

Don't misconstrue Anwar's remark on South China Sea, say experts

KUALA LUMPUR: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's remark that Malaysia was willing to discuss with China on the South China Sea issue should not be interpreted as the former submitting to the latter over the disputed area, analysts said.

Institute of Strategic and International Studies (Istis) Malaysia senior fellow Eddin Khoo said Malaysia's position over the territorial dispute was firm but the country was resorting to diplomacy to resolve the matter.

He believed Anwar made the remark after he was assured in his meetings in China that there was room for negotiation between both countries, which established diplomatic ties in 1974.

"I do not think the prime minister's statement is in any way a

surrender or capitulation to China.

"Furthermore, he reiterated that although Malaysia is a small nation (in comparison to China), our position is firm.

Our interests have to be safeguarded but it will be done in the spirit of negotiation," he said.

During the Prime Minister's Department assembly early this week, Anwar had said Malaysia was ready to negotiate with China over issues surrounding claims on the South China

Sea.

Anwar said he had raised the matter during his four-eyed meeting with Chinese president Xi Jinping during his official visit to the people's republic.

The dispute, said Anwar, was brought up because Malaysia's

national oil and gas company Petroliaam Nasional Bhd (Petronas) had one of its largest oil rigs operating in the said waters.

Khoo agreed with views that the previous administration was firmer in its stance on the dispute as they were less challenged partly due to some of them being in the pre-Covid pandemic era.

"The world at the time was hardly a buzz (following Covid-19 restrictions). The stands of the previous administrations were fine for their time, but all positions of the existing government need to evolve," he said.

Nusantara Academy for Strategic Research senior fellow Dr Azmi Hassan said he did not think Anwar's statement was a departure from the policy adopted by the previous administrations.

"I don't think there is any change (in policy) when he said Malaysia is willing to discuss with China to resolve differences in

the South China Sea. Compared with the Philippines and Vietnam, we had never adopted a 'hard stance'. We have always taken a diplomatic approach to the issue," he said.

Azmi added that it was good that Anwar raised the matter during his trip to China.

"That is the best that we can do now so that it would prevent them (China) from continuing to provoke us. With its superpower economy and military, we consider China a 'big brother'.

"We, however, need to be very implicit to China that we have another 'big brother'," he said, referring to an incident involving

the *West Capella*, a Panamanian- and Viet- flagged drill ship hired by Petronas.'

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DR AZMI HASSAN
senior fellow
Nusantara Academy for
Strategic Research

In April 2020, reports emerged that *West Capella*, when it was completing its work in the South China Sea, was tailed by a Chinese-owned research vessel and an armed Chinese coast guard vessel.

The United States, under the then president Donald Trump's administration, deployed two warships to the area and these were joined by an Australian Navy vessel.

Khoo said negotiation was the way forward for all parties

staking claims on the South China Sea to resolve territorial disputes. **By Adib Povera**



Eddin Khoo