

## *Malaysia wields soft power shield amid fighter jet gaps*

Hornet fighter crash underscored Malaysia's air power vulnerability but pacts, alliances and diplomacy provide certain cover



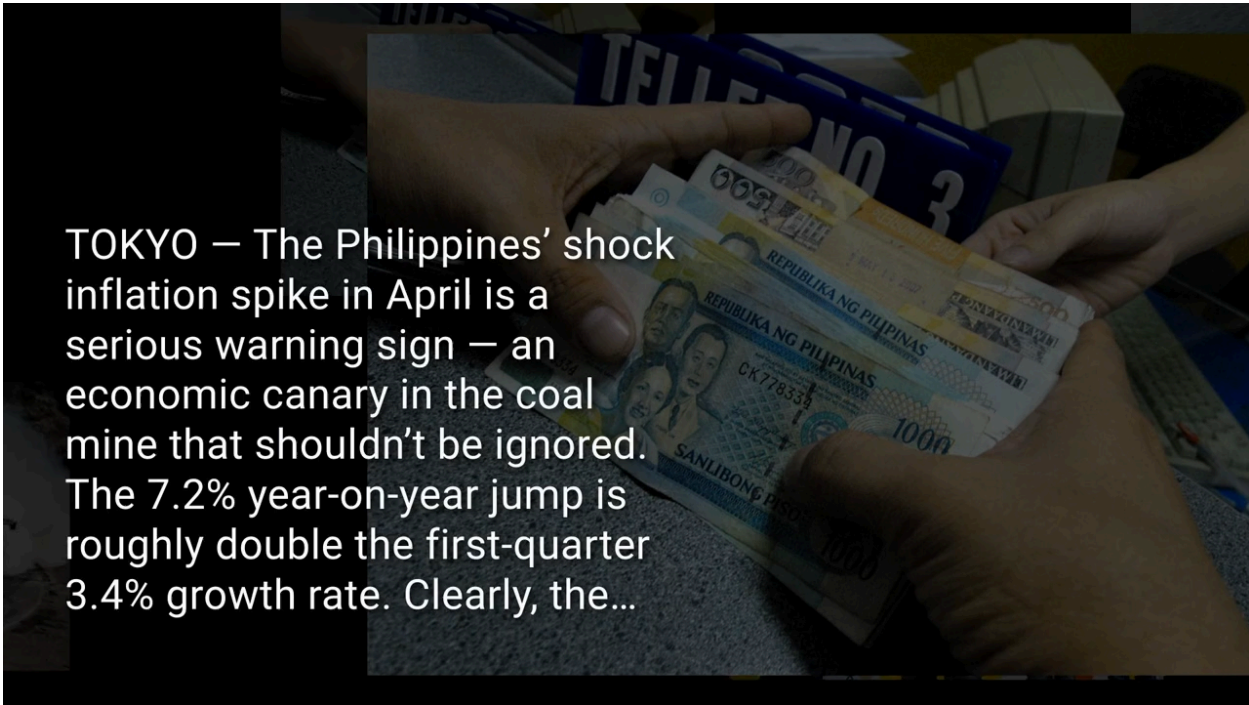
By LUTHFY HAMZAH  
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Malaysia's air force is in a delicate state of transition. Image: Facebook

The [fiery crash](#) of a Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) F/A-18D Hornet in Kuantan last week was a stark reminder of the vulnerabilities plaguing Malaysia's aging fleet.

As investigations unfold, the incident has amplified calls for swift modernization, with some [experts championing the French-made Rafale fighter as a quick fix](#). But the Rafale represents a costly detour from Malaysia's strategic trajectory toward fifth-generation capabilities.



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Instead, the path forward lies in a calibrated mix of incoming hardware — like Korean FA-50s — and, crucially, a robust interim strategy grounded in leveraging defense pacts, bilateral alliances and soft power diplomacy.

With FA-50 [deliveries](#) not expected until 2026, this “insecure period” requires not panic procurement but a fortified diplomatic front —one that Malaysia, as [ASEAN's 2025 chair](#), is uniquely positioned to lead.

The transition gap is real and pressing. Malaysia's current fleet — a mix of US-made Hornets nearing retirement, Russian Su-30MKMs [hampered by sanctions](#) and [grounded MiG-29s](#) — leaves the RMAF stretched thin.

The FA-50 deal of 18 light combat aircraft from Korea Aerospace Industries (KAI), valued at 4 billion ringgit and partially [offset by palm oil exports](#), promises a vital boost.

