Middle-East Journal of Scientific Research 22 (9): 1339-1352, 2014
ISSN 1990-9233

DOI: 10.5829/idosi.mejsr.2014.22.09.22050

A Non-Regional Perspective on Bilateral Relations Between States from Different Regions: A Case Study of Malaysia-Saudi Arabia Relations

[1]*Asmady Idris and* [2]*Omer Kurtbag*

[1]Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia
[2]Gaziomanpasa University, Turkey

Abstract: This study attempts to introduce a new approach of analyzing bilateral relations between states from different regions, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia, by formulating a 'non-regional perspective' which is extracted from debates on regionalism. Throughout the discussion, the study has found that the non-regional elements are capable of influencing Malaysia's relations with Saudi Arabia in the international system and also with the indication that the element of 'historically essential' has been more prevalent than 'accidentally essential'. Despite this, both elements are still very much related to the connotation of the non-regional perspective in analyzing bilateral relations between states from different regions.

Key words: Region・Regionalism・Non-regional・Malaysia・Saudi Arabia

INTRODUCTION

Studies on bilateral relations between states tend to employ foreign policy perspectives as their conceptual framework. By using a foreign policy perspective, the formulation of states' policies and behavior are usually discussed in terms of the role of leaders, decision-making groups (bureaucratic policymakers), domestic actors and the influence of systemic pressure (either during the bipolar or unipolar era). This study, however, attempts to introduce a new approach to analyze bilateral relations between states from different regions.

The study endeavors to conceptually formulate a 'non-regional perspective' to study bilateral relations between states from different regions. The connotation of a non-regional perspective is extracted from debates on regionalism. Regionalism is closely associated with the process of regionalization or regional interaction among states within a particular region. The non-regional perspective is, perhaps considerably, an alternative way of looking at and understanding the nature of interactions between two states from different regions. It seeks to reformulate a new conceptual framework for this type of interaction or relation.

The study therefore undertakes a case study on the nature of Malaysia-Saudi Arabia relations. Both Malaysia and Saudi Arabia are from different regions, namely, Southeast Asia and the Middle East, respectively. Despite the fact that there is no geographical proximity between these two countries, they have interacted since ancient times until the present. To discuss this further, three main aspects of analysis are covered in this article.

Firstly, it begins with an analysis of the conceptual definition of a region. Secondly, it refreshes the debates on regionalism, which revolved around the old and new regionalist perspectives. Finally, the study attempts to extract 'essential ingredients' of regionalism in order to try to formulate a non-regional perspective as the underlying conceptual framework for analyzing Malaysia-Saudi Arabia bilateral relations. Methodologically, the study employs the use of content analysis of studies on regionalism. It also examines related empirical data to strengthen the non-regional perspective on the case study of Malaysia-Saudi Arabia relations.

Defining "Region": A region literally means 'a large tract of land, a more or less defined portion of the earth's surface and distinguished by certain natural features, climatic conditions, a special fauna or flora or the like.' It also denotes 'an area of the world made up of neighboring countries that, from an international point of view, are considered socially, economically, or politically interdependent' [1].

Corresponding Author: Asmady Idris, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia.

Researchers generally believe that the definition of a region varies and that no definition is absolute. As Nye [2] has put it:

> …region is an ambiguous term… many hours were wasted at the 1945 UN Conference in San Francisco trying to define it precisely. There are no absolute or nationally determined regions. Relevant geographical boundaries vary with different purposes….relevant region for security may not be one for economic integration.

However, Nye [3] defines a region as a limited number of states linked by a geographical relationship and by a degree of mutual interdependence.

For reasons of inadequacy, researchers do not typically depend merely on a single variable to contextually describe a region. For instance, the limitless use of geographical proximity might lead to the problem of boundary delineation. This is proven in the works of, for example, Bruce Russet [4], Ian Kearns [5], Norman Palmer [6], Michael Curtis [7], Mehrdad Mirarab [8] and Michael Smith [9] who are commonly skeptical about the size of regions, the concept of zones and geographical delineation.

Therefore, according to Russet [10], there are at least five criteria (variables) that form a region:

- Social and cultural homogeneity - regions are composed of states that are similar with respect to several kinds of internal attributes;
- Political attitudes or external behavior - as identified by the voting positions of national governments in the United Nations;
- Political interdependence - countries are joined together by a network of supranational or intergovernmental political institutions;
- Economic interdependence - as identified by intraregional trade as a proportion of the nation's national income;
- Geographical proximity.

Russet's work has provided some reasonable alternatives to enable researchers to justify the criteria to be applied to the study of regions. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Russet's definition is final. This is because most researchers argue that a region can be regarded as something that evolves beyond a natural entity, without denying the importance of geographical proximity; it is socially constructed and politically contested, or it is politically and ideologically made and re-made [11, 12, 13].

In other words, regions are not dead physical things but keep changing and always respond to surrounding factors. It largely depends on the interplay between geographical proximity and contiguity, such as territorial location and boundary delineation; actors' (both state and non-state actors) perception and behavior, especially their eagerness to generate regional co-operation and integration; the nature of institutions that are clearly set up for managing regional issues and conflicts, such as the European Union, the ASEAN, the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) and others; interconnected issues (sharing commonalities and interests), whether political, economic, or socio-cultural, that encourage countries from the same region to share with; and the role of the international system, particularly with regard to extra-regional influences from foreign powers, external threats and global market pressures [14, 15, 16, 17, 18].

