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THREE TEXTS, ONE POLICY SCRIPT: ASEAN CENTRALITY AND RULE-BOUND RE-ENGAGEMENT IN MALAYSIA'S CHINA POLICY, 2018-2019


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Abstract:

This article explains why Malaysia's China policy under Mahathir Mohamad's second premiership followed a distinctive sequence in 2018–2019: project review, renegotiation, and rule-bound re-engagement, rather than strategic decoupling. Existing accounts emphasise hedging, domestic political change, and the political economy of Belt and Road Initiative projects, but they do not fully account for the procedural ordering or Malaysia's persistent reliance on legal and multilateral framing. Using a policy text analysis approach, the study examines two Malaysian policy documents together with one relevant ASEAN regional reference text: Malaysia's Foreign Policy Framework of the New Malaysia, ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, and Malaysia's Defence White Paper. Read together, these texts articulate a rules-first, ASEAN-centred policy vocabulary emphasising dialogue, international law, and non-militarisation. Using interpretive process tracing, the article derives observable implications from the script and aligns them with the 2018–2019 policy timeline. It shows how review could be justified as governance correction, renegotiation as contractual repair, and resumed cooperation as ASEAN-compatible, rules-based engagement, while sensitive security issues were channelled through ASEAN-led venues. The article concludes by highlighting how authoritative texts can tether short-term volatility and enhance small-state predictability under rivalry.

Keyword:

ASEAN Centrality; Foreign Policy Framework; Malaysia–China Relations; South China Sea



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Introduction: The Puzzle and the Claim

Malaysia's China policy during the early period of the second premiership of Mahathir Mohamad (2018–2019) presents an intriguing policy sequence. Following the electoral transition of May 2018, the new government suspended or reviewed several large infrastructure projects linked to China, most notably those associated with the Belt and Road Initiative. Yet this initial pause did not culminate in a strategic decoupling from China. Instead, the policy trajectory evolved through a clear sequence: review, renegotiation, and eventual resumption of cooperation under revised contractual and fiscal terms. Existing explanations emphasise material constraints, domestic political change, or the strategic hedging behaviour typical of smaller states navigating great power rivalry (Kuik, 2008, 2016; Kuik & Lai, 2020; Kuik & Lai, 2025; Jin & Ahmad, 2025; Borges & Costa, 2025; Lim & Liu, 2019). While these perspectives illuminate the structural and political pressures surrounding Malaysia's policy choices, they do not fully explain why the adjustment followed this particular procedural order, nor why Malaysia consistently framed its recalibration in legal and multilateral terms rather than through geopolitical distancing.

This article addresses the puzzle through a policy text analysis centred on authoritative documents and their relationship to policy practice. Specifically, it argues that two Malaysian policy documents, read alongside the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific as a relevant regional reference text, articulated a coherent policy vocabulary that structured Malaysia's behaviour toward China. These texts are the Foreign Policy Framework of the New Malaysia¹ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia [MOFA], 2019), the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN], 2019), and Malaysia's Defence White Paper (Ministry of Defence Malaysia [MOD], 2019). Read together, these texts articulated a rules-first, ASEAN-centred approach that emphasised dialogue, international law, and non-militarisation in managing regional tensions. Analytically, such textualised commitments help explain how certain policy choices were publicly presented as legitimate, appropriate, and regionally credible.

The central argument of the article is that these texts functioned as a public policy script that narrowed the repertoire of publicly justifiable policy options. Within this script, project reviews could be justified as efforts to restore fairness and legality; renegotiations could repair governance and fiscal imbalances without undermining bilateral cooperation; and resumed engagement could proceed within rule-based and regionally embedded frameworks. Simultaneously, sensitive maritime disputes were channelled through dialogue, support for an

¹ In this article, the term "New Malaysia" refers to the political period following the 2018 general election, when the Pakatan Harapan coalition came to power and initiated a series of governance and policy recalibrations under the premiership of Mahathir Mohamad.

early Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, and ASEAN-led venues rather than militarised confrontation (ASEAN, 2019; MOFA, 2019). In this way, the policy language encoded in these documents helped frame both the sequence of economic policy adjustments and the venue discipline through which regional security issues were addressed.

The study therefore asks three related questions. First, how did these official policy texts articulate Malaysia's diplomatic orientation and normative commitments during the early "New Malaysia" period? Second, how did these textualised ideas translate into a specific repertoire of policy actions toward China between 2018 and 2019? Third, how does this relationship between policy text and policy practice help explain the observed sequence of review, renegotiation, and rule-bound re-engagement? To answer these questions, the article examines the language and principles contained in the three policy documents and traces their alignment with Malaysia's policy decisions during the period under study.

By treating policy documents as authoritative textual artefacts rather than merely declaratory statements, the article contributes conceptually and empirically to the study of small-state foreign policy. Conceptually, it shows how policy texts can codify a state's diplomatic vocabulary and preferred modes of justification under geopolitical rivalry. Empirically, it reconstructs how Malaysia's China policy recalibration between 2018 and 2019 followed a rules-based and ASEAN-centred pathway that was consistent with the language articulated in these texts.

Methodologically, the article also contributes by specifying a replicable text-to-practice tracing procedure that links policy documents to observable policy sequences through justificatory alignment.

Literature Review: Malaysia's China Policy, Hedging, and the Missing Textual Perspective

Malaysia's foreign policy toward China has attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly in the context of Southeast Asian responses to the rise of China and intensifying major-power competition. Existing literature generally focuses on three interrelated themes: the strategic behaviour of smaller states under power asymmetry, the political economy of Malaysia–China relations, and the evolution of Malaysia's South China Sea policy. While these studies provide important insights into why Malaysia recalibrated its relations with China during the late 2010s, they tend to emphasise structural incentives, domestic political processes, and strategic calculations. Less attention has been paid to how official policy texts articulate, justify, and stabilise the diplomatic vocabulary through which such policy adjustments are publicly framed.

