

Why Anwar went to Russia

Malaysia has a chance to capitalise on new trade flows as Russia shifts its focus towards Asia.

RUSSIA has long defied easy explanations.

The 19th-century poet Fyodor Tyutchev famously remarked that "Russia cannot be understood with the mind, nor can she be measured with a common yardstick; she has her own way of being; in Russia, one simply believes."

Yet, despite the enigma that is Russia, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim journeyed to Vladivostok last week with a clear purpose: Advancing Malaysia's interests by strengthening ties with Russia. His grand strategy was to broaden Malaysia's geoeconomic space while diversifying its global partnerships.

The visit was undoubtedly met with various reactions, from interest to bemusement, and perhaps even unease.

Anwar himself acknowledged the sensitivity of engaging Russia in the current geopolitical climate.

At the outset of his meeting with President Vladimir Putin, Anwar conceded that visiting Russia was "not an easy feat" but affirmed that it was "the right decision."

This conviction was validated by Putin's invitation for Malaysia to attend the BRICS summit in Kazan next month - a critical step in the gradual move towards membership in the emerging bloc.

While BRICS may still be in its formative years compared to more established international



Prof Mohd Faiz: Anwar's trip a calculated move to secure Malaysia's place in a rapidly evolving global landscape.'

organisations, its potential should not be underestimated.

By engaging early, Malaysia could secure its position as a key player in this growing network.

(BRICS initially comprised Brazil, Russia, India and China, and was established in 2009 as a cooperation platform for emerging economies with South Africa joining the bloc in 2010. The bloc has now been expanded to include Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates.)

Beyond BRICS, Anwar sought to elevate Malaysia-Russia economic ties. For all the efforts of previous administrations, Malaysia's trade relations with Russia have remained underdeveloped relative to some of its Asean neighbours.

In 2022-23, Malaysia's trade with Russia increased by 15.6% to RM14.22bil, yet this is lower in comparison to the volumes of

nations like Vietnam, which benefits from a free trade agreement with Russia via the Eurasian Economic Union.

Russia's shifting focus towards Asia, accelerated by sanctions and the decline of its European trade, presents a timely opportunity for Malaysia. In 2023, Russia's trade with Asia surged dramatically with its exports and imports rising by 72% and 68%, respectively.

This pivot toward the East offers Malaysia a chance to capitalise on new trade flows.

In an environment of growing protectionism around the world, Malaysia needs to leverage business opportunities wherever they arise.

On the tourism front, Malaysia has yet to sufficiently capture the Russian market, which currently favours Thailand and Vietnam.

Attracting Russian tourists could provide a significant boost to Malaysia's tourism industry and diversify its sources of travellers.

During his address at the Eastern Economic Forum, Anwar's speech resonated with the audience from the outset, blending his rich background in Malay and English literature with the sublime heights of Russian literary giants.

He then outlined three strategic areas for future collaboration: Islamic finance, agriculture and education.

As a global leader in Islamic finance, Malaysia is well posi-

tioned to assist Russia in developing syariah-compliant financial systems, tapping into its large Muslim population.

Moreover, the halal industry presents a fertile ground for deeper cooperation, with ample opportunities for joint initiatives.

In agriculture, Russia's prominence as a leading grain producer aligns with Malaysia's objectives to enhance food security.

In education, Russian expertise in technology presents wide-ranging opportunities for collaboration, especially through the recently established Russian-Malaysian High-Tech Centre.

Yet, Anwar's approach to Russia does not imply blind alignment. During talks, he reiterated Malaysia's stance on the Ukraine conflict, advocating for a peaceful resolution through dialogue.

In all his diplomatic engagements, the Prime Minister was steadfast in defending Malaysia's principles and interests even with major powers.

This was evident in his handling of questions about China in the South China Sea, where Malaysia consistently upholds its sovereignty while maintaining a careful balance in its relations.

This same pragmatism governs Malaysia's relationship with Russia. Disagreements may arise, but diplomacy doesn't require airing every issue publicly.

Anwar also sought to underscore common ground with partner nations on issues of deep importance to Malaysians.

His calls during the Vladivostok speech for international pressure on Israel to end the genocide in Gaza struck a powerful chord with even Putin, seated beside him, joining in the applause.

In this delicate balance, Anwar demonstrated Malaysia's approach of seeking alignment where possible but managing differences where necessary.

Domestically, the reception to Anwar's visit has been largely positive. Social media reflected a surge of national pride with many Malaysians appreciating the Prime Minister being accorded respect on the global stage.

This was not necessarily a political endorsement of Anwar himself but rather a broader expression of pride in Malaysia's international stature. It also reflected a desire for Malaysia to assert its place in a multipolar world.

Anwar's visit to Russia was far from a half-cocked adventure. It was a carefully calculated move to secure Malaysia's place in a rapidly evolving global landscape.

By engaging with Russia, Malaysia is broadening its economic horizons, strengthening its strategic partnerships and asserting its independence in a world increasingly defined by geopolitical competition.

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