Regionalism Debates: As a result of the intensification of regional economic and political groupings, which have been on a steep rise in the post-Cold War era, the last two decades have seen a surge in regionalism studies. Regionalism, as a complex and multidimensional process, has often been associated with 'a response to globalisation and a reaction to the diverse aspects of global processes in their entirety' [19], but it is also true that it is driven by internal or intraregional factors and actors. In other words, regionalism can be essentially regarded as part of the process within, not outside, a region itself. According to Evans and Newnham [20], regionalism is the close affiliation of a group of units (individuals, leaders, collective minds of people, or states) to a particular region, just like what nationalism means to a nation. The process of regionalism possibly comes from both within and between states. Within states, it may be in the form of ethnic nationalism, political separatism and the idea of independence. Between states, it corresponds with states' foreign policies and how they respond to the external environment through 'regional lenses' (alliances, ententes, common markets, etcetera).

Nevertheless, most researchers commonly denote regionalism as 'the formation of interstate associations or groupings on the basis of regions' [21]. Derived from this definition, the tendency of researchers to associate regionalism with the formation of formal organizations appears to be widely accepted. Researchers have also invented theoretical approaches and models to develop the study of regionalism [22, 23, 24].

The development of the process of regionalism has largely been interplay of the interaction between the international political system and the domestic structure of states. For instance, anarchy, hegemony, bipolarity, multipolarity and globalization will continue to influence the local structure of states within a region to form regional groupings in order to cope with instability, uncertainty and the fear of marginalization from the mainstream of the world political system and also, to some extent, to increase economic gains as well as to strengthen socio-cultural and religious contiguity. Regionalism therefore acts as the middle link between the domestic and international structures. For this reason, regionalism is sometimes regarded as 'a halfway house between the nation-state and a world not ready to become one' or as 'the next big step forward in international cooperation [25].

Researchers of regionalism can be roughly divided into two main schools: the old regionalist school and the new regionalist school. The basic argument of each school is distinct from each other as both emerged from two different phases in the international political system. The former emerged during the bipolar era and the latter developed after the Cold War.

Old Regionalism: The old regionalist school is normally associated with the works of Hoffman [26], Binder [27] and Cantori and Spiegel [28]. According to Palmer [29], perhaps with the exception of Hoffman, Binder and Henderson, instead of focusing on the word 'regionalism' itself, old regionalists emphasized the concept of 'regional integration.' The word 'integration' has led to a series of lengthy debates between these researchers.

There are at least two different definitions of integration. Deutsch *et al*. [30] defined integration (based on the formation of a security community) as the attainment, within a territory, of a sense of community and of institutions and practices strong enough and widespread enough to assure, for a long time, dependable expectations of 'peaceful change' among its populations. Haas [31] saw integration (political integration) as the process whereby political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations and political activities toward a new centre, whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over the pre-existing national states.

Nye argued that both definitions have some weaknesses and limitations to be reconciled. For the first, it is still unclear whether integration is easier to achieve in a security community or a common market while for the second, he expressed his doubt about how to measure the level of political activities, loyalties and new institutions possessing jurisdiction [32]. The most obvious outcome of the debate, however, is the birth of a few models, such as the federalist, neo-functionalist, transactionalist (communication), the regional system and the empirical system approach in order to foster regional integration.

Fundamentally, old regionalists do not argue so much about the basic characteristics of regionalism, especially geographical proximity and other regional elements defined by Russet. Nevertheless, they differ much on the 'end product of integration' and the methods to scientifically materialize ends. Like federalists, they tend to focus on the 'federal union' as the product of integration while neo-functionalists focus on a political community [33] and transactionalists concentrate more on economic, social and political transactions via contacts, interchanges and communications between states as indicators of successful integration [34].

These three models, however, have been criticized both by the regional system and the empirical system approaches as inadequate studies of regional integration as they ignore the role of high politics, such as extra-regional powers, war and peace and arms and alliances. On some points, the critique holds as the three models place greater emphasis on mutual interdependence (politics and economics) and are characteristically 'Eurocentric'. This is because when the old regionalism model is extended to smaller states (or less-developed countries), the pattern and desire to form at least regional co-operation is relatively distinct from big and developed countries. Leaders in smaller states consider regionalism as a way of strengthening united interests in security, politics and economics to make up for the limitations of the United Nations in safeguarding their interests. According to another argument, regionalism is also regarded as an alternative to solve conflict among members without too much dependence upon major powers [35].

As the old regionalism process continues to make a considerable impact in international relations studies, however, with Haas's 1975 publication *The Obsolescence of Regional Integration Theory*, there appears to be an indication that the spirit and enthusiasm of old regionalists, especially of Haas, was on the verge of declining. In his writing, Haas [36] expressed his disappointment by saying that:

> Regional integration in Western Europe has disappointed everybody: there is no federation, the nation-states behave as to be a distinctive 'supranational' style now looks more like a huge regional bureaucratic appendage to an intergovernmental conference in permanent session.

