

By COLLINS CHONG YEW KEAT

THE 9th Eastern Economic Forum (EEF) in Vladivostok earlier this month created new power dynamics and reflects the strategic intent by Russia to further bolster its weight and extended influence in the Global South and emerging powers in the non-Western bloc.

It sent a message to the West that despite the sanctions and the efforts to isolate Russia, it still has the option to increase leverage on other non-Western parties and allies to increase Moscow's economic and trade options.

Malaysia is important to the region and will decide the direction of Asean next year. Malaysia's participation in the EEF is thus seen as necessary for Russia's larger purpose of regional defence and economic friendshoring efforts, apart from the traditional partners in the region, namely Vietnam and Myanmar in the realm of defence and security.

This presents a strategic and vital opening for Russia to engage more with Malaysia, especially when Malaysia is also trapped between the duopoly of China and the US in the region.

Malaysia is seen to be the gateway to further engagement with the region, the Arab world and the Global South, with growing leadership in critical industries of the future including semiconductor, critical minerals, digital economy, advanced technology, energy and security and transition and food and supply chain security.

This goes well in complementing Russia's efforts to widen its fallback options, and in extending Russia's entry and ease of entry into the region.

Russia was Malaysia's 8th largest trading partner among European countries last year, with total bilateral trade increased by 15.6% to RM14.22bil, compared to RM12.3bil recorded in 2022.

Malaysia's strength in halal product development and the Islamic finance is also key, along with the vital new role of the

Malaysia's new *emerging* role



Kremlin course: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim shaking hands with Russian President Vladimir Putin after a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the recent EEF in Russia. — Bernama

future in new economic domains and conventional means including oil and gas and commodities, and the strategic role as a middle power and power balancer in the region.

People-to-people ties between KL and Moscow also remain a focus, and efforts have been made to boost cultural understanding and appreciation as well as tourism and education. Malaysia received over 100,000 tourist arrivals from Russia last year, with efforts to increase flight connectivity.

In serving as the connecting point to South-East Asia, Russia is expected to find new points of contact with Asean when Malaysia becomes Asean chairman in 2025.

Malaysia also desires food and energy security, and Russia is seen to be able to play a new role in this and Malaysia's participation is always in line with its stance of independence and autonomy in its option to choose economic and

diplomatic partners.

It can be deemed by other powers as another strategic move for Malaysia to widen its basket away from the China-centric economic and trade dependence, and Russia-Malaysia ties have always been solidified by historical good rapport and partnership in science and defence.

Malaysia is seen to serve as a growing power in the region that can provide long term balancing power to both the West and Beijing. Malaysia will also want added trade and economic options apart from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), and the array of bilateral and regional Asean free trade agreements (FTAs).

The region's quest for food and energy security has been noticed by Moscow, and future needs including missile defence are also in potential future calculations, which have not been traditionally

Russia sees the country as a gateway to South-East Asia as the region grows in importance for the former global power.

introduced or needed in the region before this.

It is also a message to the other parts of the region and East Asia that Russia is now an emerging player and power in this geographical and economic domain that has been traditionally held by China. Moscow realises that the region of South-East Asia has been long trapped by the dual power dominance of Beijing and its rivalry with Washington. Hence, the Russian presence is seen to be apt in providing the needed third force in the power dynamics and calculations.

Moscow's increased defence and economic friendshoring efforts in South-East Asia are part of the approaches to increase its dependence on non-Western parties and the Global South capacity.

The South-East Asian region forms the connecting domain in completing the arch of Russia's near and far-border interests, as the next complementing theatre apart from Central Asia, South Asia and Africa and the Arctic.

Moscow's influence and geopolitical grip on the Arctic also holds the next key factor in the new maritime route of the Northern Sea Route and the potential of oil and gas deposits and explorations that will complement and boost its existing Siberian advantage for

its food security and production.

The impact of global warming provides both Siberia and the Arctic with new lifelines and eventual productive volume returns in terms of food and fossil fuel.

The moves through the EEF and the defence and economic friendshoring efforts also serve as a message to China that Russia still has the upper card and is now on the verge of charting its own independent quest in Asia to increase its economic and defence friendshoring and alliance building, despite the No Limits Ties.

Historical wariness between both countries, and Putin's visit to Vietnam, Mongolia and North Korea as well as Russia's increased role and influence in Central Asia, created wariness for Beijing because these are the traditional allies and partners of China, and that the overtures by Putin are seen as encroaching into the traditional orbit of Beijing.

Russia still holds the advantage in long term food, energy and critical defence and military technology and resilience in the region, and this is seen as another fallback for the region in defence assurance. Both conventional and non-conventional returns with less strings attached, make Russia the natural transition in expanding the region's options and filling the long held gaps that have long trapped the region.

Despite this, the region is still pragmatic and smart enough to keep Washington and Beijing close to its cards, in getting the best security assurances and outcome from the new power triangle.

Collins Chong Yew Keat is an author and foreign affairs and strategy analyst in Universiti Malaya. The views expressed here are solely his own.