



GOVERNMENT-LED INITIATIVES IN MALAYSIA-QATAR RELATIONS DURING MAHATHIR'S LEADERSHIP, 2018-2020

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Abstract:

The bilateral relationship between Malaysia and Qatar, established on strong economic foundations and a resilient policy of non-alignment, faced a critical juncture following the 2017 Gulf Crisis and subsequent Malaysian leadership change. This article examines the government-led initiatives undertaken by the Malaysian administration under Tun Mahathir Mohamad (2018–2020) to translate political commitment into tangible, institutionalised, and deepened bilateral relations. The study aims to detail the trajectory of close political and economic engagement, specifically focusing on high-level diplomacy and governmental efforts to formalise cooperation. This includes analysing reciprocal visits, such as Deputy Prime Minister Wan Azizah Wan Ismail's 2018 visit to Qatar and the Emir of Qatar's visit to Kuala Lumpur later that year, which featured the inauguration of an anti-corruption monument. Furthermore, the article assesses the institutionalisation of economic ties, notably the establishment of the Malaysia-Qatar Joint Business Council (MQJBC) in 2020 and the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between MIDA and IPAQ. The research uses desk research (secondary source research), involving collection of pre-existing data from various sources. The findings show the importance of state-led business diplomacy in positioning Malaysia as ASEAN's gateway for Qatari investors and improving trade, which grew significantly between 2017-2018. These findings are examined through the Middle Power concept.

Keywords:

Malaysia-Qatar Relations, Diplomacy, Investment, Trade, The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), And the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

Introduction

The diplomatic relationship between Malaysia and Qatar, established in 1974, rests upon a foundation of strong economic ties and Malaysia's resilient policy of non-alignment. Guided by an "ummah network" perspective within the OIC framework, this partnership has consistently demonstrated durability. A crucial test of this resilience emerged during the 2017 Gulf Crisis, where Malaysia adopted a position of "active neutrality", unequivocally refusing to support the economic embargo imposed by the blockading nations. Significantly, Kuala Lumpur publicly rejected the accusation that Qatar was a state sponsor of terrorism, sharply diverging from the Anti-Terror Quartet's narrative.

Despite the regional fracture, high-level engagement continued, notably symbolised by the Emir's, Shaykh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani's, visit to Malaysia just months after the blockade began in October 2017. This commitment resulted in the signing of four bilateral memoranda of understanding (MoU) covering areas such as education and judicial cooperation. The economic underpinning remains robust: total trade saw significant expansion, rising from \$320 million in 2007 to \$670 million by 2017 ("Amir's Malaysia Visit to Focus More on Economic Cooperation", 2018). Furthermore, Qatari Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) is substantial, with the sovereign wealth fund having committed investments estimated between \$12 billion and \$15 billion in Malaysia (Burton, 2021). Efforts to institutionalise this growing cooperation led to the establishment of the Malaysia-Qatar Joint Business Council (MQJBC) in 2020, solidifying Malaysia's position as a platform to ASEAN for Qatari investors. This comprehensive political, economic, and strategic alignment underscores the necessity of examining this bilateral partnership in detail.

Literature Review

The Evolution of Malaysia-Qatar Bilateral Relations

The relationship between Malaysia and Qatar, established diplomatically in 1974, is characterised by strong economic foundations and a resilient policy of non-alignment, positioning Malaysia as an emerging middle power (Hossain & Shukri, 2020). Malaysia's foreign policy is rooted in non-alignment, supporting closer cooperation within the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which began in 1965 (Thalib, 2016). This wider framework has guided relations with West Asian countries through an "ummah network" perspective (Thalib, 2016). Elite diplomatic engagement confirms the bilateral commitment, as evidenced by the Prime Minister of Qatar visiting Malaysia multiple times, including in 2009, 2011, and 2013 (Abu-Hussin, Salleh, & Nasir, 2015). Under Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak, Malaysia prioritised promoting closer trade and investment bilaterally with selected Muslim countries, rather than relying exclusively on the OIC platform (Khalid, 2011). Furthermore, the presence of Qatar's Al Jazeera television opening a regional bureau in Kuala Lumpur in 2006 underscores the enduring media and diplomatic connections (Foley, 2012). This foundational relationship is built on strong economic and trade ties that have withstood regional and international changes (Hossain & Shukri, 2020).

The durability of the Malaysia-Qatar relationship was significantly tested during the 2017 Gulf Crisis, where Malaysia emphasised a policy of diplomatic neutrality (Farzana & Haq, 2019; Bishku, 2021). Malaysia maintained a position of "active neutrality," refusing to take sides with or backs the economic embargoes imposed by the blockading Arab nations (Farzana & Haq, 2019; Cafiero, 2017). This foreign policy decision was guided by the principle of moderation

and the aim of maintaining good relations with all countries across the Muslim world (Cafiero, 2017). Critically, Kuala Lumpur publicly rejected the accusation that Qatar was a state sponsor of terrorism, diverging sharply from the narrative promoted by the Anti-Terror Quartet (Cafiero, 2017; Hairi, 2023). Despite initial fears of consequences due to previous political connections, Malaysia shirked from Saudi demands to side against Qatar (Burton, 2021). High-level bilateral engagement continued, symbolised by the Emir of Qatar's visit to Malaysia in October 2017, just months after the blockade began (Bishku, 2021; Hairi, 2023). During this visit, four bilateral memoranda of understanding (MoU) were signed, covering crucial areas such as judicial cooperation, education, diplomacy, and legal matters (Hairi, 2023; Cafiero, 2017; Hossain & Shukri, 2020).

