

## INTERDEPENDENCY AND RELIABILITY IN MALAYSIA-CHINA RELATIONS AMIDST THE BALANCE OF THREAT

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**Abstract.** The decision to cancel several mega projects, such as the construction of the Kuala Lumpur-Singapore high-speed railway (HSR), the renegotiation of the cost of building the East Coast Railway Route (ECRL), Belt Road Initiative (BRI), and the grey zone issue in the South China Sea, has created tensions between Kuala Lumpur and Beijing. Mahathir's action, which sees the initiative as a new form of Chinese colonization of weak powers, has undermined China's initiative to make Malaysia a strategic hub under ASEAN's One Belt, One Road (OBOR) plan. China has taken action by suspending any form of cooperation and investment in Malaysia to reassess Kuala Lumpur's foreign policy towards Beijing under the Mahathir-led government. However, Mahathir has re-evaluated the initial decision to cancel the screened cooperation projects by holding negotiations on several mega-projects, the BRI issue, and the increase in China's military power in the South China Sea. The decision that Mahathir had anticipated had a significant impact on why Malaysia increased its confidence and cooperation with China despite facing national security threats. This study applies the concept of threat balance. The study's findings indicate that the trend of Malaysia-China bilateral cooperation relations is influenced by reciprocity and mutual trust. Second, the individual's leadership in identifying the context of threats and opportunities also influences bilateral relations between the two countries. Thirdly, the concept of threat balance highlights the anomalies in Malaysia-China relations. The concept of threat balance can predict Malaysia's response and attitude to China based on factors such as threats, risks, and opportunities. Fourth, economic, political, and diplomatic harmony necessitates "reciprocity and credibility" in accordance with international order.

**Keywords:** *Malaysia, China, dependence, confidence and threat balance*

### Introduction

On May 27, 2018, the 7th Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, shook the world by announcing the cancellation of three mega projects, including the construction of the Kuala Lumpur-Singapore high-speed railway (HSR). The announcement of the cancellation affects China's initiative to make Malaysia a strategic hub under the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) plan for ASEAN. At the same time, Malaysia also expressed its desire to hold renewed talks with China on the construction cost of the East Coast Railway Line (ECRL), worth RM55 billion. Mahathir sees the initiative as a new form of Chinese colonisation of the weak powers, as has happened to Sri Lanka. The situation has made Chinese investors and the government uncomfortable with the actions of Mahathir, as billions of ringgits have been invested, and the cancellation has caused losses as well as undermined the China Silk Road initiative

agenda. As a result, China suspended all forms of cooperation and investment with Malaysia in order to identify Malaysia's foreign policy towards China under the new government's leadership (Interview with Majid Khan; happen in 2019). Nine months after the announcement, Mahathir withdrew the decision and made a visit to China to attend the International Cooperation Forum (BRF) from April 24 to April 28, 2019. Both countries also signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) involving the Malaysian Sawit Coconut Board with the China Chamber of Commerce of Import and Export (CCCME). The same thing happened when Mahathir was Prime Minister from 1981 to 2003. During the 1980s, he had a negative perception of China, but in the early 1990s, he began to enhance and expand cooperation with the communist country (Ridzuan et al., 2019). Why is Malaysia increasing confidence in China, while Beijing consistently poses a threat to Kuala Lumpur? The bilateral relationship anomaly is analysed in two parts: the first is the threat balance, and the second is the reliability and diversity in obtaining coherent and significant research results.

## **Materials and Methods**

The article connects a library study to a specific research objective. In order to obtain secondary data and information through library studies, the data and the information will be obtained through printed documents such as books and articles related to international relations, international relations journals such as Asian Perspective, Asian Survey, RUSI Journals, The China Quaterly, International Affairs, Pacific Affairs, International Security, International Studies Review, The Chinese Journal, Journal of Contemporary China, World Politics, The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies, Contemporary Southeast Asia, Pacific Review and so on that have a critical and comprehensive discussion that covers issues of the resurrection of China, relations between Malaysia and China, China's foreign policy towards the Asia Sea region after the Cold War, foreign and domestic policies of Malaysia and Chinese, security issues of South-Eastern Asia, strategic relations between the United States and China on Spratly Islands. The study employed data analysis methods to gather data and information from a variety of sources, including top-class magazines such as TIMES, AsiaWEEK, Asia Times, and Oxford Magazines; external premier newspapers from Chinese national sources such as Renmin Ribao, Global Time, and the South China Morning Post; and official Chinese country documents such as China's Foreign Policy, China's PLA Offensive and Strategies, and China's Defence White Paper, to achieve coherent and meaningful research results.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Background of Malaysia's relations with China***

