

**Asean powerless to stop China's incursions, says Dr Mahathir  
Malaysian Insider  
March 3, 2016**

Southeast Asian nations are hemmed in on the disputed South China Sea, avoiding confronting China because of its sheer clout, according to former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

While countries like Malaysia may risk further Chinese encroachments by not taking a tougher stance on their claims, there are few alternatives, Dr Mahathir said in a February 25 interview with Bloomberg Television in Kuala Lumpur.

"Can Asean go to war with China?" Dr Mahathir asked.

"We are dealing with a very powerful country. We can't tell them 'look, don't do this, don't do that, or I will bash your head'."

China is the largest trading partner of the 10-member Asean and has pledged sorely needed infrastructure investment funds to the region as part of its plan to build a new maritime "Silk Road" trading route from China to the Middle East and onto Europe.

That economic clout gives it sway in its territorial disputes with the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia over the South China Sea, a key maritime artery for trade and energy shipments. China's trading influence is increasingly matched by an expanded naval presence in the region, with missiles, fighter jets and radar operating from some reefs and islands it controls.

"It's going to be the most powerful country in this world, more powerful than the United States," Dr Mahathir said of China.

He led Malaysia from 1981 to 2003, during which he made regular trips to China – in part to limit reliance on Western nations – and trade ties accelerated. Under his leadership Malaysia advocated a pragmatic relationship with China and promoted what he called "Asian values".

**MH370 tension**

China is Malaysia's largest trading partner and was its fourth-biggest foreign investor in 2015. A Chinese company is paying RM9.83 billion for the energy assets of a troubled Malaysian state investment company, while others are bidding for rail projects in the Southeast Asian nation.

Ties between China and Malaysia were briefly strained after the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight 370 in March 2014 with more than 150 Chinese nationals on board.

The two countries along with Australia are still searching for the plane. Prime Minister Li Keqiang said in November that China wanted to enhance maritime and defence

cooperation with Malaysia.

China in February sparked new questions about its intentions in the South China Sea after it deployed surface-to-air missiles to a contested island, a move that came just months after President Xi Jinping promised not to militarise the disputed atolls.

Under Xi, China has reclaimed land to bolster its claims to more than 80% of the waterway that hosts US\$5 trillion of international shipping a year, adding airstrips and lighthouses.

At least four Asean members also claim portions of the South China Sea. China has reclaimed 1,200ha of land over two years, warned US military planes and ships from going near areas it controls and its vessels have regularly clashed with Vietnamese and Philippine fishing boats.

While the Philippines and Vietnam have protested, other Asean states have been more willing to accommodate China and its economic muscle.

In November, Asean defence ministers failed to release a communique from their meeting amid reports of Chinese opposition to language on the disputes. There was a similar failure at a leaders' summit in Cambodia in 2012.

Malaysia has avoided overtly challenging China over its maritime claims. Chinese coast guard ships were spotted off the coast of Sarawak last month, sparking worries among people there, official news agency Bernama reported.

Defence Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein was quick to dispel any concerns, saying the situation was under control and that he'd arrange a meeting between the Chinese ambassador and the Sarawak chief minister to resolve any misunderstanding, the report said. – Bloomberg, March 3, 2016.

Copyright © 2015 Edge Insider Sdn Bhd

Source:

<http://www.themalaysianoutsider.com/malaysia/article/asean-powerless-to-stop-chinas-incursions-says-dr-mahathir>