

## *Examining the Concept of a Special Relationship: A Study of Indonesia-Malaysia Relations*

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The Asian Conference on the Social Sciences 2016  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to examine the concept of a special relationship. A special relationship is a close relation between two states founded on two sources of closeness, that of the two states' common identities and shared strategic interests. The paper develops a theoretical framework based on constructivist theory in order to explain what is a special relationship as well as the dynamics of a special relationship. It uses the histories of the relationships between two states bound by their common identities, in particular the histories of Anglo-American and US-Canada relations from the 1850s to the 1960s, to substantiate its arguments. The paper argues that it was because both Indonesia and Malaysia each possessed a necessary amount of power that led to them forming their special relationship in late 1965. It then argues that Indonesia-Malaysia relations, as a special relationship, produce double-edged effects, that of substantial cooperation and substantial conflicts, between the two states. Meanwhile, the Indonesia-Malaysia Special Relationship, like other special relationships, constitutes a security regime, which means the two states are committed to avoiding war between them. Because of this commitment, the substantial conflicts between Indonesia and Malaysia will not easily become violent ones. The paper makes two contributions to the existing literature on International Relations: it develops an understanding of a special relationship with theoretical foundations; it strengthens the existing understanding of Indonesia-Malaysia relations by providing an explanation of the interplay of power and common identities in the relationship.

Keywords: Special Relationship, Indonesia-Malaysia Relations, Anglo-American Relations

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## **The Concept of a Special Relationship**

The term 'Special Relationship' has been used by many states to characterize a specific set of their bilateral ties with other states: for example, the ties between the US and the UK; the US and Canada; the US and Israel; France and the Sub-Saharan African states; and Spain and the Latin American states. The meaning of a special relationship is centered on the term 'special'. It usually means a quality that is exceptional in a positive sense. Consequently, a special relationship between two states is generally being understood as a close friendship.

A special relationship is a close relation between two states founded on two sources of closeness – that of the two states common identities and shared strategic interests. Common identities of two states are derived from their shared culture, common language, historical ties or shared political values and institutions. Common strategic interests of two states, on the other hand, mean the two states rely on each other's material presence for survival. A state's strategic interest means a material presence which is fundamental to its survival.

Most of the policy makers and scholars, who have discussed the concept of a special relationship, acknowledge the existence of the twin sources of closeness. Churchill's conception of a special relationship was founded on the "fraternal association" between the US and Britain, coupled with the strategic calculation where such partnership would strengthen "shared security interests and interlinked global economic interests." Kissinger, in his article "Reflections on a partnership: British and American attitudes to Postwar Foreign Policy" later suggested that common values and geopolitical consideration were complementary elements in US-UK relations.

The discussions of other so-called special relationships also see a combination of identities and strategic drivers. Reich in his article "Reassessing the United States-Israel Special Relationship" contends that the US-Israel Special Relationship is founded on "ideological, emotional and moral pillars and on a commitment to democratic principles buttressed by strategic and political factors." Both states view each other as a truly reliable strategic asset in preserving the peace and stability in the Middle East. Haglund and Dickey hold similar understanding of the US-Canada Special Relationship. Both respectively contends that the relationship is rooted in historical ties, geographical proximity and close security and economic ties. Both observe the demographic intermingling between the two states, and their unparalleled interdependence in homeland security and in economy.

The idea of a "Special Relationship" entered into the discussion of international relations when the term was coined by Winston Churchill in his 'iron curtain' speech at Fulton, Missouri in March 1946. Since US independence, the sense of closeness between the US and the UK was naturally and consistently generated by their sense of sharing common identities. However, common identities-induced positive identifications between the US and Britain alone, did not result in strategic cooperation between them. Common identities shared by two states produce their similar understanding of strategic interests. However, two states sharing common identities each needs to own a certain amount of power, namely, the material capacity,

in order to shape their similar strategic outlook into their “common” strategic interests. The US and the UK did not view each other as sharing common strategic interests up until the late nineteenth century. America saw its mutual strategic dependence with Great Britain only after the US had emerged as a major power in the late nineteenth century. The growing of American power since the mid-nineteenth century, matched with Britain’s existing power, produced the mutual need for strategic cooperation between them. Both states, because of the necessary amount of power that each possesses, needed each other to preserve their similar vision of order in international politics, which was rooted in their common identities – the English concepts of liberty. Thereafter, the Anglo-American Special Relationship began to emerge.