Economic factors serve as a robust driver of bilateral flows, underpinning the strategic political engagement with the Gulf region. Trade between Malaysia and Qatar has seen remarkable growth, highlighted by a surge of over 200% within the first nine months of 2011 (Devadason, Baharumshah, & Subramaniam, 2014). Research utilising a gravity model to analyse trade with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which includes Qatar, confirms the significant impact of economic factors on bilateral trade flows (Devadason et al., 2014). Key determinants of this trade volume include macroeconomic factors such as the real exchange rate, per capita GDP, and inflation (Abidin & Haseeb, 2018). Furthermore, Islamic financial indicators, including the number of Islamic banks and Zakah collection, were also found to significantly affect bilateral trade volume with GCC countries (Abidin & Haseeb, 2018). Malaysia has been keen on leveraging trade opportunities with non-traditional partners like the GCC, moving beyond established trading blocs (Devadason et al., 2014). Commercial links have been strengthened by specific agreements, such as Qatar Airways designating Penang as its second destination in Malaysia following the Emir's 2017 visit (Hairi, 2023). Malaysian companies have also benefited from major contracts, securing \$2.5 billion worth of deals related to infrastructure and preparation for the 2022 Qatar World Cup (Haryono & Atika, 2023).

Beyond trade, Qatari FDI is substantial and diverse, cementing deep financial and commercial ties between the two nations. Qatar's sovereign wealth fund has committed investments estimated to be between \$12 billion and \$15 billion in Malaysia (Burton, 2021). The countries proposed establishing a joint investment fund valued at RM6.2 billion to further boost capital flow in both nations (Devadason et al., 2014). Case studies focusing on FDI inflows from West Asia/Middle East, including Qatar, specifically examine the factors influencing these capital flows into Malaysia (Hussein, Khamis, Omar, & Razak, 2024). The Qatar Investment Authority's focus on property illustrates a growing Qatari interest in Malaysia's real estate and retail sectors, demonstrating the diversification of West Asian investment (Hussein et al., 2024). Financial ties extend to the banking sector, as the Qatar Islamic Bank established a foothold in Southeast Asia (Foley, 2012). Furthermore, Qatar General Insurance and Reinsurance Group, a Qatari company, operates within the Malaysian financial landscape (Mason, 2023). While both nations share an interest in Islamic finance, the regulatory environments differ significantly, with Qatar utilising a decentralised Shariah board structure compared to Malaysia's centralised approach (Gintzburger, 2012).

The Malaysia–Qatar partnership also holds significance in the realm of geostrategic alignment and humanitarian action, reflecting Malaysia's trajectory as an emerging middle power. Strategically, Malaysia, alongside Qatar and Turkey, has been identified as part of a "challenger bracket" opposing established regional actors (Mason, 2023). This alignment manifested in a

proposed 2019 economic alliance involving the four countries, designed to use alternative trading mechanisms such as gold and bartering (Mason, 2023). Following the 2018 election, Malaysia's second government under Tun Mahathir exhibited closer personal links with Qatar (Burton, 2021). Humanitarian diplomacy has become a defining feature of the bilateral relationship, with Qatar Charity negotiating extensively with various Malaysian authorities, including the Security Council and Foreign Ministry, to secure approval for engagement (Elkahlout & Hedaya, 2024). These Qatari-led humanitarian interventions primarily focus on the health sector (Elkahlout & Hedaya, 2024). The Qatari government provided specific bilateral aid through a USD 70 million funding package to the Malaysian government aimed at supporting Rohingya refugees and asylum seekers (Snider, 2023).

The Concept of Middle Power

The concept of middle powers pertains to states that occupy an intermediate position within the international hierarchy (Spies, 2016). These nations are characterized as being neither great powers nor small states in terms of their material capacity and global influence (Jordaan, 2003). Historically, the classification of states by power levels can be traced back to 6th-century BC China and was subsequently refined in 14th-century Italy (Abbondanza, 2018). Scholars often analyze these states through three distinct perspectives: their physical position, identity, and specific behaviors (de Bhal, 2023). This hierarchical ranking aids in distinguishing status-anxious states that have surpassed the lowest stratum of power but have not yet attained great power status (de Bhal, 2023). Within the international system, middle powers are recognized for their capacity to play a significant role in regional affairs (Cooper, 2011). This middle status indicates that while they lack comprehensive global dominance, they are considerably more influential than weaker states (Spies, 2016).

