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## **Malaysia's Non-Aligned Policy: A Strong Inclination Towards China and Guarded Cooperation with the United States?**

David Han Guo Xiong

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The Anwar Ibrahim government has been openly stating that Malaysia is non-aligned in its foreign policy. However, recent indications suggest that Malaysia under Anwar has a strong inclination towards China while pursuing guarded cooperation with the United States. This trend, which has its genesis in the last decade of the Cold War, has evolved under successive governments. It is likely to continue in the foreseeable future.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Since becoming Malaysia's prime minister on 24 November 2022, Anwar Ibrahim has sought to uphold his country's policy of non-alignment in engagements with China and the United States. However, there has been a [growing perception](#) that Anwar is inclined towards a strong relationship with China and its leaders but has not kept his country's ties with the United States at the same level.

Malaysia's strong inclination towards China while pursuing guarded cooperation with the United States could be traced back to the last decade of the Cold War and has evolved over successive governments. This trend in Malaysia's non-alignment can be attributed to the importance of economic ties with China and China's rise as a major power, as well as Malaysia's political and ideological differences with the United States despite strong security relations.

### **Genesis of Malaysia's Strong Inclination Towards China but Not the United States**

Malaysia's strong inclination towards China started during the first Mahathir Mohamad administration. Bilateral ties between the two countries had been stalled for long, given

China's support for the communist insurgency in Malaysia. With relations improving following the end of the insurgency in the 1980s, the Mahathir government began to develop economic ties with China.

Pragmatism in driving Malaysia's economic growth and uncertainties surrounding China's rise as a regional power had led the Mahathir government to [cultivate constructive ties](#) with China bilaterally and multilaterally through ASEAN, while eschewing a confrontational approach in managing differences with China over matters such as the South China Sea disputes.

In contrast, the Mahathir government avoided an overtly friendly stance towards the United States. Undoubtedly, the Mahathir administration began to seek a closer security partnership with Washington in the 1980s, given the importance of the United States for regional security and in strengthening Malaysia's defence capabilities. However, Mahathir was strongly critical of US policies over several issues, such as [US promotion of democracy](#) in Malaysia and US conduct towards the Muslim world, including the [war on terror](#) despite growing cooperation between the two countries on counterterrorism. Mahathir's critical stance towards the United States was also aimed at strengthening his administration's political legitimacy among Malay-Muslims.

Abdullah Badawi, who succeeded Mahathir and served as prime minister from 2003 to 2009, had a more amicable approach to foreign policy, which improved Malaysia-US relations. However, for political and ideological reasons, Malaysia under the Abdullah government [remained critical](#) of US policies, such as Washington's discriminatory stance towards the Muslim world.

### **Towards a Pro-China Stance**

In contrast, Najib Razak who succeeded Abdullah from 2009 to 2018, not only significantly improved relations with China, but also largely minimised Malaysia's guardedness in cooperating with the United States — at least for the first half of his premiership. This stance sought to benefit Malaysia's economy and security, while minimising tensions from the US-China rivalry due to the rise of China and US rebalancing in the region.

Consequently, significant milestones in Malaysia-China relations were achieved. By [2013](#), Malaysia was China's largest trading partner in ASEAN for five consecutive years, while China became the largest trading partner of Malaysia for four consecutive years. Bilateral relations were elevated to "[Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#)" in 2013. Also, Malaysia became deeply involved in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Likewise, Malaysia-US relations witnessed a significant upswing during the Barack Obama presidency, such as enhanced partnership in counter-terrorism and maritime security, and joint cooperation in setting up the now defunct Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Also, bilateral relations were upgraded to "[Comprehensive Partnership](#)" in April 2014.

