

# Anwar and Prabowo: The strategic value of personal diplomacy



**SYED  
NIZAMUDDIN  
SAYED  
KHAASSIM**

It is truth universally acknowledged, that personal relationships between leaders are equal, if not more significant than traditional diplomacy.

Indeed it was the underpinning of this logic, that Sir David Ormsby-Gore was named the British Ambassador to the United States in 1961; owing to his personal and close relationship with the Kennedys.

Unlike bureaucratically appointed ambassadors who would be forced to find their bearing upon their appointment, Sir David has intimate access to President John F. Kennedy's administration.

This dynamic is particularly more pronounced in Southeast Asia, where personal bonds, trust, and mutual respect between leaders influence state behaviour and diplomatic outcomes.

In this regard, the relationship between Malaysia's Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and Indonesia's newly inaugurated President Prabowo Subianto is worthy of examination.

Their decades-long friendship, formed through shared political journeys, is poised to play a crucial role in guiding Malaysia-Indonesia relations and influencing the future direction of Asean. The concept of personal diplomacy — the direct engagement of leaders to advance their national interests — has long been recognized as a powerful force in international relations.

In Southeast Asia, where informal networks often shape and, at times, challenge formal state institutions, personal interactions between leaders frequently set the tone for diplomatic engagements.

The relationship between Anwar Ibrahim and Prabowo transcends mere political convenience.

Forged over decades of shared struggles and mutual respect, their friendship embodies what international relations theorists describe as a constructivist dynamic: one where shared identities and personal norms inform state behaviours.

Anwar and Prabowo's bond,



*The decades-long friendship between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto, formed through shared political journeys, is poised to play a crucial role in guiding Malaysia-Indonesia relations and influencing the future direction of Asean. PIC FROM ANWAR IBRAHIM FACEBOOK PAGE*

born during times of political upheaval, reflects this theory in action, with their personal rapport now poised to shape their approach to key regional challenges, influencing both cooperation and competition.

After a recent meeting with Prabowo, Anwar posted on social media, calling him a *"sahabat sejati"* (true friend) and *"sahabat karib"* (close friend). In Southeast Asia, where diplomacy often hinges on personal ties, these expressions carry more than rhetorical weight.

The Anwar-Prabowo connection reflects traditional cultural frameworks of reciprocal obligations and personal loyalty, where relationships often outweigh rigid institutional structures.

In today's context, their friendship offers a similar dynamic, one that could enhance diplomatic flexibility vis-a-vis Malaysia-Indonesia relations.

## **IMPACT OF PRABOWO'S PRESIDENCY ON BILATERAL RELATIONS**

The inauguration of Prabowo as Indonesia's president on Oct 20, 2024, marks a critical juncture in Southeast Asian geopolitics.

Indonesia, the region's most populous nation, has long been the dominant actor within Asean, and Prabowo's leadership style is likely to intensify this influence.

Known for his military background and assertive views on national security, Prabowo's presidency is expected to prioritize defence modernization and economic nationalism.

For Malaysia, this shift represents both an opportunity and a challenge.

The personal friendship between Anwar and Prabowo holds the potential to streamline cooperation on sensitive matters and bypass the bureaucratic obstacles that often slow down bilateral negotiations.

Yet, while this bond enhances their ability to collaborate, the weight of tradition may also present challenges, as neither leader would want to appear "overly acquiescent to the other".

Complicating this dynamic further is Prabowo's assertive posture on the global stage, which could pose challenges to Malaysia's leadership aspirations, particularly as it prepares to assume the Asean Chairmanship in 2025.

Be that as it may, the unique relationship between the two leaders offers cautious optimism for the future of bilateral ties, suggesting that their personal rapport may overcome these complexities.

The personal relationship between Anwar and Prabowo exemplifies the transformative potential of personal diplomacy in shaping regional and international dynamics.

As Malaysia assumes the Chairmanship of Asean in 2025, Anwar's ability to leverage this bond will be crucial for driving the bloc's cohesion and addressing its most pressing challenges — all while advancing Malaysia's key priorities.

Anwar's success in securing Prabowo's support for critical Asean initiatives will likely depend on his capacity to offer reciprocity in areas aligned with Indonesia's strategic interests.

This will be especially vital where collaboration can bolster Prabowo's economic ambitions, including his target of eight per cent annual growth, driven by infrastructure expansion and the development of downstream in-

dustries like agriculture, fisheries, and bioenergy.

Malaysia, under Anwar's leadership, is well-positioned to play a key role in these efforts. Bilateral cooperation could flourish through joint ventures in infrastructure and digital economy projects.

A notable example is the export of electricity from Sarawak to Kalimantan Barat, a successful model of cross-border infrastructure collaboration. This project could be expanded or replicated, fostering closer economic ties while addressing Indonesia's energy needs.

This reciprocal approach would ensure mutual benefits, aligning with Indonesia's objectives while simultaneously advancing Malaysia's strategic interests.

As Joseph Nye observed, diplomacy is not a zero-sum game. National interests after all, are often best served through cooperation, not competition.

The writer is an administrative and diplomatic officer with the government. He is a Khazanah-OXCIS scholar who completed his MSt in diplomatic studies at Kellogg College, University of Oxford