Middle powers are primarily characterized by their distinct foreign policy behaviours and commitment to multilateral cooperation (Efstathopoulos, 2018). In contrast to great powers, these states frequently employ strategies such as niche diplomacy and coalition-building to accomplish their international objectives (Efstathopoulos, 2018). Their diplomatic agendas typically emphasize being "good international citizens" by supporting crisis management and international law (Efstathopoulos, 2018). While traditional middle powers often concentrate on democratic and liberal ideals, emerging middle powers may prioritize counter-hegemonic objectives and reforms for the Global South (Spies, 2016). These nations frequently engage in "norm-entrepreneurship," leveraging their influence to establish global standards despite lacking substantial military strength (Spies, 2016). Their influence is often most pronounced during periods of uncertainty or ambiguity in relations among the world's great powers (Holbraad, 1984). Ultimately, middle powers function as stabilizing forces that promote cohesion within the global system (Jordaan, 2003).

Research Methodology

The article used desk research as the central methodology for data collection and analysis. This approach systematically involved the gathering and synthesis of pre-existing data and information from diverse resources, circumventing the necessity of original data collection through field studies. The authors utilised existing literature, reports, statistics, and academic documentation, accessing relevant information efficiently. A systematic process was also undertaken, requiring the definition of clear research objectives to guide the search strategy. Documents were rigorously evaluated based on quality, direct relevance to the research

questions. The final analysis involved synthesising the collected data to identify patterns and insights regarding government-led initiatives.

The desk research is notably advantageous, offering a quick turnaround and low cost for analysing vast amounts of information, thereby providing a vital contextual framework for the study. However, the authors acknowledge several limitations inherent to this method. The scope of the research is inherently constrained by the available data, potentially overlooking relevant themes or emerging trends. Furthermore, the authors had to meticulously address the prominent issue of data synthesis, ensuring findings were carefully combined to create original insights, rather than merely recapping existing literature.

The authors also employed thematic analysis, a systematic qualitative research method, to identify and report patterns (themes) within the dataset. This six-step process began with "Familiarisation with the Data", where the authors immersed themselves in policy reports and records from the 2018–2020 period to note preliminary insights. The next step, "Generating Initial Codes", involved segmenting the data into codes relevant to the research questions. For instance, records detailing reciprocal high-level visits, such as Deputy Prime Minister Wan Azizah Wan Ismail's trip to Qatar and the Emir of Qatar's subsequent visit, were coded under "high-level diplomacy". In the third step, "Searching for Themes", these codes were collated to identify connections and patterns, followed by the fourth step, "Reviewing Themes", to ensure their validity against the dataset. In the fifth step, "Defining and Naming Themes", the authors clearly explained each theme's significance. A major theme identified was "Institutionalising bilateral economic relations," which detailed governmental efforts to formalise cooperation. This theme was substantiated by evidence like the establishment of the Malaysia-Qatar Joint Business Council (MQJBC) in 2020 and the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between MIDA and IPAQ. Finally, the sixth step, "Producing the Final Report", allowed the authors to compile a structured account of the themes discovered, supported by illustrative data excerpts.

Research Findings and Discussion

Close Bilateral Engagement

The leaders of Malaysia and Qatar have built a strong foundation of mutual trust, fostering robust bilateral relations between the two nations. They have enhanced interstate interactions across various domains, including political, social, and economic spheres. The diplomatic ties between Malaysia and Qatar have now gained global prominence. In certain instances, the two nations collaborate closely through international organisations such as the United Nations (UN), the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Their shared views on counterterrorism, human rights protection, and the use of dialogue and peaceful methods to resolve issues serve as catalysts for international commitments and cooperation ("Qatar, Malaysia Share Common Views: Emir", 2017). It is evident that, the scope of their partnership extends beyond mere bilateral engagement.

During Tun Mahathir's tenure as head of government, his deputy, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, made an official visit to Qatar in November 2018. Accompanying her on this visit was a high-level delegation, including the Minister of International Trade, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Deputy Minister of Finance, and senior government officials. As a high-level engagement between the two nations, she met with the Emir of Qatar and later held discussions

with the Qatari Prime Minister and other ministers. The influence of soft power in Malaysia-Qatar relations was evident when she was invited to deliver a keynote speech at Qatar University, a prestigious institution in the country (“Lawatan Dr Wan Azizah Kukuhkan Hubungan Malaysia-Qatar”, 2018). This invitation was a high honour and a symbolic gesture of mutual respect between the two nations. Notably, the last foreign leader invited to speak at Qatar University was President Erdogan, highlighting Wan Azizah as a distinguished figure among international Muslim leaders to receive such an honour.

