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The 10th Malaysia-Singapore Leaders' Retreat: Principles for Enhancing Bilateral Relations

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SYNOPSIS

The 10th Malaysia-Singapore Leaders' Retreat highlighted that pragmatism, mutual accommodation, and strong political will are required to deepen cooperation and manage outstanding bilateral issues constructively.

COMMENTARY

The 10th Malaysia-Singapore Leaders' Retreat held in Singapore from 29 to 30 October 2023 marked the return of the yearly summit after the pandemic. Top leaders from both countries not only discussed existing and new areas of cooperation but also addressed outstanding bilateral issues.

Three principles which will be key to sustaining positive bilateral relations in the long term were identified. Particularly, pragmatism and mutual accommodation should drive cooperation that will mutually benefit both countries. There must also be strong political will to manage outstanding bilateral issues constructively.

Pragmatism and Mutual Accommodation in Building Bilateral Relations

The annual Leaders' Retreat, held alternately in Malaysia and Singapore, has been a major platform for both countries to discuss and advance bilateral relations. The retreat, which began in 2010 under the Najib Razak administration, reflects how a new generation of forward-looking leaders are transcending historical baggage, ideology, and personality differences to deepen bilateral relations through pragmatic cooperation, mutually benefitting both countries.

Previous iterations of the annual retreat have had positive outcomes. These include moving forward with issues regarding the [Points of Agreement \(POA\)](#) on the Malaysian Railway Lands in Singapore, and the signing of the bilateral agreement to construct the Johor-Singapore [Rapid Transit System \(RTS\)](#) Link.

Similarly, at the [10th annual retreat](#), both sides affirmed close bilateral ties in areas such as investment, trade, business, and transport. Areas of partnership that have emerged since the Anwar Ibrahim administration were also discussed.

For example, both governments agreed to enhance cooperation on the [Frameworks on Cooperation \(FOC\) in Digital and Green Economies](#) that was signed in January 2023. Cooperation in the digital economy will improve digital interoperability in commerce and trade. Likewise, the promotion of green economies will advance decarbonisation and strengthen investments in renewable energy.

Leaders of both countries also looked forward to the completion of the Johor-Singapore RTS Link in 2026. The RTS Link, which will connect Woodlands North and Bukit Chagar stations in Singapore and Johor respectively, will facilitate greater movement of people between Johor and Singapore; ease congestion at the Causeway and Tuas Link; and drive businesses, tourism, and employment.



The Johor Bahru-Singapore Rapid Transit System (RTS) Link viaducts under construction in the Johor Strait, March 2023. The bilateral agreement to construct the RTS Link is one of the positive outcomes from past Malaysia-Singapore Leaders' Retreat, and its completion in 2026 will be a tangible symbol of mutually beneficial cooperation that the annual retreat seeks to emphasise. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Mutually beneficial cooperation also entails mutual accommodation, which requires both Malaysia and Singapore to understand each other's constraints and forge feasible solutions together.

During the retreat, in response to PM Anwar's remarks that Malaysia has contributed maximum efforts to ease congestion at the Causeway, PM Lee [assured his counterpart](#) that Singapore will increase efforts to upgrade facilities at the existing Woodlands checkpoint in the next few years.

Likewise, in view of the proposal to sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on 11 January 2024 for the Johor-Singapore Special Economic Zone (SEZ), PM Anwar [reportedly remarked](#) that his administration aims to meet the tight schedule although it would require much work. The SEZ seeks to upgrade the ecosystem of the Iskandar development region and Singapore, and enhance the movement of people and goods between both sides.

Such commitment is necessary, given the [benefits in boosting the economies of Johor and Singapore](#). Johor can tap more deeply into Singapore's strong connectivity to regional and global markets, while Singapore's businesses and industries can expand their operations and capacities in Johor.

Furthermore, success in developing the SEZ also serves PM Anwar's priority of sparking economic growth and confidence. This would be politically expedient for PM Anwar, as it would strengthen relations with the incoming King of Malaysia Sultan Ibrahim Iskandar, also the Sultan of Johor, who desires [more development for the state](#).

Political Will in Managing Outstanding Bilateral Issues Constructively

However, mutual accommodation should also be combined with strong political will to manage outstanding and oftentimes sensitive issues without derailing bilateral relations.

The outstanding issues, which were addressed at the retreat, revolved around the implementation of the International Court of Justice ruling on Pedra Branca, Middle Rocks, and South Ledge; maritime boundary delimitation; water agreements; and airspace.

Both PM Lee and PM Anwar acknowledged that these issues have not been resolved as quickly as expected. Understandably, fundamental differences in both countries' approach remain key challenges in speedily resolving outstanding issues.

As PM Lee [highlighted](#), determination and trust are required to continue the process of dialogue in handling outstanding issues and, at the same time, advance progress in other areas of cooperation.

Furthermore, determination to advance bilateral ties amid difficulties serves as a bulwark against unexpected political developments that could cause dissonance in existing agreements.

A case in point is the cancellation of the [KL-Singapore High-Speed Rail \(HSR\) project](#) that was announced during the 2016 annual retreat. Key reasons for its cancellation by the Pakatan Harapan (PH) government under Mahathir Mohamad after the fall of

the Najib-led Barisan Nasional (BN) administration were [high costs and concerns about the project's sustainability](#).

However, both Malaysia and Singapore have not allowed this episode to undermine their bilateral relations. Instead, both sides have sought to enhance cooperation in other arenas, recognising that the HSR project might be revived in the future if circumstances allow.

Another example is the current Israel-Hamas conflict in Gaza. To be sure, [discussions about the conflict during the retreat](#) were amicable. PM Anwar highlighted that both countries signed the UN resolution calling for humanitarian truce and humanitarian aid in the Gaza Strip, with PM Lee adding that differences in diplomatic stance regarding the conflict need not pose a hindrance to bilateral relations.

However, both sides are cautious about this matter, as Singapore's close ties with Israel had previously strained relations with Malaysia, which does not have diplomatic relations with Israel.

Conclusion

Moving forward, the annual retreat should not only be a litmus test of bilateral relations. Principles underlying the retreat, namely pragmatism, mutual accommodation, and strong political will, ought to be entrenched to ensure stability and continuity of Malaysia-Singapore relations on the basis of shared interests, even amid bilateral differences and changing political circumstances.

The next retreat is scheduled to take place in Malaysia in 2024, which also marks the centennial anniversary of the completion of the Causeway. May the Causeway, which epitomises the close interdependence between Malaysia and Singapore, be a reminder that the two sides must jointly strive to ensure future successes in bilateral cooperation.

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