

RESHAPING UK-MALAYSIA BILATERAL TIES

Anwar's visit is the much-awaited shot in the arm

HELD up by conflicting schedules and a general election that saw the Labour party, having

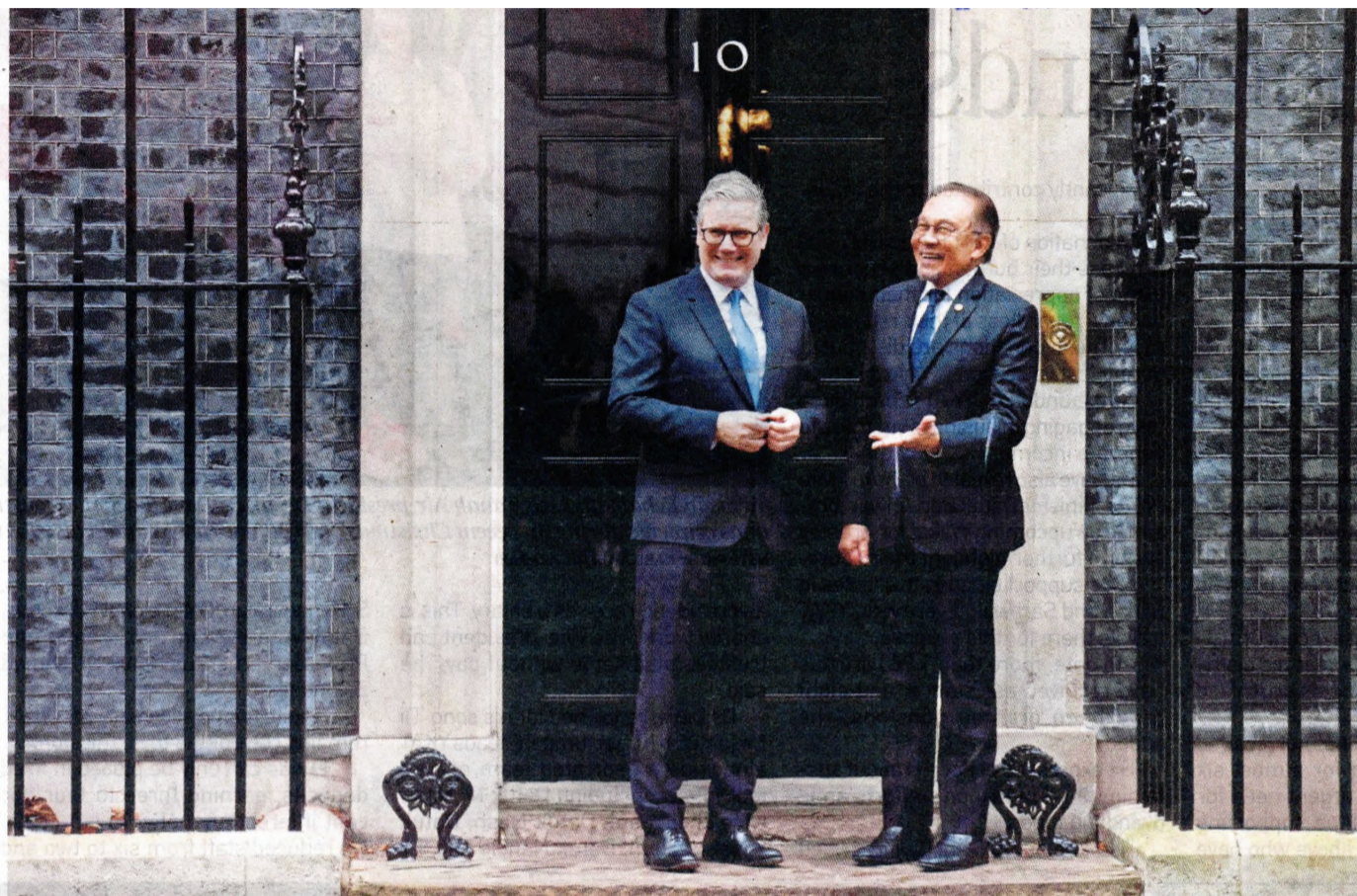
hibernated in a winter of discontent for 15 years, finally returning to power with an overwhelming majority, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's working visit to London couldn't have been longer in the making.

Policy-makers on both sides, acutely aware of the need for a high-level engagement, had kept their noses to the grindstone to ensure it happened. Being in the thick of things might rule me out as a "detached commentator" but sometimes reflecting from afar runs the risk of being short-sighted. So, here's my, perhaps, not too impartial take on the four-day official visit to the United Kingdom. Observing his interactions with officials, business and thought leaders over the past few days, I am quite prepared to conclude that this visit is the much-awaited shot in the arm to rejuvenate and reshape Malaysia-UK bilateral ties.