A major strand of the literature examines Malaysia's China policy through the concept of hedging. Kuik (2008) argues that Southeast Asian states, including Malaysia and Singapore, often avoid rigid alignment with either major power and instead adopt a hedging strategy that combines elements of engagement, balancing, and risk management. Rather than choosing between the United States and China, weaker states seek to maintain strategic autonomy while benefiting from economic ties with both sides. In subsequent work, Kuik (2016) further elaborates this argument by suggesting that hedging reflects uncertainty about future power distributions and the potential costs of alignment. For weaker states such as Malaysia, hedging

therefore represents a pragmatic strategy to manage strategic ambiguity and avoid being drawn into great-power rivalry.

This line of reasoning has also been applied specifically to Malaysia's behaviour in the South China Sea. Kuik and Lai (2020) highlight how Malaysia's policy has been shaped by structural uncertainties in the regional balance of power. According to their analysis, Malaysia simultaneously pursues economic cooperation with China while maintaining security partnerships and diplomatic engagement with other regional actors. Such a strategy reflects a desire to avoid provoking China while preserving strategic flexibility in a fluid regional environment. From this perspective, Malaysia's cautious diplomacy and preference for quiet negotiation in maritime disputes are consistent with a broader pattern of small-state hedging.

A second strand of scholarship focuses on the political economy of Malaysia–China relations, particularly in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Lim and Liu (2019) argue that Malaysia's engagement with China under the Najib administration was driven partly by domestic economic considerations, including infrastructure development and investment needs. However, the political transition following the 2018 general election introduced new scrutiny of these projects. Concerns over fiscal sustainability, governance transparency, and the terms of infrastructure contracts contributed to the review and renegotiation of several China-linked projects. Similarly, Ngeow (2020) shows that Malaysia's China policy has often been shaped by domestic policy processes and bureaucratic dynamics rather than by purely geopolitical calculations. These studies demonstrate that Malaysia's recalibration of relations with China after 2018 cannot be understood solely through external strategic pressures; domestic political and economic factors also played an important role.

A third body of work situates Malaysia's China policy within the broader historical evolution of bilateral relations and regional security dynamics. Md Akhir, Lee, and Ashraf (2018) provide a comprehensive overview of Malaysia–China relations since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1974, highlighting the steady expansion of economic cooperation alongside cautious management of security differences. At the regional level, Kreuzer (2016) compares Malaysian and Philippine responses to China in the South China Sea and observes that Malaysia has traditionally favoured quiet diplomacy, legal framing, and low-profile dispute management. This cautious approach contrasts with the more confrontational posture occasionally adopted by other claimant states and reflects Malaysia's broader preference for avoiding escalation while preserving its maritime interests.

More recent analyses of Malaysia's foreign policy under the "New Malaysia" administration have also emphasised continuity amid adjustment. Noor (2019), for example, argues that while the political transition of 2018 introduced new rhetoric and policy reviews, Malaysia's overall foreign and security policy orientation remained broadly consistent with earlier patterns. Malaysia continued to prioritise ASEAN centrality, regional cooperation, and diplomatic engagement rather than strategic confrontation. This observation resonates with the broader literature on Malaysia's long-standing diplomatic style, which emphasises moderation, multilateralism, and pragmatic engagement.

Taken together, these strands of scholarship provide valuable explanations for Malaysia's cautious and adaptive diplomacy toward China. The hedging literature explains why Malaysia avoids rigid alignment in a context of major-power competition. Political economy studies clarify why certain economic agreements became politically contentious and subject to

renegotiation after 2018. Historical and regional analyses highlight Malaysia's preference for quiet diplomacy and ASEAN-centred engagement in managing security disputes. However, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of policy texts themselves in articulating and stabilising these diplomatic preferences.

This article addresses that gap by focusing on how official policy documents and related regional texts articulate the diplomatic language through which Malaysia's China policy recalibration was publicly justified. Rather than treating policy texts as purely descriptive statements, the study examines how they codify normative commitments, institutional preferences, and acceptable modes of policy adjustment. By analysing these texts alongside the sequence of policy decisions between 2018 and 2019, the article offers a complementary perspective on how Malaysia's recalibration toward China was framed, interpreted, and stabilised within a rules-based and ASEAN-centred diplomatic vocabulary.

Argument and Analytical Framework: Policy Text Analysis and Text-to-Practice Tracing

This study adopts a policy text analysis approach to examine how small states publicly articulate and stabilise foreign policy behaviour under strategic rivalry. Rather than treating official documents as merely descriptive statements, the article reads them as authoritative texts that set out diplomatic priorities, normative boundaries, and preferred venues of engagement. Applied to Malaysia's China policy in 2018–2019, the analysis focuses on how such texts made review and renegotiation publicly defensible while keeping continued cooperation possible.

Research Design and Analytical Procedure

To enhance methodological transparency, this study specifies its research design in terms of text selection, coding procedure, and text–practice linkage.

First, the selection of texts follows three criteria. The first is authoritativeness: only official policy documents issued by the Malaysian government or ASEAN are included, as these carry formal diplomatic weight and are intended for public justification. The second is temporal relevance: the selected texts were published during or immediately after the 2018–2019 policy adjustment period, ensuring their relevance to the policy sequence under examination. The third is domain coverage: the texts collectively span foreign policy (Foreign Policy Framework), regional order (ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific), and defence posture (Defence White Paper), allowing for a comprehensive reconstruction of Malaysia's diplomatic vocabulary.

Second, the coding procedure proceeds in two stages. In the first stage, key textual clauses are identified through close reading, focusing on passages that articulate diplomatic priorities, normative commitments, and institutional preferences. In the second stage, these clauses are categorised into four analytical dimensions: (1) identity claims, referring to how Malaysia defines its diplomatic role; (2) normative commitments, including references to legality, fairness, and rule-based order; (3) institutional or venue preferences, particularly the role of ASEAN and ASEAN-led mechanisms; and (4) issue-specific scripts, especially those relating to the South China Sea. Coding is conducted iteratively to ensure internal consistency across texts.

Third, the linkage between text and policy practice is established through a text–practice alignment test. Rather than treating texts as causal drivers, the analysis examines whether policy actions are publicly justified using language consistent with the coded textual categories. The evidentiary standard is therefore one of justificatory alignment: if the policy script is meaningful, observable policy decisions should display a correspondence in vocabulary, sequencing, and venue choice. This approach allows the study to trace how authoritative text’s structure the repertoire of publicly defensible policy options.

