



FEATURES OF THE FORMATION AND EVOLUTION OF MALAYSIAN FOREIGN POLICY (FROM INDEPENDENCE TO THE END OF 2010).

Shaislam Akmalov

Associate Professor at the International Academy
of Islamic Studies of Uzbekistan

PhD in Political Science, Associate Professor.

shaislamakmalov&jmail

Abstract

This article presents a brief historical analysis of the development of Malaysia's foreign policy as one of the leading nations in Southeast Asia and the Islamic world following its liberation from British colonial rule. Particular attention is paid to revealing the essence of the political, economic and social measures subsequently adopted, which contributed to Malaysia's transformation into one of the Asian Tigers, earning the trust of states of global and regional significance.

Malaysia represents a unique political system in which elements of monarchy, democracy and federalism are harmoniously combined. This synthesis ensures stability and diversity in the country's governance, reflecting its cultural and historical characteristics. In foreign policy, it adheres to the principles of neutrality, opposing double standards and actively developing cooperation, including with Uzbekistan. In this context, a study of the formation and transformation of the Federation of Malaysia's foreign policy is of theoretical and practical interest.

Keywords: Malaya, foreign policy, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Organisation of the Islamic Conference, Non-Aligned Movement, external influence, metropolis, regional cooperation, political confrontation, political-ideological system, policy of Islamic unity, concept of Islam Hadhari.

Introduction

The Federation of Malaya's attainment of independence on 31 August 1957 marked a turning point, signalling the transition from four centuries of colonial rule to the establishment of a sovereign state. During this period, the country's leadership faced the unprecedented challenge of formulating its own foreign policy, taking into account complex domestic factors such as the ethnic heterogeneity of society and economic dependence on the metropolis. Studying this initial phase is critical to understanding how the young country managed to transform external pressure from the United Kingdom into a policy of active neutrality and regional leadership, which





remains relevant for modern states, including Uzbekistan, in their quest to strengthen national sovereignty.

The significance of the declaration of independence. Until 1957, all aspects of Malaya's foreign relations were under the complete control of the United Kingdom. The declaration of independence necessitated the immediate establishment of a diplomatic apparatus and the forging of relations with the international community amidst the harsh bipolar confrontation of the «Cold War». The significance of this phase lay in the need to legitimise the new statehood through international recognition and the search for security mechanisms, which was enshrined in the 1957 Defence and Mutual Assistance Agreement with London. However, true independence was demonstrated by the country's leadership's ability to gradually distance itself from the policies of the former colonial power.

The new course of independent Malaysia evolved from the forced pro-Western orientation of its early years to a policy of «open doors» and neutrality. Whilst «outspoken anti-communism» and close ties with the British Commonwealth prevailed during Abdul Rahman's premiership (1957–1969), by the mid-1960s the country began to show a tendency towards independence, refusing to join the SEATO military-political bloc. A fundamental element of the new course was the proclamation of Islam as the state religion, which not only ensured the internal political dominance of Malay Muslims but also laid the foundation for Malaysia's future positioning as a leader of the Islamic world.

Speaking on the occasion of the 66th anniversary (1 September 2023) the Supreme Ruler of the Malay Federation, Abdullah al-Mustafa, stated: «In fact, this strong unity is also the main key to the country's stability and prosperity, as well as the seed and source of strength for us in facing any current and future challenges. «Therefore, the shared responsibility of the leadership and the people lies not only in preserving and strengthening the harmony and unity we have achieved, but also in nurturing it», added the Head of State.

During the period of British colonial rule, all aspects of Malaya's foreign relations were under the complete control of the United Kingdom. However, from the very outset of the country's independent development, there arose a need to formulate and implement its own foreign policy, to establish diplomatic relations with other states, and to set up the relevant foreign service structures. In doing so, a wide range of internal and external factors of a historical, geographical, socio-political, and ethno-religious nature were taken into account; these factors formed the basis for the shaping of Malaysia's foreign policy, the identification of its main priorities, and the practical implementation of these objectives.





A characteristic feature of the Federation of Malaya's practical steps in the early years of its existence was that it did not display any notable activity on the foreign policy stage, adhering to the foreign policy course of the former colonial power. This can be explained by the following circumstances: the consequences of Malaya's 400-year colonial dependence; the predominance of predominantly British capital in the economy; the presence of a British military contingent in the country and a reluctance to pursue an independent defence and foreign policy; the ideological influence of the former colonial power; and so on.

In October 1957, the Malayan government concluded a Defence and Mutual Assistance Agreement with the United Kingdom, under which London retained its troops and military bases in the country. In military and political terms, the agreement closely tied the young country to the United Kingdom, which defined the nature of bilateral relations and directly influenced Kuala Lumpur's foreign policy.

The turn of the 1950s and 1960s was significant in that the Malayan leadership began to recognise the need to develop relations with neighbouring states. Thus, in 1967, the country joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), whose members also included the Philippines and Thailand. Attempts to establish regional cooperation should be seen as the country's first independent steps on the international stage – prior to the creation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, which was openly opposed by the Philippines and Indonesia, leading to political confrontation in the region.

