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Malaysia

Mahathir Mohamad urges Asean to move towards China after US's Taiwan 'provocation'

Former Malaysian prime minister blames Washington for ratcheting up tensions in region



Mahathir Mohamad said China's philosophy was not to conquer and occupy nations © Samsul Said/Bloomberg

Mercedes Ruehl and **Oliver Telling** in Singapore 5 HOURS AGO

Malaysia's former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad has blamed "US provocation" for the increased tensions over Taiwan and urged south-east Asian countries to move closer to China.

The 97-year-old politician, who is the country's longest-serving leader and last stepped down as prime minister in 2020, told the Financial Times in an interview that China was a "big market" for [Malaysia](#) and the region and maintaining that economic relationship was crucial.

[Mahathir](#) added that China's philosophy — unlike the west — was not to conquer and occupy nations.

"Yes, China is claiming the South China Sea as theirs but they haven't invaded us . . . They want to influence methods in Asean countries, but they have not occupied us, they have invested in us," he said, referring to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, a political and economic bloc. "China is a very good trading partner."

Asean, which includes the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, needs to stay away from the US and the west's "provocation" of China, Mahathir said, referring to this month's controversial trip by US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan. The visit infuriated China, which claims the island as its territory and launched a series of unprecedented military drills around the country in response.

Mahathir's comments highlighted the bind of south-east Asian countries that have long relied on the US for security and China for trade. Many governments in the region have struggled to find a response to the increased tensions between the rival superpowers.

The Mahathir administration from 2018 to 2020 strengthened ties with China even though he had [called for greater scrutiny](#) of Beijing's investments in the country.

Malaysia has been beset by political turmoil since Mahathir stepped down. The country has had two prime ministers in as many years, hampering the government's response to the coronavirus pandemic and causing intense jockeying and infighting between factions. It is set to hold elections as early as this year.

The fallout has led to a resurgence of the United Malays National Organisation, the party which Mahathir used to dominate that is now associated with Najib Razak, the former prime minister who was convicted of money laundering linked to the 1Malaysia Development Berhad embezzlement scandal.

Najib [lost his final appeal last week](#) but Mahathir said his rival and former protégé could remain influential from prison. "He has his fanatical followers, who will do everything they can to frustrate justice. They will try to get him pardoned," Mahathir said.

Mahathir called the current government of Ismail Sabri Yaakob corrupt and when asked if he would run again he replied that he "would do his very best".

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