The article operationalises this through the concept of a public policy script. A public policy script refers to an authoritative textual artefact that identifies a state’s diplomatic posture, normative priorities, and preferred venues for managing sensitive issues. Once published, such a script becomes politically consequential because it provides a reference point for public justification and diplomatic signalling. This emphasis complements existing accounts of Malaysian hedging by showing how a broad strategic posture can be articulated through a more specific and publicly legible policy vocabulary (Kuik, 2008, 2016; Kuik & Lai, 2020). The script approach explains how that posture becomes procedurally organised into a patterned sequence of adjustment rather than abrupt rupture, and why venue discipline persists even when economic ties are recalibrated.

Methodologically, the study employs interpretive process tracing to examine the relationship between policy texts and policy practice within a bounded time frame (mid-2018 to end-2019). In this article, process tracing is used as a within-case analytical tool rather than as a formal hypothesis-testing strategy. The analysis first identifies key principles and recurring language in authoritative policy documents, then derives observable expectations about policy conduct, and finally compares these expectations with the chronological sequence of Malaysia’s policy decisions and official statements during the period under study. This approach focuses on how policy actions were publicly framed and justified, and whether these justifications correspond to the principles articulated in official policy texts. The primary evidentiary test is therefore a text–practice alignment assessment: if the policy language articulated in these documents is meaningful, subsequent policy choices should be publicly explained using similar vocabulary (such as legality, fairness, ASEAN centrality, and dialogue) and should display a recognisable procedural pattern, namely the progression from review to renegotiation and eventually to rule-bound re-engagement.

A temporal caveat is necessary. The principal policy texts analysed in this study were published in 2019, whereas several important policy actions, including the suspension and review of major China-linked infrastructure projects, began in 2018 shortly after the change of government. The analysis does not claim causal primacy of policy texts but focuses on their role in structuring justificatory language.

The analysis draws on two types of material. First, the primary Malaysian policy texts are the Foreign Policy Framework of the New Malaysia (MOFA, 2019) and Malaysia’s Defence White Paper (MOD, 2019). These are read alongside the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (ASEAN, 2019) as a relevant regional reference text that helps contextualise Malaysia’s diplomatic vocabulary and institutional framing. These documents are treated as authoritative because they articulate foreign policy principles, regional order preferences, and defence posture in a public form. Second, the comparison material is a dated event timeline of Malaysia’s China-related policy moves across 2018–2019, reconstructed from the established secondary literature on Malaysia’s China policy, the political economy of BRI-linked projects,

and Malaysia's South China Sea behaviour (Kreuzer, 2016; Lim & Liu, 2019; Md Akhir et al., 2018; Ngeow, 2020; Noor, 2019). The analytical units are (1) textual clauses coded for identity, norms, and venue preferences, and (2) policy events coded for procedural form (review, renegotiation, resumption), justificatory language, and venue choice.

The empirical outputs are designed to make the argument transparent and replicable. The article develops a concise codebook (presented in an appendix) that maps each selected textual excerpt to a code category (identity claim, normative boundary, venue preference, South China Sea script) and to an expected observable implication. In addition, a 2018–2019 timeline table (in the main text or appendix) aligns coded excerpts with dated policy events and public framings. Together, these artefacts permit readers to evaluate whether Malaysia's policy choreography can plausibly be read as consistent with a rules-first, ASEAN-centred policy script rather than as purely ad hoc adjustment driven solely by material constraints or partisan turnover.

The Script in Three Texts: Identity, Rules, and Venues

This section examines how two Malaysian policy documents, read alongside one relevant ASEAN regional text, articulated the normative and institutional vocabulary surrounding Malaysia's foreign policy behaviour during 2018–2019. The primary Malaysian texts are the Foreign Policy Framework of the New Malaysia (hereafter Foreign Policy Framework, abbreviated as FPF) and Malaysia's Defence White Paper (hereafter Defence White Paper, abbreviated as DWP). These are contextualised by the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (hereafter ASEAN Outlook, abbreviated as AOIP), which is treated here not as a Malaysian official document but as a regional normative reference that helps illuminate the wider diplomatic language in which Malaysia located its policy.

Taken together, these three texts articulate a coherent diplomatic orientation for Malaysia as a rules-oriented, ASEAN-centred, dialogue-based diplomatic actor. In policy-text terms, such textual commitments help define the range of policy options that can be publicly justified and institutionally framed as consistent with Malaysia's stated diplomatic posture. By analysing the language and principles contained in these documents, it becomes possible to reconstruct the normative script that made review, renegotiation, and rule-bound re-engagement with China appear consistent with Malaysia's declared diplomatic role.

The Foreign Policy Framework and the Identity of "Change in Continuity"

The Foreign Policy Framework of the New Malaysia establishes the central narrative of Malaysia's foreign policy under the new administration after the 2018 election. The document explicitly frames its orientation through the concept of "Change in Continuity," indicating that while policy approaches may be recalibrated, the fundamental principles of Malaysia's diplomacy remain consistent (MOFA, 2019). This formulation is significant because it signals that policy adjustments should not be interpreted as strategic rupture but rather as procedural correction within an established diplomatic tradition.

The Framework also emphasises procedural legitimacy and public accountability in foreign policy formulation. It describes the document as having been "prepared via an extensive consultative process" and as a "people-centric document" (MOFA, 2019, p. 3). By foregrounding consultation and public participation, the text constructs foreign policy as a

domain that must remain transparent and publicly defensible. In practical terms, this creates reputational constraints on abrupt or purely opportunistic shifts in external relations.

A second defining feature of the FPF is its strong emphasis on ASEAN as the central institutional anchor of Malaysia's diplomacy. The document states that "ASEAN is the cornerstone of Malaysia's foreign policy" (MOFA, 2019, p. 19). This formulation positions ASEAN not merely as one regional organisation among others but as the primary venue through which Malaysia interprets and manages regional dynamics. As a result, sensitive geopolitical issues are expected to be addressed within ASEAN-led diplomatic frameworks rather than through unilateral or confrontational approaches.