During this difficult period, Malaysia received support from leading Western nations with interests in the region (the US, the UK, Australia and New Zealand). Despite this, a trend towards independence was already beginning to emerge in the country's foreign policy: Malaysia openly declared its commitment to a policy of neutrality, refusing to join SEATO despite pressure from the UK. From the mid-1960s, relations began to develop with countries in Asia and Africa, primarily Muslim nations.

The establishment of ASEAN in August 1967 was facilitated by the normalisation of relations between Malaysia and Indonesia. Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines also joined this intergovernmental regional organisation. Kuala Lumpur's desire to play an active role stems from its aim to resolve bilateral issues (primarily territorial) with virtually all member states of the Association within the framework of ASEAN.

The pro-Western policy of outspoken anti-communism and close ties with the countries of the British Commonwealth, pursued by Prime Minister Abdul Rahman (1957–1969) in the early years of the country's independence, was replaced by a subsequent shift towards a policy of non-alignment, neutrality and peaceful





coexistence. A striking example of this approach was Malaysia's declaration of its readiness to develop cooperation with all states, regardless of their political and ideological systems. Diplomatic relations were established with the USSR (April 1967) and other countries of the socialist bloc, and ties were expanded with the member states of the Non-Aligned Movement, primarily Muslim.

Between 1970 and 1976, when Abdullah Razak was the second Prime Minister, Malaysia, as a member of the OIC, began to officially identify itself as a Muslim country that leaned more towards neutrality, non-alignment, peaceful coexistence, and genuine independence from the UK and other global players. Malaysia began to distance itself from the «great powers», emphasise regionalism, and deepen practical contacts with the countries of the «Communist bloc».

Fundamental changes in the foreign policy of the Federation of Malaysia took place under the fourth Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad (1981–2003), although its main directions, goals and principles remained unchanged. Under his leadership, a number of significant new diplomatic steps and initiatives were also introduced, such as: the «Look East» policy; leadership among developing countries; an active approach to resolving the issues of Palestine and apartheid; and the policy of Islamic unity. It should be particularly emphasised that modern Malaysia, a country with a dynamic, diverse and flexible economy, owes its existence to the efforts of former Prime Minister M. Mohamad, under whose leadership the country achieved a remarkable economic breakthrough in the 1980s and 1990s, rapidly transforming itself from a supplier of fuel and agricultural raw materials into a developed industrial nation.

Among the most notable foreign policy initiatives during the fifth term of Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi (2003–March 2009) were the development of pragmatic responses to geopolitical and economic challenges; the adoption of a scientific approach to formulating official positions on international issues; positioning the country as an influential player, a regional leader, and chair of the Non-Aligned Movement, the OIC and ASEAN; and the intensification of foreign policy content, among others.

One of A. Badawi's initiatives following his appointment as Prime Minister was the concept of Islam al-Khadhari («civilised» Islam).

Ahmad Badwi identified the key priorities of his foreign policy as fostering dialogue with countries in the Islamic world, particularly those in the Near and Middle East, with the main topics of discussion being: the situation in Palestine, the establishment of a free trade area with the Gulf States, and other matters of practical cooperation.



Najib Razak, who took office as the sixth Prime Minister in April 2009, identified establishing contacts with the leadership of ASEAN states as one of his foreign policy priorities. A series of his visits to Indonesia, Brunei, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia, as well as his active participation in international events within the framework of the ASEAN and APEC multilateral forums, contributed to strengthening the regional dimension of the government's foreign policy.

Under N. Razak, significant steps were taken to strengthen cooperation with China. In 2009, for instance, N. Razak paid a visit to the PRC, and PRC President Hu Jintao visited Malaysia. A Joint Action Plan for Strategic Partnership was signed, which became a roadmap covering areas such as the economy, politics, science, education, military-technical cooperation and others. For the first time, the parties declared a strategic partnership when defining the nature of bilateral relations.

Against the backdrop of China's growing presence in Southeast Asia, Malaysian-American dialogue intensified. In May 2009, Malaysian Foreign Minister A. Aman paid a working visit to Washington, and in September, US Deputy Secretary of State D. Steinberg visited Malaysia; the main topic of his meeting with N. Razak was unblocking the negotiation process on the creation of a bilateral free trade area. The very fact of a visit at this level (the first since US Secretary of State C. Rice's visit in July 2007) and the topics of the talks indicated that the two countries were attempting to build a new paradigm for their relations. At the same time, Malaysia had high hopes for the new policy of US President Barack Obama's administration towards the countries of the Islamic world.

