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AIR CONTROL AND CONTESTED SOVEREIGNTY: MALAYSIA'S SECURITY DILEMMA AMID CHINA'S PROSPECTIVE ADIZ IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

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Abstract:

China's potential declaration of an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the South China Sea (SCS) poses critical strategic and security challenges, particularly for Malaysia as a key littoral and claimant state in the disputed region. Drawing on its 2013 precedent in the East China Sea, Beijing could employ an ADIZ as a strategic instrument to consolidate control over contested airspace, reinforcing its expansive territorial claims under the "nine-dash line." Such a move would not only heighten regional tensions but also directly affect Malaysia's airspace sovereignty and strategic posture. The objective of this study is to examine the concept of ADIZs within the framework of international law, focusing on the legal ambiguities in existing mechanisms such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) guidelines. It also seeks to assess the security, diplomatic, and legal implications of a Chinese-declared ADIZ for Malaysia. Using a qualitative research methodology, the paper conducts a doctrinal legal analysis of ADIZ norms and precedents, complemented by a case study of China's East China Sea ADIZ to identify operational and diplomatic patterns. The findings reveal three primary risks for Malaysia: militarily, the overstretching of the Royal Malaysian Air Force's (RMAF) surveillance and interception capabilities; diplomatically, the strain on Malaysia's balancing act between deep economic engagement with China and its defence commitments under frameworks like the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA); and legally, the infringement of sovereignty should China enforce measures within Malaysia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The study concludes that Malaysia should adopt a multi-pronged strategy by

enhancing regional air defence cooperation, leveraging ASEAN-led security mechanisms and pursuing confidence-building measures with China. A strategic hedging approach is vital to safeguard Malaysia's air sovereignty and contribute to regional stability.

Keywords:

Air Defence, ADIZ, China, Sovereignty, South China Sea, Territorial Claim

Introduction

Identification Zone (ADIZ) has become increasingly prominent in contemporary security dynamics. An ADIZ; defined as a designated airspace in which a state monitors, identifies and controls the entry of aircraft for security purposes, it operates outside the bounds of formal international law which can be seen as serving primarily political-military instrument (FAA AIM 5-6-1, 2021). China's unilateral establishment of an ADIZ over the East China Sea in 2013, which overlaps with Japanese-administered airspace near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, illustrates how Beijing can exploit legal ambiguities to extend jurisdictional control without overtly violating international norms, a precedent that heightens concerns over the potential replication of such measures in the South China Sea (SCMP, 2022).



Figure 1: China Proposed ADIZ in SCS

Sources: the Trumpet available at *What China's Air Defence Identification Zone Could Mean for the South China Sea* | theTrumpet.com

Malaysia, with a long coastline along the South China Sea including strategic zones like the Luconia Shoals and Beting Patinggi Ali within its EEZ faces vulnerabilities to such assertive moves. A recent incident in 2021, when 16 Chinese military transport aircraft flew near Sarawak's airspace without responding to control instructions, underscored this risk (Reuters, 2021). Were China to declare an ADIZ here, it could force Malaysian aircraft operating within their own EEZ to identify themselves or seek permission, effectively undermining national autonomy and operational sovereignty (Fravel, 2017).

Malaysia's geographic proximity to contested waters, alongside its modest air-defence infrastructure and traditionally low-profile diplomatic stance, places it in a delicate position. While it aims to maintain cordial ties with China, it also relies on strategic partnerships such as the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) to bolster its defence posture. The risk of overlapping ADIZ claims exacerbates the danger of miscommunication, increased aerial tension, or inadvertent escalation in regional airspace, further complicating stability.

This study argues that a Chinese ADIZ over the South China Sea would present a profound challenge to Malaysia's air sovereignty. It would impede freedom of navigation and strain regional airspace governance. In response, Malaysia would need to recalibrate its posture; technically, operationally and diplomatically by enhancing surveillance, strengthening FPDA cooperation and engaging in confidence-building measures to protect sovereignty, uphold regional norms and deter strategic ambiguity going forward.



Figure 2: Comparison of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and China ADIZ

(Source: Illustrated by author)

Literature Review

The prospect of China declaring an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the South China Sea (SCS) has attracted significant academic attention, with scholars assessing its operational necessity, legal ramifications, and strategic signalling value. While some focus on the pragmatic calculus driving Beijing's decision-making, others examine the tensions such zones create with established international norms and the symbolic power they hold in great-power competition. Together, these perspectives provide a multi-dimensional understanding of how a potential SCS ADIZ could reshape regional security, challenge aviation freedoms and influence the responses of claimant states such as Malaysia.

