

## **Navigating Big Powers in the Indo-Pacific Today: Lessons for Malaysia from Ancient Kedah and the Sultanate of Melaka**

*By Dr. Nasha Rodziadi Khaw (Guest Author)<sup>1</sup>*

### **Executive Summary**

- Malaysia's contemporary foreign policy reflects a long-standing strategic logic derived from Ancient Kedah and the Melaka Sultanate, where influence was exercised through managing networks of trade, diplomacy, and cultural exchange rather than territorial control.
- Both Ancient Kedah and Sultanate of Melaka operated through decentralized, multi-nodal systems with differentiated authority, enabling adaptability, resilience, and effective engagement across diverse actors and regions.
- Historical experience demonstrates that survival and influence were achieved through balancing multiple powers simultaneously, avoiding rigid alignment while leveraging relationships for strategic advantage.
- In today's multipolar environment, Malaysia's optimal strategy lies in calibrated, domain-specific engagement—maintaining autonomy by compartmentalizing relationships across economic, security, and diplomatic spheres while positioning itself as a regional mediator and hub.

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## Introduction

The modern states of Kedah and Melaka are integral components of Malaysia's nation-building landscape, contributing to its economic development, cultural heritage, and regional identity. Their contemporary roles only partially reflect their deeper historical significance. Centuries earlier, their antecedents, Ancient Kedah (2nd–14th century CE) and the Sultanate of Melaka (15th–16th century CE), were key actors in trans-regional maritime exchange, diplomacy, and cross-cultural interaction. They functioned as pivotal nodes within expansive systems linking the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, shaping patterns of trade, political authority, and cultural transmission across maritime Asia.

Today, Malaysia continues to occupy a position of enduring geostrategic importance, most notably through the Strait of Malacca, one of the world's most critical maritime chokepoints. This corridor facilitates a substantial proportion of global trade, connecting major economic regions across Asia and beyond. In this context, the historical trajectories of Ancient Kedah and the Sultanate of Melaka offer some important strategic insights into the increasingly complex and multi-layered regional order the country exists in today.

Coupled with relatively well-developed infrastructure, political stability, and access to natural resources, Malaysia remains a key nodal hub within regional and global economic systems. In such an environment, influence is exercised less through territorial dominance or rigid alignment, and more through adaptive engagement, calibrated diplomacy, and strategic anchoring.

Malaysia's centrality places it within an increasingly fluid geopolitical environment. Intensifying U.S.–China competition is straining ASEAN cohesion and generating pressures between alignment and autonomy (Kui 2022, 2023). Yet, such dynamics are not unprecedented. Historical experience in maritime Southeast Asia demonstrates that earlier polities navigated comparable pressures not through territorial control, but by leveraging their roles within wider exchange systems.

In international relations, history should not be treated merely as retrospective narrative, but as a form of strategic memory. It provides a reservoir of accumulated experience that informs policy instincts,

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shapes diplomatic behaviour, and structures how states position themselves externally. For maritime societies such as Malaysia, whose identity is rooted in exchange and interlinkages, the past offers a repertoire of strategic logics that remain relevant today.

This paper argues that Malaysia's contemporary foreign policy is not merely a response to present geopolitical conditions, but reflects a historically rooted logic of connectivity-based statecraft inherited from pre-modern maritime polities. This logic persists today in the form of strategic multi-alignment, where influence is exercised through calibrated engagement and network embeddedness rather than rigid alignment.

## **Power Structure of Historical Antecedents**

Ancient Kedah represents one of the earliest expressions of connectivity-based political organisation in maritime Southeast Asia. From as early as the second century CE, the region was integrated into trans-Asiatic exchange circuits linking India, the Middle East, China, and Southeast Asia. Rather than functioning as a centralized polity, it developed as a polycentric landscape composed of interlinked coastal and riverine settlements, each serving as a nodal point within a wider system of circulation (Nasha et.al 2024).

Ancient Kedah existed as a loose confederation of coastal and riverine settlements, roughly located on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula. These nodes were functionally differentiated. Littoral sites operated as entry points for maritime trade, while riverine routes extended linkages into the hinterland. Ritual spaces formed part of this system, acting as arenas of cultural mediation religious practices, identities, and authority, alongside economic exchange.

This polycentric structure is also reflected in external representations. Accounts from Arab, Indian, Chinese, and later local sources describe Ancient Kedah in varying and sometimes inconsistent terms, as a port, a polity, a trading station, or even a geographic reference (Nasha et.al 2024). These variations reflect differentiated encounters with specific nodes rather than a single unified entity. Ancient Kedah was thus experienced not as a singular polity, but as a composite entry system into a broader maritime exchange architecture.