In early December 2018, the Emir of Qatar embarked on a working visit to Malaysia. This visit underscored Qatar's strategic effort to expand its diplomatic relations with friendly nations and highlighted Doha's prompt engagement with Malaysia's newly formed leadership. The Emir had the first meeting with Tun Mahathir, who was serving his second stint as Malaysia's prime minister. This leader-to-leader diplomatic contact emphasised the mutual recognition of Malaysia and Qatar as reliable partners in their respective regions. During their discussions, the leaders explored a wide array of topics, including bilateral cooperation and geopolitical issues. The meeting provided an excellent platform for upper-tier diplomatic activity, serving as an important checkpoint to reaffirm political intentions, foster trust, and strengthen the bilateral direction between the two countries.

The principal event during the Emir's visit to Kuala Lumpur was the joint inauguration of an anti-corruption stainless steel monument in Putrajaya (Dataran Putra). This monument, a gift from the government of Qatar to the Prime Minister and the people of Malaysia, serves as a testament to Malaysia's anti-corruption stance and its commitment to combating corruption (“Amir's Malaysia Visit to Focus More on Economic Cooperation”, 2018). It symbolises the solidarity and efforts of the international community in the fight against corruption. The Qatari gift, the monument, acts as a badge of honour for Malaysia's anti-corruption initiatives and enhances Qatar's image as a strong proponent of integrity and good governance. For both nations, the monument stands as a permanent reminder of their shared values and political commitment to combat corruption, reinforcing their desire to deepen ties beyond economic aspects to include moral dimensions.

From 11 to 14 December 2019, Tun Mahathir embarked on an official four-day visit to Qatar. Accompanying him were key figures from the Malaysian government, including the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Defence, the Minister of Economic Affairs, and other senior officials. This visit was marked by significant events in Doha that highlighted Qatar's expanding diplomatic initiatives and its strategic use of soft power. A notable event was the presentation of the Doha Forum Award by the Emir of Qatar to Tun Mahathir. This accolade was a testament to Tun Mahathir's exemplary leadership, his proactive initiatives, and his substantial contributions to Malaysia's development. As a leading figure in the Global South, Mahathir's recognition through this award underscored Qatar's support for a leader known for his principled and articulate stance on global issues. This award was particularly significant, as it was the first leadership award ever conferred by the Doha Forum (“Dr M Receives Doha Forum Award,” 2019). The second significant event was the conferral of an honorary Doctor of Philosophy upon Tun Mahathir by Qatar University. This award, recognised for its intellectual distinction, acknowledged Tun Mahathir's exceptional contributions to both the academic and political arenas, which have significantly contributed to Malaysia's advancement. For Tun Mahathir, the award symbolised the robust diplomatic relationship between Malaysia

and Qatar. By framing the award as a representation of national success, Tun Mahathir adeptly transformed this personal honour into a diplomatic asset that enhances bilateral relations.

Merely three days following Tun Mahathir's official visit to Qatar, the Emir of Qatar reciprocated with a visit to Malaysia. Prior to this engagement, the Malaysian Foreign Minister personally conveyed an invitation through a written message from Tun Mahathir, exemplifying direct and respectful leader-to-leader communication. In Kuala Lumpur, the Emir participated in the KL Summit 2019, which was also attended by the President of Turkey, the President of Iran, and the King of Malaysia. During the summit, the Emir addressed a pressing issue that demands both regional and global attention: the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Although these engagements helped build trust, they were potentially hindered by Malaysia's frequent leadership changes, particularly since 2020, which exposed the relationship to domestic political risks.

Institutionalizing Bilateral Economic Relations

Qatar and Malaysia were poised to enhance and expand their partnership across various domains, with a particular focus on trade and investment. However, translating the political commitment to the future trajectory of their bilateral relations into tangible actions was essential. There was a call for relevant agencies, such as bureaucratic machinery, to implement the outcomes of the discussions between the Emir and Tun Mahathir ("Malaysia Looking Forward to Broaden Ties with Qatar," 2018). This suggests that establishing working committees or joint mechanisms to embed the discussion's outcomes was considered critically important. The institutionalisation of cooperation between Qatar and Malaysia would endure, even amidst potential political leadership changes in the future.

Recognising the significance of formalising their bilateral economic diplomacy, Malaysia and Qatar established an official structured platform to facilitate ongoing economic engagement and cooperation. In February 2020, The Malaysia-Qatar Joint Business Council (MQJBC) was established as a direct result of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by the Qatar Chamber and the Malaysia Chamber of Commerce and Industry in 2017 ("Qatar-Malaysian Joint Business Council Formed," 2019). The Council aims to foster connections and partnerships among businesses in both nations. The private sectors and commercial actors have the potential to act as informal agents of economic diplomacy, simultaneously influencing the international relations between their respective countries. The council engages in exchanging economic information, evaluating investment opportunities, and organising trade fairs.