The Framework further emphasises that Malaysia intends to pursue a more active diplomatic posture. It states that Malaysia will adopt a "proactive and vocal" role in advocating its principles and interests (MOFA, 2019, p. 8). However, this activism is simultaneously anchored in normative commitments to justice, fairness, democracy, and the rule of law. By linking activism with normative principles, the document defines a diplomatic identity that is both engaged and rule-based.

The treatment of the South China Sea within the Framework illustrates how this identity claims translate into specific policy preferences. The document affirms that Malaysia will continue to engage all parties through dialogue and supports the early conclusion of an effective Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (MOFA, 2019, p. 19). It also calls for the non-militarisation of the maritime domain and emphasises the importance of maintaining the South China Sea as a "region of peace, friendship and trade" (MOFA, 2019, p. 19).

These formulations establish a clear diplomatic script. Dialogue, legal frameworks, and institutional negotiation are presented as the appropriate instruments for managing maritime disputes, while militarisation and confrontation are implicitly framed as undesirable. Analytically, these textual commitments define the parameters within which Malaysia's subsequent policy actions could be publicly justified.

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and the Regional Normative Framework

While not a Malaysian policy document, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific provides the broader regional normative framework within which Malaysia's official language can be situated. The AOIP was adopted by ASEAN in 2019 as a statement of collective regional principles for navigating the evolving strategic environment of the Indo-Pacific.

The document places strong emphasis on ASEAN's central role in shaping the regional order. It states that ASEAN must "maintain its central role in the evolving regional architecture" and emphasises that ASEAN-led mechanisms should remain the primary platforms for dialogue and cooperation (ASEAN, 2019, p. 1). By reinforcing ASEAN centrality, the AOIP provides an institutional structure through which regional competition can be managed without forcing smaller states into rigid strategic alignments.

The AOIP also advances a normative vision of the Indo-Pacific as a region defined by cooperation rather than confrontation. It calls for the Indo-Pacific to be a region of "dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry" (ASEAN, 2019, p. 2). This language explicitly rejects zero-sum geopolitical competition as the organising principle of regional relations.

Another key element of the AOIP is its emphasis on international law and rule-based governance. The document identifies openness, transparency, inclusivity, and respect for international law as fundamental principles of regional cooperation. It explicitly refers to the United Nations Charter and the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea as legal foundations for regional conduct (ASEAN, 2019, pp. 2–3). In addition, the Outlook reiterates the importance of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, which promotes peaceful settlement of disputes and the renunciation of the threat or use of force (ASEAN, 2019, p. 3).

By codifying these principles, the AOIP establishes a shared normative vocabulary for Southeast Asian diplomacy. ASEAN centrality, dialogue, inclusivity, and legal order become the expected language through which regional issues are framed. For Malaysia, aligning its national policy with this vocabulary enhances the legitimacy and credibility of its diplomatic conduct. Consequently, policy approaches that emphasise negotiation, legal frameworks, and institutional engagement are easily framed as consistent with ASEAN norms.

The Defence White Paper and the Diplomacy-First Security Posture

The third text in this script is Malaysia's Defence White Paper: A Secure, Sovereign and Prosperous Malaysia, published in 2019. Although primarily a defence document, the White Paper reinforces the same normative and institutional principles articulated in the Foreign Policy Framework and the ASEAN Outlook.

Importantly, the Defence White Paper explicitly situates itself within the broader policy direction established by the Foreign Policy Framework. It notes that the White Paper was developed alongside the Framework, indicating that Malaysia's defence posture is intended to complement the diplomatic orientation articulated in foreign policy (MOD, 2019).

One of the central themes of the document is Malaysia's commitment to peaceful international engagement. The White Paper describes Malaysia as a "neutral and peace-loving nation" that seeks stability through inclusive diplomatic initiatives and defence diplomacy (MOD, 2019, p. 2). Rather than emphasising coercive power projection, the document highlights dialogue and cooperative engagement as the preferred instruments of national security policy.

This orientation is reinforced by the White Paper's description of Malaysia's military posture. It states that Malaysia adopts a "defensive posture" and rejects the use of force as a means of resolving disputes (MOD, 2019, p. 34). The document further emphasises that Malaysia prefers peaceful settlement of conflicts in accordance with international law (MOD, 2019, p. 22). These statements clearly align Malaysia's defence doctrine with the principles of restraint and legality emphasised in the Foreign Policy Framework.

The White Paper also highlights the role of diplomacy and partnerships in maintaining national security. It emphasises that Malaysia places greater emphasis on diplomacy in its relations with other countries and that cooperative partnerships are essential to maintaining regional stability (MOD, 2019, p. 22). These partnerships are explicitly framed within the context of international law, conventions, and shared norms.

Finally, the document reiterates the importance of ASEAN as the foundation of Malaysia's regional engagement. It observes that the development of ASEAN-led security mechanisms has strengthened ASEAN's role as the cornerstone of Malaysia's foreign policy (MOD, 2019, p. 14). By reaffirming ASEAN's centrality within a defence strategy document, the White Paper reinforces the institutional script already articulated in the Foreign Policy Framework and the ASEAN Outlook.

Convergence Across the Three Texts

When read together, the two Malaysian documents and the ASEAN regional text reveal a consistent vocabulary of rules, ASEAN centrality, diplomacy, and peaceful dispute management. Second, they position ASEAN as the central institutional framework through which regional relations should be conducted. Third, they emphasise diplomacy, partnerships, and international law as the preferred instruments for managing security challenges.

This convergence is analytically significant because it demonstrates that Malaysia's foreign policy during the early "New Malaysia" period was not articulated through a single document but through a cluster of mutually reinforcing texts. Each document addresses a different policy domain, which include foreign policy, regional order, and defence, but all reproduce the same normative vocabulary and institutional preferences.

In analytical terms, these texts help explain why policies emphasising dialogue, renegotiation, and rule-based engagement were easier to justify than abrupt disengagement or militarised confrontation. The next section examines how this textualised script shaped the actual sequence of Malaysia's China policy between 2018 and 2019.