The background chronology of Malaysian diplomatic relations with China took place during two different periods: the first was during the Malacca era, and the second was the post-colonialization period. Scholars such as Bakar (2005) argue that Malay civilisation interactions with China have a fairly long history. This is because, according to Chinese sources recorded during the ancient Chinese dynasty, bilateral relations existed since the times of the Xia Dynasty (2140-1711 S.M.) and the Shang Dynasty (1722-1066 S.M.). Despite this, Dahana (2002) argued that diplomatic relations between

Malaysia and China began in the Ming Dynasty. Both scholars based their research on Yin Ching, a Chinese envoy. Yin Ching was sent by Emperor Chu Ti in 1403 to Melaka to recognise Parameswara as the ruler of Melaka. Investigators find that Malaysia's diplomatic ties with China began to deteriorate long ago. Thus, bilateral relations have not occurred suddenly, but have been intertwined since the reign of Malacca and the dynasty.

### ***Evolution of the chronological growth of Malaysia's relationship with China***

Post-colonialization shows the evolution of Malaysia's foreign policy towards China, from hostility to the formation of mature and friendly bilateral relations. During the World War era, the main actors, the United States and the Soviet Union, used the military as a mechanism to increase their influence and prestige. However, after the World War ended, the two main actors engaged in ideological competition, initiating a cold war between two ideologies: democracy and communism. The democratic or liberal bloc was led by the United States and consisted of Britain and the Western European countries, while the communist bloc was headed by the Soviet Union and its allies, China, and the Eastern European countries. The spread of such ideology is also more focused on small and newly independent states. The analysis found that both actors focused on expanding their influence on small and newly independent nations, as small nations needed help and support in both economic and security aspects. During the Cold War era, the newly independent Malaysia had no diplomatic or economic ties with China. The situation has been influenced by the tense relationship between the United States and China. Furthermore, Tunku Abdul Rahman has no relationship with China because of China's assistance during the Vietnam War and the Indonesian confrontation movement against Malaysia, which was sponsored by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). China's assistance to these countries is in the form of military and financial support (Ping, 2010; Idris, 1990). Moreover, Malaysia maintains no ties with China and prefers to align itself with the United States because of the US's assurances of economic aid, security, education, and other related areas (Leong, 1987). Nevertheless, in 1974, under the leadership of Abdul Razak, Malaysia changed its foreign policy towards China. Malaysia began to normalise relations with China, even though the country was still struggling with the threat of the communist movement. This change was influenced by US President Nixon's visit to China in 1971. Furthermore, the 1970 withdrawal of US and British troops from Malaysia and Singapore was one of the factors that led Malaysia to normalise relations with China.

The withdrawal of U.S. and British troops from Southeast Asia created a power surplus, and the situation resulted in no major powers being able to offset the influence and threat of communism. The situation prompted Malaysia to change its foreign policy towards China in order to maintain national sovereignty and security. Malaysia's normalisation of relations with China is also driven by national interests. This is because China's economic growth in its broad market and competitive aspects benefits the country's economic sustainability and indirectly supports the New Economic Policy (NEP). According to Swee-Hock et al. (2005), the growth of China's economy benefits the country's economic sustainability and indirectly supports the New Economic Policy (NEP). Since the end of the Cold War, bilateral relations between Kuala Lumpur and Beijing have matured. The term maturity was used because, during the Cold War era, Malaysia's cooperation with China was at a moderate level, focusing only on economic aspects. After the Cold War era, bilateral relations and cooperation expanded to include

political, military, science and technology, education, health, and other areas. Malaysia's increased ties with China were influenced by US pressure on small nations. The United States is exploiting small nations through economic blocs such as the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the European Union (EU), the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and so on (Liow, 2000).

