

CPTPP: Supporting rules-based international order

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Malaysia too must view our participation in the CPTPP within these geo-economic and geopolitical developments. - NSTP/File pic

It has been more than two years since Malaysia and ten other countries signed the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Seven have already ratified the agreement. Malaysia is among those that have yet to do so.

While this may be the result of domestic political developments, there remains fundamental concerns relating to the agreement that continues to divide public opinion; despite great assurances having been given that these areas have been accorded sufficient protection.

However, domestic economic and social concerns are just part of the picture. There are geo-economic and geopolitical considerations as well. The world is witnessing the emergence of a New Cold War. The rise of China is a matter of concern for the United States as well as those within the region like Japan, Australia, India and some of the Asean members.

The developments in the South China Sea (linked to China's nine-dash line) has understandably raised tensions; prompting even Malaysia to submit a note verbale to the United Nations to challenge these claims.

The trade war, the technological rivalry and the threats of economic decoupling are all symptomatic of this unfolding great power contest. The CPTPP, too, has to be viewed within this wider context. When first proposed, it was widely seen as part of Obama's "Pivot to Asia" which was partly driven by geo-economics but also by geopolitical concerns over China.

Since opening up, China has grown by leaps and bounds. Its rise was not only unexpected; it was encouraged with the belief that this would eventually lead towards political reform within China. This however has not happened. Failure on this front and then witnessing as China grew increasingly strong and influential through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and its growing global leadership role, strongly motivated this US response.

Malaysia too must view our participation in the CPTPP within these geo-economic and geopolitical developments. Though the US is not a party to the agreement, there are other important reasons why Malaysia should ratify the CPTPP. Malaysia's foreign policy has remained relatively consistent since independence, which is to safeguard Malaysia's sovereignty and national interests while preserving good relations with all countries.

Malaysia strongly supports multilateralism and deepening regional integration through our contributions in organisations like the UN and Asean. Pursuing regional economic integration like the Regional and Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA, now CPTPP) are among the tools used to achieve this.

While endogenous (i.e. domestic politics and economics) and exogenous (i.e. Cold War, Post-Cold War etc.) factors may explain this, it is also due to Malaysia's middle-power position in the international system.

A middle-power is described as one that exerts influence in international affairs through the multilateral system, prefers compromise to resolve conflict and emphasises good international citizenship, all of which are reflected in key aspects of Malaysia's foreign policy. There are questions on its effectiveness, especially now when nationalism threatens global cooperation, and unilateral action replaces rules-based action.

It would however be foolish to discount the role that middle-powers can play. Consider for instance the positive response from the other regional actors to the 2019 Asean Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). The AOIP offers an alternative narrative which can temper potential regional tensions while maintaining Asean centrality in the ongoing regional developments.

Ratifying the CPTPP would allow Malaysia to influence the emerging geopolitics in a manner that befits its preferred approach. It would also send a strong message to both the US and China. With some major powers increasingly drifting towards populist nationalism, it is incumbent upon middle-powers like Malaysia to defend the international rules-based system, including through deepening regional integration via initiatives like the CPTPP.

The tools available to a middle power in no way handicaps the effectiveness of a state's foreign policy especially when undertaken collectively. Malaysia's ratification of the CPTPP would send a clear message that we and other middle-powers party to the agreement, will continue to support the rules-based international order.

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