Investment

Several factors may influence Qatar's investment in Malaysia. Firstly, Malaysia's economy is not reliant on a single industry; it is diversified across multiple sectors, each possessing distinct components and competitive advantages. As a multi-sectoral economy, Malaysia demonstrates resilience to economic shocks. Its economic identity, characterised by comparative advantage, is underpinned by resource-based strengths, including natural resources such as oil, gas, palm oil, and rubber. Additionally, Malaysia's comparative advantage extends to advanced electronic manufacturing and a skilled workforce. Secondly, Malaysia positions itself as a 'gateway to ASEAN,' aspiring to become a regional hub for foreign investors, thereby creating substantial business opportunities. These opportunities facilitate investors' access to the broader Southeast Asian market. Once foreign investors allocate their capital in Malaysia, they integrate into both the Malaysian and regional business ecosystems. Furthermore, service-based economic

activities foster synergistic partnerships between Qatar and Malaysia. This sector is a strength for Qatar and a priority for Malaysia, which is looking to attract more investors to the country (“MIDA Signs MOU With IPAQ to Promote Investments - MIDA | Malaysian Investment Development Authority,” 2020). Consequently, should Qatar's public and private institutions invest more in Malaysia's service sector, Qatar would be integrated not only into the financial ecosystem but also into the social and cultural fabric of Malaysia.

Historically, foreign ownership in the Gulf states was subject to stringent restrictions. These nations exercised considerable control over the entry of foreign enterprises into their markets, often requiring foreign investors to collaborate with local partners to initiate business activities. Currently, a trend towards economic liberalisation is evident among many Gulf states, as they increasingly open their economies to global capital. Qatar is part of this trend, undertaking reforms to its investment framework. Notably, Qatar has relaxed its foreign investment ownership regulations, permitting 100% foreign ownership in multiple sectors (“Laws and Regulations,” 2025). This reform serves as an invitation to Malaysian companies, indicating potential for business expansion within the Qatari market. The newly established business-friendly environment in Qatar facilitates the integration of Malaysian enterprises into Qatar's internationalisation strategy. Additionally, Qatar's strategic geographical position enhances its appeal, serving as a bridge to the Middle Eastern market. Its logistical advantages position Qatar as an entry point to the GCC market, while its emerging role as a hub connecting Europe, Asia, and Africa further underscores its economic significance.

State-led economic engagement was a central focus of Malaysia Deputy Prime Minister's official visit to Qatar in 2018. During this visit, the Malaysian delegation, along with Wan Azizah, met with the Qatar Business Association (QBA) and the Qatar Chamber. Demonstrating Malaysia's political commitment to an economic partnership with Qatar, Wan Azizah conveyed Malaysia's eagerness to enhance economic ties with the country (“QBA Hosts Deputy PM of Malaysia, Discusses Ways to Strengthen Ties,” 2018). This strong intent was further evidenced by the multiple visits made by Malaysian business delegations to Qatar in 2018 (“YAB Tun Dr . Mahathir Mohamad Visit to Qatar, 11 to 14 December 2019 - MIDA | Malaysian Investment Development Authority,” 2020). On the Qatari side, there was a call to bolster bilateral cooperation and a suggestion to conduct a study on investment opportunities in both countries. Deepening economic interdependence between Malaysia and Qatar is unlikely without active engagement from the business community. Therefore, non-state actors, such as business communities, play a crucial role in achieving the objectives of the state's foreign economic policies. Efforts to strengthen bilateral economic relations should not rely solely on government initiatives.

During Tun Mahathir's visit to Qatar in December 2019, a collaborative roundtable meeting was organised on December 12th by the Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA), the Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE), the Qatar Chamber of Commerce and Industry (QCCI), and the Qatar Business Association. This event saw the participation of approximately 81 Qatari business professionals from 62 different companies, all seeking opportunities for collaboration in various sectors (“YAB Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad Visit to Qatar, 11 to 14 December 2019 - MIDA | Malaysian Investment Development Authority,” 2020). The sectors identified for potential partnerships included green technology, education, oil and gas, halal food processing, hospitality, and Islamic banking. Tun Mahathir's visit can be interpreted as a strategic initiative in state-led economic

diplomacy, highlighting a clear link between the governmental visit and the focused business interactions.

Foreign relations encompass more than just interactions between states; they also involve collaborations driven by market forces. During his 2019 visit to Qatar, Tun Mahathir engaged in direct discussions with leading Qatari business figures and industry representatives. This roundtable meeting functioned as a bridge connecting political leadership with private sector participants. In his address to international audiences, Tun Mahathir participated in dialogues focused on enhancing and broadening bilateral cooperation, particularly in trade and investment. He highlighted several sectors with potential for collaboration, including information technology, energy, automotive, real estate, tourism, and agriculture. The Prime Minister advocated for Malaysia to Qatari businesses, underscoring the nation's high-value industries such as electronics, digital and animation, and the medical sector, where multi-sectoral partnerships hold promise. Furthermore, the halal food and Islamic finance sectors, which are integral to Malaysia's economic identity, were presented as appealing opportunities for investment from the Gulf region ("Prime Minister of Malaysia and Qatari Businessmen Discuss Ways to Expand Bilateral Economic Cooperation," 2019).