Its system of authority was shaped by a dispersed pattern of settlement, economic organisation, geographical configuration, and strategic positioning. As a result, authority was not territorially imposed but situationally exercised through the management of linkages, mediation of exchanges, and strategic anchoring within wider regional flows. Power derived less from centralised control than from integration into trans-regional systems of circulation.

The Sultanate of Melaka, meanwhile, represents a more politically consolidated yet fundamentally similar expression of this logic. Often portrayed as a unified territorial kingdom, Melaka was in practice a thalassocratic formation composed of multiple coastal and riverine polities organised

around its strategic port at the narrowest chokepoint of the Strait of Malacca (Muhammad Yusuf 1992). Its strength derived not from territorial expansion per se, but from its ability to regulate maritime circulation and channel exchange through its port-city.

The Sultanate of Melaka's political structure was highly differentiated and asymmetrical. While the core port and its immediate hinterland were governed directly by the Sultan and his officials, surrounding territories were administered through varying degrees of control, ranging from indirect rule and delegated authority to semi-autonomous and autonomous polities maintaining nominal allegiance (Nasha 2022). These included strategic coastal outposts, riverine settlements, and competing ports incorporated into Melaka's orbit through tribute, alliance, or selective coercion.

This layered configuration reflects a political order in which authority was calibrated according to the strategic value, economic capacity, and geographical position of each node. Rather than imposing uniform control, Melaka sustained its influence by managing relationships across a complex field of actors, including local rulers, merchant elites, and external trading partners (Nasha 2022). Power was exercised through coordination, mediation, and regulation of flows rather than direct domination.

Ancient Kedah and the Sultanate of Melaka demonstrate that political organisation in maritime Southeast Asia was historically grounded in flexible systems of loyalties between dynastic rulers, merchant-aristocrats, and local chieftains who governed dispersed coastal and riverine nodes. Both operated as interconnected systems composed of multiple ports, settlements, and strategic outposts, where authority was exercised through the management of exchange, the mediation of relationships, and the calibration of influence across diverse actors.

## **From Historical Logic to Contemporary Strategy**

This internally differentiated political configuration of Ancient Kedah and Sultanate of Melaka produced a correspondingly complex mode of external engagement, in which foreign relations were not conducted through a singular centralised authority, but through myriads of overlapping channels shaped by local interests, commercial priorities, and shifting political alignments.

The interaction between Kedah Tua, the Chola Empire, and the Song dynasty in the 11th century C.E. reveals a maritime order in which influence was exercised through dispersed and situational forms of engagement, rather than through centralised control. While relations with the Cholas were largely cooperative, marked by trade and diplomacy despite an isolated episode of military projection, the Song generated sustained commercial demand, alongside active participation from Middle Eastern traders. Within this milieu, Ancient Kedah functioned as an intermediary node. Its resilience derived not strictly from territorial sovereignty, but from its strategic embeddedness within transregional networks of exchange.

This logic persisted into the Melaka Sultanate in the 15th century C.E. Melaka strategically leveraged Ming China's recognition to offset Siamese pressure, while at times continuing tributary relations with Siam and maintaining economic and commercial ties with both. As for its competitors, Pasai and Aru, these were managed through diplomacy and occasional intervention in their internal affairs. Across both cases, authority was not anchored in direct territorial control, but in the calibrated management of relationships within a fluid maritime landscape.

Taken together, these historical configurations point to a consistent strategic pattern: survival and influence were secured not through exclusive alignment, but through the ability to navigate, balance, and extract advantage from multiple overlapping spheres of power. What appears today as hedging or pragmatic diplomacy may, in fact, reflect a deeper, historically embedded mode of statecraft, one that can be more precisely conceptualised as strategic multi-alignment. While the contemporary environment is undoubtedly more complex, characterised by a greater number of actors, domains, and institutional layers, the underlying dynamic remains unchanged.

Today's environment in the Indo-Pacific, marked as it is by intensifying major power competition, presents similar challenges of complexity, uncertainty, and interdependence. Ancient Kedah and Sultanate of Melaka responses to geopolitical challenges centuries ago therefore offer more than historical insight for us; they provide a strategic template. Their approach was not one of rigid alignment or outright opposition, but of calibrated engagement. They sustained multiple relationships simultaneously, adjusted levels of interaction according to context, and avoided over-commitment to any single power. Authority was maintained not through dominance, but through adaptability, mediation, and the capacity to operate effectively within a plural and contested order.