Nevertheless, Najib's equal courting of both powers did not last long. After a dismal performance in the 2013 general elections, Najib adopted a more [pro-China](#) policy, such as in economic cooperation, so as to enhance Malaysia's economic growth with

a view to reversing his government's weakening legitimacy. Also, in order to safeguard Najib's credentials among Malay-Muslims, the Najib administration had to distance itself from the Donald Trump administration, such as by [criticising](#) Trump's relocation of the US embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

### **Reversing Najib's Pro-China Stance**

Najib's pro-China stance was rescinded with a more stringent adherence to non-alignment after the fall of his administration in the May 2018 elections. Particularly, while acknowledging the importance of close bilateral relations with China, the Mahathir-led Pakatan Harapan (PH) government [renegotiated](#) with China to reduce the scale of the BRI in Malaysia. Also, despite Malaysia's strong security ties with the United States, Mahathir was more willing than Najib to [criticise](#), and distance Malaysia away from, Trump's confrontational policy towards China and Trump's diplomatic style, which was undermining US relations with Asia.

Similarly, after the collapse of the PH government in February 2020, the successive governments of Muhyiddin Yassin and Ismail Sabri Yaakob sought to have positive relations with both powers equally so that they could concentrate more on coping with political instability at home.



Malaysian prime minister Anwar Ibrahim met with US secretary of state Antony Blinken on the sidelines of ASEAN summits in October 2024. Compared to his active diplomacy with China, Anwar's approach towards the Biden administration has been more cautious.

*Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

### **Anwar's Strong Inclination Towards China but Not the United States?**

However, under Anwar, Malaysia's trend of strong inclination towards China and guarded cooperation with the United States seems to have returned, even though he had [stated](#) that Malaysia will be non-aligned in its foreign policy.

Over the past two years, Anwar's prioritisation of relations with China has been apparent. During his [inaugural visit](#) to China from 29 March to 1 April 2023, he met with Chinese president [Xi Jinping](#) and premier [Li Qiang](#) in Beijing after attending the

[Boao Forum for Asia \(BFA\)](#) in Hainan. In September 2023, Anwar met Li again while attending the China-ASEAN Expo (CAEXPO) held in Nanning. This year, Li visited Malaysia in June to commemorate the 50th anniversary of diplomatic ties. Then, in November 2024, Anwar visited China again to attend the 7th China International Import Expo (CIIE) in Shanghai and made a courtesy call on Xi in Beijing.

Clearly, Anwar is inclined towards deepening relations with China. Strong ties with China are important in driving Malaysia's economic growth, which is a foremost priority for Anwar. Furthermore, Malaysia could elevate its influence in international affairs by tapping into China's rise as a major power, as can be observed in Anwar's efforts to seek [China's support](#) for Malaysia's membership bid for BRICS.

In contrast, Anwar has been keeping a cautious distance from the United States. Unlike Anwar's active diplomacy towards China to meet top Chinese leaders, he has yet to interact with President Biden on a similar level. Indeed, Malaysia's relations with the United States have been [strained](#), mainly due to differences over issues such as the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict in Gaza.

Certainly, the Anwar administration values relations with the United States, such as in the areas of [security cooperation](#) and [economic ties](#). However, in order to improve Anwar's legitimacy among Malay-Muslims and safeguard close relations with China, it is not feasible for Malaysia to project an overtly friendly relationship with the United States anytime soon.

## Conclusion

The foregoing discussion shows that Malaysia's strong inclination towards China while keeping a cautious engagement with the United States began much earlier than the Anwar administration. There have been similarities and differences across successive administrations in how this aspect of Malaysia's non-aligned policy has manifested itself. It may even be debatable as to whether non-alignment is still an accurate term to characterise Malaysia's relations with China and the United States.

But any such nuances or debates should not detract from the fact that Malaysia's non-aligned policy has been deeply institutionalised and largely consistent over the years. However, a substantial deviation from non-alignment could occur due to major geopolitical and geoeconomic changes, or drastic domestic political upheavals. Until then, Malaysia's strong inclination towards China while cooperating with the United States discreetly will still be a unique feature of its non-aligned policy.

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