In the meeting, Tun Mahathir highlighted Malaysia's strategic regional position and its conducive business environment. As a founding member of ASEAN, Malaysia stands out as a prime destination for foreign investment in Southeast Asia. Investors benefit not only from access to the Malaysian market but also from the expansive ASEAN market, which encompasses over 600 million consumers. Thus, Malaysia functions as a pivotal platform to the regional market. Beyond market access, Malaysia's esteemed reputation as an investment hub is frequently utilised to attract investors. The World Bank's Doing Business Report 2020 revealed that Malaysia was ranked 12th in ease of doing business in 2019, an advancement from 15th places the previous year ("Dr M: Malaysia an Ideal Destination for Qatari Investors," 2019). This improved ranking is anticipated to enhance investor confidence in Malaysia as a leading investment destination.

In October 2019, the Qatar Investment Promotion Agency (IPAQ) and the Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA), both public investment entities, entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to formalise and strengthen the economic ties between Qatar and Malaysia. This MoU was designed to foster mutual cooperation by facilitating the flow of investment capital between the two countries, thereby creating a direct governmental conduit for capital distribution. Furthermore, the agreement aimed to coordinate joint promotional initiatives, including conferences and seminars, to engage investors from both nations ("MIDA Signs MoU with IPAQ to Promote Investments - MIDA | Malaysian Investment Development Authority," 2020). As such, this MoU was intended to lay the groundwork for enhanced investment collaboration between Qatar and Malaysia.

Investment promotion agencies in Malaysia and Qatar play a pivotal role in fostering economic development by attracting foreign direct investment. In Malaysia, the Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA) was established to enhance the inflow of foreign capital and oversee the manufacturing and services sectors (Hossain, 2022). This agency serves as the primary liaison for investors and is considered a reliable intermediary for the implementation of investment policies (Felker & Jomo, 2007). Additionally, MIDA collaborates with various state agencies to retain investments and align them with national growth objectives (Jusoh,

2020; “Our Principles - MIDA,” 2024). Similarly, the Investment Promotion Agency Qatar (IPAQ), founded in 2019, coordinates the national investment agenda and promotes economic diversification (Mohib & Carroll, 2024; “About Us - Invest Qatar,” 2025). This agency offers a digital platform for investors and streamlines the commercial registration process to support a robust digital ecosystem (Kularatne, Miyajima, Muir, & Muir, 2024). Ultimately, both organizations facilitate the entire investor journey, creating new pathways for sustained industrial and digital growth (“About Us - Invest Qatar,” 2025; “Our Principles - MIDA,” 2024). These agencies function as navigational bridges, assisting foreign investors in navigating the complexities of local regulations to establish a stable presence in new markets.

The collaboration between the Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA) and the Investment Promotion Agency of Qatar (IPAQ) is anticipated to substantially impact bilateral relations, serving as intermediaries for domestic firms seeking foreign investment opportunities. For instance, MIDA has facilitated Malaysian corporations in their pursuit of investment prospects in Qatar. Additionally, MIDA has enabled Malaysia to access Qatar's considerable capital resources, including its sovereign wealth fund. While MIDA endeavors to attract foreign investors to Malaysia, IPAQ is dedicated to diversifying Qatar's investments abroad, particularly in the high-growth economic sectors of Southeast Asian economies. Notably, the collaboration between MIDA and IPAQ is mutually complementary. Despite these institutional efforts, risks persist due to unequal capital movement, wherein Qatari foreign direct investment (FDI) into Malaysia significantly exceeds reciprocal investments, potentially creating dependencies of Malaysia on Qatar.

The agreement established between the parties of the two countries served as a pivotal tool for cooperation. In addition to fostering significant momentum for future collaboration, the agreement had formalised the commitments of the signatories. It provided concrete advantages that surpassed mere symbolic acts. As noted by Tun Mahathir, the bilateral cooperation between his country and Qatar had witnessed rapid and consistent growth due to the signing of multiple agreements (“Prime Minister of Malaysia and Qatari Businessmen Discuss Ways to Expand Bilateral Economic Cooperation,” 2019). (Note: As of 2018, the two nations have formalised a total of 12 Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) and agreements (Agonia, 2018). These agreements are primarily aimed at mitigating issues related to double taxation and financial evasion, in addition to promoting collaborative efforts between the Qatar News Agency and the Malaysia News Agency.

