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From Russia, with trade and amity

THE image of President Vladimir Putin being given a rousing state welcome at Parliament Square in Kuala Lumpur was enough to show how far relations between Malaysia and Russia have progressed. They have come a long way since the height of the Cold War, when Malaysia's foreign policy was pro-Western and the mere thought of neutrality, let alone an alliance with the former Soviet Union, was spurned by the country's leaders, who believed that non-alignment was equivalent to the support of communism.

But now, not only have Putin and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad stepped into each other's warm embrace, the two leaders - through an exchange of visits and enhancement of contacts - have opened the way for the enormous trade potential between the two countries. The multi-billion ringgit business deal sealed in conjunction with Putin's visit on top of the setting up of the Malaysia-Russia Business Council bear testimony to the rewards that lie ahead.

Of course, these are some of the things that have become achievable following the collapse of the Soviet Union and a change in the world order. But if it is all about seizing initiatives and opportunities, Malaysia through Dr Mahathir has done wonders and Putin, through his short but meaningful visit, has crowned such efforts. On top of that, this coup came barely a month after the Prime Minister returned from a successful trip to Ukraine, another former Soviet republic, and just a year and a half after Dr Mahathir himself went to Moscow and Warsaw.

These landmark connections are not about Malaysia adjusting its ideological affinities. In a unipolar world, there cannot be such an abrupt turnaround in the country's leanings towards the former Eastern-bloc nations. As Dr Mahathir has said, Malaysia wants to be friendly with all nations regardless of ideology and policy. Historically, the twain of Malaysia and Russia did not meet because of conflicting policies. But times have changed and Malaysia now looks up to Russia to play a bigger role, especially in endearing itself to smaller nations that have been distanced as a result of the Cold War. And while at it, Russia could do many nations a favour by putting an effective curb in that post-Cold War menace called unilateralism.