Certain issues in bilateral relations observed during the first quarter of 2010 did not fundamentally affect the overall trend, which was characterised by a convergence of positions, improved mutual understanding and intensified dialogue between the administrations of Barack Obama and Najib Razak. The results of the Malaysian Prime Minister's four-day visit to the US in April 2010 serve as the basis for this conclusion. N. Razak took part in the summit on global nuclear security and held a meeting with the US President, during which issues of bilateral relations, security and the fight against terrorism in Asia were discussed. A notable feature of this event was that, of all the Asian countries, the US side initiated meetings between the White House and N. Razak and Chinese President Hu Jintao. Summing up his visit to the US, N. Razak noted that it had been one of his most fruitful trips abroad, and that the meeting with the US President had resulted in a further warming of bilateral political relations and a significant revival of cooperation in the economic and investment spheres.





In light of the above, it is clear that by 2010 Malaysia had consolidated its position as an active member of ASEAN, successfully increasing its economic openness (trade-to-GDP ratio >130%) and transitioning to high-income country status. Key achievements also include the active attraction of foreign investment, economic recovery following the 2008–2009 crisis, and the promotion of the interests of developing countries.

The main foreign policy successes that have contributed to strengthening the Federation's political influence are as follows:

—Strengthening its role in ASEAN: Malaysia played a significant role in the integration of Southeast Asian countries and the establishment of the ASEAN Community.

—Economic diplomacy: The active attraction of investment into high-tech sectors, which contributed to the rapid economic recovery following the fall in GDP in 2009.

—Neutrality and partnership: Foreign policy was conducted in accordance with the principles of neutrality and the maintenance of peaceful relations with all countries, including the US, China and the Islamic world.

By the end of 2010, despite global crises, Malaysia's economy had grown by 4.8% in the fourth quarter.

In the second decade of this century, Malaysia also emerged as an «assembly hub» for many companies. The main investors were the US, South Korea, Singapore, Japan and China (75.1% of foreign direct investment). Foreign trade began to play a significant role in the economy. Key trading partners included the US, Singapore, Japan, China, Thailand, South Korea, Taiwan and Germany. Malaysia's trade development was facilitated by its membership of trade organisations such as the WTO, APEC and ASEAN. Malaysia came to be classified among the wealthiest and most developed countries within the developing world – the newly industrialised countries (NICs).

Malaysia is one of the leaders in the Muslim world. It is a member of the so-called «Islamic Eight», an association of countries established in 1997 modelled on the «G8».

In this way, the Malaysian leadership has succeeded in laying a solid foundation for the further transformation of its foreign policy and economy to a higher level, which will undoubtedly help to strengthen its position not only at the regional but also at the global level. In this regard, foreign partners will also take into account the fact that Malaysia is actively developing cultural and humanitarian ties, cooperating within the framework of international organisations (OIC, SCO) and proposing a unique model of development free from radicalism.





REFERENCES:

1. <https://vietnamnews.vn/opinion/1583160/malaysia-celebrates-its-66th-national-day-and-60th-malaysia-day.html>
2. Лоссовский И. Е. Эволюция внешней политики Малайзии как отражение внутреннего исторического развития страны // Гуманитарные исследования в Восточной Сибири и на Дальнем Востоке. – 2011. – №. 3. – С. 53-60.
3. Holder R. The fight for Malaya. Kuala Lumpur: Editions Didier Millet, 2007. 196 p.
4. Малайзия: справочник / авт.-сост. Ю.Г. Александрова и др. М.: Наука, 1987. 361 с.
5. ANTHONY MILNER. NAMA, GROUP-BINDING AND MORAL BALANCE: Themes and Origins of Malaysian Foreign Policy. The Tun Hussein Onn Chair in International Studies Lecture 2014.
6. Ahmad M.Y. 50 years of Malaysia's "Economic Diplomacy": The continuing struggle for peace, security and development // The Journal of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations. 2008. Vol. 10, N 1. P. 45-66.
7. Clutterbuck R. The long long war. The emergency in Malaya 1948-1960. Singapore: Cultured Lotus, 2003. 206 p.
8. Л.Ефимова Федерация Малайзия — успехи и трудности. https://mgimo.ru/about/news/experts/federatsiya-malayziya-uspekhi-i-trudnosti/?utm_source=google.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=google.com&utm_referrer=google.com. 16.09.2016.
9. Dhillon K.S. Malaysian Foreign Policy in the Mahathir Era 1981-2003: Dilemmas of Development. Singapore: NUS Press, 2009. 300 p.
10. Sharifah Munira Alatas A Malaysian Perspective Of Foreign Policy and Geopolitics: 2021. Global Study Quarterly, Volume 1, Issue 4, December 21, ksab031. <https://academic.oup.com/isagsq/article/1/4/ksab031/6380107>
11. Delphine Allès and Louise Perrodin. Chapter 7 - The Construction of Malaysia's Foreign Policy since 1957: An Emerging Middle Power's Choice to Follow, Challenge or Compromise with the Global Order.
12. Anthony milner nama, group-binding and moral balance: Themes and Origins of Malaysian Foreign Policy. Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia. 2015.