Malaysia's dynamic relationship with China continued in 2004, when China's economy grew positively and Beijing was accepted as a member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). China's receipt of \$600 billion in foreign direct investment (FDI) makes it a fast-growing economy. China's gross domestic product (GDP) grew rapidly from \$362.4 billion in 1978 to \$13.7 trillion in 2004 and continued to rise to \$24.7 billion in 2007. It is the greatest development in the international economic system (Jin and Li, 2011). China's increasingly significant economic growth shows that Beijing is becoming the engine of growth and economic development for its neighbours and the world. China's pattern of change at the regional and international levels reflects the nation's revival of power, not only in the economic sphere but also as a parameter of the country's growth in soft power. China wants to demonstrate its regional and global responsibility. The rise of China's power has had both positive and negative effects on the international community, leading to the creation of the Chinese Threat Theory. Small countries in the Southeast Asian region, for example, are worried that China's drastic growth will pose a threat and cause market uncertainty, and that major investors such as the United States, the European Union, and Japan will withdraw their investments and focus on the Chinese market (Severino, 2008). However, Malaysia rejected and affirmed that China's economic growth should be viewed positively, as it significantly contributed to the non-determination of world market values and a decrease in dependence on the United States. For example, Mahathir insisted that China is not a country that Malaysia cannot wish away, and you have to learn to live with China.

The strengthening of Malaysia's bilateral relations with China also goes hand in hand with China's strengthening relations with ASEAN. Malaysia uses the regionalization factor to enhance relations with China. Malaysia is tasked with bringing China into Southeast Asia's political scene. During the Cold War era, Malaysia was the first ASEAN member to establish diplomatic relations with China, followed by the Philippines and Thailand in the 1970s. In the 1990s, Singapore and Indonesia established ties with China. The ASEAN member states chose not to establish diplomatic relations with China due to their concerns and negative perception of the country. It's because they're struggling with the communist insurgency movement at the domestic level. Nevertheless, after the end of the Cold War, ASEAN member states began to establish good relations with China. The researchers found that among the factors that led them to establish relations with China was the end of the communist movement, and the second was changes in China's internal political system, such as the change in Chinese leadership from Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping, the Open Doors Policy, and the Peace Principles of China by Deng Xiaoping. Both events opened a new leaf for ASEAN member countries' relations with China. In 1992, China became an important invitee and negotiating partner at the ASEAN meeting. Then, in 1994, for the first time, China, together with members of ASEAN (Sino-ASEAN), structured and cooperated in the area of regional security through the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting (Haacke, 2002). In 1995, the first official dialogue between ASEAN and China was held in Hangzhou through the ASEAN-China Official Consultation, better known

as the ASEAN-China SOM. The dialogue was held to discuss diplomatic, political, and security issues at the highest level, involving high-ranking government officials. The orientation of China's enhanced relations with ASEAN is like *Table 1*.

**Table 1.** ASEAN-China relations.

Year	ASEAN-China
1991	Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen first attended the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting
1992	China joined the ASEAN meeting as an important invitee member in the capacity of a negotiating partner.
1994	for the first time, China joined the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)
1995	The first time China became an ASEAN dialogue partner was during the ASEAN-China SOM
1996	China was fully qualified as an ASEAN dialogue partner.
1997	ASEAN held its first unofficial summit with China, known as ASEAN + 1.
2000	China initiates bilateral cooperation with all ASEAN countries
2002	China and ASEAN sign a framework agreement on comprehensive economic cooperation.
2004	Tariff elimination for 500 different types of products.
2005	East Asia Summit was established by Malaysia and received a positive welcome from China and the United States.
2010	ACFTA entry into force resulted in China becoming ASEAN's largest trading partner, ahead of the European Union and Japan.