Haas also admitted that the ignorance of the so-called 'externalization factors' (referring to the global agenda of policy and research) in the context of European integration theories has been the main reason why they are becoming obsolete. The phrase 'externalization factors' could be linked to Haas's disappointment in relation to European regional integration studies in the 1970s, of which he says: '…. A major mistake made in the context of European integration studies was the downplay of the so-called 'externalization factors'… in an era of the increasing impact of external events and forces on regional development…' [37]. He relates the regional problems within the context of European regional integration, especially in economic matters like inflation, the energy crisis, unemployment, the modernization of the agricultural sector without paying huge subsidies, among others, with the functions of economic interdependence with trading partners outside Europe. Haas [38] also portrays externalization as a guise for the *dependencia* doctrine, which indirectly urged less-developed countries to form an economic front to achieve a collective arrangement to deal with foreign capital investment and the exportation of primary products.

Moreover, the externalization factor can be linked, as mentioned by Palmer, to an intrusive system, which portrays the politically significant participation of external powers in the international relations of the subordinate system (regional sphere). Furthermore, Hurrell views the process of regionalism from a systemic perspective and considers the impact of outside pressures as important for the construction of regional interaction among members. Importantly also is Grugel and Hout's [39] argument on the vulnerability of a peripheral region (smaller and poor states) in terms of the pressure of external factors and the changing global order.

But Haas's obsolescence of regional integration theory is nowhere obsolete. Instead, regionalism has found a new way to adapt to changes in the contemporary international system. It has been given a new lease of life by re-adjusting and re-formulating its approach towards the process of globalization. New regionalism is taking over the old [40].

New Regionalism: The main idea of new regionalism can be found in the writings of Fawcett and Hurrell [41], Palmer [42], Gamble and Payne [43], Buzan [44], Grugel and Hout [45], Smith [46], Hettne, Inotai and Sunkel [47] and Schulz, Soderbaum and Ojendal [48].

According to this school, the wave of new regionalism began to take off in the mid-1980s. This can be exclusively connected to several developments occurring in Europe, such as the movement of the European Community (EC) toward a broader pattern of global economic opportunities and the process of radical transformation in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. This is also followed by 'some indicators' that the hegemony of the United States is declining (although still debating), especially in the global economic sphere.

Moreover, with the end of the Cold War, states have presumably been freed from the grips of bipolarity and have more room to design their own foreign policies. They are no longer constrained by the rivalry of two superpowers. The desire to cooperate and integrate regionally has therefore increased. For smaller states or less-developed countries, for instance, efforts are strongly geared toward strengthening old regional organizations *vis-à-vis* forming new groups (and sometimes aligning with other big and influential countries). Organizations like ASEAN, Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) have been moving positively although in some regions, the movement is marginal in relation to current global changes. There is also a newly-developing trend toward inter- or cross-regional arrangements, as was the case with the Asia-Europe meetings, the latest negotiations over the establishment of a free trade area between the EU and the US, or the US-led Trans Pacific Partnership talks that aimed to liberalize trade across the Pacific.

Since new regionalists have come up with the concept of 'new regionalism', they have attempted to reformulate and redefine the old concept reflecting the post-Cold War era. In the words of Farrell [49], 'In the new regionalism approach, regions were regarded not simply as formal organizations (as was the case in studies of the EU), nor as a 'given' but rather understood as constructed and re-constructed in the process of global transformation. Thus, the region is not a static form, but dynamic in its development and open to change and adaptation'. Basically, the outlook of new regionalism is more general and broad and not based solely on state-initiated regionalization. It pays attention to a set of interactions between states, markets and a wide range of civil society actors within the geopolitical given [50].

Researchers in this school, however, offer a variety of definitions. For example, Palmer makes some distinctions between old and new regionalism. He argues that the old places too much emphasis on regional integration and pays insufficient attention to externalization factors (too ambitious and limited in scope) whereas the new does not stress the establishment of major organizational forms so much but can practically be translated into an extensive pattern of cooperative political, diplomatic, commercial and professional contacts, relations and associations.

To some extent, Palmer also relates new regionalism to the scope of international regimes, which has been well-developed by Krasner who defines it as 'sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures which actors' expectations converge in a given area of international relations'. New regionalism is not merely a revival of the old, rather, it is more of a near universal phenomenon and exercises influence in global affairs. Palmer observes the emergence of great trading blocs like the EU and North America and Japan as the main feature of new regionalism [51].

Smith relates new regionalism to the work of Stubbs and Underhill who identify three central elements of regionalism: region, regionalization and regionalism. Regionalism is related to the emergence of an organization, which gives shape to the region in a legal and institutional sense and providing some 'rules of the game' within the region. Although most researchers generally believe that new regionalism is more universal, Smith however recognizes three elements that set some limitations: the question of the area covered, the scope (areas of interaction) and the level and extent of regional organization [52].

For the first element, Smith finds that political change, rather than geographical presence, influences regional membership. In terms of scope, most regional organizations like NATO and the EU have widened the issues covered, ranging from security to social matters, while the level and extent of regional organization fluctuate and remain uneven. Some organizations are tightly structured and others much looser and highly bound to complex bureaucratic and administrative structures [53].

