



Malaysia's Chairmanship of ASEAN and Anwar Ibrahim's Foreign Policy

David Han Guo Xiong



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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Malaysia's hosting of the 47th ASEAN Summit symbolises the most significant achievement of Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's foreign policy to date. He has attained major milestones in elevating Malaysia's international standing, advancing regional collaboration, and improving Malaysia-US relations.
- Yet, such accomplishments cannot hide limitations in Anwar's policy on key security challenges in the region.
- It remains to be seen whether Anwar's inclusive approach to ASEAN multilateralism will endure after ASEAN chairmanship is passed on to the Philippines.

COMMENTARY

The 47th ASEAN Summit, held in Kuala Lumpur from 25 to 28 October 2025, marks the culmination of Malaysia's one-year chairmanship of ASEAN. The Anwar Ibrahim administration had put in considerable effort in hosting an eventful summit with its relevant meetings to promote multilateral cooperation on a wide range of issues. US President Donald Trump's presence [heightened the positive atmosphere](#) emanating from the summit.

Undoubtedly, through the summit, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has elevated Malaysia's international standing and advanced regional collaboration. Notably, he has improved the optics of Malaysia-US relations. Yet, such accomplishments cannot hide limitations in Anwar's policy in addressing key security challenges in the region.

Anwar's Foreign Policy

Since becoming prime minister in November 2022, a key objective of Anwar's foreign policy has been to restore Malaysia's international standing by placing more emphasis on multilateralism. It is aimed at enhancing Malaysia's collective collaboration with ASEAN member states and external partners, as well as constructively engaging the United States and China to promote regional peace and stability amid US-China rivalry.



Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's constructive engagements with external partners, including the United States and China, reflect his broader effort to balance Malaysia's strategic relationships and promote inclusive multilateralism. *Image source: ASEAN Secretariat.*

Thus, the 47th ASEAN Summit, accompanied by other meetings such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Summit and the East Asia Summit (EAS), was not just a high point of Malaysia's ASEAN chairmanship in 2025; by hosting [ASEAN's largest-ever summit](#), Anwar has achieved the major milestone of elevating Malaysia's stature as a key ASEAN state in shaping the region. Indeed, many world leaders and heads of several international institutions had gathered in Kuala Lumpur to deepen cooperation across a wide range of domains such as AI usage, digital and green economies, and regional economic integration and trade.

Additionally, two more milestones took place at the ASEAN Summit, namely, the official acceptance of Timor-Leste as the 11th member of ASEAN, and the signing of the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord between Thailand and Cambodia to expand the ceasefire to the border clashes between the two countries in July 2025. The peace agreement was witnessed by Anwar and Trump, both of whom added their personal signatures to the document.

These milestones reflected Anwar's wider efforts in advancing an inclusive multilateralism, underpinned by ASEAN centrality and unity. For example, through this inclusivity, Malaysia's ASEAN chairmanship in 2025 has broadened and deepened ASEAN's cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Global South.

Moreover, Malaysia has positioned itself as a conduit for the United States to entrench its engagement in Southeast Asia since the US presence remains critical in ensuring regional peace and security. At the bilateral level, Malaysia signed a reciprocal trade and critical minerals agreement with the United States.

This is not to suggest that there were no problematic aspects in Anwar's engagement with Trump at the summit. For instance, domestic critics argue that the reciprocal trade deal puts Malaysia at a [disadvantage](#) in its trade relations with the United States. Also, Trump's presence in Kuala Lumpur [triggered protests](#) in Malaysia due to US support for Israel in the Gaza conflict.

Yet Trump's presence at the summit also symbolises a major success of Anwar's broader and concerted diplomatic efforts in repairing Malaysia-US ties, which were strained in the first two years of his premiership during the Joe Biden administration. Additionally, prior to the summit, Anwar had yet to meet a US president in bilateral meetings, in contrast to his multiple interactions with top Chinese leaders.

Thus, Anwar's positive interactions with Trump at the summit not only deepen the strategic partnership between the two countries but also allows Malaysia to have a more balanced and equal relationship with China and the United States. In turn, this could allay concerns that Malaysia under Anwar has been inclining too closely towards China.

Trump's attendance at the summit also indicates that the United States still considers Malaysia a useful partner in Southeast Asia. During a subsequent bilateral meeting in Kuala Lumpur on 30 October involving US Secretary of War Pete Hegseth and Malaysian Defence Minister Mohamed Khaled Nordin, the two countries [signed a formal agreement](#) to deepen defence cooperation. This agreement aims to strengthen the security partnership between the two countries.

Overall, given the success of the ASEAN Summit, it was not surprising for Anwar to declare that Malaysia is the "[centre of the world's attention](#)" for upholding ASEAN's neutrality and centrality. Such remarks seem to suggest that Anwar could have perceived that the international community recognises Malaysia as a respected voice in the region. In this regard, Anwar's key objective of restoring Malaysia's standing as a leading ASEAN state seems to have been met.

Limitations of Anwar's ASEAN Policy

Nevertheless, the positive gains from the 47th ASEAN Summit cannot completely mask the limitations of Anwar's ASEAN policy in relying on ASEAN multilateralism to address several security challenges in Southeast Asia.

One could point to the ongoing Myanmar crisis and the South China Sea disputes. In his opening remarks at the EAS, Anwar [indicated](#) that there has been "some relative progress" in addressing the Myanmar crisis and highlighted ASEAN's commitment to upholding the Five-Point Consensus, and its call for an immediate ceasefire and for channelling humanitarian aid into Myanmar. Furthermore, Anwar [added](#) that "there have been extensive discussions" on the South China Sea and "all parties have agreed to formulate this Code of Conduct".

However, there has only been minimal progress in addressing the Myanmar crisis and the South China Sea disputes. Indeed, due to the complexities of these intractable challenges and the weaknesses of ASEAN mechanisms in coping with such issues, these problems will not be resolved anytime soon. Nevertheless, the lack of progress

raises the question as to whether Anwar's ASEAN policy has prioritised attention-grabbing issues at the expense of doing enough to address ongoing security challenges.

Conclusion

To sum up, the 47th ASEAN Summit has allowed Malaysia to regain its visibility in regional affairs in ways not seen since the fall of the Najib Razak government in 2018. This visibility has been part of Anwar's efforts to restore the respected voice of Malaysia on the international stage. Notwithstanding the limitations of Anwar's ASEAN policy in resolving several regional challenges, one possible and positive legacy of Malaysia's 2025 ASEAN chairmanship is in anchoring the primacy of multilateralism in managing regional issues constructively and comprehensively. By focusing on issues that allow for constructive collaboration, Anwar has managed to prevent a few key challenges from hindering progress and alienating partners in regional cooperation.

Moving forward, it remains to be seen whether Anwar's approach to managing ASEAN's relations with external partners will endure when the Philippines assumes the chairmanship of ASEAN in 2026.

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