Although Malaysia's bilateral ties with China have increased politically, economically, financially, culturally, and so on, Kuala Lumpur is still concerned about China's increased military and aggressive actions in the South China Sea. The South China Sea issue has remained unresolved from the Cold War era to the present day. In February 1992, the issue in the waters became increasingly sensitive and complicated as China restructured its maritime bases and colonies (Kopela, 2017). China increased its military spending by US\$17.2 billion and conducted massive military exercises on the islands. At the same time, Beijing established a military facility on Hainan Island as a precautionary measure in the event of conflict in the waters (Baginda and Mahmood, 1995). China also attacked Vietnamese ships that passed through the claimed waters. The situation indirectly reflects China's violation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DoC) signed in 2002. China's rise in power and aggressive actions on land or at sea are bringing the concerns of countries in the Southeast Asian region to life. This is because China not only wants its natural resources in the waters but also reflects China's desire to expand its waters and air zones. The situation led the Philippines in 2013 to file a case of expansion and increase of Chinese military power in the South China Sea internationally through the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA). Malaysia has taken several steps to be vigilant and prepare for China's aggressive nature. Among Malaysia's actions is military cooperation with its neighbours. For example, the military cooperation between Malaysia with Singapore (United Spirit) and Malaysia with Indonesia (Safkar Indapura) was carried out on Natuna Island. To oversee the country's waters, Kuala Lumpur has also deployed naval forces (MiG-29 Fulcrum and US F-18), which are a group of fighters on Layang-Layang Island. The government also built a naval base in Sepanggar, Sabah, to monitor and reduce foreign naval intrusion activities (Nathan, 1990). Kuala Lumpur also increased military spending and actively conducted military exercises with member countries of the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA).

According to the analysis, Malaysia was taking cautious action by increasing military spending and cooperating with Western powers to avoid provoking suspicion and negative perceptions from China. ASEAN is an international organisation that focuses on economic integration rather than a military community, as outlined in ZOPFAN. Thus, military cooperation among ASEAN members is also being carried out on a moderate scale and does not involve major powers to balance China's power in the

waters. This is because Malaysia is aware that China's balance of power, with the involvement of the United States and Japan, will lead to war and political instability in the Southeast Asian region. For China's part, amidst efforts to ease tensions in the waters, Beijing is prepared to engage in more serious negotiations with Malaysia on the South China Sea issue. China also does not want the South China Sea issue to become an obstacle to enhanced economic cooperation through market and broadband trade, as well as e-commerce between Beijing and Kuala Lumpur via BRI (Cheng-Chwee, 2017). For example, in May 2014, during the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) conference in Shanghai, Xi Jinping reaffirmed that Beijing has always adhered to the concept of peace in resolving issues in the claim territory (Tan, 2015). Beijing takes it seriously to peacefully resolve the question of disputed territories in order to ensure and consolidate its success in achieving the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) objectives by providing benefits to both sides in terms of trade, investment, banking, technology, information industries, and so on.

### ***Balance of threat***

The concept balance of threat is applied because it can deduce Malaysia's response and attitude towards China, which consists of threats, risks, and benefits. Stephen M. Walt outlined the concept of a threat balance among small nations consisting of an alliance strategy or a balance strategy (Walt, 1985). The alliance strategy occurs when small nations cooperate with the most threatening nations to avoid being attacked by the great powers. When a small country allies with a large country or another small country to increase its influence and strengthen its national defense, a balancing strategy is applied (Walt, 1990). In addition to balancing strategies and alliances, small nations also carry out value-protection strategies. A value-protection strategy is a country's behavior in balancing risks by implementing policies of a multifaceted nature. Analysts find that a country applies a strategy of alliance, balance, and value protection by responding to international pressure consisting of the amount and form of threats, opportunities, or both. The study does not deny the role of the relative balance of power, but the balance of threat has a more significant effect on the perception of the leaders and the actions of one country against another, especially the small power against the big power. Walt (1985) argued that a nation chooses to alliance or make a balance because of the pressure of the great powers that pose the most threat and the greatest potential to attack them (Walt, 1985).

