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Malaysia need not be in the first island chain — with or without Japan's OSA — Phar Kim Beng and Luthfy Hamzah



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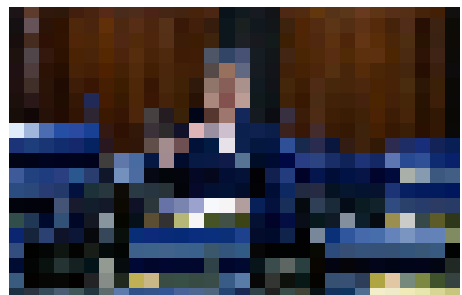
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NOVEMBER 13 — As Malaysia's chairmanship of Asean and the Related Summits comes to an official close on December 31, 2025, Kuala Lumpur will not be stepping away from regional influence. Far from it — Malaysia will continue to shape the tone and texture of Asean diplomacy, especially in supporting the Philippines, the incoming 2026 Asean Chair. Yet, as Malaysia

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has no incentive to be drawn into any militarised alignment such as the so-called “First Island Chain.”

The regional environment is already charged. The one-year truce between China and the United States, painstakingly negotiated in Kuala Lumpur in 2025, is due to expire by mid-November 2026, likely reigniting tariff tensions and defence posturing. Against such a backdrop, entanglement in containment strategies or maritime deterrence frameworks would undermine Malaysia’s core foreign-policy doctrine — neutrality, equidistance, and strategic autonomy.

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The geography of the first island chain

Cold War-era US strategists conceptualised the First Island Chain as a line of defence stretching from Japan through Taiwan and the Philippines to Borneo. It was meant to bottle up the Soviet Union and, later, China. In its revived form, it underpins Washington’s Indo-Pacific strategy, reinforced by the Quad (US, Japan, India, Australia), AUKUS, and now Japan’s Official Security Assistance (OSA) framework.



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Even after the gavel passes to Manila, Malaysia's influence within Asean will remain formidable. Kuala Lumpur's stewardship throughout 2025 has restored confidence in Asean's diplomatic machinery, particularly in managing the Thai Cambodian ceasefire and the Asean-GCC-China Economic Summit. — Picture by Yusof Isa

Malaysia's geography, however, lies beyond the operational logic of this containment belt. Kuala Lumpur's primary concern is not to deter Beijing but to preserve open sea lanes in the South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca — both arteries of global trade. The focus is on freedom of navigation, economic resilience, and regional dialogue — not on militarised deterrence.

To identify Malaysia as part of this island chain would distort its regional role and jeopardise its carefully cultivated image as a peace broker and bridge-builder between competing powers.

Japan's OSA: Cooperation, not containment

Tokyo's Official Security Assistance (OSA) initiative, launched in 2023, allows Japan to provide non-lethal defence support — patrol boats, radars, and communications systems — to partner states in the Indo-Pacific. It marks Japan's most assertive post-war security policy yet, signalling a shift toward proactive defence diplomacy.

For Malaysia, OSA presents both opportunities and constraints.

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Malaysia should treat OSA as a functional instrument — a way to modernise its security infrastructure and humanitarian response systems — without subscribing to any military bloc. Cooperation does not necessitate alignment.

Asean leadership beyond the chairmanship

Even after the gavel passes to Manila, Malaysia's influence within Asean will remain formidable. Kuala Lumpur's stewardship throughout 2025 has restored confidence in Asean's diplomatic machinery, particularly in managing the Thai Cambodian ceasefire and the Asean-GCC-China Economic Summit.

As the Philippines assumes the 2026 chairmanship, Malaysia's experience and credibility will be indispensable in ensuring continuity. The challenge for Manila will be to maintain Asean's strategic autonomy amid renewed Sino-US rivalry. Malaysia, acting as mentor and moral anchor, can guide the Philippines toward upholding Asean's "open and inclusive Indo-Pacific" vision rather than being pulled into security architectures dominated by extra-regional powers.

A political transition at home

Malaysia's foreign policy in 2026 will unfold under the shadow of impending elections. With a general election likely by late 2026 or mid-2027, domestic political stability will take precedence. No Malaysian administration will want to inherit the risks of a foreign entanglement just months before voters head to the polls.

The calculus is straightforward: neutrality and economic continuity are politically safer than geopolitical adventurism. Aligning Malaysia with a First Island Chain logic — a de facto containment front — would invite unnecessary friction with China, its largest trading partner, and unsettle regional investors.

This is particularly risky given that the Sino-US truce is set to expire in November 2026, just as Malaysia could be entering campaign season. Should tariffs, technology restrictions, and defence manoeuvres resume, Asean states — especially the Philippines and Malaysia — would face renewed pressure to "choose sides." The wisest course for Malaysia is to maintain its non-aligned stance while continuing to shape Asean's collective neutrality.

Maritime cooperation without militarisation

Malaysia's long-standing principles, enshrined in the 1971 Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) and reinforced by the Asean Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), provide a tested blueprint for navigating such turbulence. The focus should be on building maritime resilience — not joining alliances.

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maritime monitoring.

2. Cybersecurity and Communications – Developing joint frameworks to secure undersea cables and digital infrastructure vital to Malaysia’s semiconductor and shipping sectors.

3. Humanitarian Cooperation – Expanding joint exercises for natural-disaster response, reflecting Asean’s humanitarian rather than militarised identity.

These initiatives would strengthen Malaysia’s maritime posture while reinforcing its role as a peaceable, technologically capable nation.

Avoiding a strategic logjam

The “First Island Chain” is not merely a geographic construct — it is a strategic trap. Once embedded in its logic, nations find it difficult to pursue balanced diplomacy. The Philippines, by virtue of its geography, has little choice but to remain within its ambit; Malaysia, however, does not.

To join any such containment formation would be to cede autonomy and invite retaliation. Worse still, it would undermine Malaysia’s credibility as a neutral interlocutor — the very asset that elevated its 2025 chairmanship. As the US and China resume their contest for dominance, neutrality will once again become the region’s most valuable currency.

Malaysia’s advantage lies precisely in not being entangled — in being the Asean member that can talk to both Washington and Beijing without suspicion.

The continuity of prudence

As 2025 draws to a close, Malaysia’s leadership of Asean will be remembered for restoring purpose to the bloc: strengthening intra-Asean economic ties, promoting rare-earth cooperation, and bridging the Global South with the industrial North. This credibility must now be preserved through consistency.

Malaysia does not need to stand in anyone’s chain to remain relevant. Its influence flows not from geographic positioning but from diplomatic equilibrium — the ability to mediate, moderate, and mobilise consensus across divides.

With elections approaching and the global order teetering between rivalry and restraint, Malaysia’s best defence is strategic restraint itself.

** Phar Kim Beng, PhD, is professor of Asean Studies at the International Islamic University of Malaysia and director of the Institute of International and Asean Studies (IINTAS). Luthfy Hamzah is a research fellow at IINTAS.*

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