The two sources of closeness – common identities and shared strategic interests – in a special relationship give rise to the mutual positive identifications between the two states involved. Such positive associations produce the two states’ mutual understanding that they share a special relationship, which means a relationship that is *closer* than other bilateral relations either of them enjoys. The shared understanding held by the two states, in turn, stirs up their respective *expectation* that their relationship *should be* closer than their other bilateral ties.

A special relationship produces substantial cooperation and substantial conflicts between the two states involved. By substantial cooperation, it means, cooperation between two states that are deeper than those established in their other bilateral relations. The substantial cooperation in a special relationship are strategic partnerships between the two states involved. Whereas by substantial conflicts, it means, conflicts between two states that are more intense than those happen in their other bilateral ties, which are characterized as friendly or normal relations.

There are three sources of conflict in a special relationship: power competition between the two states involved; their drives to assert the superiority of their respective national identity over that of their culturally similar counterpart; and the mismatch of expectation between them. These three sources of conflict, through their mutual reinforcements, produce substantial conflicts between two states who share a special relationship.

The respective national identity of two states bound by a special relationship is founded on their pre-modern common identities. As a consequence, there are inevitable similarities in the national identities of the two states concerned. Both the states, therefore, need to emphasize their difference based on their common identities, so as to ensure their respective distinctive existence in the world of nations. The differentiation is expressed in superiority sense.

The power politics between two states who share a special relationship, combined with the sense of distinctiveness of their respective national identity as opposed to the counterpart, create the two states’ sense of superiority of their respective national identity over that of their culturally similar counterpart. The superiority complex has the element of power politics because it is founded on the power politics-induced mindset of comparison. For example, Canada emphasizes the superiority of its English culture when compared to that of America. Canadians hold a conviction: they possess authentic English values and ideals, which make them morally superior to,

and politically more civilized than, the United States. For them, American culture is superficial and corrupted; it has to be rejected.

Power competition between two states with special relations leads to the mismatch of expectation between them.

When one of the states in a special relationship demonstrates competitive behaviours against the counterpart, they run counter to the counterpart's expectation where it should not receive such treatments, since they share a relationship which is closer than their other bilateral ties. The mismatch of expectation produces resentments on the side of the state, who is being treated competitively, towards its counterpart, and its retaliative measures to strengthen its power ensued.

A special relationship constitutes a security regime. A security regime refers to the war avoidance norms observed by the states involved.

A special relationship is built on the existence of power balance between the two states involved. The relationship is produced, only when the two states respectively starts to own a certain amount of power. Because of the presence of power balance between them, two states in a special relationship find it very costly to turn their conflicts into violent ones. The power balance, therefore, furnishes a basis of order between them. Order is "peaceful coexistence under conditions of scarcity". By peaceful coexistence, it means states coexist without a war in a significant period of time. The presence of power balance hinders the two states with special ties from plunging into a war against one another, hence allows them to coexist peacefully.

Founded on their peaceful coexistence, the aspiration for peace generated by the two sources of closeness of two states sharing a special relationship gives rise to their shared war avoidance norms – namely, the two states' commitment to avoid war between them. Shortly after the signing of the Treaty of Washington in 1871, the US and Canada decided to demilitarize their border. Such demilitarization, which produced the undefended US-Canada border, was an outcome of US-Britain/Canada shared war avoidance norms. The undefended border demonstrated the two parties' commitment to avoid armed conflicts between them, hence reduced – not eliminated – the possibility of war between them. Both sides' war planning against one another remained active well into the late-1930s, while they rendered their border to be undefended. As both states in a special relationship observe their shared war avoidance norms, the substantial conflicts between them, therefore, will not easily turn into violent ones.

