Malaysia's unstable domestic politics impeded its ability to influence regional and international forums significantly. The erosion of sustained, rational foreign policy

formulation and execution diminished Malaysia's influence in ASEAN and other multilateral organizations.

In summary, the results confirm that domestic political instability between 2018 and 2022 produced substantial negative effects on the consistency, credibility, and effectiveness of Malaysia's foreign policy.

The findings highlight the vital importance of institutionalizing foreign policy processes insulated from political fluctuations to uphold the Rational Actor Model principles. Such reforms are essential to restoring Malaysia's international standing and ensuring that foreign policy is conducted on the basis of rational, strategic, and long-term national interests rather than transient political agendas.

Impact of domestic political instability on Malaysia's foreign policy (2018–2022)

The period from 2018 to 2022 was marked by significant political volatility in Malaysia, characterized by the fall of three different governments within five years. This political turbulence directly affected the implementation, credibility, and prioritization of Malaysia's foreign policy objectives.

Three principal effects of political instability were identified:

A. Inconsistency in diplomatic direction

The rapid succession of governments from Pakatan Harapan (2018–2020), Perikatan Nasional (2020–2021), to Ismail Sabri's administration (2021–2022) resulted in notable discontinuities in diplomatic approaches. Each administration brought divergent foreign policy priorities, leading to shifts in stances on key issues such as the Palestinian conflict, relations with China, ASEAN engagement, and economic forums. Respondents from Wisma Putra highlighted the challenges diplomats faced in conveying a coherent foreign policy narrative abroad, with one senior official remarking that policy reversals and shifting emphases complicated Malaysia's diplomatic communications. MITI respondents corroborated these observations,

indicating that trade negotiations such as those related to CPTPP were frequently disrupted or restarted due to changes in political leadership. This inconsistency contradicted the rational decision-making ideal of stable, objective-oriented policy formulation, revealing instead a decision-making process heavily influenced by short-term domestic political concerns.

B. International perceptions of Malaysia

International actors perceived Malaysia as politically unstable and inconsistent during this period. The unorthodox transitions of power without electoral mandates raised doubts about the country's commitment to previously established foreign policy agreements. Foreign investors and diplomatic partners questioned the continuity and reliability of Malaysia's commitments, particularly regarding trade agreements like RCEP and CPTPP, and geopolitical positions on contentious issues such as the South China Sea. Interviewees noted a decline in Malaysia's reputation as a dependable regional player and moral leader in global forums, impacted by U-turns on international conventions and inconsistent messaging.

These shifts undermined Malaysia's diplomatic influence and economic attractiveness on the international stage.

C. Changing priorities in foreign policy

The frequent governmental changes also precipitated shifts in Malaysia's foreign policy priorities. Approaches toward major powers oscillated, with alternating emphasis on China, the United States, and the European Union depending on the ruling party's orientation. Engagement within regional frameworks such as ASEAN and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) fluctuated, affecting Malaysia's role in mediating regional issues like the Myanmar crisis or championing causes in the Muslim world. Economic diplomacy reflected similar volatility, with inconsistent trade and investment policies contributing to uncertainty among international partners. Respondents underscored that these priority shifts were often tactical and leader-dependent, compromising the strategic coherence of Malaysia's foreign policy objectives.

Summary Table. Shifts in foreign policy priorities by administration (2018–2022)

Aspect	Pakatan Harapan (2018–2020)	Perikatan Nasional (2020–2021)	Ismail Sabri Administration (2021–2022)
Diplomatic Focus	Democracy promotion, international justice (Palestine, Kashmir), ASEAN reforms	Pragmatic relations with China, Saudi Arabia; emphasis on political and economic stability	Post-COVID economic recovery, RCEP, foreign direct investment prioritized
Regional Engagement	Active ASEAN leadership, Muslim world advocacy	Defensive stance, reduced activism in OIC and Islamic causes	Economic diplomacy aligned with domestic recovery priorities
Trade and Economic Policy	Advancement of CPTPP negotiations, emphasis on trade liberalization	Uncertainty and delays in agreements, cautious approach	Steady promotion of investment, but mixed messages in policy continuity

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that Malaysia's domestic political instability between 2018 and 2022 exerted a profound negative impact on the effectiveness and consistency of its foreign policy implementation. The frequent changes of government, occurring three times within a short span and through parliamentary realignments rather than general elections, disrupted strategic continuity and diminished Malaysia's credibility as a reliable diplomatic partner. These political upheavals engendered abrupt shifts in foreign policy priorities, inconsistent diplomatic narratives, and delays in ratifying key international agreements such as RCEP and CPTPP. Moreover, Malaysia's fluctuating foreign policy stance undermined its capacity to lead regionally within ASEAN and weakened investor confidence, thereby exposing institutional vulnerabilities in policy formulation and execution. The inconsistency in adhering to foundational principles such as non-intervention and neutrality further reflected how political volatility complicated coherent foreign policy approaches to regional challenges the Myanmar crisis and human rights advocacy.

Despite these challenges, the study underscores the enduring importance of Malaysia's strategic foreign policy principles neutrality, peacekeeping commitments, non-intervention, and balanced economic diplomacy which remain central pillars capable of guiding Malaysia through political

turbulence if institutionalized effectively. However, the lack of a stable and insulated foreign policy apparatus enabled short-term domestic politics to dominate decision-making, contravening the Rational Actor Model's ideal of consistent, long-term strategic planning. This situation not only impaired Malaysia's diplomatic influence but also exposed the nation to reputational risks in the global arena.

Limitations of this study include its qualitative focus constrained to interviews with government officials from selected agencies and document analysis over a limited five-year period. The study's findings may not fully capture broader societal, opposition, or external viewpoints influencing Malaysia's foreign policy. Additionally, rapid geopolitical changes beyond the study's timeframe could alter Malaysia's foreign policy landscape. Further, restrictions in accessing classified or sensitive policy deliberations may limit the depth of institutional analysis.

Recommendations for future policy and research include:

Institutionalizing foreign policy mechanisms that ensure continuity and insulation from political turnover to uphold consistent diplomatic engagement and long-term commitments.

Strengthening inter-agency coordination and communication channels among Wisma Putra, National Security Council, and MITI to improve policy coherence and administrative efficiency.

Enhancing Malaysia's diplomatic capacity to balance pragmatic economic interests with principled stances on human rights and regional security, thereby reinforcing international trust.

Conducting longitudinal studies incorporating perspectives from opposition parties, civil society, and foreign stakeholders to gain a more holistic understanding of the political-foreign policy nexus.

Exploring the role of digital diplomacy and social media as emerging instruments shaping Malaysia's foreign policy narratives in politically volatile contexts.

Overall, this study contributes to scholarly discourse by highlighting the critical interplay between domestic political stability and foreign policy efficacy in a developing country context. Addressing the identified institutional fragilities is imperative for Malaysia to restore and sustain its international standing and strategic capabilities amid an increasingly complex regional and global environment.

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