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FIRST-EVER VISIT

NAJIB'S WHITE HOUSE VISIT 'A FEAT'

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'The Diplomat' says both sides expected to make progress in relations

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's visit to the White House next week is a "feat within the context of the bilateral relationship" between Malaysia and the United States.

The Diplomat associate editor P. Prashanth, in a piece published in the magazine's website on Wednesday, said this was especially so since the initial forecast for US-Malaysia relations under President Donald Trump seemed to be gloomy, with Malaysian policymakers, like their regional counterparts, worrying about the implications of the so-called America First policy.

He said such a policy appeared to be so with the nixing of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the release of a trade hit list, the questioning of the One China policy and the Trump travel ban.

"As the Trump administration's Asia policy began to take shape, convergence, as it often does, became clearer in certain areas like North Korea, eventually paving the way for Najib's White House visit. There is no doubt that the visit itself is a feat within the context of the bilateral relationship.

"The last time Malaysia was granted a White House visit was in 2004 under former prime minister (Tan) Abdullah (Ahmad) Badawi. This is Najib's first-ever White House visit since coming to power nearly a decade ago," Prashanth said.

He writes mostly on Southeast Asia, Asian security affairs and US foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific.

He said the fact that Najib was the second Southeast Asian leader to visit the Trump White House, after Vietnamese Prime Minister

Nguyen Xuan Phuc, was a consequence of scheduling changes.

"Officials from both sides had to do a lot of substantive work to get the visit through so early on in the Trump presidency, and so quickly as well."

He said while both sides were expected to make some headline-worthy progress in the heavily scrutinized visit, the true test for US-Malaysia relations laid less in the successful conduct of this interaction and more in the ability of both sides to manage the challenges to relations further down the line.

"For all the focus on Najib himself, the reality is that US and Malaysia have successfully cooperated on a range of issues under six prime ministers since the Southeast Asian state's independence, despite disagreements on matters such as economic policy, human rights and US foreign policy in the Middle East."

He said even though bilateral ties had hit new heights under Barack Obama, with both sides elevating ties to the level of a comprehensive partnership and Malaysia becoming a member of key US-led initiatives, issues like human trafficking continued to pose complications to the relationship.

He said for Najib's visit, the official agenda would be presented as wide-ranging, in line with the 60th anniversary of diplomatic ties as well as the realities of the comprehensive partnership itself.

Top agenda items would include North Korea, counter-terrorism, maritime security and expected defence deals, but the timing of the visit, a day after the anniversary of the Sept 11 attacks, as well as Najib's more private engagements, will make the visit seem "a bit security-heavy".

However, Prashanth said the progress made in bilateral ties ought not to be dismissed, particularly at the beginning of a new US administration.

He said much would rely on the ability of both sides to manage key challenges to relations further down the line.