### **Indonesia-Malaysia Relations, 1957-2009**

Indonesia and Malaysia are bound by their common identities rooted in the Malay way of life. The Malay way of life is constituted by the combination of three essential elements – the notion of kingdom, the Malay language and Islam. Within the mindset of kingdom, the people of the dominant ethnic community in archipelagic Southeast Asia speak the Malay language and adhere to Islam. Because of their common identities, leaders of the newly independent Indonesia and Malaya shared similar strategic apprehensions of the regional order of archipelagic Southeast Asia. They

viewed the region as one entity which reflected the Malay way of life – that of the Malay Archipelago or Malay World. For Indonesian and Malayan leaders, the Malay World served as a shield which safeguarded the survival of their respective state, where each was built around the Malay way of life.

While Indonesian and Malayan leaders shared similar strategic understanding, the two states were not bound by common strategic interests. Both parties' understandings on each other were based on different footings.

The Indonesian elites did not see Malaya as of the same rank with Indonesia. For the great majority of Indonesian leaders, Indonesia was a major Power on the world stage. A combination of factors gave rise to such an understanding: Indonesia had succeeded in its revolutionary struggle against a major European Power – the Netherlands; it was the largest state in Southeast Asia; it was the fifth most populous state in the world.

Buttressed by its sense where Malaya was only a little state relative to Indonesia, the Sukarno regime aimed to exercise its dominance over Malaya, as part of its efforts to establish Indonesia's strategic preponderance in archipelagic Southeast Asia. The regime had shown active interest in shaping the affairs of Malaya. Indonesia's determination to assert its regional preponderance was aimed at addressing a fundamental security issue of Indonesia – its disintegration as a state. Indonesia had been plagued by a series of regional coups in Sumatra and Sulawesi since the end of 1956. For Sukarno and the Indonesian army leaders, by maximizing Indonesia's sphere of influence in archipelagic Southeast Asia, they could then minimize the prospect of Indonesia falling apart.

Essentially, in the eyes of the Sukarno regime, there was no common strategic interest between Indonesia and Malaya. Malaya had yet to possess the necessary amount of power that would secure Indonesia's recognition of its strategic reliance on Malaya. Instead of perceiving its mutual strategic dependence with Malaya, Indonesia desired for its strategic preponderance over Malaya. Such aspiration for dominance coincided with Indonesia's strategic understanding. With Malaya that lay within its sphere of influence, the Malay Archipelago – mainly represented by Indonesia and Malaya – constituted a shield that ensured the survival of Indonesia.

The Malayan leaders, on the contrary, believed that Indonesia and Malaya needed each other for survival. The Tunku administration in 1963 expressed Malaya's desire to "forge the closest links with Indonesia". Two sources of closeness – common identities and shared strategic interests – produced Malayan leaders' wish for intimate ties with Indonesia. From Malaysians' perspective, not only did Indonesia share "sentimental and blood ties" with Malaya, but also they were each other's nearest neighbour.

The understanding of geographical proximity with Indonesia indicated Malaya's realization of its mutual strategic dependence with Indonesia. The amount of power owned by Indonesia had surpassed a level that produced its strategic standing in Malaya's foreign policy. Based upon their common identities-induced similar strategic understandings – that of the Malay Archipelago constituted a shield that protected their respective survival – the presence of Indonesia as the largest state in

Southeast Asia, created Malaya's need for strategic partnership with Indonesia. Malayan Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman explained: "As we were too small to stand alone, our only hope for security was to live in close association with Indonesia in particular, and other countries in Southeast Asia in general."

Malaya's intention towards Indonesia was unmistakable. It wanted to establish a special relationship with Indonesia – a closer relation between Malaya and Indonesia when compared to their other bilateral ties. The desire for special associations reflected Malaya's realization of its blood ties with Indonesia, and that both states were strategically dependent on one another.