Chang Ching (2020) critically examines why, unlike in the East China Sea, China has refrained from formally declaring an ADIZ over the South China Sea. He argues that China currently

perceives no operational need for such a zone because its existing civil aviation infrastructure specifically the Hong Kong and Sanya Flight Information Regions, provides sufficient surveillance depth for air defence identification and classification. Notwithstanding, Chang cautions that if foreign military air activity intensifies in areas outside these coverage zones, China could revisit the option of establishing an ADIZ to mitigate airspace vulnerability. This analysis highlights the pragmatic calculus behind ADIZ decisions and underscores the evolving threat environment in the region.

In a related exploration of ADIZs and freedom of navigation in maritime disputes, Robert Beckman and Phan Duy Hao (2019) investigate the legal and normative implications of such declarations for maritime freedoms and sovereignty in contested waters. Their analysis underscores the tension between an ADIZ's operational intent to bolster national security and the principle of freedom of overflight protected under international law. Using China's East China Sea ADIZ as a focal point, the authors discuss how such zones might be used to augment territorial claims without explicit legal basis. They recommend the development of "rules of the road" for ADIZs through multilateral dialogue to preserve aviation safety and reduce the risk of miscalculation, an insight directly relevant to regional stability in the SCS.

Focusing specifically on China's ADIZ in the East China Sea, Richard Bitzinger (2020) assesses the strategic value and inherent vulnerabilities of this initiative. He finds that while the zone signals Beijing's intent to assert quasi-legal control, its poor enforceability undermines its military credibility. Bitzinger argues that such ADIZ declarations often become symbolic tools of power projection that generate diplomatic friction without yielding lasting strategic leverage. His observations serve as a cautionary parallel to a potential South China Sea ADIZ, particularly in terms of Malaysia's response strategies, which must anticipate both symbolic signalling and tangible operational impacts.

Table 1: Thematic Synthesis of Literature on ADIZ in Contested Maritime Regions

Author & Year	Focus Area	Main Argument / Findings	Relevance to SCS ADIZ & Malaysia
Chang Ching (2020)	Operational need for ADIZ in SCS	China sees no immediate need for a formal ADIZ in SCS as civil aviation infrastructure (Hong Kong & Sanya FIRs) already covers air defense surveillance. May reconsider if foreign military air activity increases.	Highlights China's pragmatic and threat-based calculus; helps Malaysia anticipate conditions that could trigger an ADIZ declaration.
Beckman & Phan Duy Hao (2019)	Legal and normative implications of ADIZ	ADIZs can reinforce territorial claims without explicit legal authority, creating tensions with freedom of overflight under international law. Calls for multilateral "rules of the road" to reduce miscalculation risks.	Provides legal framing for potential disputes; underscores importance of ASEAN-level or ICAO-led coordination if China declares an SCS ADIZ.

Bitzinger (2020)	Strategic value & vulnerabilities of ADIZ	China's East China Sea ADIZ serves as a political signal but lacks strong enforcement capability. Such zones can project power symbolically yet generate diplomatic pushback.	Offers a cautionary precedent; suggests that an SCS ADIZ may be more about political signaling than enforceable air control, affecting Malaysia's diplomatic-military planning.
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The Concept of ADIZ

An Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) is a defined area of airspace, typically extending beyond a state's territorial airspace, within which incoming aircraft are required to identify themselves and provide flight details to the relevant national authorities. According to Annex 15 of the Convention on International Civil Aviation, an ADIZ is defined as a "special designated airspace of defined dimensions within which aircraft are required to comply with special identification and/or reporting procedures additional to those related to the provision of air traffic services (ATS)ⁱ. The primary function of an ADIZ is not to regulate sovereign airspace which is legally capped at 12 nautical miles from a state's coastline under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) but rather to enhance early warning and surveillance for national security purposes.

Importantly, ADIZs are not governed by any specific treaty or codified international law. Instead, they are a product of state practice, developed particularly during the Cold War, and their legitimacy is based on customary usage and state acceptance. Irrespective ADIZ has become a customary rule, it is still a fact that many states have established and enforced their ADIZs with relatively few objections (Bakhtiar et al, 2016). It is also true that international law does not prohibit the establishment of ADIZs. More than 20 countries maintain ADIZs, including the United States, Canada, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. However, international recognition of ADIZs varies, particularly when such zones overlap with disputed territories or impose obligations on foreign civilian or military aircraft flying in international airspace.

