

**P**RIME Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's crucial official visit to Indonesia that just ended signalled Malaysia's intent to prioritise the

immediate region and crucial neighbours in strengthening a common voice and diplomatic consolidation.

A solid bilateral cooperative engagement pillared on the values of trust, healthy interdependence, principles of justice and good governance and a stronger together mantra, remains the fundamental bulwark against common challenges facing both nations and the region.

Both are cognisant of past histories and past tensions regarding disputed territories, where although the Sipadan and Ligitan dispute had been decided and settled, the Ambalat dispute in the Celebes Sea remains thorny.

Jakarta wanted to reinforce its political and diplomatic clout in the region and wanted a strong front in facing its renewed quest for regional leadership and stronger clout and deterrence in facing the main trigger point in the South China Sea which it is increasingly implicated, and with China in mind.

Indonesia began a series of charm offensives in showing its soft power and diplomacy with a focused approach to strengthening ties with Asean neighbour states, especially with key players that will be important in working with Indonesia in facing common challenges, particularly China.

With the good step and impact of resolving the maritime dispute with Vietnam, Indonesia is looking to start addressing and removing the barrier and thorn of the most important bilateral relationship in Asean, with Malaysia.

Indonesia needs to strengthen ties with Malaysia and has always historically regarded Malaysia as the most important partner in various issues, particularly on economy, trade and security aspects.

In assuming Asean leadership, Jakarta will want to portray that it has the diplomatic initiative and leadership in a positive way in solving regional disputes and in cementing its claim and new status as not only the regional leading power, but a rising global player in its middle power status, having recently played host to global initiatives in the G20 and in claiming its status as the new leading Asian voice and power in the global power apparatus.

Malaysia needs to leverage shared rich ties and trust at all levels, to strengthen this foundation.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo's (Jokowi) new venture into ensuring Indonesia stakes its claim for this global influence status, reflects bigger openings for both nations to continue to strengthen common mutually beneficial partnerships.

Jakarta is keen to play a stronger role in the Ukraine dispute and is also sending a message to both Asean members and regional players, including China, that it will be ready to step up and claim a stronger deterrence presence through strengthening Asean and through its leadership.

Various steps taken to bolster Indonesia's

# Strong ties vital against common challenges

influence and power through various strategic and geopolitical strategies, including the Nusantara capital move, and playing a greater military and strategic amplification in disputed zones with China and key areas such as the Sunda Strait, project a new push to cement Indonesia's coming of age in regional power parity role.

Both countries have great importance and leverage on the most crucial chokepoints and strategic geographical zones, including the Malacca and Sunda Straits.

Indonesia sees Malaysia and Australia as key players, including Vietnam and the Philippines in forming a stronger common cooperative platform in facing the challenges from China.

As such, Malaysia will always remain its key priority and will use its Clout as the Asean Chair to push for greater momentum in solving disputes with Malaysia and will seek to have agreements in this for this year, also in capitalising on Anwar's new leadership to seize the chance to empower and solidify relations, which includes ensuring past and current disputes remain secondary and separate from the main core ties between both countries.

Jokowi would also want to leverage Anwar's reformist image and global appeal, and Anwar has made it clear that he sees regional players as the fundamental cornerstone of his policy, including Asean.

Anwar also wants Malaysia to benefit from the rising power status of Indonesia, which will receive the most positive chain implications compared with other neighbouring players.

Anwar can also capitalise on Jokowi's equal rise of global appeal and role, and that realising both will allow exploration of greater openings and joint strength not only as a regional powerhouse but also in representing the rising power of the developing world and in cementing both countries' status as the leading powers of the Muslim world in projecting a new image of both countries as a modern, progressive Islamic country, with both leaders hoping to steer both countries to a moderate and centric path.

Both do not want other low political issues to dominate ties, such as transboundary crime and haze issues, sensitivity in nationalist issues

and trigger points regarding pride and ownership of various disputed cultures or bragging rights, in creating barriers for the larger more important picture of common security and common defence of the bigger traditional threats.

Labour and migrant issues will be further consolidated, with further commitment and positive impact from the One Channel System in streamlining and better protecting both players' interests in this long-held issue.

Both KL and Jakarta will focus on the common shared cultural heritage, language, religion, diversity, characteristics and many other shared traits to boost people-to-people ties and understanding, as a positive replicating effect on other areas of cooperation.

Human capital development, talent mobility, and educational and sports cooperation are good platforms for greater spillover effects.

Track II and Track III ties would be further deepened, at the same time expanding government-to-government ties in a broader development goal, focusing on the welfare of the people, and economic recovery and resilience in resources and trade.

Focus on core strategic returns to both countries will be intensified, particularly on food security, supply chain, resources (oil and gas, and palm oil and others), protection of trade routes, economic expansion and pandemic recovery, and in future areas of progress on scientific and technological cooperation, including in artificial intelligence, 5G and quantum technology, and in the digital and green economy as well as security and defence.

All these will enhance the greater impact on shared leverage and solidify their chips and cards in bargaining power and influence impact for both countries.

Anwar's visit will be very crucial in providing a positive message to a three-pronged stakeholder.

Firstly it sends a message to both countries that they want these bilateral ties to be the bedrock of Asean and its unity, and in reutilising the historical importance of both countries in Asean's formation and strength.

It remains the cornerstone of regional

stability and strength and in portraying a united front and message of solidarity to common regional issues.

Secondly, it sends a message to other players that both countries share greater prevailing common interests and common threats than letting current issues derail the good ties between the two weakening their approach to facing threats and coercions.

Disputes and tensions face both Kuala Lumpur (KL) and Jakarta in the South China Sea and for Jakarta, the increasing tension over Natuna Islands will see the need for it to amplify and bolster joint readiness and strength in having a greater deterrent voice and capacity in capitalising on its most important neighbour.

Both countries possess a high level of geostrategic and geopolitical advantage ranging from geography, critical resources and growing clout and power if both pool together their joint strength, resources and cooperation in critical economic junctures and military and security cooperation to withstand economic and military tools and pressure and in confronting regional challenges.

Thirdly, it sends a message to the EU that both countries will be ready to amplify cooperation and create new mechanisms in protecting their common industries, particularly the palm oil industry in facing new barriers in the European market.

Regional and bilateral solidarity and commitment are seen as an urgently needed front in pushing back against Brussels' perceived renewed selective targeting of this industry for its future trade and economic preservation of its vital interests.

Both KL and Jakarta realise the huge potential left untapped for both powers to elevate ties, consolidate strengths and synergise common threats, which will need a wise and clear common sense for both leaders to tap into this opening, rather than letting disputes and strategic bilateral rivalry and distrust ruin better returns.

Malaysia needs the support of Indonesia in various areas of interest and survival, but we must also be wise in our cards and strategic openings in leveraging Indonesia's needs and dependence on us in other areas that will be of importance to Jakarta and the region.

While the saying "love thy neighbour yes, but love thyself first" remains true in the realm of international politics, in most cost-benefit calculations, a supportive, and trusted neighbour that will provide stronger joint capacity in repelling common threats will never fail to be a most prized asset, providing a well-planned and long term proper strategic card, is in place.

Comments: [letters@thesundaily.com](mailto:letters@thesundaily.com)

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