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Malaysia-Russia ties set for a new high

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Russia holds key to for a Eurasian integration in the Far East



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THE inaugural Asean summit held in Sochi, Russia, from May 19-20 offers more than just a glimpse into the future of Asean and Russia. A slew of diplomatic activities, discussions and agreements were cemented between Russia and Asean members on various areas which reverberate with the summit motto "Towards Strategic Partnership for the Sake of the Common Good".

Malaysia's delegation led by the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Razak, has once again demonstrated his diplomatic prowess in opening up windows of opportunities that would bring mutual benefits to Malaysia and Russia.

Despite the tragic downing of the Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 in a war-torn region of Ukraine where pro-Russian separatists operate, the Malaysian government under Najib remained composed and refused to get embroiled in the geopolitical game under the Russophobic agenda in the name of "justice" for MH17.

The "Malaysian way" of diplomacy could be seen in the prime minister's engagement with the Russian media. In his exclusive interview with RT, a Russian state-owned English news channel recently, Najib made a very interesting remark with regard to the prospect of Malaysia to be part of free-trade deal with Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

This signals Malaysia's readiness to embrace greater international political economic spectrum, rather than just being confined into a more rigid and competing free-trade blocs that is currently jostling for supports among the Asean members: The Trans-Pacific Partnership of the US



Malaysia under Abdul Razak remained steadfast in non-aligned posture despite heightened Cold War tensions

and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership of China.

What Najib has said about EAEU and a greater partnership with Russia in the area of security, politics and culture could be seen as an incisive act for Malaysia to balance the two competing global powers of the US and China that have a large presence within our own diplomatic belt.

With this encouraging development in multilateral platform, Malaysia and Russia strategic partnership has gone from strength to strength and is expected to reach greater height as demonstrated by both parties.

For us to understand the future prospect between Malaysia and Russia, it is best for us to review some notable exchanges between them in recent history.

Russia in Malaysia's Look East Policy

According to the Russian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's rapprochement with Russia (then as USSR) could be traced as early as April 3, 1967. Despite heightened Cold War tensions, Malaysia under the second Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein remain steadfast in non-aligned posture and continue to build diplomatic relationship with the Soviets and Communist China.

The trend continues and intensifies under the fourth Prime Minister Tun



The trend continues and intensifies under Dr Mahathir as he inaugurated a 'Look East Policy'

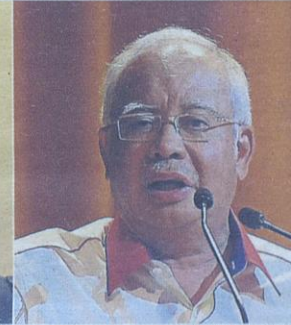
Dr Mahathir Mohamad as he inaugurated a more focused foreign policy (Look East Policy) that is non-Western in nature yet remained non-aligned.

Some notable strategic exchanges in the realm of economy and defence conducted during Dr Mahathir's tenure were the acquisitions of eight-teen MiG-29 fighter aircraft for Royal Malaysian Air Force in 1994 and in 2003, another 18 SU-30MKM Sukhoi multi-role combat aircraft.

The acquisition of MiG-29 in 1994 was quite special to both parties: The Russian made their first major military hardware sales in the region since the days of President Sukarno of Indonesia (back then Indonesia was very close to the Soviets).

Malaysia, for the first time broke tradition of buying weapons only from the West and back then was the only country to fly the Russian jets in the region.

Malaysia's defence procurement policy is tied to trade "offsets" component as part of the government's policy to support Malaysian domestic industry. The offsets for the MiG-29 purchase were the establishment of an aerospace education programme at Universiti Sains Malaysia. For the SU-30 purchase, a joint programme with the Russian Federation had inaugurated Malaysia's very first cosmonaut on board of Russia's Soyuz TMA-11 spacecraft that went to the



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International Space Station in 2007.

As part of the deal, the Russian Federation bore the training costs of two Malaysians who completed the "Angkasawan" programme — Dr Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor and Faiz Khaleed at the Cosmonaut Training Programme in Star City, Russia. The training is for 18 months.

What was less publicised but equally significant was that part of the payment for the MiG-29 and SU-30MKM were done using palm oil and consumer goods.

Malaysia-Russia 'Far East Connection'

Perhaps not known to many Malaysians, Kota Kinabalu is the first and only Malaysian city that has signed a "Sister City" partnership with Russia's far east city, Vladivostok. The idea was mooted during the Mayors' Roundtable Discussion of the 4th Tourism Promotion Organisation for Asia-Pacific cities, where both cities are members, that was held in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, on Sept 27-30, 2009.

As part of the sister city relations, both sides agreed to cooperate in economic, cultural, scientific and other fields which will contribute to familiarisation with the structure and activities of the local municipal, educate residents on the history, culture and modern life of both cities; social, cultural, sports, youth and

other delegations exchanges; the development of economic ties and relations in the field of tourism; and the other activities that could deepen the sister city relations.

Credit for this bridge-building effort must go to the former Kota Kinabalu Mayor Datuk Iliyas Ibrahim and former Sabah Minister of Tourism, Culture and Environment Datuk Masidi Manjun. They have opened the door for a greater cooperation in a multi-track diplomacy especially in local government and citizen engagement with external parties.

Russia — Key to Malaysia's Eurasian Integration

There are many other opportunities unlocked by both sides in the modern history of Malaysia-Russia relationship. Unique partnership in defence, economy and technological sharing that were initiated by past leaders could serve as template for future leaders to enhance cooperation in other areas that have yet to be explored.

Malaysia's advantage of being in Russia's good book, is that we can lobby to be part of the larger strategic alliances of a well-established multilateral organisations which Russia has a strong presence. These alliances include BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India and China and South Africa), Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and Collective Security Treaty Organisation.

As demonstrated by Kota Kinabalu City Hall, more could be done beyond the official and formal government-to-government channel. Malaysian-Russian citizen-level engagement looks promising when more direct flights between Malaysia to Russian cities come online soon.

Malaysia's future to be part of a greater Eurasian integration is bright and we all know Russia holds the key to that.

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