There are four criteria that influence a country's perception of threat and insecurity towards another country is influenced by four criteria: aggregate power, proximity geography, aggressive power, and an aggressive image. Powell et al. (2015) argued that aggregate power is the resource of a nation, consisting of population numbers, economic strength, military capabilities, and technological excellence. The government is using the resources for national interests as well as instruments to respond to international pressure (Powell et al., 2015). The leaders do not view the overall increase in national resources as a threat, but they are always cautious, as some of those resources could potentially create a perception of threat from other countries. The economic downturn of one country may not give rise to a negative perception, but the development of weapons and military technology leads to suspicion in other countries. Analysts find that in addition to improving and developing a country's progress, the psychology and perception of leaders are also parameters of a nation's perceived threat. Leaders must carefully monitor every development and degradation of their progress to avoid

provoking negative reactions from other countries. The second criterion is the geography of proximity, which means that a country that is closer to a threatening country is more vulnerable to danger and risk than a country that is farther away. The third criterion is a country's capability to attack. A country has the capacity to attack when the geographical influence of proximity and increased resources are at the same level, which raises a security dilemma. The final criterion pertains to a country's perceived aggression. When a country exhibits aggressive behaviour, other countries often find ways to counterbalance it. However, at times, a country may remain vigilant against other potentially aggressive countries, even if it no longer exhibits such behavior. This is because the country is built to be aggressive, even though it no longer practices aggressive policies.

### ***Malaysia's dependence and thrust worthiness vis-à-vis China***

Trustworthiness and synergy between the great and the weak occur when both sides reach agreement in all aspects of diplomacy, economy, defense, and so on. These scenarios are important when a cooperation or alliance is defeated by a zero-sum game, a positive-sum game, or a win-win situation. Dos (1970) argued that the international social networking system in the post-colonial era witnessed the oppression and exploitation of the strong nations against the weak nations because the great powers monopolized and dominated markets, trade, and finance. Moreover, they impose strict trade and investment conditions and high interest rates on loans that burden small powers. Dos Santos argues that:

*“Trade relations are based on monopolistic control of the market, which leads to the transfer of surplus generated in dependent countries to the dominant countries; financial relations are, from the viewpoint of the dominant powers, based on loans and the export of capital, which permit them to receive and profit ... thus strengthening their control over the economies of other countries”*

(Dos, 1970)

Nevertheless, in the 21st century, the great powers are competing to strengthen their power and prestige over the small powers, no longer through exploitation and oppression but rather through mutual relations through cooperation and trust. The gap between trust and dependence causes big power and small power to solve problems together, resulting in a win-win situation. For example, China's initiative was through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), and the Silk Roads Economic Belt (SREB), while the United States passed through the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Both initiatives focus on the emerging small powers in the Southeast Asian region by providing opportunities for wealth and benefits not only to the big powers but also to the smaller powers through mega-scale economic cooperation. The credibility and dependence of small powers like Malaysia on China are influenced by economic factors and autonomy. Small powers prioritize economic interests as they progress through efficiently planned development, which not only brings about natural changes but also profoundly transforms societies. This can be achieved when the state maintains autonomy, unaffected by the needs or desires of bettors, political parties, interest bodies, individuals, or others, thereby ensuring the effectiveness of the state's legal system in mass society. In the next section of the

article, we analyze the security linkages of the threat to establish reliability and diversity in Malaysia's relations with China.

Malaysia has strengthened ties with China, even though the communist country has consistently posed a threat to Kuala Lumpur since the 1955 Delhi Conference and the era of international order. The situation can be explained using a threat-balancing strategy to create trust and dependence between Malaysia and China. The threat balance factor includes not only international pressure, but also regional and domestic pressure. China's Communist Party (CCP) relations with the Malaya Communist Party (MCP), Chinese society issues across the sea, Chinese interference in domestic political issues, trade imbalances in exports and imports, Chinese aggressive actions in the South China Sea, and so on, are among the communist state's threats to Malaysia. As a result, each Malaysian Prime Minister is reviewing and restructuring the pattern of Malaysia's relations with China in order to be relevant to the current situation. The researchers argue that Malaysia's foreign policy applies a playing-field strategy, which is an approach used to understand the actions of a country in structuring its grand strategy for interacting with the great powers. This is due to Malaysia's limited choices in the economic and security spheres, where opportunities often come with risks. From a different perspective, there is no one single policy that is effective for the country.