From Script to Repertoire: Why Review, Renegotiation, and Rule-Bound Re-engagement Followed

This section translates the policy script identified in the preceding texts into a set of observable implications. Analytically, the key question is how these texts made certain forms of policy adjustment more publicly defensible than others. The question is therefore not whether material constraints and domestic politics mattered, but why Malaysia's China policy recalibration took the procedural form of review, then renegotiation, and finally rule-bound re-engagement, rather than a strategic decoupling (Lim & Liu, 2019; Kuik, 2008, 2016; Kuik & Lai, 2020).

Deriving Observable Implications from the Script

Across the two Malaysian texts, read alongside the ASEAN regional reference text, four recurring commitments generate testable implications. First, the FPF positions ASEAN as the institutional anchor and security platform: "ASEAN is the cornerstone of Malaysia's foreign policy" and "provides Malaysia with important platforms to address security issues" (MOFA, 2019, p. 19). Second, the AOIP codifies ASEAN's normative "grammar" for the Indo-Pacific. It envisages "ASEAN Centrality as the underlying principle" with "ASEAN-led mechanisms... as platforms for dialogue" (ASEAN, 2019, p. 2) and grounds regional cooperation in "a rules-based framework" and "respect for international law... [including] the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea" (ASEAN, 2019, pp. 2-3). Third, the DWP aligns defence posture with diplomacy and law, committing to "bilateral diplomacy, international law and a web of partnerships" alongside ASEAN-led mechanisms (MOD, 2019, p. 24). Fourth, the FPF

explicitly scripts restraint in the South China Sea (SCS): “continuous dialogue,” “early conclusion of the Code of Conduct (COC) under... ASEAN,” “non-militarisation,” and a SCS that should be “a region of peace, friendship and trade,” “not... confrontation or conflict” (MOFA, 2019, p. 19).

From these commitments, the policy repertoire implied by the script is expected to display the following observable properties:

- Corrective legality rather than antagonism: major project adjustments should be framed as restoring legality, defensibility, and fairness, not as an anti-China pivot.
- Repair rather than rupture: when problems exist, the preferred remedy should be renegotiation and governance repair rather than cancellation designed to sever ties.
- Re-engagement through recognised frameworks: resumed cooperation should be narrated as consistent with rules-based order and ASEAN-compatible regional architectures.
- Venue discipline in security: sensitive security disputes should be channelled into ASEAN-led mechanisms and framed through dialogue and law to avoid militarisation and escalation.

These implications sit comfortably with the hedging literature’s expectation that small states avoid binary alignment (Kuik, 2008, 2016; Kuik & Lai, 2020), but they add procedural specificity: how hedging is enacted and justified in a particular political moment.

Review as Rules-Based Correction Rather Than Anti-China Signalling

The first phase, review, is the least surprising given the political economy baseline inherited from the Najib period and the visibility of BRI-linked contracts (Lim & Liu, 2019; Ngeow, 2020). An important analytical question, however, concerns how these reviews were publicly framed and justified. The Foreign Policy Framework of the New Malaysia describes itself as a “people-centric” document “prepared through an extensive consultative process” (MOFA, 2019, p. 3). This formulation suggests that major economic decisions, particularly those involving large infrastructure projects and foreign partnerships, were expected to be presented in terms consistent with transparency, accountability, and procedural legitimacy. Within this policy language, the review of China-linked projects could be framed not as a rejection of cooperation but as a correction of arrangements that were perceived to be inconsistent with legality, accountability, and fiscal defensibility.

The FPF’s SCS language demonstrates how the document distinguishes between principled posture and relational antagonism. It does not script hostility; instead, it scripts process: “continuous dialogue” is “a move in the right direction,” and the “early conclusion” of an ASEAN-framed COC is a priority (MOFA, 2019, p. 19). The same passage rejects militarised escalation and instructs a cooperative framing: the SCS “should be a sea of cooperation... and not confrontation or conflict” (MOFA, 2019, p. 19). This matters for the China policy sequence because it helps explain why, even when Malaysia publicly scrutinised China-linked projects, it remained normatively committed to dialogue and non-escalation in the most sensitive strategic theatre.

The DWP reinforces this logic by diagnosing the risks of polarisation and emphasising legality in maritime rights, noting that incursions challenge Malaysia's EEZ rights "as provided by international law" and that big-power action–reaction dynamics raise "the risk of regional polarisation" (MOD, 2019, p. 21). A review framed as fiscal and governance correction therefore becomes a "safe" move: it addresses domestic concerns (Lim & Liu, 2019) without requiring securitised, confrontational diplomacy that would contradict the defence document's warning against polarisation.

Observable implication: the review phase should be accompanied by justificatory language consistent with legality and accountability, and it should avoid identity-threatening rhetoric that depicts China as an adversary requiring rupture. This is consistent with Malaysia's broader long-run preference for cautious legalism and quiet diplomacy in the SCS (Kreuzer, 2016), now reinforced by explicit textual commitments. The point is therefore not that the 2019 documents caused the initial reviews, but that they later codified a vocabulary through which such reviews could be interpreted and justified as rules-based correction rather than geopolitical rupture.

Renegotiation as Governance Repair and Contractual Defensibility

If review is the diagnostic move, renegotiation is the corrective move. The script's key prediction here is that Malaysia would seek to repair rather than abandon cooperation. This is where the combination of "rules-based" commitments and ASEAN-centred diplomacy becomes most consequential.

AOIP sets the regional normative expectation that the Indo-Pacific should be a region of "dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry" (ASEAN, 2019, p. 2). This phrase performs a disciplining function: it supplies a vocabulary that renders a confrontational rupture less appropriate, while legitimising adjustment through negotiation. AOIP further ties this cooperative posture to governance principles, including "good governance" and "a rules-based framework" (ASEAN, 2019, pp. 2–3). When Malaysia renegotiates, it can present the act as consistent with the region's preferred conduct: cooperation continues, but within rules-based standards.

The DWP's concept of engagement through "a web of partnerships" anchored by "bilateral diplomacy" and "international law" (MOD, 2019, p. 24) also implies that partnership is not unconditional; it is structured by rules and instruments. Renegotiation fits this posture precisely because it is a diplomatic instrument that repairs problematic governance arrangements while preserving the relationship as a partnership.

