

# Malaysia-China ties

## How the two can benefit

**A**NY country that has remained the largest trading partner for 14 consecutive years must be important to Malaysia. China is that country. Last year alone, the total trade was worth RM487.13 billion.

Two other Sino-Malaysian ties provide the contexts for Anwar's March/April visit to the second biggest economy in the world: the tenth anniversary of the China-Malaysia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership this year and the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Kuala Lumpur and Beijing to be celebrated, possibly in Malaysia, next year. Beijing is a weighty contributor to foreign direct investment in Malaysia, especially in technology and infrastructure. Anwar's few days in China brought to Malaysia RM170 billion worth of investment commitments.

But trade alone doesn't determine a nation's future. Anwar's engagements in Beijing have a wider purpose: an opportunity to develop relationships with Chinese President Xi Jinping and newly minted Chinese Premier Li Qiang, both of whom he is meeting for the first time. Personal contacts give political and diplomatic relations the necessary boost.

Consider the political upheaval in Myanmar. Many would think this to be an unmentionable topic in Beijing, but Anwar took it up with Xi and asked him to use his influence to help solve the crisis there. Malaysia has long suffered from the influx of refugees from Myanmar, made worse by the military

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coup there two years ago. Since the coup, more than 3,000 protesters have been killed and 55,000 houses have been burned. According to the UNHCR, a UN refugee agency, up to January this year, there were 158,870 refugees from Myanmar comprising 106,500 Rohingya, 23,450 Chins and 28,920 from other ethnic groups, escaping persecution. Malaysia, through Asean, has been trying to end the upheaval in Myanmar through the Five-Point Consensus, but the military regime led by General Min Aung Hlaing has refused to implement any of the five points, despite agreeing to the consensus in an Asean gathering in Jakarta. China is the only hope to get the general to act.

Anwar's Beijing trip is significant in another way, too. It was there on Friday he told the world: Malaysia will not allow any big power to dictate what is good for its future.

Taken in isolation, this statement can be read in many ways, but context tells us that Anwar is referring to the New Great Game being played by big powers. New imperialism is his term. Anwar is right. As if colonialism isn't dead, big powers strut the globe telling nations which countries they should be friends or enemies of. Doesn't independence mean something? The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a good example. Since the invasion, big powers have been busy recruiting nations to be enemies of Russia. Many told them, thanks, but no thanks. Not because they are not enemies of war, but because they are not enemies of Russia.

Some see Anwar as a pro-China prime minister, but the truth lies elsewhere. As a leader of a small nation, he wants to build good relations with all. Going to China, our nearest big-power, doesn't mean not going to the United States.

Diplomacy isn't a zero-sum game. If a one-line summary of Anwar's trip to China is needed, it is this: big powers will do well to understand that independent nations have a choice.