

# All is not lost for ECRL, experts say ahead of PM's 2nd visit to China

Malaysian Reserve - 20/2/2019 pag. 8

*A decision may be made when Dr Mahathir attends the 2nd BRI summit in April*

by ALIFAH ZAINUDDIN

THE government could still pursue the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) if favourable terms can be reached with Beijing, geopolitical experts said, as there has been no final decision on the project so far.

The fate of the RM81 billion project remains uncertain, although it is expected that a decision might be made when Prime Minister (PM) Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad attends the second Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) summit in April.

Experts said that Dr Mahathir's second trip to China, after assuming premiership in May last year, will alleviate Malaysia's perceived anti-China image.

"The Pakatan Harapan government's understanding about the nature of Chinese investment has improved markedly compared to the first few months when they were in power — that not all forms of Chinese economic activities are necessarily extractive in nature," Silkroad Institute ED Lau Zheng Zhou told *The*



Pic Ismail Che Rus

**Dr Mahathir's 2nd trip to China will alleviate Malaysia's perceived anti-China image, say experts**

*Malaysian Reserve* recently.

Lau said Dr Mahathir has been consistent in wanting a fairer deal for Malaysia and has presented himself

as a tougher negotiator, as shown by his taking of certain hard decisions like project cancellations and talking to a competitor like Japan.

On the other hand, China has upped its charm offensive recently as rising tensions with the US has left Beijing scrambling to win friends in the region.

"The nature and dynamics of BRI have also changed gradually in the region as similar issues of extractive economic activities have been raised by politicians and the local population. As a result, China has begun to invest more on improving people to people ties in hope of winning the hearts and minds of the people," Lau said.

China's new tactics have seen President Xi Jinping welcoming Japanese PM Shinzo Abe to Beijing in October last year, making him the first Japanese leader to visit China in seven years.

Xi himself made a visit to the Philippines — a major long-time ally of the US — in November, making him the first Chinese leader to make a state visit in 13 years.

In Malaysia, the Chinese embassy in Kuala Lumpur last month released a music clip titled "Bahu Kiri", or left shoulder, to celebrate 45 years of diplomatic ties between China and Malaysia. The video has since garnered over 85,000 views and shared nearly 2,000 times on Facebook.

While this may seem trivial, it could easily be classified as one of China's efforts to exert soft power influence. Last year, as part of a government overhaul to make policy-making more efficient, China created the Ministry of Culture and Tourism specifically to promote its cultural influence.

Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute's Centre for Public Policy Studies chairman Tan Sri Dr Ramon Navaratnam said such efforts could work in favour of a mutually beneficial solution for both countries.

"I would assume that the project will continue in a modified and minimised scale. The project is too important to reject without more careful study and that would explain the delay in the final decision.

"It could have been rejected much earlier. But the fact that there is still no decision and they are considering the pros and cons, it increases the likelihood of them continuing the project," Ramon said.

When asked if a pro-ECRL decision would affect public confidence towards the government, Ramon said: "If it is a realistic decision, I'm sure the people will support it. There is no harm in a U-turn. You don't do U-turns for fun."