Meanwhile, Payne and Gamble describe new regionalism as a state-led or states-led project designed to reorganize a particular regional space along defined economic and political lines. This definition distinguishes new regionalism from globalization as the latter is regarded as a social process. The main feature of new regionalism is more open compared to the old. Open regionalism (from a global political economy perspective) means that 'policy is directed towards the elimination of obstacles to trade within a region, while at the same time doing nothing to raise external tariff barriers to the rest of the world.' In other words, although there is a tendency towards protectionist elements, this can however be avoided through the application of strategic trade (instead of insulating the economy from foreign competition, the aim is to expose it to competition while at the same time ensuring it is able to cope).

Interestingly Gamble and Payne also highlight three distinct contemporary processes of new regionalism in North America, the EU and East Asia. In North America, it is difficult to ignore US influence in the regional decision-making process while in Europe, regional decision-making is, to some extent, interplayed between London, Paris and Bonn. This is because, historically, these have been the capitals of the main European powers and the degree of influence among them has been relatively equal. The East Asian region is quite unbalanced with a heterogeneous population and has always been the subject of a tug-of-war between Japan and China and foreign powers, mainly the United States and Russia [54].

Furthermore, Hettne defines new regionalism in rather general and inclusively broad terms. New regionalism does not merely address economic or security alliances but also ecological and security imperatives; as Hettne [55] puts it:

> A multidimensional form of integration which includes economic, political, social and cultural aspects and thus goes far beyond the goal of creating region-based free trade regimes or security alliances. Rather, the political ambition of establishing regional coherence and identity seems to be of primary importance.

Further, Hettne points to the main distinguishing feature between the old and new regionalisms. While the old was controlled by bipolarity, the new regionalism takes place in a multipolar global order and since the decline of US hegemony and the breakdown of the communist subsystem, the new regionalists have acted on what Hettne has called 'hegemonic regionalism'. This hegemonic regionalism simply refers to the existence of a dualist bipolar structure within the region itself. For instance, Hettne [56] points to Europe where regional free trade arrangements, customs unions and other structures have reproduced center-periphery tensions.

Hettne's hegemonic regionalism can also be linked to Buzan's [57] regional security complex theory, which denotes 'a set of states whose major security perceptions and concerns are so interlinked that their national security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another'. This theory strongly posits the existence of regional subsystems as objects of security analysis in a geographically diverse anarchic international system. Since US hegemony has probably been declining, states in a particular region, specifically in East Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia, need to find a new formula to establish a regional security grouping to maintain stability and generate economic growth. This phenomenon might also lead to the emergence of dualist bipolar structures in the regional and international security systems.

Importantly, therefore, researchers in this school (new regionalist) do not view geographical proximity as a necessary condition of regionalism, especially in economic groupings. Nevertheless, new regionalism is generally defined in much looser and more universal terms than old regionalism, notwithstanding the greater emphasis on the establishment of an organization. Unlike old regionalists, the elements of continuous interaction concerning various issues (from security to the environment), a sense of regional cooperation and coherence and the involvement of multiple actors (states and non-state actors) are the main ingredients of new regionalism. It also argues that trading blocs (North America, the EU and Japan) are the best models of new regionalism. All variables of regionalism, both old and new, will be outlined below.

Old Regionalism Variables:

- The desire of state leaders to integrate or cooperate
- Non-violent interactions and, presumably, equality among members (benefits)
- Influenced by bipolar rivalry
- Generally Eurocentric
- Issues covered: security, politics and socio-economic matters
- Emphasis on geographical proximity (naturalness of region) – but not all researchers agree, especially those from less-developed countries
- Homogenous culture, religion and historical experience
- Institutionalized interaction through regional organization – federalism, neo-functionalism, transactionalism
- States are the main unit of analysis (state-centricity)
- Neo-realist school (Karl Deutsch's work – amalgamated and pluralist community – to eliminate war, states are urged to form a security community)
- Neo-liberal perspective – absolute and relative gains. States will be motivated to form a group when there are salient economic gains to be made from cooperation.
- It is probably easier to achieve regional integration in the field of security than it is in the economic sphere
- Models of regional integration: federalism, neo-functionalism and transactionalism
- Examples of regional organizations are the European Economic Community (EEC), the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom).
- The structuralist (southern structuralist) position – The fear of marginalization from the international political economic system leads Third World countries to set up regional groups (subordinate subsystem or trans-regional organization). The Group of 77, Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and others – 'uncommitted states' (However, this could not be considered part of old regionalism due to its loose geographical proximity and wider membership in vast trans-regional organizations, mainly Asian, Latin and African regions.)
- Arguably, old regionalism failed because of too much emphasis on regional integration and a lack of consideration of externalization factors

New Regionalism Variables:

- The desire to integrate or cooperate (both state and non-state actors)
- The end of the Cold War: looser international system and high degree of uncertainty
- Multipolarity, globalization and the decline of US hegemony?
- Issues: broader, from security to ecological and environmental concerns
- Much looser geographical proximity and contiguity – transcends geographical boundaries in trading blocks, such as NAFTA and APEC
- Homogenous, shared interests (culture, religion, historical experiences and the environment)
- "International regimes" sometimes connected with new regionalism – regional organizations appear unnecessary in determining the degree of regionness.