A significant precedent that informs current discussions about the South China Sea is China's unilateral declaration of an ADIZ over the East China Sea in November 2013. The zone encompasses airspace over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, which are administered by Japan but claimed by both China and Taiwan (M Vanhulle Busch, M., & Shen, W. 2016). What distinguished China's ADIZ from others was its assertion that all aircraft whether civilian or military, regardless of destination must submit flight plans and identify themselves when entering the zone, even if they are not intending to enter Chinese sovereign airspace. This declaration triggered strong diplomatic protests from Japan, the United States, and South Korea, all of whom rejected the validity of the ADIZ and conducted military flights through the zone in defiance. The incident marked a strategic shift in China's use of ADIZs from a defensive surveillance tool to an assertion of sovereignty in contested areas, thereby politicizing what is otherwise a security-driven mechanism.

China's East China Sea ADIZ serves as a strategic and operational template for a potential ADIZ over the South China Sea. The legal and diplomatic controversy it generated particularly due to overlapping claims and lack of prior consultation foreshadows the tensions that could arise should China declare a similar zone over the SCS. Given the contested nature of maritime and airspace boundaries in the region, a South China Sea ADIZ would likely overlap with the EEZs and flight paths of several Southeast Asian states, including Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines (RMAF ATC, 2025). If modelled after the East China Sea precedent, such a move could be interpreted as an attempt to unilaterally extend Chinese authority over international airspace, raising serious concerns over freedom of navigation and overflight, and challenging established international norms.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design that integrates doctrinal legal analysis with a strategic case study approach to comprehensively examine the legal, operational, and strategic implications of Air Defence Identification Zones (ADIZs), focusing on Malaysia's position within the South China Sea context. By combining legal examination of international norms with the analysis of real-world strategic practices, the research aims to bridge the gap between theoretical legal frameworks and practical policy considerations in safeguarding national airspace sovereignty.

The research adopts a dual methodological framework combining doctrinal legal analysis and a strategic case study. The doctrinal legal analysis examines relevant legal instruments, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) guidelines, to clarify the legal basis, authority, and limitations of ADIZ declarations. Meanwhile, the strategic case study focuses on Malaysia's defence, diplomatic, and legal responses to China's assertive actions in the South China Sea, drawing lessons from China's 2013 East China Sea ADIZ as a precedent. This integrated design ensures that both legal theory and strategic realities are considered in assessing Malaysia's options.

The study relies on both secondary and primary sources to build a robust evidence base. Secondary data sources include legal texts and treaties, such as UNCLOS, ICAO regulations, and bilateral agreements, alongside scholarly interpretations from peer-reviewed journals, legal commentaries and defence policy analyses. Official publications, including the Malaysian Defence White Paper 2020, ASEAN declarations, FPDA reports and government statements, provide policy context, while case-specific documents, such as China's 2013 ADIZ declaration and related Japanese and U.S. responses, offer comparative insight. Primary inputs are drawn from informal interviews with policy practitioners, retired military officers, and academics specialising in international law and security, as well as analysis of official speeches and parliamentary debates by Malaysian defence and foreign affairs officials.

The study applies multiple analytical methods to ensure depth and precision in interpretation. A doctrinal legal analysis is used to interpret and clarify ambiguities in international law regarding ADIZs, while a comparative case study evaluates China's East China Sea ADIZ to extract operational and strategic lessons relevant to Malaysia. Thematic analysis is employed to identify recurring policy themes such as sovereignty protection, strategic hedging, and regional cooperation within Malaysia's policy documents and official statements. Furthermore, the strategic hedging model is applied as an analytical framework to assess how Malaysia balances deterrence and engagement strategies in its dealings with China.

The legal, operational and strategic findings are synthesised to form a comprehensive understanding of Malaysia's ADIZ-related challenges and opportunities. This integration enables the evaluation of Malaysia's vulnerabilities in protecting its airspace sovereignty, the assessment of its compliance with international norms, and the formulation of policy recommendations. The ultimate aim is to provide well-founded options for strengthening Malaysia's strategic and legal position in the South China Sea, enhancing its ability to safeguard national interests while maintaining regional stability.