Secondary literature clarifies why governance repair would be politically salient. Lim and Liu (2019) highlight that Malaysia's responses to BRI-linked projects were strongly shaped by concerns about costs, distributional effects, and governance features, precisely the sort of problems that renegotiation is designed to address. A policy-text reading does not deny these pressures; it explains why the "repair" solution is chosen over rupture: because the public script makes corrective negotiation easier to justify than strategic severance. This is compatible with hedging logic in which a weaker state avoids hard alignment and preserves room for manoeuvre (Kuik, 2008, 2016; Kuik & Lai, 2020), but it specifies the sequencing: review produces public grounds for renegotiation; renegotiation repairs legitimacy and defensibility; and only then can cooperation resume on revised terms.

Observable implication: renegotiation should be framed as restoring acceptable governance and fiscal standards, and its public justification should invoke legality, appropriateness, and continuity of cooperation rather than geopolitical distancing.

Re-engagement as ASEAN-Compatible and Rules-Based Resumption

The final phase, rule-bound re-engagement, becomes appropriate once governance repair has been achieved and public justification can be anchored in the script. The relevant textual foundation is the AOIP's insistence on "openness," "inclusivity," and a "rules-based framework" grounded in international law (ASEAN, 2019, pp. 2–3). A return to cooperation with China is not merely permitted by this grammar; it is positively enabled, provided it is narrated as open, inclusive, and rule-governed rather than exclusive or coercive.

The FPF's ASEAN-centredness is equally important. By describing ASEAN as "the cornerstone of Malaysia's foreign policy" and as providing "platforms to address security issues" (MOFA, 2019, p. 19), the document instructs that sensitive matters be processed through ASEAN mechanisms even while economic ties continue bilaterally. This facilitates issue differentiation: Malaysia can resume economic cooperation with China on revised terms while continuing to manage security frictions through ASEAN venues and dialogue scripts.

The DWP strengthens this approach by explicitly endorsing a multi-pronged toolkit that includes ASEAN and ASEAN-led mechanisms, alongside "bilateral diplomacy, international law and a web of partnerships" (MOD, 2019, p. 24). The "web of partnerships" language is especially conducive to re-engagement, because it frames engagement as plural and non-exclusive rather than aligned. It thereby reduces the reputational cost of resuming cooperation with China after reviews, as long as such cooperation remains compatible with rules and does not imply strategic subordination.

Observable implication: re-engagement should be narrated as consistent with regional principles of openness and rules, and it should be presented as compatible with ASEAN centrality and non-alignment rather than as a shift into a China-centred orbit.

Venue Discipline and Non-militarisation as the Security Side of the Repertoire

A key advantage of the script approach is that it explains not only the economic-policy sequence but also the persistence of venue discipline in security. The AOIP is explicit that ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum, and ADMM-Plus, are the platforms to be "strengthen[ed] and optimiz[ed]" (ASEAN, 2019, p. 2). It further instructs that ASEAN be an "honest broker" in a strategic environment of competing interests (ASEAN, 2019, p. 1). These claims normalise a foreign policy repertoire in which strategic competition is managed institutionally rather than through unilateral escalation. Here, the ASEAN Outlook is used as a regional reference point rather than as a Malaysian policy source.

The FPF's SCS script maps directly onto this venue discipline. It prioritises "continuous dialogue," calls for "early conclusion" of the COC "under the framework of ASEAN," and proposes "non-militarisation" (MOFA, 2019, p. 19). By specifying both instrument (dialogue) and institutional target (COC under ASEAN), the text makes ASEAN venues the "appropriate"

default for sensitive security issues. The DWP corroborates this by emphasising that “ASEAN and ASEAN-led mechanisms continue to serve as indispensable platforms” and that “ASEAN unity and centrality are a foundation for managing power dynamics and regional uncertainties” (MOD, 2019, p. 22-23). This is a strong institutional claim: ASEAN is not merely useful; it is foundational.

This security-side repertoire is consistent with Malaysia’s historically cautious South China Sea posture, which has long emphasised legal framing and quiet diplomacy (Kreuzer, 2016), and it also aligns with hedging strategies that avoid hard balancing in a context of major-power rivalry (Kuik, 2008, 2016; Kuik & Lai, 2020). From a policy text perspective, the significance of the three documents examined here lies in how they articulate this pattern of behaviour in an explicit and publicly accessible form. By codifying principles such as dialogue, legality, and ASEAN-centred engagement, the texts provide a clearer framework through which Malaysia’s diplomatic conduct can be presented and justified, while also indicating the preferred venues through which sensitive regional issues are managed.

Summary: Why the Sequence Holds Together

The transition from script to repertoire can now be stated as a tight chain of observable implications. Reviews are made appropriate because the texts provide a rules-based and consultative justificatory framework, enabling correction without antagonism. Renegotiation becomes the preferred remedy because AOIP and DWP privilege cooperation through dialogue, governance standards, diplomacy, and law rather than rupture (ASEAN, 2019, pp. 2–3; MOD, 2019, p. 23-24). Rule-bound re-engagement becomes legitimate because ASEAN’s regional grammar affirms openness and rules-based cooperation, while Malaysia’s defence and foreign policy documents frame partnerships as non-exclusive and legally grounded (ASEAN, 2019, pp. 2–3; MOD, 2019, pp. 22–23). Throughout, venue discipline persists because all three texts privilege ASEAN-led mechanisms and reject escalation and militarisation as appropriate conduct (ASEAN, 2019, pp. 2–3; MOFA, 2019, p. 19; MOD, 2019, p. 22).

In short, material and domestic pressures help explain why recalibration was necessary (Lim & Liu, 2019; Ngeow, 2020), and hedging explains why binary alignment is unlikely (Kuik, 2008, 2016; Kuik & Lai, 2020). Analytically, the contribution of this policy-text approach is to explain why Malaysia’s recalibration took the specific procedural form of review, renegotiation, and rule-bound re-engagement, and why this economic sequence coexisted with ASEAN-centred venue discipline and non-militarised restraint in the security domain.

