

Malaysia holds the power to stabilise China–ASEAN relations

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China's 3 September 2025 military parade — held to mark the 80th anniversary of Japan's surrender in World War II — was not just a commemoration. It was a carefully staged show of force that revealed China's growing confidence as a military power.

Over 12,000 troops, cutting-edge missile systems and hypersonic weapons rolled across Tiananmen Square, watched by foreign dignitaries and a global audience. In response to China's growing military prowess, Malaysia can serve as a convenor of dialogue between China and Southeast Asia, working towards tangible outcomes for peace in the region.

Military parades are both signals and symbols. They demonstrate technological capabilities but also serve as reminders of national narratives. In China's case, the parade was framed as part of a 'peaceful rise', though its assertiveness in the [South China Sea](#) tells a different story. The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative [documented China Coast Guard vessels patrolling](#) disputed waters at a monthly average of 95 ship-days in the first five months of 2025 alone, a stark contrast to Beijing's peaceful rhetoric.

ASEAN's response to China's rise remains divided. Indonesia has cautiously [stepped up maritime patrols](#) but avoids direct confrontation. Vietnam has welcomed greater US naval presence while boosting its own defence industry. Cambodia and Laos remain sympathetic to Beijing, reflecting their heavy economic dependence on China. This diversity in responses weakens ASEAN's ability to present a united front, even though the [2025 State of Southeast Asia](#) Survey revealed that 52.3 per cent of regional elites prefer aligning with the [United States over China](#), if forced to choose. Malaysia sits at the centre of this dilemma, striving to balance ties with China while maintaining strategic autonomy.

History warns against misreading military parades. In 1914, European leaders [underestimated the mobilisation capacity](#) of rival powers. In 1937, imperial Japan's grand parades [foreshadowed its aggression](#) in Asia. Even in 2003, the United States [miscalculated the outcomes](#) of its overwhelming military advantage in Iraq. Each case illustrates that military spectacles can breed dangerous overconfidence — both for the state displaying its strength and for others reacting to it.

The global context today is even more complex. Rival blocs such as the [Shanghai Cooperation Organisation](#), BRICS and the [Quadrilateral Security Dialogue](#) are consolidating their influence, with major powers pressing smaller states to take sides. For Southeast Asia, this risks hardening geopolitical fault lines. The challenge for Malaysia is to avoid being overshadowed in this rivalry while asserting its role as a convener of dialogue.

Malaysia under Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim can be pivotal in diplomatic discourse. As host of the 24th ASEAN–China Senior Officials’ Meeting on the Implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, [Malaysia has already positioned itself](#) as a convener of dialogue. In October 2025, Kuala Lumpur will host the East Asia Summit, bringing together leaders from ASEAN, China, the United States, India and Japan, among others. For Malaysia, this is more than a ceremonial duty. It is an opportunity to demonstrate leadership by reconciling rivalries between great powers with [regional stability](#).

Anwar’s credibility as a diplomatic leader rests on several factors. As Malaysia is not perceived as overtly aligned with either Washington or Beijing, it has room to act as an honest broker. Anwar has also cultivated a reputation for speaking frankly on global issues, [from Palestine](#) to economic justice, which enhances his legitimacy in convening difficult conversations. Plus, Malaysia’s strategic geography along the Strait of Malacca grants it direct stakes in maintaining freedom of navigation, a concern shared by all trading nations.

The test now is whether Malaysia can translate this credibility into tangible outcomes. Beyond rhetoric, Anwar could push for concrete measures such as [Track II dialogues](#) between ASEAN and Chinese scholars to build trust, maritime confidence-building initiatives – including hotlines and incident-at-sea-protocols – and minilateral coalitions with like-minded partners such as Indonesia, Singapore, Japan or Australia to safeguard freedom of navigation.

Most critically, Malaysia could accelerate progress on the long-delayed [Code of Conduct](#) in the South China Sea by tabling a framework agreement at the East Asia Summit. Each of these initiatives would help anchor Malaysia’s role as a proactive stabiliser rather than a passive observer in the region.

Parades may dazzle, but they do not decide outcomes. The true test lies in diplomacy, dialogue and the ability of leaders to prevent symbolic shows of strength from spiralling into conflict. Anwar has a fleeting but significant window in October 2025 to steer the conversation away from rivalry and towards rules. If he succeeds, Malaysia will reaffirm its standing as a middle power able to punch above its weight. If he fails, the region risks sliding into a new era of mistrust, where military parades are remembered less as commemorations of past peace than as preludes to future conflict.

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