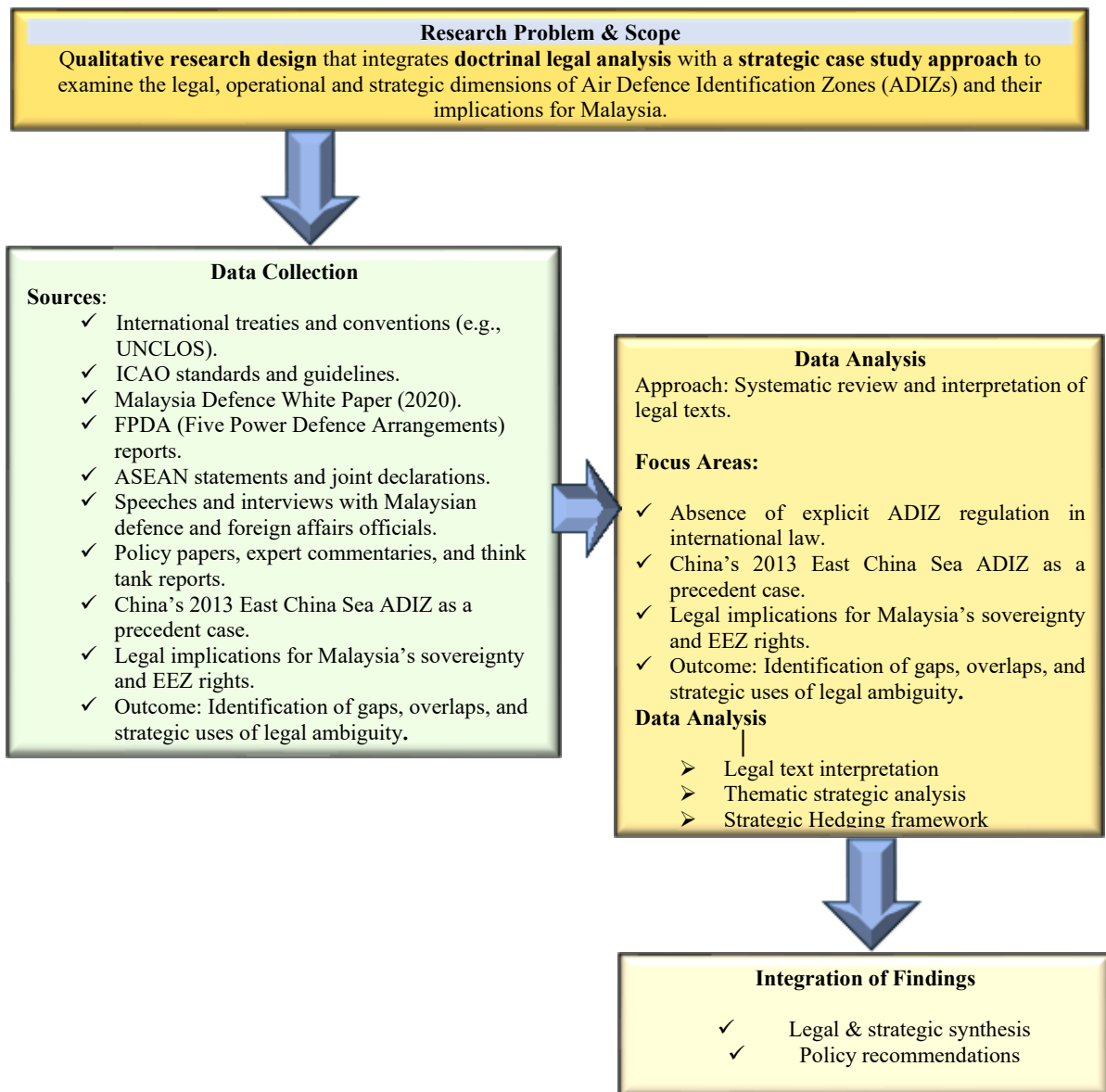


Figure 3: Research Methodology Framework

Discussion

China's Motivations and Strategic Intentions

China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea is rooted in a blend of historical claims, strategic calculations, and national prestige. Central to Beijing's motivations is the

longstanding narrative of territorial integrity and its "nine-dash line" claim, which seeks to establish administrative control over nearly 90% of the SCS (Hayton. B, 2023). While international rulings, such as the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration decision in favour of the Philippines, have rejected China's expansive claims, Beijing continues to reinforce its position through strategic infrastructure, naval deployments, and paramilitary presenceⁱⁱ. The declaration of an ADIZ would serve as an additional mechanism to formalize and consolidate its perceived authority over the airspace, effectively extending its presence beyond the surface and into the aerial dimension of regional dominance.

From a strategic perspective, an ADIZ would be a key pillar in China's anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) doctrine, which is aimed at deterring or complicating foreign military operations in proximity to its claimed territories (Gertz, B. (2019). Establishing an ADIZ allows for earlier detection of foreign aircraft, enhances situational awareness, and imposes procedural obligations on states operating in the region. Furthermore, such a move would allow China to test the responses of neighbouring countries and the United States, while incrementally advancing its sphere of influence without resorting to overt conflict. It is also a signal to domestic and international audiences that China is willing to defend its national interests, particularly as part of President Xi Jinping's vision of a rejuvenated and powerful China capable of projecting strength in its near seasⁱⁱⁱ.