Tunku Abdul Rahman took a balancing approach to anti-communist and anti-Chinese strategies alongside allies such as the United States, Britain, Pakistan, Thailand, and the Philippines. However, Tunku did not join the 1954 SEATO Agreement to curb communism in Southeast and West Asia. Thus, analysts find that Tunku's balance is more economic and diplomatic than military. During Abdul Razak's era, he pursued a value-protection strategy against China. In 1974, Razak shifted Malaysia's foreign policy from a policy of isolation to one that was free and neutral, establishing ties with all countries, including those that were communist. Though Malaysia has normalized relations with China, Kuala Lumpur still feels suspicious about the communist country because of China's ties with the MCP. During the early era of Mahathir's rule in the 1980s, Mahathir openly stated that China posed a major threat to the country due to its ties with the MCP, issues with Chinese society across the sea, and aggressive actions in the South China Sea. Despite this, in 1985, Mahathir began to build confidence with China by issuing a white paper to manage a controlled relationship with China. From 1985 to 1989, Kuala Lumpur sent delegations to Beijing seven times. For the first time, the two countries signed two formal agreements: the Investment Protection Agreement and the Agreements for the Establishment of a Sino-Malaysia Joint Economic and Trade Committee. Although there has been an increase in bilateral relations, Malaysia is pursuing pragmatic cooperation with China because the Cold War is still not over and China still has ties with the MCP. Among the factors that changed Mahathir's perception of China were the Open Doors Policy and the China Go Global Policy. The end of the Cold War marks a new era in Malaysia's bilateral relations with China. For the first time, the two countries are expanding their economic, health, education, tourism, and other cooperation. A total of 36 memoranda of understanding (MoUs) worth RM8 billion were signed by both countries. During the era of Abdullah and Najib, bilateral relations were dynamic. Both countries not only signed a memorandum of understanding, but a memorandum of agreement (MoA) was also signed, meaning that the previous MoU was realized. The event resulted in bilateral trade between Malaysia and China worth US\$20 billion, marking the highest value of the previous era.

The results of both memoranda also make Kuala Lumpur China's largest trading partner among ASEAN countries, replacing Singapore (Ganesan, 2008).

In 2019, under the new Pakatan Harapan (PH) government, China did not follow the previous government tradition of visiting a prime minister first. Mahathir, who once again became Prime Minister, was the first head of government to cancel several mega projects with China and raise the grey zone issue in the South China Sea, causing tensions in Kuala Lumpur-Beijing bilateral relations as the government appears to be pursuing anti-China policies. Nevertheless, these issues do not affect friendly relations, trust, and solidarity between the two countries. For example, China has consistently increased its cooperation with Malaysia, with both countries signing a memorandum in which China agreed to increase Malaysia's exports of palm coconut to the country by 2019, which are estimated at 2.26 million metric tonnes compared to 1.8 million metric tonnes in 2018. The trade's value amounts to RM4.5 billion. On the Malaysian side, the government rejects the allegations of a 5G threat to the country as raised by the United States, despite the right-wing elite's insistence. Mahathir insists that Malaysia will make its own independent settlement with China despite Western suspicions about Beijing's cyber espionage.

## **Conclusion**

Based on analysis and arguments, the shift between the two countries does not hinder enhanced cooperation; instead, it increases their confidence and trustworthiness. Every cooperation between the two sides is also an attempt to create a win-win situation because they need each other in line with the international order. Dependency and credibility shape the history of Malaysia's relations with China, as they contribute to the interaction and harmony of both countries' interests in economic, political, and diplomatic domains. From 1974 until today, China has been Malaysia's main trading partner, and Malaysia is China's third-most important trading partner in the Asian region. China is also one of the largest importers of palm coconut and a major importer of electric and electronic goods, natural gas and liquid gas, natural rubber, and solar energy. Malaysia's position is important to China because its raw materials are used for the country's industrial needs. Aside from that, the Malacca Strait is an important route for ensuring the success of the New Silk Road initiative. China is also enhancing relations with Malaysia to use Kuala Lumpur's influence to convince ASEAN member states that Beijing's growth and progress are peaceful.

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## **Conflict of interest**

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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