- Only a few regional security alliances exist, mainly in developed countries, such as NATO and OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe). For less-developed countries, this is less clear.
- Instead of depending on a single group, many less-developed countries form sub-regional groupings; sub-regional groupings are more effective, e.g., ASEAN and the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC).
- Overall, the term "new regionalism" is more ambiguous than the old.

The Formation of the Non-regional Perspective: Following the analytical discussions on what constitutes a region, regionalism (old and new), as well as its variables, the study will now attempt to extract some of the main elements of regionalism (both old and new) in order to formulate a non-regional perspective as the underlying conceptual framework for studying Malaysia-Saudi Arabia relations. Without further lengthening the debates on both schools, it will attempt to organize the variables of regionalism into a three-fold classification:

- Basically essential;
- Historically essential; and
- Accidentally essential

The first classification (a) 'basically essential' refers to the basic characteristics (variables) of regionalism, such as geographical proximity, the actors' (especially state leaders) desire to form a regional organization, continuous interaction (from security to environmental issues) and institutionalized organization. The second classification (b) 'historically essential' refers to variables that largely focus on historical linkages and shared commonalities. They include a homogenous culture and linguistic, religious, ethnic and colonization experiences.

The third classification (c) 'accidentally essential' is concerned with how actors (particularly state leaders) instantaneously respond to externalization factors or external challenges in the international system. Actors' responses (for instance by forming or joining regional organizations) are accidentally essential for the survival of a group of states that faces challenges and threats from external sources. Based on the above classification, the study suggests that, with a slight variation from Thompson's finding (who argued that there are three necessary and sufficient conditions for defining a regional subsystem: general geographic proximity, regularity and intensity of interactions and shared perceptions of the regional subsystem) [58], there are at least four fundamental variables that constitute regionalism:

- Geographical proximity;
- The establishment of a regional organization;
- Close and continuous interactions (initiated by the desire of state leaders),
- Shared perceptions on co-operation and the joint defense of regional (or trans-regional) interests from external threats.

These four variables can be justified as a basis for making a lucid differentiation between regionalism and non-regional perspective. This is because the notion of a non-regional perspective (in terms of bilateral relations between states from different regions, which is the current focus) is principally based on the absence of geographical proximity as well as on the nonexistence of a regional organization. Rather, it is based on a set of continuously non-geographical and deinstitutionalized interactions between two states; however, they share some commonalities, especially in terms of historical, political, socio-economic and religious linkages and face (as they are characterized as small states, they are sometimes more vulnerable) some external challenges at the systemic level.

By excluding two basically essential variables of regionalism (geographical proximity and regional organization), the premise of non-geographical and deinstitutionalized interactions (without a similar affiliation in a regional organization), though sharing some interests and commonalities (historically essential), despite originating from different regions as well as facing some external challenges (accidentally essential), sets the bedrock of a non-regional perspective that will be conceptually applied in the context of Malaysia-Saudi Arabia relations.

Yet, in some ways, it could be said that the non-regional perspective subscribes to the new regionalism school since the concept of non-regional excludes geographical proximity; new regionalism places less emphasis on geographical proximity as a necessary condition for regional integration between states, unlike old regionalism, which strongly underlines narrowed geographical proximity in achieving regional integration between states within a region. Moreover, both the non-regional perspective and the new regionalism school indicate the importance of shared interests and commonalities in influencing states to interact or to form or participate in an organization or association within the international system. The main difference between these two is that the non-regional perspective largely concentrates on bilateral relations between states whereas new regionalism is more concerned with multilateral relations and considers regional organizations as the basic element of the process of regionalization. Further, in contrast with the latter, which mostly focuses on the post-Cold War era, the former not only reflects the post-Cold War era but could be applied to the early existence of the modern state and its interactions in the international system.

In addition, the authors disagree with the new regionalism school, which does not strongly stress geographical proximity as a condition for regionalism in the post-Cold War era, for the authors believe that geographical proximity is still the most basic definitional element of a region and the process evolves from it. It is for this reason that the term 'non-regional' can be applied to relations between states that are located in different geographical regions and, more importantly, to describe Malaysia's relations with Saudi Arabia, which are not based on geographic contiguity.

Hence, in contrast with the impact of regionalism upon state relations within the same region, which are generally considered intimate, the notion of a non-regional perspective presumes that bilateral relations between two particular countries, based on non-geographical and deinstitutionalized interactions (regional organization), are probably more loose and formal.

The Non-Regional Perspective and the Character of Malaysia-Saudi Arabia Relations: Since Malaysia and Saudi Arabia are not located within the same geographical region and because the former is not a member of the Gulf Co-operation Council while the latter is not part of ASEAN (hence the prevalence of "deinstitutionalized" relations; this does not specifically refer to membership in NAM, the Group of 77 and the OIC), the issues (or variables), for instance, that will be examined in relation to Malaysia's relations with Saudi Arabia will also be outside the contexts of ASEAN and the GCC's regional specificities. In other words, the notion of a non-regional perspective, in the researcher's opinion, directly connotes those factors outside ASEAN and the GCC that are capable of shaping and influencing bilateral relations between these two states, which are located in different regions. This conceptual framework is shown in Figure 1.

