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## **ASEAN and the EU: Malaysia's active neutrality to forge transregional partnerships for peace and prosperity**

Today, our world is one where peace is a delicate construct that is no longer a given, but rather a prize we must work hard to acquire, if not fight to impose. This is the stark reality manifested by the killings and atrocities in Ukraine and Gaza, which serve not merely to unmask the disguises of many global hypocrisies, but as harbingers of a profound geopolitical transformation crisis gripping our world.

These recent seismic events raise the spectre of a global conflict. It prompts us to contemplate the potential triggers of a bipolar global conflict. Could the resolution of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the subsequent availability of Western military forces (American, French and German troops are deployed in and around Europe in a state of high readiness for action due to the conflict) open the window to a shift of the battleground to the Asia-Pacific, with the Taiwan Strait as the potential flashpoint?

Can Malaysia – an aspiring regional leader and an emerging middle power – assume a pivotal role as part of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and lead it at the heart of the impending transformative change? What is in it for Europe if and when Malaysia gets there?

### **Malaysia's place in the bipolarity**

Malaysia, with its policy of active neutrality and strategic geopolitical positioning, is compelled to reassess its role amidst these shifting sands. The nation's historical experience with colonisation and Cold War dynamics has honed its ability to navigate the treacherous waters of major power competition and contestations. By navigating an equidistant diplomatic stance, Malaysia preserves its policy autonomy while engaging with global powers and regional actors in a dance of cohesion and cooperation, as well as deference and defiance.

Malaysia's foreign policy is characterised by pragmatic activism that is evident in its 'fiercely independent', selectively 'à la carte' cooperation and holding firm to its 'right of defiance' toward major powers; sui generis, to put it plainly. This is evident in its bilateral defence partnerships with AUKUS countries, the trilateral security pact between Australia, the UK and the US, primarily focused on defence and security in the Indo-Pacific region, as part of a broader strategy to counter China's growing influence in the region. The partnership, however, is tempered by Malaysia's fiercely vocal concerns about the alliance's militarily expansionist implications, all the while aggressively courting new investments and reinvestments from the West's derisking friend-shoring exercises. Simultaneously, Malaysia balances its relations with China, supporting initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative and the Global Development Initiative, and welcoming Chinese investments by the droves, while resisting vocally and with radical and controversial moves – sinocentric actions that impinge on its national interests. Grinding the East Coast Rail Link deal with China to a halt for renegotiations is a decent example of such gumption.

### The ASEAN way

Anyone with a stake in ASEAN would have their fair share of jitters, if not outright paranoia, of the next global conflict flashpoint being in the ASEAN neighbourhood. As such, while Myanmar is often the topic that paralyses ASEAN discussions, it is the potential bipolar eruption, which is most likely to happen at the Taiwan Straits, that keeps ASEAN players awake at night. This is especially so for those member states that are at loggerheads with China over territorial claims in the South China Sea, also known as the maritime domain of the 'nine-dash line' – as any conflict in the region may render all previous efforts jeopardised at best, erased at worse. Panic and insomnia aside, there is a consensus in the region that the trigger would not be pulled by China; this makes the future much brighter and navigable.

ASEAN's collective diplomacy, which Malaysia actively engages in, underscores a commitment to regional unity and neutrality, crucial in mediating conflicts such as those potentially arising from tensions in the Taiwan Strait. The ASEAN response to a potential bipolar confrontation between the USA and China would likely be nuanced. It will probably reflect a historical preference for neutrality and regional stability over alignment with major powers. This is informed by a colourful canvas of historical experiences and a deep-seated preference for autonomy. Cambodia's development of the Ream Naval Base with Beijing's assistance, for instance, underscores the complex interplay of sovereignty and strategic partnership within the region. Indonesia and Vietnam's commitment to non-alignment and military independence reflects a broader regional ethos that values neutrality and indigenous mechanisms for resolving challenges over external intervention – the ASEAN way. Singapore's significant defence pact enables the US to use its air and naval bases, but simultaneously also has defence and security cooperations with China's People's Liberation Army. The Philippines and Thailand, despite their treaty alliances with the US, have shown

a willingness to engage with China, illustrating the region's intricate balancing act. This is not a simple dichotomy of choosing sides, but a sophisticated strategy for maintaining equilibrium and regional self-determination.

This collective diplomacy is rooted in a shared understanding that the group's strength lies in unity and the ability to act as a cohesive entity, rather than in fragmented alignment with external powers. The ASEAN perspective on the US-China rivalry is pragmatic, viewing it through the lens of survival and the imperative to avoid becoming collateral in a geopolitical standoff.

