

# Anwar in Paris: Recalibrating the terms of engagement

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IF the French were expecting a deferential guest, they did not get one. When Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim rose to speak at the Sorbonne on Friday, his address was both a nod to France's intellectual tradition and a measured challenge to its strategic assumptions.

Woven with references to Sartre and Montesquieu, Camus and Tocqueville, and the Pirenne thesis to boot, it was a tour de force in intellectual diplomacy — at once appreciative and unsparing, gracious, yet audacious.

The visit, the first by a Malaysian leader to France in 15 years, was a success by most diplomatic metrics.

There were new Airbus orders, deeper energy cooperation with Petronas, joint ventures in AI and carbon capture, and warm nods to rising student exchanges.

But the real significance lay in Anwar's message, and its subtext: Southeast Asia is done being spoken for, let alone spoken down to. If Europe wants to be present in the Indo-Pacific, it must learn to listen.

Anwar is no stranger to rhetorical flourish. But behind it was a sharp proposition: Europe must stop seeing Southeast Asia as a theatre for its anxieties — about China, about global disorder, about the fraying of Pax Americana — and start engaging it as a self-assured, diplomatically agile



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region that neither courts conflict nor shirks complexity.

The Sorbonne speech was neither anti-Western nor triumphalist.

It was something rarer: calibrated, with measured cadence. "We are used to being described," the prime minister said. "We are less accustomed to being heard." In one line, he captured decades of misapprehension.

From colonial missions civilisatrices to the strategic templates of today's think tanks, Southeast Asia has often appeared in Europe's imagination as either a developmental ward or a geopolitical flank.

Yet Asean, as Anwar reminded his audience, is the world's fifth-largest economy and a laboratory of democratic metamorphosis — not perfect, but incrementally improving.

He did not shy away from hard topics. On Ukraine, he upheld international law but cautioned that "our region — and Asean in

particular — is not a geopolitical mirror to be held up to another's crisis".

On Gaza, he called the war a "collapse of conscience" and criticised the selective application of humanitarian concern. On Iran, he backed non-proliferation but insisted that dialogue, not double standards, must anchor global order.

President Emmanuel Macron received the message with composure.

At their joint press conference, he echoed Anwar's call for a ceasefire in Gaza, reaffirmed France's support for a two-state solution, and condemned Israeli strikes on Iran as lacking legal basis.

He also nodded to the broader point: that universal values must not be applied selectively. Sure, not all that glitters is gold but it was still a rare moment of moral convergence, if not full alignment.

But it was in trade — not war — where Anwar delivered his firmest message. Europe, he implied, cannot ask for deeper economic ties while clinging to regulatory structures that feel increasingly skewed.

For many in Southeast Asia, the EU's standards — however well-intentioned — function less as neutral guardrails and more as protectionist obstacles.

Agricultural exports, processed foods and pharmaceuticals face

layers of certification and restrictions. European negotiators tend to arrive assuming their standards are not just high, but self-evidently the model for others to adopt. That presumption is now being met with measured resistance.

Malaysia, like many of its peers, is not asking for lower standards. It is asking for honest conversations about the practical effects of high ones. Patent terms, for example, are contentious.

The EU seeks longer periods of exclusivity. In developing countries, this affects access to life-saving medicines. And that we cannot, and must not, do.

The imbalance goes deeper. Southeast Asian nations are expected to meet stringent environmental, labour and governance criteria, yet often find little flexibility in return.

There is little allowance for differences in legal systems, social compacts or development stages. The European position thus begins to resemble leverage masquerading as principle.

"That means seeing regulation as dialogue to come to a formula for mutual gain, not fiat pointed at the head for capitulation," Anwar said.

"Let us be clear: we do not ask for indulgence. We ask only that Europe meet us where we are, not where its models presume we ought to be."

Europe hopes that bilateral

deals, like the one still under negotiation with Malaysia, will evolve into a full Asean-EU free trade agreement.

But that ambition may remain stalled if the substance of the relationship lags behind its symbolism.

"Consensus *ad idem* is as crucial in geoeconomics as it is in geopolitics, and some say even more," Anwar quipped, invoking a legal phrase meaning meeting of minds.

Still, the mood in Southeast Asia is shifting. Engagement will remain strong, but deference is no longer part of the deal. Condescending collocutors, *vous n'êtes pas le bienvenu*.

Anwar said: "We welcome partners. But we welcome them as equals."

Europe should take note. In an increasingly multipolar world, engagement is not a favour bestowed but a partnership earned.

If the after-dinner tête-à-tête, originally set for 10 minutes, but which lasted three-fold longer, is anything to go by, then somewhere along the way, Anwar and Macron must have struck the right chords.

Tocqueville once wrote that democracy is not just a system of rules but also a habit of the heart. And so, increasingly, is diplomacy.

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