

PM to walk the tightrope between East and West nations – analysts

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While Anwar Ibrahim has yet to detail Malaysia's foreign policy direction, the newly minted prime minister is likely to play a diplomatic balancing act between East and West given the friendly relationships he has with both sides, according to international relations analysts.

However, they opined that it is not a question of being "pro-China" or "pro-US" but more of balancing the needs of the country.

Speaking to Malaysiakini, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu's lecturer for Business, Economics and Social Development, Zaharul Abdullah, said he believes the foreign policy under Anwar will continue to be independent, principled and pragmatic.

Despite being generally regarded as "favourable to Uncle Sam" and known to have good relations with US politicians, Zaharul thinks Anwar (above) will keep practising Malaysia's balanced relationship with the US and China as well as

enhance its security cooperation with both nations.

“In the emerging Cold War between the US and China, Anwar will continue (Malaysia’s position) to be non-aligned and uphold Zopfan (Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality),” he said.

In his maiden presser after taking office last Thursday, Anwar briefly commented on China ties, saying he saw the relationship with Beijing as “pivotal” while affirming that relations with the US, Europe, India and other neighbouring countries were equally important.

Universiti Malaysia Terengganu’s lecturer for Business, Economics and Social Development Zaharul Abdullah

China has been actively working to extend its economic influence through bilateral and multilateral trade agreements, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP).

It also recently applied to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) - a regional trade pact with stricter membership requirements than RCEP.

However, the Asian superpower is also flexing its military muscle in the disputed

South China Sea, where both China, Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries hold overlapping sovereignty claims.

In such a climate, Zaharul expects that Anwar, a 75-year-old veteran politician, will more vocally insist that every party stops escalating tension to avoid any military conflict.

“At the same time, he will continue to employ three strategies, namely defending sovereignty and sovereign rights, downplaying China’s threat and overplaying economic cooperation and benefits with China, as well as supporting the Asean conflict management process more than a bilateral consultative mechanism.

“Although the government tends to de-emphasise the dispute, the tone of the government will be more stern and critical compared to previous governments,” the analyst said.

Meanwhile, to balance China’s influence, Zaharul believed that Putrajaya under Anwar will continue enhancing its commitment to agreements such as the CPTPP and Indo-Pacific Framework (IPF).

“We will (also) see a warmer relationship with countries such as Singapore, the US, and the Muslim world,” he added.

Sharing similar views with Zaharul, Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA) senior fellow Oh Ei Sun also strongly believes that Anwar will have the finesse to remain neutral in controversial issues surrounding US and China.

“For any prime minister, it’s not a question of pro-China or pro-US but it’s a question of pro-investment and pro-trade.

“Whichever side that will be able to provide more investment and trade, it would be very hard for Malaysia to resist but to be closer to that power,” Oh said.

Vocal on human rights issues

Having to be diplomatic, however, does not mean Anwar as prime minister will stop being vocal and critical on human rights issues.

Anwar had in the past raised concerns over issues pertaining to the Uyghur Muslim community in Xinjiang and lambasted Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi’s treatment of the Rohingya.

Zaharul said the 10th prime minister will likely maintain his stance on human rights issues and inclusive global governance, but with a more diplomatic and diplomacy-based approach.

“Sensitive issues such as Beijing’s mistreatment of Muslim Uyghurs will be raised and conveyed directly during high-level meetings between both government leaders.

“He will be more vocal, through regional and international platforms such as Asean, United Nations and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, in underscoring and championing issues like human rights and dignity, equitable wealth distribution between rich and poor countries, oppression against the poor and developing countries, good and inclusive global governance and promoting a moderate and progressive Muslim,” he said.

Anwar to take driver’s seat?

Although Malaysia’s foreign policy outlook will generally stay its course during Anwar’s tenure, a senior fellow at the Nusantara Academy for Strategic Research, Azmi Hassan, opined that it will not be surprising if the reformist leader catapults the country into the international limelight.

Compared to his recent predecessors, Azmi said the new prime minister, who is coined as a globalist, is expected to take the driver’s seat instead of delegating foreign policy to his soon-to-be-appointed foreign minister.

“I think Anwar will be very active, hands-on. The direction of the foreign policy will be given by Anwar.

“The foreign policy was just so-so under Muhyiddin Yassin and Ismail Sabri Yaakob, no surprises.

“But it would be very interesting for Anwar because I know he is very close to foreign policy,” Azmi said, adding that Anwar is a well-known world leader and has plenty of international exposure.

While concurring that Anwar would be a prominent leader with international stature, Oh did not echo Azmi’s sentiments.

Pointing out that foreign policy is not a major part of Malaysia’s political discourse, unlike other countries, the SIIA senior fellow said foreign affairs matters would more likely be left to professionals or the incoming foreign minister.

“Of course, Anwar’s foreign policy would be more pronounced compared to Muhyiddin and Ismail Sabri’s.

“Whenever he can feature himself and his government more prominently, he will

take up the opportunity.

“But foreign policy is usually relegated to the back seat and therefore, it’s not something that politicians would fight over,” Oh told Malaysiakini.

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