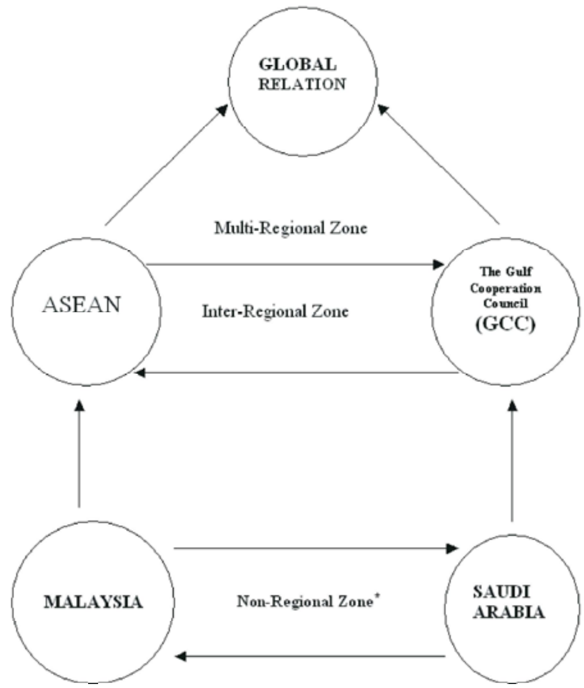

Fig. 1: Focus of Study*
*Non-Regional Zone is the Focus of Study

As stated before and based on Figure 1 above, it has been extensively argued that the non-regional perspective on Malaysia's bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia is mainly based on sharing some interests and commonalities (historically essential) as well as facing some external challenges (accidentally essential), which indirectly leads to a conceptualization of the character of Malaysia-Saudi Arabia relations.

Fundamentally, the Malaysian government has always had the desire to interact and cooperate with Saudi Arabia politically, economically and socially. These continuous interactions (relations) can be traced from the era of the Malacca Sultanate in the 1400s until today. The establishment of the Malacca Sultanate in the fifteenth century was well-known for its commercial trading center as well as for Islamic religious development, especially in the Malay Archipelago. These two roles, in some way, tied the Malay Peninsula with the Arab Muslim communities who came to Malacca to trade or to convey the message of Islam to the local pagan community.

Before Malaya gained its independence in 1957, formal relations with Saudi Arabia were not yet established. For example, in terms of economic interactions between 1936 and 1939, there were no Middle

Eastern nations, including Saudi Arabia, listed in the Malayan Yearbook for import-export activities (Malayan Year Book, 1936 and 1939, Mehden, 1993). Nevertheless, since Malaya, which later became Malaysia after Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak jointly formed the Malaysian Federation in 1963, achieved independence on August 31, 1957, relations between Malaysia and Saudi Arabia have been more structured and have largely centered on political and socio-economic matters. This was enhanced by the establishment of a Malaysian embassy in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, in 1964 and the appointment of Tunku Abd. Rahman, the first Malaysian Prime Minister, as the first Secretary of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in 1970 [59].

Nevertheless, it has been a one-sided affair in relation to diplomatic visits as all Malaysian premiers since the era of Tunku Abdul Rahman (the first Malaysian Prime Minister) until now have officially visited the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Conversely, only the late King Feisal and the current King Abdullah Ibn Abdul Aziz have ever set foot in Malaysia in 1970 and 2006, respectively. To some extent, this indicates the significance of the Malaysian government and its people in fulfilling various needs. For Malaysian Muslims in particular, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia not only houses two holy places, Mecca and Medina, for pilgrimages but is also the location for pursuing Islamic education at higher levels.

Over the years since independence, the pattern of Malaysia's relations with Saudi Arabia has been strictly economic and religious. Economically speaking, Saudi Arabia is currently ranked as Malaysia's nineteenth largest trading partner and the balance of trade has always been negative for Malaysia due to heavy imports of Saudi petroleum. The volume of trade has gradually increased every year. In 2012, for instance, the volume of bilateral trade between these two countries rose significantly to $3.66 billion from only $260 million in 1990. Malaysia's total exports to Saudi Arabia were $1.22 billion, with electrical and electronic products, manufacturers of metal, machinery, appliances and parts, chemicals and chemical products and wood products among its export items. Meanwhile, Malaysia's imports (which was estimated at $2.44 billion) from the Kingdom were oil, refined petroleum products and chemicals and chemical products [60].

During the Mahathir era, the trade figures with Arab countries did not increase dramatically contrary to high expectations and despite Malaysia's efforts to improve commercial ties through visits by large trade missions to these states. At the end of the 1980s, trade with these countries was only 2.4 percent for exports and 1.3 percent for imports; in 1981, it stood at two percent and eight percent, respectively. However, bilateral trade with Saudi Arabia constitutes an exception in this respect as Malaysian exports to this country increased from USD61 million in 1981 to USD91 million in 1985 and USD144 million in 1989 [61].

