



Image: Narendra Modi @Twitter

The stage is set for further cooperation and diplomacy to occur between Malaysia and India. The former is poised to tap into potential partners for economic development while the latter is attempting to pursue strengthened relations within the Southeast Asian region - *Adi Putera Anwar\**

Narendra Modi's recent visit to Malaysia in meeting newly elected Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed right in the aftermath of the 14th Malaysian General Election nearly two months ago signals a potentially renewed energy in Malaysian-Indian relations. Malaysia and India have enjoyed strong historical, cultural and economic ties, this is further rooted in the sizable Indian population present in Malaysia.

Therefore, at the current juncture of a "New Malaysia", there are many prospects to be considered between the two nations. Under the administration of former Malaysian Prime Minister [Najib Razak](#), India was courted in efforts to bolster domestic support from the Indian community back in Malaysia. This manifested in the improvement of immigration/visa facilities for tourists from India travelling into Malaysia highlighting the latter's growing tourism industry. On the side of Narendra Modi, Malaysia is regarded as a strategic partner and key player in his Act East policy which seeks to further strengthen cooperation, partnership, and support within the Asia Pacific and hence, the Southeast Asian region.

However, within the context of Malaysia, the appointment of Mahathir Mohamed to the position of Malaysian Premier presents a wild card situation. Given his stark approaches to foreign policy which tends to bend the norms of Malaysian foreign policy, it is unlikely that the prioritization of relations based on historical and cultural ties is a vital component in his formulations. Hence, the focus of the Malaysian-Indian dimension is largely narrowed to economic cooperation. With India, being Malaysia's largest trading partner in South Asia and Modi being the first world leader to meet with Mahathir, interests intersect and are aligned within the realm of economic improvement. This is further accentuated with the increasing capacities for investments on New Delhi's end within the Straits of Malacca, a

key major trade route into the South China Sea and Pacific Ocean region. Whereas on the other side of the coin Malaysia also has a vested interest within the Indian Ocean region which in itself is a dynamic and integral maritime trade network. Evidently so when viewing the crux of Malaysian administration is concentrated within the Peninsula close to the Western Seaboard, the Straits of Malacca, and the Andaman Sea, the gateway to the Indian Ocean. Therefore, developments of security and trade are of necessary interest for Malaysia in ensuring that the disruption of maritime trade is contained. Commitment to the Indian Ocean on Putrajaya's side is enshrined in Malaysia's membership of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).

### [Read: New Malaysian government suspends construction of major Belt and Road rail project](#)

Thus, the relations between Malaysia and India showcases a significant commitment in each other, viewing one as an important partner in pursuing a mutual growth of geo-economic capacities. However, as Modi continues to pursue his "Act East" policy, Malaysia under Mahathir within the near two months of his tenure shows signs of steering Malaysia even further East into Japan. An initiative that the Malaysian Prime Minister rejuvenated from the same policy he eschewed during his previous tenure as Prime Minister during the 1980s. In brief, it was a comprehensive policy in strengthening ties with Tokyo and an attempt to import Japanese work ethics and economic performance. A shift from a sustainable policy with the West, and a statement of Mahathir's unconventional approaches to foreign policy.



The ball is currently in New Delhi's court in how it proceeds to engage with Putrajaya within the capacity of its Act East policy | Image: Berita Daily

Yet, the traction made within the scope of geopolitics has yet to gain any significant velocity. Mahathir displays a much larger focus on Japan than issues of the Indian Ocean and negotiations with India. But the shift back to Japan is placed within the backdrop of more immediate concerns in home affairs for Malaysia. What is certain is that Putrajaya will continue to remain equidistant from regional powers and manoeuvre Malaysia to partners that can ensure healthy economic prospects without over-committing to one singular party. This is made evident by Malaysia opting to maintain cordial, but an arm's length

relationship with China, a cooling down from the more dynamic pursuits pursued under the previous administration of Najib Razak. As of now, it would be prudent to consider that the direction that Mahathir is bringing Malaysia shall remain until the newly appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs Saifuddin Abdullah enters the office.

### [Read: Former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib arrested, to be charged over 1MDB Scandal](#)

Thus, what needs to be taken into consideration is that the ball is currently in New Delhi's court in how it proceeds to engage with Putrajaya within the capacity of its Act East policy. Subsequently, the main challenges and opportunities for engagement between the two countries once a defined foreign policy on Malaysia's side is implemented shall consider the security and economic connectivity of the Indian Ocean region and The Straits of Malacca. It is also worth to note that the pressures for the race to court Putrajaya have been somewhat alleviated following the political will on its part to keep Chinese investments at bay until a new deal is revised, allowing more flexibility on Modi's administration to play its hand.



Straits of Malacca | Image: JOC

Other challenges of note would be the visa processes for citizens of both India and Malaysia to visit each respective country. Currently, there is a favourable agreement in allowing Indian tourists into Malaysia but for Malaysian tourists aiming to visit India has found financial difficulties due to hikes in visa charges for tourist visas. Given that, as mentioned above, that Malaysia is home to a significant Indian population who are still able to trace their roots to the motherland will possibly place pressure on Putrajaya into entering the negotiating tables with New Delhi for a more conducive agreement.

In conclusion, the stage is set for further cooperation and diplomacy to occur between Malaysia and India. The former is poised to tap into potential partners for economic development while the latter is attempting to pursue strengthened relations within the Southeast Asian region. Given that both countries have shared very close ties, it would be sensible to suggest the notion that such a relationship shall continue to be fostered. The

only uncertainty would be the character of Mahathir Mohamed who has displayed a penchant for going for the unconventional route should it lead to greater economic prosperity for Malaysia.

*\*Adi Putera Anwar is an aspiring diplomat from Sabah, Malaysia. He has done undergraduate studies in International Politics and intelligence studies. He has a keen interest in South Asian Geopolitics and Malaysian Foreign Policy.*

*The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Kootneeti Team.*

*The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Kootneeti Team*

Facebook Comments