This relationship, however, does not operate in a vacuum. While it has struggled at home with policies such as Brexit, and drastic cuts to its foreign and defence budgets, the UK's ambition for its engagements in the Asia-Pacific has never wavered, having worked hard to sustain that presence.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer might have wanted to prioritise reconnecting with Europe, but ignoring Asia would be a strategic blunder. In any event, it would be a mistake for any British leader to frame engagement with Europe or Asia, as an "either-or" choice. Intensified engagement with all regions is what the UK needs, not a bit but desperately.

Over the past five years, there have been notable developments in the UK's approach to the Asia-Pacific region. Chief among these is the much-publicised Indo-Pacific "tilt" — a term deliberately chosen to avoid the implication that London is pivoting away from other regions it continues to regard as strategically important. Another milestone was the UK's acceptance as Asean's 11th and newest Dialogue Partner. While the Indo-Pacific Tilt is being positioned as a "permanent pillar" of UK foreign policy, the swift approval of the UK's application to



Britain's Prime Minister Keir Starmer greeting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim outside 10 Downing Street in London on Jan 15. AFP PIC



DR MOHD FAIZ ABDULLAH

Asean — achieved in just over a year — stands in stark contrast to the prolonged wait faced by other aspiring Dialogue Partners.

This expeditious decision reflects Asean's recognition of the UK's substantive contributions and strategic value. If Asean had not deemed the UK to offer significant benefits, the application would undoubtedly have lingered on the waitlist.

But perhaps the most decisive move to enmesh the UK with our region came just last December, when it joined the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

Without its economic umbilical cord to the European continent, the UK has rushed to broaden its access to markets in other regions — and with good reason. Recent visitors to the country would be hard-pressed to find signs of optimism about its immediate economic future. With public services and infrastructure in decay,

there is a pervasive mood of despondency and decline among Britons.

Nonetheless, businesspeople and institutional investors seem upbeat about the country's longer-term prospects, a sentiment that explains why the other 11 countries in the CPTPP welcomed the UK as the first member from outside the Pacific Rim. This creates opportunities for Malaysia to strengthen its already strong trade and investment ties with the UK.

But a dose of realism is needed when assessing the future of Malaysia-UK relations. The two nations are, of course, tied by the Five Power Defence Arrangements — an agreement that also includes Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand, committing the signatories to consult in the event of an external attack on Malaysia or Singapore. Yet their strategic outlooks are hardly in lockstep. The fact of the matter is that, since the Second World War, the UK has anchored its security in its alliance with the United States.

Of course, there is nothing inherently objectionable about this. Malaysia itself counts the US among its most vital defence partners. Yet the UK has, at times, appeared to regard its "special relationship" with America as amounting to a surrender of strategic autonomy, behaving

more like an auxiliary arm of the US military than a truly independent power.

This prompts a crucial question: in Asia, where US-China tensions seem poised to escalate, is there truly a need for yet another American ally, potentially adding further complexity to the region's already precarious geopolitical equilibrium?

Malaysia envisions an inclusive Asia-Pacific, and the UK has a significant role to play in realising this vision. For its part, the UK would do well to embrace this inclusivity in its approach to engaging the region. If both nations can navigate their differences with care and strategic foresight, the economic and strategic rewards could be substantial.

On the economic front, there is considerable potential for collaboration.

Both countries should earnestly pursue complementary approaches grounded in their respective industrial strategies: Malaysia's New Industrial Master Plan 2030 and the UK's Invest 2035. These strategies highlight advanced manufacturing, renewable energy, and digital technologies as key growth areas where the two countries could profitably collaborate.

Another promising area for co-operation is the rapidly evolving field of artificial intelligence (AI).

Just days ago, the UK unveiled

its AI Opportunities Action Plan, aimed at "turbocharging" the integration of AI into its economy. This plan includes initiatives such as automating administrative tasks to improve public service delivery.

At the same time, the UK has recognised the potential risks of AI, with its AI Safety Institute adopting a sandbox approach to ensure a balanced and secure development of the technology.

Similarly, Malaysia's National AI Office, launched by the prime minister last month, seeks to drive innovation and develop an AI Adoption Regulatory Framework. The UK, with its expertise and resources, is an ideal partner for Malaysia. Establishing mechanisms for information-sharing and joint initiatives would prepare both nations to harness the transformative potential of AI while mitigating its risks.

As Anwar aptly stated, "We have promises to keep and miles to go" in building the cooperation that could define the Malaysia-UK relationship.

The path ahead demands hard work and sustained commitment from both sides. But there is ample reason to remain optimistic. The ground has been set, and all that remains is to get on with it.

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