

Anwar, Putin to boost ties, may discuss BRICS ambitions



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MALAYSIA and Russia have had friendly ties for the past decade, with the 2014 downing of Malaysia Airlines' Flight MH17 bringing the two countries closer, including through greater military and technical collaboration.

This cordial relationship will be on full display at this week's Eastern Economic Forum (EEF 2024) in Vladivostok, which is 6,416km from Moscow and nears the borders with China and North Korea.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, at the invitation of President Vladimir Putin, is leading a delegation here to spur bilateral cooperation while Russia seeks to develop its eastern provinces.

Anwar is scheduled to meet Putin at a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the EEF 2024 today, before they share the stage at the forum's plenary session with

Chinese Vice-President Han Zheng tomorrow.

"Our bilateral trade with Russia continues to grow steadily, despite the challenging global economic landscape," Malaysia's ambassador to Moscow Datuk Cheong Loon Lai said.

Malaysia's total trade with Russia had grown to US\$1.79 billion from January-July this year, up 15.3 per cent from the same period last year, Cheong said yesterday.

"We import more from Russia, but our exports have grown steadily since last year," he said, adding that Malaysia's exports had expanded 70.7 per cent to US\$580 million in the first seven months of this year due to increased shipments of electrical and electronic products.

Growing Russian interest in Malaysian products and services was reflected through the big participation in the recent XV Russia-Islamic World: Kazan Forum 2024 in the region of Tatarstan.

During the forum, Malaysia set up a pavilion promoting various sectors, including the halal industry, education sector, as well as agricultural, food and beverages products.

As for people's movement between the two countries, Malaysia witnessed a remarkable

increase in Russian tourist arrivals last year, with 109,689 visitors, marking an outstanding growth of 232.4 per cent from the previous year.

Tourism Malaysia has projected a 30 per cent growth from the Russian market this year, with an expected total of 140,000 arrivals.

Putin has identified the development of his nation's Far East as a priority in pursuit of deeper engagement with Asia-Pacific economies.

Anwar's meeting with Putin may see both leaders discussing and assessing Malaysia's application to join the BRICS organisation.

BRICS was founded by Russia, China, India and Brazil 15 years ago. It has since welcomed several emerging economies, including South Africa in 2010 and more recently Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates.

Anwar announced the plan to join BRICS on July 29, with Russia later confirming the country's interest and stated that it would "actively support" closer relations.

Malaysia, together with Thailand, represent just the latest in a long line of mostly emerging-market economies to express their strong desire to join the bur-

geoning economic bloc.

But industry observers said as Malaysia applied to join the influential bloc, there are questions about its impact on Asean centrality and the country's longstanding ties with advanced industrial countries

The initiative to join BRICS has been panned as an illusory aspiration that will not yield real gains.

But Institute of Strategic and International Studies chairman Mohd Faiz Abdullah said that was not the case.

Participation in BRICS aligned with Malaysia's Asean membership, especially in tackling global challenges like climate change and technological disruption, he wrote in the latest *East Asia Forum Quarterly*.

Malaysia could leverage BRICS' institutional mechanisms to collaborate in areas such as sustainable forestry with Brazil, water management with South Africa, smart grid technologies with China and cybersecurity with India.

The knowledge gained through these partnerships can be shared with Asean, boosting Malaysia's influence in both blocs.

Malaysia's participation in BRICS and Asean will allow the application of best practice

across both forums, strengthening its role in Asean as the country assumes the Asean chair in 2025.

While the G7, comprising some of the world's most powerful economies, has long been a dominant force globally, industry observers said the emergence of BRICS presents a counterbalancing force in the global economy and a coalition of emerging economies with diverse perspectives and priorities.

Asean is the long-standing cornerstone of Malaysia's foreign policy and the country remains committed to its principles of regional integration and cooperation.

Faiz said joining BRICS did not imply a shift away from Asean, but rather an expansion of Malaysia's strategic and economic horizons.

Cheong, meanwhile, said BRICS could open up new channels of dialogue. This will allow Malaysia to participate more effectively in global discussions on equitable development and trade financing, thus enhancing the country's global profile.

"(BRICS) should not be seen in the context of diversifying or shifting from another alliance. It will allow us to join in the engagement on the interests of the Global South," he added.