Trade

Malaysia–Qatar trade has expanded substantially but remains comparatively small within Malaysia's overall Middle East economic engagement. In 2007, the total trade amounted to \$320 million, which doubled to \$670 million by 2017, indicating a deepening economic interdependence between the two nations (“Amir's Malaysia Visit to Focus More on Economic Cooperation”, 2018). This upward trend continued between 2017 and 2018, with total trade rising from RM3.19 billion in 2017 to RM3.72 billion in 2018, representing an increase of approximately 16%-17% (roughly RM530 million). This data suggests a significant expansion in trade within a short period. However, in relative terms, Qatar accounted for just 0.1% of Malaysia's total trade in 2007 and 0.16% in 2017, underscoring its limited scale despite the proportional increase. Moreover, comparing to Malaysia's other Middle East partners, Qatar remains less significant: in 2024, bilateral trade reached \$1.38 billion (up 49% from 2023), but this is dwarfed by trade with UAE (\$9.22 billion) and Saudi Arabia (estimated \$10-12 billion),

representing only about 6% of Malaysia's \$22.3 billion total GCC trade and highlighting asymmetries where Qatar ranks as a tertiary partner amid Malaysia's focus on larger GCC economies (MITI, 2025; MATRADE, 2025; The Observatory of Economic Complexity. (n.d.), 2025).

The export dynamics between Malaysia and Qatar highlight Malaysia's prowess in manufacturing, which stands in stark contrast to Qatar's energy-dominated export activities. Malaysia's exports to Qatar are predominantly composed of electrical and electronic products, manufactured metals, wood-based goods, and processed food items (Hussin, 2019). Malaysia greatly benefited from Qatar's market, particularly in the manufacturing and halal sectors. Conversely, Qatar's export economy is heavily reliant on LNG, with its exports to Malaysia mainly including crude oil, chemical substances, and metal products.

The evolution of economic relations between Malaysia and Qatar has been significantly shaped by state-led business diplomacy, as evidenced by various initiatives. In March 2019, the Qatar Chamber hosted a visit from a Malaysian delegation with the goal of fostering connections between Malaysian and Qatari businesses. This initiative, termed a 'market immersion mission', was jointly organised by the Malaysian Embassy in Qatar and the Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE) ("Malaysian Food Export Firms Explore Market Options in Qatar," 2019). The delegation held individualised meetings to build connections between Malaysian companies and prospective business partners in Qatar, while simultaneously gaining valuable insights into the Qatari market, local business environment, laws, and culture. The Qatar Chamber expressed its willingness to provide the delegation with comprehensive data on business establishment in Qatar. The delegation included five mid-tier companies (MTCs) involved in the production and export of processed foods and palm-based products. These companies participated in the Mid-Tier Companies Development Programme initiated by MATRADE, which aims to enhance the capabilities of Malaysian firms to excel in both regional and international markets. The involvement of Malaysian companies in Qatar's high-value market reflects a strategic move towards the internationalisation of domestic firms, particularly within export-orientated sectors.

Malaysia has strategically employed government-led business promotion to enhance market access in Qatar and the surrounding region. On 28 April 2019, the Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE) facilitated a visit by Malaysian business representatives to the headquarters of GWS, a prominent logistics provider in Qatar, as well as to the Logistic Village Qatar (LVQ) ("GWC Receives Malaysia Trade Delegation at Headquarters, Logistics Village in Qatar," 2019). The delegation, comprising 14 representatives from various industries, including facility management and latex medical gloves, sought to explore potential collaborations and partnerships with Qatari enterprises. Additionally, they aimed to promote their products and services within the Qatari market. This initiative not only projected the potential for long-term and evolving relations between Malaysian and Qatari businesses but also indicated GWS's openness to deeper cooperation with its Malaysian counterparts. Furthermore, MATRADE's involvement in this initiative illustrates the importance of state-facilitated private sector business expansion. MATRADE may also play a crucial role in negotiating the reduction of business-related barriers for Malaysian companies seeking entry into the Gulf market.

MATRADE functions as the strategic external trade promotion entity of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry, with the specific mandate of enhancing the global presence of domestic enterprises (Azudin & Norhashim, 2018; Mansor & Cheah, 2024). Since its inception in March 1993, the agency has operated as a comprehensive information center, providing exporters with essential market research and trade intelligence to enhance international competitiveness (Mansor & Cheah, 2024). To facilitate market entry, MATRADE oversees a range of export promotion activities, including trade missions and business matching programs aimed at connecting local suppliers with suitable foreign importers (Azudin & Norhashim, 2018; Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation, n.d.). Additionally, the organization offers technical training and advisory services to ensure that Malaysian companies meet stringent international standards in technology, packaging, and safety (Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation, n.d.). Through its Exporters Advisory Unit, MATRADE disseminates timely market intelligence, establishing itself as the primary reference point for international entities navigating the Malaysian market (Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation, n.d.). This multifaceted support framework indicates that MATRADE serves not merely as a facilitator but as a structural catalyst, propelling domestic firms to enhance their operational capabilities to meet the sophisticated demands of the global arena.

Relevancy Of the Concept of Middle Power

Middle powers frequently bolster their international influence by nurturing bilateral relationships founded on mutual trust and shared values. These nations strategically employ diplomacy to promote stability and cohesion within the global system (Jordaan, 2003). A pertinent example is the relationship between Malaysia and Qatar, which has developed a strong foundation of trust, enhancing their political and social interactions. Such middle powers often engage collaboratively through international organizations, including the United Nations and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. High-level diplomatic engagements, such as the official visit of Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister to Qatar in 2018, serve to reaffirm these political commitments. These interactions also involve the strategic use of soft power, such as delivering keynote speeches at prestigious universities. Additionally, symbolic gestures, like the inauguration of an anti-corruption monument, highlight shared moral dimensions between nations. Through these engagements, middle powers can project a positive image of international citizenship and assume a more significant role in regional affairs (Efstathopoulos, 2018).