In addition to military considerations, Beijing's strategic intentions are also influenced by political signalling and long-term regional shaping. By potentially declaring an ADIZ in the SCS, China could attempt to normalise its presence in disputed areas and force regional actors into a position of reactive diplomacy. It could also create a de facto buffer zone, discouraging surveillance flights or intelligence-gathering missions by the U.S. and its allies. More subtly, it may also be aimed at pressuring ASEAN members into a more cautious and accommodating posture in the ongoing Code of Conduct negotiations. The ADIZ, if declared, would not merely be an airspace control measure but it would represent a tool of statecraft intended to shift the strategic balance in China's favour (RMAF ATC, 2025a).

The establishment of a ADIZ can also be seen as an effort by China to strengthen China's legal basis for asserting its control over the SCS. Although ADIZ are not explicitly recognized under international law, China could claim that establishing an ADIZ is within its sovereign right to manage its airspace and territorial waters (Vanhulle Busch, M., & Shen, W., 2016). This legal basis would allow China to prevent foreign aircraft from freely flying over the disputed area, strengthening its territorial claims and complicating other states' attempts to challenge China's sovereignty under UNCLOS.

Implications for Malaysia's Airspace Sovereignty

For Malaysia, the prospect of a Chinese ADIZ covering parts of the South China Sea raises urgent concerns about sovereignty, security, and operational freedom. While Malaysia does not have any ADIZ of its own, it maintains Flight Information Regions (FIRs) for civil aviation, and the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) monitors national airspace through radar and air patrols (RMAF ATC, 2025a). An ADIZ overlapping with Malaysian airspace or EEZ would create a scenario in which Malaysian military and civilian aircraft could be required by a foreign power to report their presence or flight plans in airspace that Malaysia considers under its jurisdiction. Such a requirement would directly challenge the principle of sovereign control

over national territory and violate the international norm of free overflight in non-sovereign airspace.

Malaysia has already experienced incursions that foreshadow the kinds of tensions an ADIZ could bring. In June 2021, 16 Chinese military aircraft approached and entered Malaysia's Maritime Zone off the coast of Sarawak, prompting a scramble of RMAF fighter jets and diplomatic protests from Kuala Lumpur (RMAF ATC, 2025a). While China later described the flights as routine training missions, the incident underscored both Malaysia's vulnerability and China's willingness to test the limits of regional airspace governance. A declared ADIZ would embolden China to repeat or escalate such activities with a veneer of procedural legitimacy, complicating Malaysia's ability to defend its airspace or assert its rights under international law without risking diplomatic fallout or military confrontation.

Furthermore, Malaysia's limited air defence infrastructure may hinder its ability to consistently monitor or challenge Chinese activities within an ADIZ. Unlike states with robust airspace surveillance and interception capabilities, Malaysia relies on a small fleet of fighter aircraft, aging radar systems, and geographically dispersed military assets across the peninsula and Borneo. In the face of a formalised Chinese ADIZ, Malaysia would likely need to accelerate investment in integrated air defence systems, enhance its radar coverage over the South China Sea, and strengthen interoperability with strategic partners under existing frameworks like the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA). Failure to adapt may result in reduced air sovereignty and a gradual erosion of its ability to act autonomously within its own region.

Findings - Implications for Malaysia

Military Domain

Impact on RMAF Operations and Surveillance Capabilities

The establishment of a Chinese ADIZ over the South China Sea would significantly affect the Royal Malaysian Air Force's (RMAF) operational freedom and airspace surveillance capabilities. Malaysia's current air defence posture is oriented more toward peacetime monitoring than sustained high-intensity air defence operations (MOD DWP, 2020). The imposition of an ADIZ that overlaps with Malaysia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), or air patrol zones would introduce new operational constraints, as RMAF assets may be required by China to report flight paths or adhere to foreign air traffic procedures in areas Malaysia considers its sovereign right to patrol (RMAF ATC, 2025b). This could lead to frequent airspace confrontations, increase the need for rapid-response missions, and place added strain on already limited resources.

Resource and Capability Gaps

Malaysia's radar coverage and early warning systems, particularly in East Malaysia, are fragmented and insufficient to detect or respond to sustained aerial intrusions. The country's fleet of fighter aircraft, including the F/A-18D Hornets and Sukhoi Su-30MKMs, are limited in number and expensive to operate, making continuous patrols infeasible. A Chinese ADIZ could exacerbate the operational tempo and require Malaysia to rapidly modernize its Integrated Air Defence System (IADS), invest in long-range radar, and consider acquiring unmanned aerial surveillance platforms. Moreover, increased Chinese aerial presence may reduce Malaysia's confidence in the effectiveness of its deterrent capabilities, prompting a

rethink of its long-standing policy of “quiet diplomacy” in favour of more visible shows of defence preparedness^{iv}.