Prior to the 1990s, Malaysia received capital donations from the Kingdom through the Saudi Fund for Development (SFD). For example, between the years 1975-1983, Malaysia received a total of SR312.30 million from the fund. This financial aid, which was in the form of a loan (with interest rates ranging from 3.5 to 4.0 percent per annum and a grace period of 5 to 15 years), successfully financed a few development projects, such as the Medical Faculty of the National University of Malaysia, the Ulu Kelantan Land Settlement Project, the Pahang Tenggara Land Settlement Project (both were projected to grow 30,000 acres of rubber plantations and 86,400 acres of oil palm plantations, as well as for the settlement of small farmers) and the construction of five Mara Junior Science Colleges, among others [62].

Heading towards the 1990s and onwards when Malaysia's economy experienced unprecedented growth and was labelled one of the ASEAN tigers (before succumbing to the financial crisis of 1997), the Saudi government no longer considered it as a country in need of financial aid. Instead, both countries ventured into various economic and investment scheme projects. Currently, the volume of Malaysian investments in Saudi Arabia is estimated at USD4.5 billion whereas Saudi investments in Malaysia are nearing USD100 million. There are 10 major industries, such as food, electronics, electric products, textiles, plastics, machinery and equipment, among others. Furthermore, the number of Malaysian companies registered with the Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority (SAGIA) stood at 87, of which 17 are engaged in the industrial sector and the remaining 70 work in the service sector. In addition, 34 companies are 100 percent owned by Malaysians while 53 firms are joint venture projects with Saudis and other foreign investors [63]. In other words, Malaysia's economic cooperation with the Kingdom has a great deal to offer in the near future.

With regards to religious affiliation, it is commonly understood that sharing a common religion, Islam, could play a pivotal role in strengthening bilateral relations between states. Having said this, in the case of Malaysia's relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Islam could somewhat bolster relations. As mentioned earlier, the Kingdom houses two holy places of Islam, Mecca and Medina, which indirectly attract all Muslims around the globe, including Malaysians, to attend pilgrimages. Also, alongside the Al-Azhar University in Egypt, the Kingdom has a handful of notable universities that provide platforms for Malaysians to pursue religious education at university levels. These close interactions and encounters have '…allowed the students from Malaya to gradually acquire new language and ideas with which to oppose colonialism in their own societies as well as determine their disadvantaged position from within it' [64]. In return, Saudi Arabia is now more eager to allow more Arab students from Asian countries, including Malaysia, in line with its 'Look East' strategy, to pursue higher education studies in such areas as medicine, science and engineering while it decides whether to increase funding for studying abroad [65].

However, in relation to the religious interaction between these two countries, there are two contrasting situations that are worthy of discussion here. Firstly, for many years, the Kingdom has been generous in supporting Islamic development in Malaysia. Blessed with its wealthy resources, it has donated large sums of money to several religious institutions in Malaysia. Among Islamic organizations or institutions in Malaysia that received Saudi donations are the Muslim College in Petaling Jaya, the Malaysian Muslim Welfare Organization (PERKIM), the International Islamic University of Malaysia (UIAM) and the Regional Islamic Organization for Southeast Asia and the Pacific (RISEAP). Other religious activities included building mosques and Muslim schools in diverse areas of Malaysia. The donations ranged between RM200,000 and RM3 million [66, 67, 68]. These donations were not on an annual basis; rather, they were generally based on request in conjunction with visits by Saudi officials to Malaysia.

Secondly, since the practice or implementation of Islam differs slightly in Malaysia and Saudi Arabia, for the former has been traditionally accustomed to the Shafiite School whereas the latter is commonly associated with Wahhabism (the teaching of Sheikh Muhammad Ibn Abdel Wahhab) there have been no formal exchanges of *fatwas* (religious jurisprudence) between these two countries. Notwithstanding, Malaysia has applied a cautious approach in dealing with the influence of Wahhabism among its Muslim communities. The Malaysian government, however, has never indicated that the Wahhabi doctrine is deviant. It is mainly due to the existence of some differences in religious beliefs and practices, though not fundamental and only on the minor side (*furu'iyyah*) of Islam and its rigidity in implementing religious practices that result in the Wahhabi doctrine not being considered as deviant teaching in Malaysia [69]. The study, however, suggests that the main reason that the Malaysian government does not consider the Wahhabi doctrine as deviant is to safeguard its diplomatic relations with the Kingdom. One example was when an Iranian-origin dissident group occupied the Grand Mosque of Mecca in November 1979; the Malaysian government, after remaining unresponsive for a while, described the group as 'extremist' and 'deviationist' in accordance with the Saudi assessment of the event [70]. Thus far, this indifferent approach has successfully safeguarded Malaysia's relations with Saudi Arabia.

The above mentioned interactions can be considered as historically essential, for they were solely grounded upon sharing some interests and commonalities. Below is a discussion about another interaction between Malaysia and Saudi Arabia in what the authors call accidentally essential because both countries give joint, spontaneous reactions to external threats or challenges that may jeopardize their interests. Furthermore, since Malaysia and Saudi Arabia fall in the same category as small states, their relations are largely exposed to externalization factors and they both succumb to great power influences. For instance, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia were unable to avoid the rivalry between the United States and the former Soviet Union during the bipolar era, neither could they insulate themselves from external challenges. Both governments sought to cope with challenges either by aligning with one of the two superpowers blocs or participating in international organizations of smaller state in order to preserve their interests (security and political stability), to gain economic advantages, especially global market opportunities, or to bolster socio-cultural and religious affiliations.

