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## **Singapore-Malaysia Relations in 2024: A Positive Start**

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### **SYNOPSIS**

*Singapore-Malaysia relations began on a positive note in January this year, as can be observed in the progress towards the completion of the Johor Bahru–Singapore Rapid Transport System Link and the signing of a memorandum of understanding for developing the Johor-Singapore Special Economic Zone. As long as both sides remain committed to deepening their cooperation and take a constructive approach in managing long-standing obstacles, the relationship can continue to progress.*

### **COMMENTARY**

On 11 January 2024, Singapore and Malaysia commemorated a significant milestone in the construction of the Johor Bahru–Singapore Rapid Transport System (RTS) Link. The commemoration was followed by the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) for the Johor-Singapore Special Economic Zone (JS-SEZ). These events were a follow-up to the 10th Annual Leaders' Retreat in Singapore in October 2023.

The progress in bilateral ties points to the importance of strong commitment to ensure consistency and continuity in improving diplomatic relations. Such commitment will result in mutually beneficial gains for the economic growth of both countries.

For the Anwar administration, its commitment to deepen mutually beneficial cooperation with Singapore may be attributed to its priority of improving Malaysia's economic performance, as this could help boost the unity government's legitimacy. With the Sultan of Johor as the current king of Malaysia and given the close economic ties between Johor and Singapore, the federal government is likely to further pursue

bilateral cooperation with Singapore. This is notwithstanding issues such as Pedra Branca and the shelved Malaysia-Singapore High Speed Rail (HSR) project.

### **A Promising Start to Bilateral Relations in 2024**

The strong commitment of Singapore and Malaysia to strengthen bilateral relations was evident in a [ceremony](#) held at the site of the RTS Link Marine Viaduct along the Straits of Johor to mark the completion of the main connecting span in December 2023. During the ceremony, prime ministers Anwar Ibrahim and Lee Hsien Loong [signed a commemorative plaque](#) which symbolises the commitment to complete the RTS Link project.



With the completion of the main connecting span of the Johor Bahru–Singapore Rapid Transport System (RTS) Link Marine Viaduct in December 2023, Singapore and Malaysia appear to be on track to forge stronger ties despite long-standing bilateral issues. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Likewise, the [signing of the MoU on the JS-SEZ](#) on the same day showed mutual commitment to deepening economic cooperation as the signing took place just two months after the 10th Annual Leaders' Retreat. Also, both governments have agreed to work towards a full-fledged agreement on the JS-SEZ and discuss the project at the 11th Annual Leaders' Retreat in Malaysia later this year.

Malaysia and Singapore are committed to ensuring the success of the RTS Link and the JS-SEZ projects as these endeavours will benefit the economies of both countries considerably. Indeed, the RTS Link, which is scheduled to start operations by the end of December 2026, is expected to enhance commuting between Singapore and Johor and boost businesses and tourism. The JS-SEZ will increase the cross-border flow of people and goods, improve the business environment, and strengthen the connectivity of both economies.

### **Sultan of Johor: The Agong's Role in Singapore-Malaysia Relations**

Successive changes in Malaysian governments since the fall of the Barisan Nasional regime in the 2018 general elections had led to disruptions in the implementation of existing bilateral agreements, such as the shelved Malaysia-Singapore HSR project.

However, Malaysia's growing political stability since the 2022 general elections has been conducive to improved bilateral relations.

The ascension of Sultan Ibrahim Iskandar of Johor to the throne as the 17th Yang Di-Pertuan Agong (king) of Malaysia on 31 January 2024 may support the stability of the unity government and the continuity of its policies toward Singapore. Indeed, in his [speech](#) at the opening of the third session of the 15th parliament on 26 February 2024, Sultan Ibrahim warned against attempts to destabilise the political situation and undermine the unity government.

No doubt, as the Malaysian king, Sultan Ibrahim is obliged to remain above politics, including in the foreign policy arena. Nonetheless, he has been known to be [significantly vocal](#) about political affairs in Malaysia. Thus, Sultan Ibrahim, in his capacity as the Malaysian king, is likely to have some degree of influence over domestic politics and foreign policy.

For example, Sultan Ibrahim has played a [prominent role](#) in establishing good relations between Johor and Singapore. As the current king of Malaysia, Sultan Ibrahim is likely to continue to have a positive impact in bolstering not only Johor-Singapore relations, but also diplomatic ties between Singapore and Malaysia as a whole.

Additionally, Sultan Ibrahim has expressed support for Prime Minister Anwar, along with expectations for the latter to address major concerns such as [growing Malaysia's economy](#). This support gives impetus for the Anwar administration to deepen bilateral ties with Singapore, not only to boost the economic performance of Malaysia but also to maintain good relations with Sultan Ibrahim, who wants cooperation with Singapore to benefit Johor economically.

### **Pedra Branca: A Cause for Concern?**

There are concerns, no doubt, that bilateral issues such as maritime delimitation, water, and airspace could derail the recent progress in bilateral ties. So far, however, both countries have been able to manage these issues constructively.

A case in point is the Pedra Branca issue. In 2017, Malaysia had sought to apply for a [review](#) of the [2008 International Court of Justice \(ICJ\) ruling](#), which awarded sovereignty over Pedra Branca and Middle Rocks to Singapore and Malaysia, respectively, while concluding that "sovereignty over the South Ledge belongs to the State in whose territorial waters it lies". But the Pakatan Harapan government that took office a year later withdrew the application.

In January 2023, the Anwar government [stated](#) that Malaysia respected the 2008 ICJ ruling but found out, through a special task force, that the dropping of the application to review the ruling was "improper".

Consequently, a Royal Commission of Inquiry (RCI) was formed in January this year to examine the reasons for the withdrawal of the review application. However, the inquiry appears to be domestically oriented rather than targeted at Singapore per se.

Specifically, the RCI is [focused](#) on identifying those responsible for failing to handle the review application properly and enabling Malaysia to be better prepared to cope with similar sovereignty issues in the future. The Singapore government considers the RCI an [“internal matter of Malaysia”](#) that would not undermine bilateral ties.

Moreover, both countries have been working together on the [Malaysia-Singapore Joint Technical Committee](#) to implement the 2008 ICJ ruling on Pedra Branca, Middle Rocks, and South Ledge. This includes [ongoing discussions](#) concerning sovereignty over South Ledge.

Two implications could be inferred. First, the Anwar administration may be seeking to assure Malaysians that his country is addressing outstanding bilateral issues with Singapore, thereby improving the image and legitimacy of his unity government. Second, the Anwar government remains committed to developing positive ties with Singapore while upholding Malaysia’s national interests.

### **Continuity and Optimism in Bilateral Relations**

Thus, Singapore-Malaysia relations can progress without major obstacles as long as there is a strong commitment to deepening cooperation involving constructive measures to manage long-standing bilateral issues. Successive governments following the short-lived Pakatan Harapan government under Dr Mahathir Mohamad have sought to grow bilateral ties. Singapore is headed for a leadership transition in the coming months, but its government’s commitment to bilateral relations is expected to remain strong.

Overall, the positive developments in diplomatic ties over the past year have infused optimism for the upcoming 11th Annual Leaders’ Retreat in Malaysia and in the run-up to the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of diplomatic ties in 2025.

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