Diplomatic Domain

Malaysia's Balancing Act between China and the West

Diplomatically, Malaysia faces a delicate balancing act. On one hand, it seeks to preserve strong economic ties with China which is its largest trading partner and a significant investor in infrastructure under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). On the other hand, Malaysia has longstanding security relationships with Western powers, notably through the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) with the UK, Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore, and ongoing defence engagements with the United States. A Chinese ADIZ would intensify the pressure on Malaysia to choose sides in an increasingly polarised geopolitical environment. Open defiance of the ADIZ could provoke economic retaliation from Beijing, while passivity might invite criticism from ASEAN neighbours and security partners for failing to uphold regional sovereignty and international norms.

ASEAN and Regional Signalling

A Chinese ADIZ would also test Malaysia's role within ASEAN as a moderate voice promoting multilateralism and regional stability. Kuala Lumpur has generally advocated for a rules-based order and the peaceful resolution of disputes, yet it has also historically refrained from directly challenging Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea (Ahmad, M.Z & Sani, M.A (2017). The ADIZ issue could compel Malaysia to take a firmer public stance, especially if neighbouring states like Vietnam and the Philippines actively protest or conduct freedom-of-navigation operations. At the same time, Malaysia may also pursue backchannel diplomacy to avoid escalation, opting for quiet engagement with Chinese counterparts while signalling alignment with broader ASEAN consensus on airspace freedom and maritime rights.

Legal Domain

Air Sovereignty and International Law

From a legal standpoint, a Chinese ADIZ that encroaches into Malaysia's EEZ or Flight Information Region (FIR) raises serious questions under international law. While ADIZs are not explicitly prohibited, they are not recognized under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which governs maritime rights, or the Chicago Convention of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), which governs civil aviation. Crucially, both frameworks emphasize the right of freedom of overflight in international airspace. Malaysia would have a strong legal basis to challenge any enforcement of procedural controls by China over international or Malaysian-administered airspace, particularly if such controls affect civilian aircraft operating in accordance with ICAO standards (FAA, 2021).

Enforcement and Norm-Setting Challenges

The legal danger lies not in the ADIZ declaration itself, but in its enforcement and normalization. If Malaysia does not contest the zone, there is a risk of tacit acceptance, which may shift the normative baseline over time in favour of China's expanded interpretation of jurisdiction. This could also affect future legal positions in international forums and weaken Malaysia's ability to assert its claims in disputed areas. Conversely, an assertive legal response such as filing diplomatic notes or pursuing a regional legal coalition could reinforce Malaysia's

position as a defender of international law. Ultimately, Malaysia must weigh the legal precedents it sets today, as they may shape the evolving rules of engagement in the airspace over the SCS for decades to come.

Strategic Responses and Policy Options

Malaysia's approach to the SCS reflects a careful balance between safeguarding its sovereignty and maintaining regional stability. Faced with growing external pressures, particularly from China's assertiveness, Malaysia should adopt a mix of diplomatic engagement, defence modernisation, and multilateral cooperation through ASEAN. This strategy emphasizes peaceful dispute resolution, adherence to international law, and enhancing national resilience. The following topics will explore Malaysia's strategic responses and policy options which reveals how the country should navigate complex geopolitical challenges while protecting its national interests.

Strengthening Regional Air Defence Cooperation

One of Malaysia's immediate strategic responses to a potential Chinese ADIZ in the South China Sea should be the strengthening of regional air defence cooperation. This includes enhancing coordination within the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA), which remains a credible, though underutilised, security mechanism involving the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and Malaysia^v. Joint air exercises like *Bersama Shield* and *Bersama Lima* should be expanded in scale and complexity, with greater emphasis on integrated air surveillance and early warning systems (FPDA, 2024). Such cooperation would not only build capacity but also send a signal of deterrence, showing that Malaysia is not isolated in managing regional airspace challenges.

Joint Surveillance and Information Sharing

Malaysia could also explore bilateral and trilateral arrangements with key regional partners such as Indonesia, Singapore, and the Philippines for joint surveillance and airspace monitoring. Shared use of radar systems coordinated air patrols, and real-time data exchange on unidentified or non-compliant aircraft movements would significantly improve situational awareness across Southeast Asia's maritime airspace (RMAF ATC 2025b). The adoption of secure communication protocols and joint command and control simulations would further enhance interoperability and operational readiness. This kind of regional defence network could help ensure that any ADIZ declarations or aggressive manoeuvres by external powers are swiftly identified and appropriately addressed.