Construction is reportedly ahead of schedule, with the [first jets over 50% complete](#) and pilot training set to begin in South Korea this October. Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has [urged accelerated delivery](#), potentially shaving months off the 2026 timeline.

These “Golden Eagles” will enhance training, patrol and light strike roles. Crucially, they are compatible with existing Hornet munitions, such as [AIM-9 Sidewinders](#) and [AMRAAMs](#).

But until they arrive, how can the RMAF safeguard Malaysian airspace amid escalating [South China Sea tensions](#) and a rising regional arms race?

## Old alliances, new relevance

Enter the [Five Power Defense Arrangements \(FPDA\)](#), a cornerstone of Malaysia's defense diplomacy since 1971. This pact—binding Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom—serves as a psychological and practical deterrent, emphasizing consultative mechanisms over binding commitments.

In 2025, the FPDA has been more active than ever. [Exercise Bersama Shield in April](#) involved seven ships and over 30 aircraft from the five nations simulating warfighting across the Malay Peninsula, honing integrated air and maritime defenses.

This was followed by the [23rd FPDA Defense Chiefs' Conference](#) in May, where leaders reaffirmed the pact's role in maintaining regional stability and previewed [Exercise Bersama Lima](#), scheduled for later this year, featuring next-generation warfighting scenarios.

For Malaysia, the FPDA isn't just exercises; it's a signal to potential aggressors that any incursion could invite a multilateral response. Analysts highlight its [historical value in deterring assertiveness](#), particularly from neighboring states, through confidence-building and shared intelligence.

Complementing the FPDA are growing bilateral ties that strengthen Malaysia's defensive posture. Relations with South Korea, deepened by the FA-50 deal, include technology transfers and joint training that foster interoperability.

Ties with the US – through a potential deal for surplus [Kuwaiti Hornets](#) – could provide stopgap fighters and access to upgrades and spares for Malaysia's existing fleet.

FPDA partners Australia and the UK offer advanced radar and cyber support, while dialogues with [Japan and India explore co-production opportunities](#).

These pacts and relations ensure that, even with delayed deliveries, Malaysia isn't isolated. The Ministry of Defense's 2025 priorities include enhancing such cooperation, including through joint patrols and intelligence sharing to monitor hotspots [like the Spratly Islands](#) in the South China Sea.

## Soft power deterrent

However, hardware and pacts alone won't bridge the gap; soft power is the glue. As ASEAN's 2025 chair under the theme "Inclusivity and Sustainability," Malaysia wields diplomatic leverage to build "strategic trust" and prevent conflict.

Kuala Lumpur hosted the ASEAN Regional Forum's May meeting on confidence-building and preventive diplomacy, emphasizing tools to avoid conflict escalation.

This chairmanship positions Malaysia as a neutral hub in regional crises, [such as the Thailand and Cambodia border crisis](#), a key driver for progress on a [South China Sea Code of Conduct](#).

The pinnacle of Malaysia's diplomatic effort is the upcoming [East Asia Summit \(EAS\) in Kuala Lumpur, October 26-28](#), marking the forum's 20th anniversary. With leaders from 18 nations attending—including ASEAN's 10, plus Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, the US and Russia—Malaysia will be the epicenter of global dialogue.

Confirmed attendees include [US President Donald Trump](#), whose participation signals renewed US engagement in Asia. Chinese President [Xi Jinping may send Premier Li Qiang](#). Russian [President Vladimir Putin could also join](#).

In a region where perceptions shape reality, Malaysia's role as host signals that aggression here risks international backlash. It mirrors the FPDA's long-standing psychological edge, which historically helped deter assertive behavior from Indonesia.

Critics might dismiss this as "[retreat diplomacy](#)," but ASEAN's track record of managing Cold War divides and current flashpoints suggests otherwise.

For Malaysia, this diplomacy is a pragmatic shield during a time of vulnerability – buying time to integrate the FA-50s and lay the groundwork for fifth-generation capabilities, [such as South Korea's KF-21 Boramae](#), which offers stealth upgrades and local production synergies.

Rushing into a Rafale procurement – given their combat limitations and interoperability woes exposed in the [2025 India-Pakistan clashes](#) – would undermine Malaysia's strategy.

As the country awaits the FA-50s, its real arsenal lies in FPDA muscle, bilateral partnerships and ASEAN-driven diplomacy. In Southeast Asia's volatile skies, sometimes the most potent weapon is a well-hosted conversation.

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