Text–Practice Alignment, 2018–2019: A Compressed Narrative

The previous sections showed that two Malaysian policy documents, read alongside the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific as a regional reference text, articulated a policy vocabulary centred on rules-based conduct, ASEAN centrality, dialogue, and non-militarisation. This section examines how the policy trajectory between 2018 and 2019 aligned with that script. Rather than presenting an exhaustive event chronology, the aim is to show how the language and principles embedded in the three documents correspond to the observable sequence of review, renegotiation, and rule-bound re-engagement in Malaysia’s China policy.

2018: Review and Suspension as Rules-Based Correction

The first observable phase following the political transition of 2018 involved the suspension or review of several China-linked infrastructure projects associated with the Belt and Road Initiative. From a purely material perspective, these decisions can be explained by fiscal concerns, governance questions, and domestic political pressures surrounding the projects (Lim & Liu, 2019; Ngeow, 2020). However, the public justification for these actions consistently employed a vocabulary compatible with the normative script articulated in the policy texts.

The Foreign Policy Framework emphasises that Malaysia's diplomacy should be grounded in transparency, consultation, and principled conduct. The document describes itself as a "people-centric document" prepared through "an extensive consultative process" (MOFA, 2019, p. 3). By foregrounding public accountability, the text establishes an expectation that major policy decisions, including those concerning foreign investment and infrastructure agreements, must be justified as consistent with governance standards and national interest.

Within this framework, the review of major projects could be narrated as a corrective measure rather than a geopolitical signal of hostility toward China. The emphasis on legality and transparency made it possible to frame project suspension as an effort to restore fiscal prudence and contractual defensibility. In other words, the language of review aligned with a rules-first logic: existing agreements were scrutinised to ensure they conformed to acceptable governance and economic standards.

This framing also corresponds with the policy language articulated in Malaysia's official documents, which emphasise the rule of law, transparency, and fairness as guiding principles of governance. Within this framework, the review of major infrastructure projects could be presented as a corrective step aimed at ensuring contractual defensibility and fiscal responsibility when governance concerns emerged. Such actions therefore did not necessarily signal strategic distancing from China but rather reflected an effort to align policy decisions with the procedural standards outlined in the Foreign Policy Framework of the New Malaysia.

2019: Renegotiation and the Principle of "Change in Continuity"

The second phase of the policy sequence involved renegotiation and eventual resumption of cooperation on revised terms. This stage aligns closely with the central narrative of the Foreign Policy Framework, which explicitly frames Malaysia's foreign policy orientation as one of "Change in Continuity" (MOFA, 2019). The phrase captures the logic that while policy instruments may be adjusted, the underlying orientation toward regional cooperation and engagement remains intact.

Renegotiation fits this logic particularly well. Instead of cancelling cooperation outright, renegotiation functions as a mechanism of governance repair, allowing existing agreements to be revised so that they meet the standards of transparency, fiscal responsibility, and national interest articulated in the Framework. In this sense, renegotiation represents continuity in diplomatic engagement but change in contractual terms.

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific further reinforces the appropriateness of this approach. The document describes the Indo-Pacific as a region characterised by "dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry" (ASEAN, 2019, p. 2). This normative framing discourages

abrupt rupture in bilateral relationships and instead encourages dispute management through negotiation and cooperative adjustment.

Moreover, the AOIP grounds regional conduct in a “rules-based framework” and in respect for international law (ASEAN, 2019, pp. 2–3). Renegotiation, by definition, operates within this rule-based logic: it seeks to correct problematic arrangements through legal and diplomatic procedures rather than unilateral disengagement. Consequently, renegotiated cooperation with China could be presented as consistent with ASEAN’s regional principles rather than as a departure from them.

The Defence White Paper also reinforces this interpretation by emphasising diplomacy and partnerships as the preferred instruments for managing external relations. The document notes that Malaysia places “greater emphasis on diplomacy in dealing with other countries” (MOD, 2019, p. 12). From this perspective, renegotiation is not simply an economic adjustment but a diplomatic instrument that allows Malaysia to maintain cooperative relations while addressing domestic governance concerns.

Maritime Issues: Dialogue, Code of Conduct, and Non-Militarisation

The alignment between text and practice is also visible in Malaysia’s approach to the South China Sea during the same period. While the maritime dispute remained a persistent regional issue, Malaysia’s public diplomatic language consistently emphasised dialogue, legal frameworks, and ASEAN-led processes.

The Foreign Policy Framework clearly articulates Malaysia’s position on the issue. It states that Malaysia supports the “early conclusion of an effective Code of Conduct” in the South China Sea and calls for the “non-militarisation” of the maritime domain (MOFA, 2019, p. 19). The document further emphasises that the South China Sea should remain a “region of peace, friendship and trade” (MOFA, 2019, p. 19).

This language reflects a broader regional commitment embedded in the ASEAN Outlook, which emphasises the peaceful settlement of disputes and respect for international law as guiding principles for Indo-Pacific cooperation (ASEAN, 2019, pp. 2–3). Within this normative framework, maritime disputes are expected to be managed through diplomatic dialogue and institutional negotiation rather than through coercive escalation.

Malaysia’s defence posture also aligns with this orientation. The Defence White Paper explicitly states that Malaysia adopts a “defensive posture” and rejects the use of force as a means of resolving disputes (MOD, 2019, p. 5). The document further emphasises the importance of diplomacy and partnerships in maintaining regional stability.

Taken together, these statements explain why Malaysia continued to emphasise ASEAN-led mechanisms and dialogue in addressing South China Sea issues even while recalibrating its economic relations with China. The diplomatic script embedded in the three policy texts made escalation or militarised confrontation inconsistent with Malaysia’s publicly declared identity. In this respect, the ASEAN Outlook serves as a regional normative backdrop against which Malaysia’s own official language appears more intelligible.