ASEAN Multilateral Mechanisms

Beyond military collaboration, Malaysia should actively leverage ASEAN platforms to frame the ADIZ issue as a regional security concern. While ASEAN has traditionally struggled with consensus on sensitive security matters, it remains the primary multilateral channel through which Southeast Asian states can collectively assert norms of conduct in the South China Sea. Malaysia can champion initiatives under the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting- Plus (ADMM-Plus) framework to enhance regional airspace governance, including proposals for an ASEAN-wide airspace code of conduct or air-to-air incident prevention mechanisms (NST, 2018). Promoting unity on this issue within ASEAN is critical to counter unilateral moves that undermine regional stability and international law^{vi}.

Elevating Legal and Normative Positions

In tandem with diplomatic efforts, Malaysia should advocate for adherence to international norms under ICAO and UNCLOS through ASEAN statements and multilateral declarations. Encouraging the inclusion of airspace governance in the ongoing negotiations for a binding Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea would help establish a normative framework that restricts the imposition of ADIZ-like procedures over disputed maritime zones. Such a move could pressure China to moderate its posture or at least conform to internationally accepted practices, especially in airspace not directly above its sovereign territory.

Confidence Building Measures with China

While enhancing deterrence and regional cooperation is necessary, Malaysia must also pursue confidence-building measures (CBMs) with China to reduce the risk of miscalculation. This includes reactivating or initiating bilateral military to military communication channels, conducting joint air safety workshops, and proposing protocols for managing aerial encounters near contested zones. These mechanisms can help clarify rules of engagement, prevent unintended escalation, and sustain a baseline of trust even amid strategic rivalry. For Malaysia, maintaining open channels with China is essential not only for crisis management but also for preserving broader economic and diplomatic ties.

Pursuing Strategic Hedging and Policy Flexibility

Finally, Malaysia's overall response must be anchored in strategic hedging which is a policy of maintaining flexibility by diversifying partnerships, avoiding overt alignment, and selectively engaging both great powers. Rather than overtly opposing China's strategic moves, Malaysia can adopt a policy of calibrated resistance: for examples asserting its legal and sovereign rights while avoiding provocative actions that could escalate tensions. At the same time, it should quietly deepen cooperation with like-minded partners, invest in indigenous air defence modernization and contribute actively to regional security dialogues. This balanced approach allows Malaysia to protect its airspace sovereignty without undermining its long-standing commitment to non-alignment and regional peace.

Table 2: Summary of Findings on Implications of a Chinese ADIZ in the South China Sea

Domain	Key Findings	Implications for Malaysia	Recommended Strategic Response
Military	ADIZ constrains RMAF operations; may require compliance with Chinese procedures in Malaysia's EEZ.	Increased risk of airspace confrontations; resource strain.	Upgrade IADS; expand radar; invest in UAVs; intensify FPDA exercises.
Capability Gaps	Limited radar coverage; small costly fighter fleet limits continuous patrols.	Reduced deterrence; inability to sustain air patrols.	Acquire long-range radar; enhance interoperability; expand surveillance networks.
Diplomatic	Malaysia balances economic ties with China and defence	Economic retaliation risk vs. reputational costs of passivity.	Pursue calibrated diplomacy; quiet China engagement; strengthen ASEAN ties.

	obligations to FPDA & US partners.		
ASEAN & Regional Signalling	Traditionally cautious stance toward China; pressure to align with vocal ASEAN states.	Need to take a firmer stance or risk marginalisation.	Push ASEAN/ADMM-Plus airspace code of conduct; incident prevention mechanisms.
Legal	ADIZ not illegal but overlap with EEZ/FIR violates sovereignty and ICAO norms.	Legal precedent erosion: sovereignty undermined.	File diplomatic protests; build regional legal coalition; integrate air governance into COC.
Norm-Setting	Non-response risks tacit acceptance, shifting norms in China's favour.	Weakened future claims in disputes.	Assertive legal stance; consistent policy defending overflight freedoms.
Risks	Avoid overt alignment; protect sovereignty via calibrated engagement.	Risk of escalation if perceived as provocative.	Strategic hedging: diversify partnerships; defence readiness; CBMs with China.
Strategic Options			

Conclusion

The prospect of China declaring an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the South China Sea presents a serious challenge to regional stability and Malaysia's airspace sovereignty. As a coastal state with both strategic geography and economic interests in the South China Sea, Malaysia cannot afford to overlook the implications such a move would entail. An overlapping ADIZ could undermine Kuala Lumpur's control over its airspace, restrict the freedom of movement for its military and civilian aircraft and embolden further incursions into areas Malaysia considers part of its national jurisdiction. In this context, safeguarding air sovereignty is not just a technical or tactical issue, but it is a fundamental matter of national security, territorial integrity and international legal standing.