It should be noted that Malaya emphasized on its mutual strategic dependence with, not its outright reliance on, Indonesia. It wanted the relationship to be equal. In other words, both parties would have to rely on each other for survival. The Tunku revealed his conversation with Sukarno, "I made it quite clear that Malaya was only a small country. The Malay people looked to Indonesia for guidance and help, although we maintained that independence and sovereignty were our heritage." While acknowledging that it was a small state as compared with Indonesia, Malaya considered itself as a Power to be reckoned with in Southeast Asia. A combination of factors – the size and the geographical location of Malaya; the resources that it possessed; its greater prosperity against other states in the region; and its military alliance with Britain – rendered the belief among Malaysians that Malaya was a consequential Power in Southeast Asia. These elements prompted Malaysians to perceive that power balance existed between Malaya and Indonesia. In the minds of the Malayan leaders, there was no Indonesia's supremacy in Southeast Asia; there would be only Indo-Malay mutual reliance, which represented the presence of the Malay Archipelago.

Indonesia was at the peak of its sense of power after it had succeeded in taking over West Irian from the Netherlands in August 1962. The Sukarno regime deemed that Indonesia's regional preponderance was basically in place after its success in incorporating West Irian into part of Indonesia. It wanted to fortify such preponderance of Indonesia so as to ensure Indonesia's integrity as a state. The regime began to hold the view that Indonesia should get to decide the territorial changes that had taken place at its door step, especially when the Federation of Malaysia would share borders with Kalimantan of Indonesia. The formation of the Federation of Malaysia was proposed by Malayan Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman in May 1961, in which the Federation would merge the British colonies – Singapore, Sarawak, North Borneo and Brunei – with Malaya. Indonesia sought to terminate the formation of Malaysia with the goal of consolidating its perceived preponderance in archipelagic Southeast Asia. For Indonesia, the preponderance was a shield that protected its existence as a state. In January 1963, Indonesia decided to launch its policy of confrontation. It would confront the creation of Malaysia to prevent the federation from coming into existence.

By April 1963, Indonesian guerrillas began to launch regular armed incursions into Sarawak. On 16<sup>th</sup> September 1963, the day when Malaysia was officially formed, Indonesia announced that the newly formed Malaysia would not enjoy diplomatic relations with Indonesia. Malaysia responded with the same decision. Before long,

President Sukarno declared that Indonesia would “Ganjang Malaysia” – Crush Malaysia. Indonesia stepped up its confrontation against Malaysia by intensifying its military incursions into Sabah and Sarawak, which would be sustained throughout the following years. These incursions had been effectively defeated by the British armed forces. From August to October 1964, there had been sporadic landings of Indonesian troops – by sea and by air – on the southern part of peninsula Malaysia. The Malaysian Armed Forces had successfully cracked down on these operations. The meaning of Indonesia’s military intrusions was clear: whether it was Malaya or Malaysia, the federation was not a Power that Indonesia deemed should be taken note of. Indonesia thought that it could launch military attacks on Malaysia whenever it wanted to. It believed that Malaysia was not strong enough to withstand such attacks.

Indonesia had become internationally isolated because of its confrontation against Malaysia. The Indonesian authority was increasingly impressed with Britain’s military might, which was the bedrock of Malaysia’s security under the Anglo-Malaysian Defence Agreement (AMDA). The consistent failure of Indonesia’s confrontation against a united Malaysia pointed to one unmistakable reality: Malaysia was here to stay. By 1964, it had become increasingly clear for the Indonesian Army that Malaysia would not be defeated, it would instead endure as a state in Southeast Asia. The expansion of Malaya into Malaysia began to produce Indonesia’s realization of its strategic reliance on Malaysia.

