

ANWAR'S STEADY DIPLOMACY

A MODEL FOR MIDDLE POWERS

PM's strategy has allowed Malaysia to reap benefits while maintaining sovereignty

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim steered Malaysia through 2025 with heightened diplomatic visibility, brokering regional talks, hosting world leaders and projecting the country as a steady middle power amid global flux.

The diplomatic push came as Malaysia sought to consolidate political stability after years of turbulence that saw three governments fall following the 2018 general election, before Anwar took office in 2022.

"Prime Minister Anwar's approach to navigating the complexities of rising geopolitical competition is, in my assessment, not only highly viable but also an increasingly exemplary model for other medium-sized nations," Japanese Ambassador to Malaysia Noriyuki Shikata told the *New Straits Times*.

"His strategy seems to be firmly

rooted in the principles of strategic autonomy and the unwavering reinforcement of Asean centrality. Malaysia maintains robust and diversified relations with major global players — including the United States, European nations, India and Japan — based on mutual respect and shared interests."

Shikata said the approach allowed Malaysia "to maximise the benefits derived from engaging with multiple actors without compromising its sovereignty or strategic independence".

A centrepiece of Anwar's diplomacy was Asean, where Malaysia played a more assertive role in crisis management and consensus-building.

In April, Anwar hosted Chinese President Xi Jinping for a state visit that produced more than 30 bilateral cooperation documents spanning the digital economy, artificial intelligence, trade in ser-



Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim has made Asean a centrepiece of his diplomacy, with Malaysia playing a more assertive role in crisis management and consensus-building. BERNAMA PIC

vices, rail development, agriculture, culture, tourism and mutual visa exemption.

October marked a rare diplomatic moment when Anwar rode with US President Donald Trump in his bomb-proof armoured limousine, known as "The Beast", during the Asean Summit. Washington and Kuala Lumpur used the visit to elevate ties.

US Ambassador to Malaysia Edgard D. Kagan described 2025 as a "milestone in our enduring friendship, highlighted by Malaysia's exemplary Asean chairmanship and President Trump's historic October visit".

During Trump's visit, the two countries "elevated our relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and signed a landmark Agreement on Reciprocal Trade," Kagan told the NST.

"As we look ahead, the United States remains committed to partnering with Malaysia to advance shared success, security, innovation and mutual understanding," he added.

Another high-profile visitor that month was newly installed Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, who attended the expanded Asean Summit.

"In essence, Prime Minister An-

war's foreign policy demonstrates that a nation can be deeply engaged globally, attract significant investment and contribute meaningfully to stability.

"It is a pragmatic and principled approach that offers valuable lessons for many countries navigating today's complex international landscape," said Shikata.

DIPLOMATIC TIES STRENGTHENED

Anwar's regional diplomacy was tested again in December, when he convened an emergency meeting of Asean foreign ministers in Kuala Lumpur to revive talks between Cambodia and Thailand after an earlier truce brokered by Trump broke down.

"Malaysia's quiet facilitation of dialogue between Thailand and Cambodia showed that its chairmanship demonstrated practical diplomacy by creating space for de-escalation when Asean's credibility was at risk," said former diplomat Datuk Dr Ilango Karuppannan, founder of Diplomatiq, an online platform on regional geopolitics.

"Not everything has moved as fast as critics might hope, but it would be unfair to ignore Malaysia's constructive role in crisis management. Sometimes preventing deterioration and keeping Asean together is itself an important achievement.

"The real benefit to Malaysia has been reputational. Anwar has projected Malaysia as engaged, principled and relevant," added Ilango, who is also an adjunct senior, fellow at Singapore's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies and an adjunct professor at Taylor's University.

Anwar visited multiple countries — including Indonesia and Singapore, as well as China, Russia, Brazil, Ethiopia, South Africa and Kenya — while championing the Palestinian cause following Israel's bombardment of Gaza after the Hamas attack in October 2023.

"Prime Minister Anwar travels widely because he is deliberately crafting Malaysia's role as a prin-

cipled and economically relevant middle power," veteran diplomat Datuk Jojie Samuel told the NST.

ECONOMIC GAINS FOLLOW

He is "leveraging diplomacy to attract investment, strengthen regional leadership...and consolidate his domestic leadership standing," added Samuel, an adviser on Asean affairs at the Foreign Ministry.

The diplomatic push has been accompanied by economic gains.

"Whatever the political noise, the economic pay-off is starting to show," said Kenanga Investment Bank head of economic research Wan Suhaimie Wan Mohd Saidie.

Approved investments totalled RM285.2 billion in the first nine months of 2025, up 13.2 per cent year on year despite tough global conditions, creating more than 150,000 jobs.

Malaysia also attracted massive investment from global tech giants, emerging as Southeast Asia's key hub for data centres.

In recent years, more than US\$16 billion (RM65 billion) worth of data-centre projects have been announced by Amazon, Google, Microsoft, Nvidia, Oracle and ByteDance, mostly concentrated in Johor, establishing Malaysia as Asean's "digital backbone" and positioning the country at the forefront of the AI-driven digital economy.

"That doesn't happen by accident. It reflects stronger confidence in Malaysia's policy direction and its re-engagement with key global partners," said Suhaimie.

He acknowledged criticism that Anwar's travels were excessive.

"But investors tend to follow access, clarity and trust. Anwar's diplomacy has helped reset Malaysia's image, reopen trade and investment channels, and restore credibility at the international level," he said.

"In a volatile global environment, visibility backed by execution is currency, and Malaysia is starting to benefit from both."



Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim speaking with China's President Xi Jinping at the APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in Gyeongju, South Korea on Oct 31. AFP PIC