Judging on these challenges, Malaysia must adopt a proactive and multifaceted strategy that blends defence readiness with robust diplomacy. Militarily, the enhancement of radar coverage, air defence systems and operational cooperation with regional partners through mechanisms like the FPDA is essential to deter potential encroachments and maintain credible airspace awareness. Diplomatically, Malaysia should continue to champion ASEAN unity and international legal norms that preserve freedom of navigation and overflight in disputed zones. By engaging in both quiet and collective diplomacy, Malaysia can strike a balance between resisting unilateral moves and preserving regional peace.

Ultimately, Malaysia's response to a potential Chinese ADIZ must reflect a long-term strategic vision which is one that values resilience, regional collaboration and legal consistency. Air sovereignty is not solely a matter of controlling the skies, but it is an expression of a nation's autonomy and a test of its ability to defend its interests within a complex and evolving security environment. The time to act is now through investment in capability, strengthening regional mechanisms and calibrated engagement with China. By doing so, Malaysia can remain an active and confident steward of its sovereign skies in the South China Sea.

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ⁱ Annex 15 to the Convention on International Civil Aviation: Aeronautical Information Services Fourteenth Edition July 2013; Contents of Aeronautical Information Publication p. 1-2

ⁱⁱ In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled in favour of the Philippines, declaring that China's "nine-dash line" claims had no legal basis under international law. However, Beijing has rejected the ruling and instead strengthened its presence in the region by building artificial islands, establishing military facilities, deploying naval forces, and using maritime militias. This ongoing activity reflects China's strategy to consolidate control over disputed areas, challenge the international legal order, and project its power across vital sea lanes critical to regional and global trade.

ⁱⁱⁱ Recent developments indicated that China is focusing on diplomatic engagements to maintain stability in the region. During President Xi Jinping's state visit to Malaysia in April 2025, both countries emphasised the importance of peace and stability in the SCS and signed multiple agreements to strengthen bilateral ties. While China has not declared an ADIZ over the South China Sea, it continues to assert its rights and monitor the situation closely.

^{iv} The 2020 Malaysian Defence White Paper (DWP) acknowledges external threats to national sovereignty, particularly in the SCS, where China's assertive actions, such as the encroachment of foreign vessels near Sabah and Sarawak, have raised concerns. While the DWP does not single out any nation, it emphasizes the need for Malaysia to bolster its defence capabilities to address such challenges. This includes enhancing the Malaysian Armed Forces' readiness through maritime, air, land, and cyber-electromagnetic operations, and restructuring to effectively operate across both Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia. The DWP also outlines the establishment of a new naval region in Bintulu, Sarawak, to strengthen naval presence in the SCS. Furthermore, Malaysia aims to maintain its sovereignty through diplomatic means, advocating for dialogue and adherence to international law to resolve disputes. The DWP's comprehensive approach reflects Malaysia's commitment to safeguarding its territorial integrity amid evolving regional dynamics (MOD DWP, 2020).

^v Joint air exercises such as Bersama Shield and Bersama Lima, conducted under the FPDA, have been pivotal in enhancing regional air defence cooperation among Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. Established in 1971, the FPDA was initiated to ensure the security of Malaysia and Singapore following the British military withdrawal from the region. Over the years, these exercises have evolved in scale and complexity, incorporating advanced capabilities like fifth-generation fighter jets and integrated surveillance systems. For instance, the 2024 iteration of Exercise Bersama Lima featured the participation of Australian F-35A fighters and New Zealand's P-8A maritime patrol aircraft, emphasizing a focus on integrated air surveillance and early warning systems. Such collaborations not only bolster the operational readiness and interoperability of the member nations but also serve as a strategic signal of collective deterrence, demonstrating that Malaysia is not isolated in addressing regional airspace challenges. This cooperative framework underscores a shared commitment to maintaining regional stability and upholding international norms in the face of evolving security dynamics.

^{vi} The ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) plays a pivotal role in enhancing regional airspace governance by fostering practical confidence-building measures among its members. In 2018, ASEAN defence ministers adopted the Guidelines for Air Military Encounters (GAME), marking the world's first multilateral air code aimed at reducing the risk of miscalculations and accidents during unplanned military aircraft encounters over high seas. These non-binding guidelines complement existing protocols like the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) and adhere to international aviation standards, including those set by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). By promoting safe separation, professional communication, and mutual trust, the GAME serves as a practical tool to prevent incidents that could escalate into conflicts, especially in contested areas like the South China Sea.