Therefore, their spontaneous reactions to these external challenges are represented in the trans-regional organizations of smaller states, namely, the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), the Group of 77 and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). In the case of the OIC, Malaysia, especially under Prime Minister Mahathir, did not hesitate to criticize the OIC's problem of ineffectiveness because of the rifts between Arab states as well as its organizational defects, such as being an extension of the Arab League, 'calling for the reorganization and restructuring of the OIC in order that it might be a more powerful and effective Islamic force' [71]. Beyond this, however, both countries were active in the Organization of Islamic Conference, discussing Muslim issues around the world such as, the question of Palestine, the Iranian Revolution, the invasion of Afghanistan, the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War and terrorist threats. These issues continuously influenced the nature and extent of relations between Malaysia and Saudi Arabia, especially at the global level, as both countries were seen as having the potential to lead developing nations, especially Muslim countries, to better their positions at the global level.

By the same token, Malaysia has always encouraged the Saudi government to play a greater role in the Muslim world's affairs as it is wealthier and is the custodian of two holy cities, Mecca and Medina. Saudi Arabia seems to have seen its relations with Malaysia in the prism of developing strong Islamic bonds between the two countries. An example of this is the Saudi call for troops from Malaysia during the First Gulf War of 1991 in order to protect the holy lands of Mecca and Medina against external threat or aggression, which was first refused but then supported by the Malaysian government in the face of pressure from the US and Saudi Arabia. Indeed, the Mahathir government sent peacekeeping forces after the conflict ended as a manifestation of its Islamic solidarity with Saudi Arabia [72]. Today, Saudi Arabia still seeks new strategic partnerships and alliances with close or remote partners, such as Malaysia, in an effort to counterbalance Shiite Iran's (nuclear) ambitions in the Middle East [73].

Malaysia and Saudi Arabia are also members in the Group of 77 and NAM organizations. The Group of 77, which is regarded as the voice of less-developed countries' dissatisfaction over their economic performances vis-à-vis that of developed countries in the world market system, especially in terms of the price of raw materials and agricultural commodities, has become a bridge for Malaysia and Saudi Arabia to voice their concerns about both countries' commodities in the international market. Nevertheless, since Malaysia and Saudi Arabia produce different commodities, this organization has not done much to strengthen their economic cooperation. Instead, both focus more on their own commodity groups, for instance, Malaysia has been a member of the Integrated Programme Commodities (IPC) while the Kingdom is not a member of this group, for its focus is mainly on non-oil commodities, such as rubber and tin.

Further, both countries have been active participants in numerous conferences and meetings of the Non-Aligned Movement, which primarily focused on the struggle for peace and disarmament, opposed the division of the world into economic and political-military blocs, opposed all kinds of imperialism and political domination, combined efforts to assist underdeveloped countries and helped strengthen the role of the United Nations by promoting active and peaceful co-existence [74]. Despite this, like the Group of 77, this has not contributed much to bolster relations between the two countries due to the nature of NAM, which places more emphasis on multilateral interactions as opposed to bilateral relations. On top of that, the principle of inclusiveness in NAM and opposition to the division of superpower blocs were found to be antithetical to the political practice of Malaysia and Saudi Arabia, both of which have had closer and mutual engagements with the US-British bloc since their independence.

Based on this discussion, it can be argued that Malaysia's relations with Saudi Arabia, in the context of the non-regional perspective, contains elements of historically and accidentally essential, but not basically essential (geographical proximity or regional organizations). Nonetheless, the historically essential element has been found to be more critically significant than that of accidentally essential as the former is grounded in bilateralism.

CONCLUSION

Conceptualizing a non-regional perspective in the context of regionalism debates is a mammoth task, particularly using this concept to study bilateral relations between two states from different regions. However, by classifying the essential elements of a region into three categories, basically, historically and accidentally essential, the authors have, to some extent, formulated a non-regional perspective by excluding the basically essential elements of a region, that is, geographical proximity and regional institutions. In other words, the authors' argument on the non-regional perspective denotes a process of continuous interactions between two states on the basis of shared interests, commonalities and externalization factors and in the absence of geographical proximity and institutional (regional) organization.

Moreover, it is reasonably appropriate for this study to apply the non-regional perspective to analyze Malaysia's relations with Saudi Arabia. This is because both states are physically and geographically separate and the factors that have been thoroughly discussed are not based on their own regional institutions (the ASEAN and the GCC). These non-regional elements are capable of influencing Malaysia's relations with Saudi Arabia in the international system. The identifiable non-regional elements are historically essential (including leaders' visits, economic interactions, religious affiliations) and accidentally essential, which has to do with sharing perceptions on international co-operation and jointly defending interests from external threats by joining the organizations of smaller states, such as the OIC, NAM and the Group of 77. Throughout the discussion, the study has found that the element of historically essential has been more prevalent than accidentally essential. Despite this, both elements are still very much related to the formation of the non-regional perspective (NRP).

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