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Commemorating 50 Years of Malaysia-China Diplomatic Ties

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SYNOPSIS

The commemoration of 50 years of diplomatic ties between Malaysia and China symbolised the upswing in bilateral relations under the Anwar government. However, the absence of Chinese President Xi Jinping at the commemoration may suggest that China has other larger diplomatic priorities, despite the Anwar government's efforts to deepen relations with China.

COMMENTARY

The commemoration of 50 years of diplomatic ties between Malaysia and China from 18 to 20 June 2024 marked an important milestone in bilateral relations. Chinese Premier Li Qiang's visit to Malaysia for this occasion was an affirmation by China to further deepen ties. However, Chinese President Xi Jinping's absence has raised questions in Malaysian quarters on China's priorities, despite noticeable efforts by the government of Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim to solidify its relationship with Beijing.

The 50th anniversary of diplomatic ties had occurred against the backdrop of improving Malaysia-China relations under the Anwar government. In fact, during Anwar's second visit to China as Prime Minister in September 2023, Anwar had invited Xi and Li to visit Malaysia for the anniversary. As such, Li's presence at the commemoration signalled the high regard that China has for the Anwar government's policy of prioritising bilateral relations.

Improved Relations but Issues Remain

The upswing in bilateral ties can be inferred in Li's arrival statement, where he reportedly mentioned that five decades of diplomatic relations have witnessed "[a sound momentum of growth](#)". Li reiterated this positive appraisal during the anniversary dinner, when his speech highlighted that Malaysia-China ties serve as a "[fine example of relations between countries in the region](#)".

Anwar echoed a similar sentiment during his speech at a luncheon organised by the Malaysia-China business community. He [remarked](#) that Malaysia is a "true friend" that seeks to "benefit" and "profit" from engagements with China.

These highly positive remarks were paralleled by commitments from both leaders to [deepen cooperation under the "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership"](#), in which both countries elevated bilateral ties when Xi visited Malaysia in 2013. Furthermore, both leaders agreed to deepen cooperation in areas such as trade, investments, agriculture, and infrastructural connectivity.

Indeed, infrastructure projects remain a key area of partnership for both Malaysia and China. This point was emphasised when Li and Anwar attended a [groundbreaking ceremony](#) at the site for the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) Gombak Integrated Terminal Station. When completed in December 2026, the ECRL, which spans 665 km, will not only transform Malaysia into a major shipping hub in the region, but also promote economic development and connectivity in peninsular Malaysia.

It is not surprising, then, for Li to state that the ECRL will bring "[prosperity](#)" to Malaysia. Moreover, the ECRL is a vital undertaking for China, as its success will symbolise China's geoeconomic and geopolitical influence in the region through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).



The planned train for the future East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) Gombak Integrated Terminal Station. Chinese Premier Li Qiang and Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim celebrated the project as a key area of partnership between the two countries under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) alongside the 50th anniversary of diplomatic ties. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Overall, the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Malaysia-China relations showed that Anwar's policy of prioritising ties with China have paid off with positive gains. It signals that this prioritisation has enabled Malaysia to remain a strategically

important country for China in Southeast Asia, given that Malaysia is viewed as playing a key role in ASEAN, the discourse on China-US relations in the region, and the South China Sea disputes.

According to media reports, Anwar used the anniversary celebrations as an opportunity to speak with Li and to seek support from China for [Malaysia's bid to become a member of BRICS](#). It appears that Anwar was capitalising on the strong ties with China and the positive atmosphere of the anniversary to improve Malaysia's chances of gaining membership in BRICS, which would help Malaysia amplify its voice on global affairs.

Implications of Xi's Absence at the Commemoration

Despite the positive atmosphere of the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations, the absence of Xi had a dampening effect. Given this, it was reported that there was [some disappointment](#) within the Malaysian government.

This disappointment is understandable, as Xi's absence could imply that some of the expected goals of prioritising relations with China had not been achieved. Anwar's prioritisation of bilateral ties was evident in his two visits to China in 2023. Although Anwar met Xi and the former's visits were well received in China, Xi has yet to reciprocate with a visit to Malaysia.

One Malaysian scholar [opined](#) that Xi's absence at the anniversary may indicate that China is taking Malaysia for granted. Yet, this speculation may be exaggerated, as the commitment by both countries during the anniversary suggests that China and Malaysia continue to value strong relations with one another.

A more significant implication of Xi's absence could be that China is currently placing a stronger emphasis on larger diplomatic priorities. This may be inferred from changes to the context of Malaysia-China relations.

The last time Xi visited Malaysia was in early October 2013, which took place shortly before the four-nation tour in Asia that then US President Barack Obama was supposed to undertake that same month. Malaysia was one of the destinations for Obama. This tour, which was [cancelled and postponed till 2014 because of a US government shutdown](#), sought to bolster the US rebalancing in the Asia-Pacific by strengthening relations with Asian countries including Malaysia.

Additionally, Najib Razak was the Prime Minister of Malaysia then. Najib's father Tun Abdul Razak led Malaysia to become the first Southeast Asian country to normalise relations with China in 1974. This major historical event played a role in [Najib's China policy](#) that significantly improved bilateral relations established by his predecessors.

Hence, it was an opportune moment for Xi to visit Malaysia in October 2013 to capitalise on the Najib premiership and to enhance cooperation with Malaysia, as well as to counteract the US rebalancing in the region.

By contrast, ever since Anwar became Prime Minister in November 2022, the on-going upswing in Malaysia-China relations, as well as strains in Malaysia's ties with the

United States, may have shaped Malaysia's current position in China's larger priorities, including the decision for Xi not to attend the commemoration of 50 years of Malaysia-China diplomatic relations.

An indication of China's larger priorities could be inferred from Xi's visit to Vietnam in December 2023. China was seeking to shore up relations with Vietnam in response to US President Joe Biden's visit to Vietnam in September 2023. Ostensibly, [China is vying with the United States for influence over Vietnam](#), which is becoming a key player in Southeast Asian affairs.

Therefore, even though China welcomes Anwar's efforts to bolster bilateral ties, Xi's visit to Vietnam instead of Malaysia over the past year could imply that China has more important diplomatic priorities, and Malaysia has its place in this set of priorities.

Conclusion

Despite the unmet expectations of the anniversary, the apparent optimism during the commemoration suggests that the on-going upward momentum in Malaysia-China ties is likely to continue in the coming years. This will benefit Malaysia's economic and strategic objectives, including the potential membership in BRICS.

Moving forward, as Malaysia assumes the ASEAN chairmanship in 2025, there will be a major opportunity for Malaysia to strengthen engagements with China. Should such engagements enhance the upswing in Malaysia-China relations, it will not only vindicate the Anwar Government's economic and strategic approach towards China; it could also shape the trajectory of regional affairs in years to come.

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