In April 1964, the Army Staff and Command College of Indonesia (Sekolah Staf Komando Angkatan Darat, SESKOAD) had produced an analysis on Indonesia’s foreign policy. The study concluded that Indonesia needed a strong Malaysia. A powerful Malaysia, the study explained, formed a buffer for Indonesia in the face of the communist threat from the north. It argued for the need for Indonesia to cultivate friendly relations with its neighbouring states in general, and with Malaysia in particular. In other words, the Indonesian Army wanted Indonesia to forge a special relationship with Malaysia. Based on the SESKOAD study, the Indonesian Army had come to the conclusion that the confrontation campaign should be ended. Malaysia’s power had succeeded in halting Indonesia’s tendency to launch military attacks on it. Indonesia began to share the same understanding held by Malaysia that power balance existed between the two states. A basis of order had emerged between Indonesia and Malaysia. The two states began to coexist peacefully.

A coup mounted by a group of Indonesian army officers and members of the Communist Party of Indonesia took place in Jakarta in the late night of 30<sup>th</sup> September 1965. The Indonesian Army under the command of General Suharto overcame the coup within a day. The abortive coup prompted the Indonesian Army to take control of Indonesia and the fall of President Sukarno ensued. On 11<sup>th</sup> March 1966, President Sukarno was forced to transfer all his executive powers to General Suharto. On 7<sup>th</sup> March 1967, Suharto succeeded Sukarno as Acting-President and became the second President of Indonesia by March 1968.

A series of secret meeting between Indonesia’s and Malaysia’s officials were held in Bangkok and Hong Kong shortly after the September 30 abortive coup in Indonesia. The aim of these meetings was to seek ways to end Indonesia’s confrontation campaign. Ali Murtopo – a close confidant of Suharto – and Ghazali Shafie –

Permanent secretary of Malaysia's ministry of foreign affairs – were engaged in in-depth discussions between them during the meetings. Both acknowledged Indonesia's and Malaysia's mutual tendency of wanting to become close to each other whenever they felt a sense of insecurity. Ali Murtopo and Ghazali Shafie used the Malay word "Berkampung" – to gather together – to express Indonesia's and Malaysia's recognition of their mutual strategic dependence. While compelling Indonesia and Malaysia to coexist peacefully, the presence of power balance between the two states had led to them sharing common strategic interests. Indonesia and Malaysia each possessed the necessary amount of power that produced their mutual need for strategic cooperation. The existence of Malaysia meant that it represented an integral part of the Malay World given the size of the new federation. Indonesia and Malaysia both had to cooperate with each other so that the Malay World could function as a shield that safeguarded their survival as states built around the Malay way of life.

Ali Murtopo and Ghazali Shafie after the series of secret meeting had come to the conclusion: a special relationship should be established between Indonesia and Malaysia. While the coexistence of common identities and shared strategic interests in Indonesia-Malaysia relations gave birth to their special ties, it also generated the two states' mutual aspiration for peace that gave rise to their shared war avoidance norms. Ali Murtopo and Ghazali Shafie aspired for "an enduring and durable entente" between Indonesia and Malaysia. They proposed that "the principles of détente should be scrupulously observed" by Indonesia and Malaysia whenever a difficult situation arose between the two states.

On 11<sup>th</sup> August 1966, Indonesia and Malaysia signed the Bangkok Agreement, which officially end the confrontation campaign. The agreement marked the establishment of a special relationship between Indonesia and Malaysia, which was also a security regime between the two states. Almost immediately after the official ending of Confrontation, Indonesia and Malaysia went ahead to defuse their defence against one another. It was an outcome of their shared war avoidance norms. Both demonstrated their respective commitment to avoid armed conflicts between them.

Very quickly, strategic cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia ensued. In September 1966 – about a month after the signing of the Bangkok Agreement – an agreement for security cooperation had been reached between Indonesia and Malaysia. The two states agreed to undertake joint counter-insurgency operations aimed at eliminating communist insurgents operated along the border areas shared by the two states in Borneo. The two states had become a *de facto* alliance since the start of their security cooperation in Borneo. Over time, the military cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia had been institutionalized. The two states had come to identify their regular joint military exercises as a norm that they share. The military tie between Indonesia and Malaysia became the most intimate one among the bilateral security ties that existed within ASEAN. The relations between the Indonesian and Malaysian armed forces were remarkably close. The two together could easily form a single command and control structure for a military mission if necessary. It had become a belief that Indonesia-Malaysia security relations had the potential of advancing "from *de facto* alliance to *de jure* alliance".