The institutionalization of bilateral economic relations enables middle powers to convert political commitments into enduring cooperation. While political discussions establish the strategic direction, middle powers must employ bureaucratic mechanisms to implement concrete actions ("Malaysia Looking Forward to Broaden Ties with Qatar," 2018). This process frequently involves the creation of formalized platforms, such as the Malaysia-Qatar Joint Business Council, to facilitate sustained engagement. Such institutions ensure the continuity of cooperation even amidst changes in political leadership. By formalizing these ties through Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), states can mitigate uncertainty and clarify their commitments ("Prime Minister of Malaysia and Qatari Businessmen Discuss Ways to Expand Bilateral Economic Cooperation," 2019). These agreements enable private sector actors to function as informal agents of economic diplomacy, thereby influencing international relations. This behavior is consistent with the middle power propensity to pursue cooperative initiatives that stabilize the global order (Jordaan, 2003).

Middle powers leverage strategic investment partnerships to enhance their regional influence and secure economic resilience. Malaysia, for instance, positions itself as a 'gateway to ASEAN' to attract foreign investors to the wider Southeast Asian market. At the same time, Qatar has liberalised its economy by allowing 100% foreign ownership in multiple sectors to invite international business ("Laws and Regulations," 2025). State-led economic diplomacy is crucial here, as seen in the collaborative roundtable meetings between Malaysian and Qatari business professionals. Agencies like MIDA and IPAQ play a vital role by formalising investment capital flows through official agreements ("MIDA Signs MoU With IPAQ to Promote Investments - MIDA | Malaysian Investment Development Authority," 2020). This type of cooperation helps middle powers diversify their economies and resist external domination by greater powers (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025). Furthermore, these investments integrate nations into each other's financial and cultural fabrics. Such strategies demonstrate how middle powers use niche diplomacy to focus on specific economic strengths (Efstatopoulos, 2018).

Establishing robust trade connections constitutes a fundamental strategic approach for middle powers to cultivate economic interdependence and enhance their global significance. The total trade volume between Malaysia and Qatar has experienced substantial growth, indicating a strengthening economic relationship between the two countries. Malaysia has effectively exported manufactured goods and halal products, while Qatar supplies essential energy resources, such as oil and chemicals (Hussin, 2019). To facilitate this growth, government agencies like MATRADE organize 'market immersion missions' to assist domestic firms in penetrating foreign markets ("Malaysian Food Export Firms Explore Market Options in Qatar," 2019). This emphasis on trade enables middle powers to assume a significant role in the economic affairs (Cooper, 2011). By nurturing these trade connections, middle powers can contribute to stabilizing the global order through cooperative economic behaviour (Jordaan, 2003).

Conclusion

The robust leadership-level relational ties between the two nations forms a crucial foundation for expanding bilateral economic cooperation. This was particularly highlighted by Malaysia's Ambassador to Qatar, who noted that the high-level mutual exchange visits in the fourth quarter of 2018, specifically Wan Azizah's visit to Qatar and the Emir of Qatar's visit to Kuala Lumpur in December 2018, significantly enhanced interactions between Malaysian and Qatari enterprises. Tun Mahathir's expression of gratitude to the Emir of Qatar for his 2018 visit to Malaysia underscored his strong political commitment to the expansion and continuity of bilateral relations. Tun Mahathir explicitly stated, 'We are committed in increasing trade between both countries and improving bilateral cooperation on many other areas.' (Mohamad, 2018). Consequently, the leaders appeared to prioritise trade as a central element of their cordial and close relationships.

The elevation of bilateral relations between Qatar and Malaysia to an unprecedented level has been achieved through not only the reciprocal visits of national leaders and officials but also the proactive participation of private sector representatives. This cross-sectoral collaboration has notably strengthened the trade and investment connections between the two nations. In essence, both Track I and Track II diplomacy have successfully laid a robust groundwork for cooperation in sectors such as commerce and investment.

The concept of middle power remains relevant in contemporary international relations, as shown by Malaysia and Qatar's bilateral relationship, where both nations enhance their global influence through diplomacy and shared values. These middle powers foster stability through diplomatic visits, collaboration within the United Nations and Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and soft power initiatives that project responsible international citizenship. They institutionalize cooperation through joint business councils, Memoranda of Understanding, and investment agencies, enabling private sector involvement and creating sustained interdependence. By leveraging trade growth and niche diplomacy—Malaysia as an ASEAN gateway and Qatar's economic liberalization—these states diversify economies, resist great power domination, and contribute to global order through cooperation. This aligns with the concept of middle power, demonstrating their role in regional and global affairs.

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