Summary: Text and Policy Sequence

Table 1: Illustrative Alignment Between Policy Texts and Malaysia’s China Policy Sequence (2018–2019)

Event	Relevant Text Clause	Expected Meaning	Observable Evidence
2018 Project Review	FPF emphasises consultation and accountability (p.3)	Policy correction framed as governance responsibility	Review of major China-linked projects justified as fiscal and legal reassessment
2019 Renegotiation	FPF principle of “Change in Continuity”	Adjustment without rupture	Renegotiated infrastructure agreements maintaining bilateral cooperation
Continued Economic Engagement	AOIP emphasis on dialogue and cooperation (p.2)	Regional norms favour cooperative solutions	Resumption of cooperation within broader regional frameworks
South China Sea Diplomacy	FPF support for COC and non-militarisation (p.19); DWP defensive posture (p.4)	Preference for dialogue and legal processes	Continued support for ASEAN-led negotiations and avoidance of escalation

The alignment between policy texts and policy practice can therefore be summarised as a sequence of mutually reinforcing steps. The review of projects in 2018 reflected the FPF’s emphasis on transparency and accountability. The renegotiation and resumption of cooperation in 2019 corresponded to the principle of “Change in Continuity,” which prioritises adjustment rather than rupture. At the same time, Malaysia’s maritime diplomacy continued to emphasise dialogue, non-militarisation, and ASEAN-centred mechanisms in accordance with the regional norms articulated in the AOIP and the defence posture outlined in the DWP.

More broadly, this alignment illustrates how publicly articulated policy texts can help frame the interpretation and sequencing of foreign policy decisions. By emphasising principles such as rules-based engagement, ASEAN centrality, dialogue, and the peaceful management of disputes, the three documents provided a policy vocabulary through which Malaysia’s diplomatic conduct could be presented and justified. In this way, the texts helped clarify the procedural logic underlying Malaysia’s recalibration of its China policy during 2018–2019.

Conclusion: What Texts Do for Small States

This article set out to explain a procedural puzzle in Malaysia’s China policy during 2018–2019: why the post-election recalibration followed a sequence of review, then renegotiation, and finally rule-bound re-engagement, rather than culminating in strategic decoupling. Existing accounts of Malaysian statecraft correctly emphasise the constraints and incentives faced by a weaker state operating amid major-power rivalry, including the logic of hedging and the domestic political economy pressures surrounding large China-linked projects (Kuik, 2008, 2016; Kuik & Lai, 2020; Lim & Liu, 2019; Ngeow, 2020). Yet these explanations alone do not

fully account for why adjustment took this particular procedural order, nor why Malaysia repeatedly channelled sensitive disputes into ASEAN-centred venues and legal vocabularies. The argument advanced here is that the sequence is best interpreted through the policy language and justificatory frameworks articulated in authoritative texts.

The empirical core of the analysis showed how two Malaysian policy documents, read alongside the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific as a relevant regional reference, together articulated a rules-first and ASEAN-centred diplomatic vocabulary, with dialogue and restraint as preferred instruments. The Foreign Policy Framework frames Malaysia's orientation through "Change in Continuity" (MOFA, 2019, p. 2), signalling adjustment without rupture, and explicitly elevates ASEAN by stating that "ASEAN is the cornerstone of Malaysia's foreign policy" (MOFA, 2019, p. 17). It further scripts restraint in the South China Sea by prioritising "continuous dialogue," support for the "early conclusion" of the Code of Conduct under ASEAN, and "non-militarisation" (MOFA, 2019, p. 19). The ASEAN Outlook reinforces this regional grammar by envisioning an Indo-Pacific of "dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry" (ASEAN, 2019, p. 2) and grounding conduct in "a rules-based framework" and respect for international law (ASEAN, 2019, pp. 2–3). The Defence White Paper aligns security posture with diplomacy and law by emphasising "bilateral diplomacy, international law and a web of partnerships" (MOD, 2019, p. 23) and endorsing a defensive, non-escalatory orientation. Taken together, these clauses supply not merely rhetoric but a framework for legitimate justification. They make reviews narratable as governance correction within a rules-based identity, renegotiations narratable as repair rather than rupture, and resumed engagement narratable as cooperation within recognised legal and ASEAN-compatible architectures.

More broadly, policy texts can "tether" short-term volatility by converting contingent political pressures into patterned, publicly defensible sequences. Once a state publicly articulates how it intends to act, that articulation can narrow the range of easily justifiable options and raise the political costs of deviation. For small states, this tethering function is strategically valuable. It reduces external uncertainty by signalling procedural predictability to major powers and regional partners, and it strengthens domestic credibility by tying foreign policy choices to publicly stated standards of legality, dialogue, and ASEAN-centred venue discipline. In this sense, texts do not replace material constraints or domestic politics; rather, they shape how those pressures are translated into action, and they help explain why the translation takes the form of rule-bound recalibration rather than rupture.

This analysis allows the three research questions posed at the outset to be addressed directly. First, the Malaysian policy texts, read together with the ASEAN regional reference text, collectively articulated Malaysia's diplomatic identity during the early "New Malaysia" period as rules-oriented, ASEAN-centred, and committed to dialogue, legality, and non-militarisation. Through repeated references to ASEAN centrality, international law, and cooperative dispute management, the Foreign Policy Framework, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, and the Defence White Paper defined the normative boundaries of Malaysia's external conduct. Second, these textualised ideas translated into a recognisable repertoire of policy instruments. Actions such as project reviews, renegotiation of agreements, and renewed cooperation were framed as governance correction, diplomatic repair, and rule-consistent engagement rather than geopolitical confrontation. Third, the alignment between policy texts and policy practice helps explain why Malaysia's China policy unfolded through the sequence of review, renegotiation, and rule-bound re-engagement. The texts provided the justificatory vocabulary and institutional preferences that made this sequence politically legitimate and diplomatically credible. In this

way, the relationship between policy text and policy practice demonstrates how authoritative documents can structure foreign policy behaviour by defining the repertoire of actions considered appropriate for a small state operating within a complex regional order.

Finally, the approach has clear extensions. First, the same text-to-practice tracing method and codebook logic can be applied to Malaysia's post-2019 administrations to assess whether subsequent governments reproduced, modified, or departed from the rules-first, ASEAN-centred script identified here. Second, comparative application to other Southeast Asian middle and smaller states could test whether similarly authoritative policy texts function as stabilising scripts under rivalry, and whether variations in textual commitments correspond to variations in policy sequencing and venue choices. By foregrounding what authoritative texts do, rather than only what they say, this article highlights an underutilised mechanism of small-state agency: the capacity to stabilise external behaviour through publicly scripted rules, venues, and justificatory repertoires, even amid shifting domestic coalitions and intensifying geopolitical competition.

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