On 17<sup>th</sup> December 2002, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) had decided that the sovereignty over Sipadan and Ligitan belonged to Malaysia based upon the fact that the islands had been controlled and administered by Malaysia. Sipadan and nearby Ligitan are two small islands located near Sabah's northeastern coast, off the land border between the Malaysian state of Sabah and Indonesia's East Kalimantan province. Both Indonesia and Malaysia claimed sovereignty over the two islands. In October 1996, the two states had decided to resolve their disputes over Sipadan and Ligitan through ICJ.

Losing the ownership of Sipadan and Ligitan was a serious blow to Indonesian national pride. Indonesians shared a sense of superiority over Malaysia in the form of the big-little brothers complex. In the eyes of Indonesians, they were the big brother of Malaysia. Indonesians believed that Indonesia was a great nation. The sense of greatness was derived from the understanding of the sheer size of Indonesia and a few thousand years of existence of its culture. Scholars have pointed out, in view of the fact that most of the Malays in Malaysia had their roots in Indonesia, Indonesians would think that Malaysia's culture was provided by Indonesia. Indonesians believed that their culture was superior when compared to Malaysia's, a former Malaysian policy advisor noted. Indonesians expressed their disdain for the perceived shallowness of Malaysia. As indicated by a senior policy advisor of Malaysia, Indonesians for example would argue that Malaysia had no Borobudur – a ninth century Buddhist temple located in Central Java, Indonesia – and that Malaysia had not fought for its independence. Indonesians were proud of their culture, when they thought of Malaysia, the advisor maintained. A former Indonesian diplomat too stressed the cultural pride of Indonesians when discussed about the issue of Indonesia-Malaysia common culture with author. Because Indonesia perceived itself as the provider of culture to Malaysia, it thus saw itself as the big brother of Malaysia.

It was therefore humiliating for Indonesia to have lost Sipadan and Ligitan to its supposed little brother – Malaysia. In the eyes of Indonesia, Malaysia all along had been learning from Indonesia. Meanwhile, Indonesians' sense of weakness which stemmed from the separation of East Timor was reinforced by the loss of Sipadan and Ligitan. The ICJ's granting of the ownership of Sipadan and Ligitan to Malaysia was at odds with Indonesians' expectation. A senior policy advisor of Malaysia had pointed out, many Indonesians believed that Malaysia had chosen to take away the two islands of Indonesia at a time when Indonesia was weak. Malaysia should not take advantage of a weak Indonesia since they share a special relationship, many Indonesians would think. The anger triggered by the loss of Sipadan and Ligitan had been deepened by this mismatch of expectation. Indonesians, as a result, accused Malaysia of "stealing" Sipadan and Ligitan from Indonesia or maintained that Malaysia "robbed" Indonesia of the two islands. Since then, Indonesians generally shared a perception that Malaysia intended to extend its territory into Indonesian soil.

In February 2005, Malaysia granted oil exploration concessions in two deep-water blocks named ND6 and ND7. The two blocks are close to Sipadan and Ligitan, situated in the region south of the two islands. ND6 and ND7, however, are part of the maritime area known as Ambalat which Indonesia claims to be its territory. Indonesia had earlier on awarded exploration concessions in Ambalat. The Indonesian government immediately lodged a protest against Malaysia's decision to grant

exploration concessions in ND6 and ND7. It insisted that such a move had violated Indonesia's sovereignty.

In early April 2005, minor skirmishes broke out between the Indonesian and Malaysian navies in Ambalat. Since the collision the free media in Indonesia reported extensively on the Ambalat disputes. Very quickly, Ambalat became an issue of nationalism for Indonesians which was suffused with their anger. Street protests against Malaysia's claim on Ambalat erupted in many Indonesian cities which involved the burnings of Malaysian flags. The Indonesian media termed the Ambalat disputes as "Kofrontasi 2.0". The situation in Malaysia by contrast had been calm owing to the restraint observed by the Malaysian media. The government-controlled Malaysian media were following the official order that they should not provoke further tension between Indonesia and Malaysia.