It must, however, be mentioned that that very pragmatism sometimes brings about a worrying deviation from ASEAN centrality and solidarity. During the UN General Assembly's Gaza Humanitarian Truce resolution, the Philippines abstained in dissent from the other ASEAN member states; not to mention only seven of ten ASEAN nations voted to condemn Russia at the United Nations General Assembly vote on 'illegal so-called referendums' of four Ukrainian regions.

Historically, ASEAN has demonstrated the ability to navigate between great powers, leveraging their collective bargaining power while promoting their own strategic autonomy. This regional trait would significantly shape the response in any global conflict scenario. If, of the many permutations of geopolitical fault lines, the one that mirrors the Gaza UN resolution vote dynamics prevails – with the Philippines jumping into the ring alongside the US – the rest of ASEAN will likely act in unison to draw the conflict line at the Vietnam-GuangXi border.

All in all, ASEAN will most likely put the region and their own interests paramount in resisting conflict entering the region. Not only will Malaysia and the ASEAN countries most likely withstand the pressure of jumping on the band wagon at one pole or the other, but they will most likely remain a zone of neutrality and peace because of it too.

## Malaysia's Middle Eastern axis of strength

Malaysia's diplomatic theatre, though placing centrality on ASEAN, and by extension the Asia-Pacific due to proximity, is however definitely not confined to it. Its unique historical and demographic position affords it a Middle Eastern diplomatic axis of strength, where it has the potential to act as a mediator in the region's complex conflicts. This potential stems from its historical bilateral relations, memberships in regional and thematic multilateral institutions, soft power and geopolitical positioning. Malaysia's approach in the Middle East has been consistent with the notion of active neutrality, allowing it to maintain relationships with various conflicting parties. Its relationships with the Gulf Cooperation Council states deepened in the last ten years, with trade diversifying into sectors beyond energy. This economic interdependence could afford Malaysia leverage as an intermediary, facilitating discussions from a position of mutual economic interest. Malaysia's Islamic identity and its engagements with Arab Persian Gulf monarchies on ideological and geopolitical issues further bolster its soft power.

Malaysia's membership of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition also underwrites its commitment to addressing issues of extremism and terrorism, and recently counter-Islamophobia, which resonate deeply with Middle Eastern countries. More contemporaneously, in the current administration's debut at the United Nations General Assembly, by observing the prime minister and the foreign minister's bilaterals during the high-level week, it became very clear that Malaysia's diplomatic posture to the world, ASEAN and Malaysians was one that showcased its Islamic credentials; countries like Turkey, Iran and Iraq featured prominently. All the above clearly paint a picture to show Malaysia's influence and soft power among both Gulf and non-Gulf, Arab and non-Arab, Islamic nations.

A partnership with Malaysia is a partnership with a democracy that has come of age, consisting of a Muslim majority, yet a highly pluralistic and multicultural society, the leadership of which can provide a certain gravitational and galvanising force for the Islamic world. It is one of the rare small nations that has, over the years, sought and successfully preserved friendships with most of the world, without being pressured into taking sides, or alienating or being alienated by any superpower.

## Overcome the transformation crisis without conflict

There is a growing global consensus that the departure from the brief moment of Thucydidean bipolarity towards a truly multipolar world is swifter, sharper and briefer than anticipated. This transitional cusp is understandably volatile but also filled with hopeful possibilities, providing enablers of new alignments step up to the plate. In the current geopolitical landscape, fraught with conflict and instability, Malaysia could emerge as a paramount ally of peace, development and diplomacy for Europe within the ASEAN framework. The alignment of European aspirations with Malaysia's strategic diplomatic posture is strikingly evident. Malaysia's diplomatic conduct, defined by its selective engagement and robust defence of its autonomy, renders it an essential conduit between diverging global forces and perspectives.

The collective diplomatic ethos of ASEAN, significantly influenced by Malaysia – especially when it will be its chair in 2025 – will champion a dedication to regional cohesion, to seek partnership with other groupings, pivotal in achieving critical mass for mitigating conflicts and advancing diplomatic solutions.

As once said by Willy Brandt, a beacon of progressive European values: "Peace is not everything, but without peace, everything is nothing". This encapsulates the prospective alliance's shared goal: peace as the foundation for a prosperous future. Europe's concerted engagement with Malaysia, and by extension with ASEAN, will signify a strategic avenue to nurture a collaborative framework for peace and progressive development. This has the potential to transform the precarious quest for peace into a sustained achievement, thus ensuring a peaceful legacy for the global order.

It would be the best antidote to the current insomnia and paranoia of ASEAN players and Malaysians of an impending war in the region, if Europe can assist Malaysia and ASEAN

in tilting the geopolitical transformation crisis looming over us now towards one that truly and peacefully transitions from the currently volatile bipolarity towards a stable multipolar geopolity, with ASEAN and the EU as closer partners for peace, diplomacy, sustainability, prosperity and democracy.