This historical experience provides a useful lens for understanding contemporary foreign policy. Rather than privileging a single theoretical framework, whether realist, constructivist, or agency-based (Carlsnaes 2013), Malaysia's approach is better understood as composite, with different logics activated depending on the issue at hand. Security concerns may at times necessitate balancing behaviour, particularly in response to imminent threats or shifts in regional power distribution (Kuik 2022). At the same time, under systemic conditions marked by uncertainty in major power relations, hedging becomes necessary to mitigate and offset strategic vulnerability (Kuik 2022).

At the same time, the regional landscape is no longer defined solely by state-centric interactions. The proliferation of quasi-state and non-state actors, alongside overlapping institutional frameworks, has rendered the international environment more fluid and dynamic. Power should no longer be understood as a monolithic force, but as context-dependent, relational, and multidimensional, exercised differently across varied spheres of interaction and shaped by scope, domain, weight, cost and means (Baldwin 2013). This creates space for smaller and medium-sized powers such as Malaysia to manoeuvre through effective participation within intersecting systems of trade, knowledge exchange, and cultural diplomacy (Goff 2013).

Agency by small and middle powers is exercised not by challenging major powers directly, but by navigating complexity and positioning effectively within multiple areas of engagement, including the strategic projection of identity, heritage, and narrative. Malaysia engages different actors across economic, security, cultural, and diplomatic spheres without allowing tensions in one domain to dictate outcomes in others. It enables cooperation and competition to coexist within carefully managed boundaries.

## **Conclusion**

The trajectories of Ancient Kedah and the Sultanate of Melaka serve not merely as historical precedents, but as structural analogies that illuminate Malaysia's contemporary foreign policy behaviour. In both cases, authority was sustained not through territorial dominance, but through adaptability, mediation, and the calibrated management of relationships across multiple centres of power.

This underlying logic evolved from the polycentric configuration of Ancient Kedah where authority was relational and embedded in networks of exchange, into the more coordinated but still distributed system of the Melaka Sultanate. While institutional forms became more structured, the fundamental principle remained unchanged: influence was exercised through positioning within dynamic systems rather than through direct control.

In the contemporary period, although Malaysia operates within a centralised state structure, the locus of agency has been shifting towards functionally differentiated institutions. This complexity necessitates not just convergence of interests, but effective coordination across multiple channels of engagement. It is within this context that historical statecraft is translated into modern strategy.

As the Indo-Pacific becomes increasingly multipolar and fragmented, Malaysia's foreign policy should move beyond the framework of non-alignment towards strategic multi-alignment. This involves engaging major powers across differentiated domains while preserving strategic autonomy and preventing any single relationship from becoming structurally dominant. Such an approach reflects not only present geopolitical realities, but a deeper historically grounded logic in which influence is sustained through effective placement within dynamic systems rather than rigid alignment.

Central to this strategy is the compartmentalisation of relationships. Malaysia can engage different partners across economic, security, cultural, and diplomatic spheres independently, allowing cooperation and competition to coexist without unnecessary escalation. This differentiated approach mirrors historical practice and provides a practical framework for navigating contemporary complexity.

Malaysia's foreign policy should entail aligning with different actors across distinct facets of relation, economic cooperation with one power, security engagement with another, and cultural or diplomatic initiatives with others, without allowing these relationships to become mutually exclusive or structurally binding. In this sense, alignment is no longer a singular or comprehensive condition, but a differentiated, multi-faceted and issue-specific process.

Crucially, this approach also requires moving beyond the assumption of the state as a monolithic actor. Instead, the state operates through multiple agencies and institutional channels, each capable of engaging external partners independently. This internal differentiation enables a more flexible and layered form of external engagement, allowing states to manage complexity without collapsing into a fixed positioning.

Operationally, strategic multi-alignment requires layered engagement across both formal and informal channels. Beyond state-to-state diplomacy, sustained interaction should be cultivated with quasi-state actors, non-governmental institutions, and transnational networks and dialogues. Networks and dialogues are not merely instruments of soft power, but mechanisms for shaping regional narratives and reinforcing Malaysia's role as a mediator and knowledge hub.

States operate across differentiated domains, and alignment in one sphere does not necessitate alignment in others. Historical experience demonstrates that effective agency lies in the ability to manage complexity, sustain flexibility, and engage across multiple centres of power. Malaysia's strength lies not at the margins of regional order, but at its centre, as a bridge, mediator, and indispensable node within an evolving maritime system.

The lesson from Ancient Kedah and Sultanate Melaka is clear: influence is sustained not through dominance or alignment, but through the calibrated management of relationships across competing powers.

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