After the fall of Suharto, Indonesia was facing serious challenges in maintaining its territorial integrity. It had lost East Timor and was plagued by the independent movements in West Papua and Aceh. In the meantime, Indonesia had failed to defend its claim over Sipadan and Ligitan in the ICJ. Indonesians had become highly sensitive to the issue of territorial integrity of Indonesia. They were afraid of losing more territories. As a result, Indonesia was adamant that it would not lose Ambalat this time around. Such resolve was reinforced by Indonesians' shared perception that Malaysia intended to expand into their soil. Most importantly, Indonesia wanted to secure its access to the untapped oil and gas resources in Ambalat.

Ambalat, in the meantime, was an issue of national pride for Indonesia. In the eyes of Indonesians, the issue of Ambalat was inextricably intertwined with their loss of Sipadan and Ligitan. It was humiliating to have lost the two islands to Indonesia's little brother – Malaysia. Indonesia as Malaysia's big brother – Indonesians maintained – had provided all the assistance that Malaysia was needed for its nation building, and Malaysia in return had taken away Sipadan and Ligitan that belonged to Indonesia. The humiliations which stemmed from the loss of Sipadan and Ligitan fortified Indonesia's determination to defend its alleged sovereignty over Ambalat. Indonesians asserted that Malaysia had seized Sipadan and Ligitan from Indonesia, it would not again lose Ambalat to Malaysia.

Indonesia's resolve to defend its supposed sovereignty over Ambalat was further toughened by its resentments towards Malaysia, which stemmed from its loss of Sipadan and Ligitan. Indonesia's officials had revealed to their Malaysian counterparts about why Indonesians were emotional about Ambalat. It was because Indonesians were bound by a sentiment: they would not forgive Malaysia for taking away Sipadan and Ligitan. This sentiment was an outcome of the mismatch of expectation. Indonesia and Malaysia shared a special relationship. Malaysia – as Indonesians saw it – hence should not choose to take possession of Sipadan and Ligitan when Indonesia was weak.

The exploration activities in Ambalat had to be suspended as both Indonesia and Malaysia were regularly flexing their respective military muscles in the disputed waters.

It was clear that Indonesia's and Malaysia's sovereignty dispute over Ambalat was more intense than their territorial disputes in the past. Nonetheless, the war avoidance norms shared by the two states remained strong enough to prevent them from plunging into an armed conflict between them. Shortly after the surface of the Ambalat disputes, Indonesia and Malaysia reaffirmed their commitment to preserving their friendly coexistence by creating a joint technical committee, beginning to negotiate for a solution to the disputes. Both parties had reassured one another that the Ambalat disputes would be resolved through discussions.

When minor skirmishes broke out between Indonesian and Malaysian warships in Ambalat in early April 2005, top political and military leaders of the two states intervened immediately to put an end to the skirmishes. President Yudhoyono expressed Indonesia's aspiration for peace with Malaysia, asserting that such clashes should not happen again in the future. The two states had pledged better communications to prevent a clash in Ambalat between their armed forces from happening again. The two armed forces subsequently established their standard operating procedures, designed to prevent any physical clashes between them during their encounters in Ambalat.

Indonesia and Malaysia remained unable to work out a solution for their sovereignty dispute over Ambalat. Both sides' dealings with the disputes, nevertheless, were effectively restrained by their shared war avoidance norms. Intense and regular negotiations had been going on between the two states, aiming to resolve the disputes. Both sides were of the view that armed conflict between them over Ambalat would not occur. They recognized that peace prevailed in their relationship. Both shared an understanding that their talks over the Ambalat disputes could go on indefinitely, until they had reached an agreement. "We have achieved a level of sophistication in solving our disputes peacefully," said one former top level Malaysian diplomat.

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