

PM visit a strategic recalibration

Moving past domestic noise, Malaysia and Turkiye are formalising decades of rapport into a strategic partnership for regional and economic stability.

LONG before artificial intelligence drew us into the maze of intellectual confusion, getting us fixated on everything and therefore nothing, TS Eliot had warned against being “distracted from distraction by distraction”.

“A treacherous path indeed that could sink us down the rabbit hole of ‘tumid apathy with no concentration’.”

Indeed, for someone whose every utterance is checked with an eagle eye to be pounced on like a predator would on its prey, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim has to tread on eggshells in his choice of words.

Thus, writing in the visitors’ book at Anitkabir in Ankara was akin to walking the treacherous tightrope between Scylla and Charibdis: “Mustafa Kemal Ataturk gave form to a people’s faith in themselves and in each other. From this arose a great nation, secure in its sovereignty and sustained by the indomitable will of its people.”

And that was enough to cause the naysayers and detractors to pour scorn on such a tribute, setting the distraction grapevine on overdrive.

But we have bigger fish to fry, and the bonds of friendship between the peoples of Malaysia and Turkiye cannot be held hostage by the small-mindedness and malignity of those hell-bent on hate and negativity.

These ties are both deeply bound and profoundly personal.

It was almost 18 years ago today that Anwar, then de facto opposition leader, after having led the March 2008 electoral tsunami, had to take refuge at the Turkish embassy in Kuala Lumpur, trig-

gered by reliable intelligence of an assassination plot.

Sinister machinations were afoot to forestall the political transformation that had been unleashed with the revivification of Anwar’s Reformasi movement after his release from a five-year incarceration, but I digress.

The point is that the relationship between Anwar and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has its roots going back decades and has withstood the test of time.

In an interview with TRT World, Anwar spoke movingly of his trials and tribulations and expressed deep gratitude for how Erdogan had stood by him “in true friendship”.

Certainly not taking this personal friendship and rapport for granted, Anwar has taken pains to make the most of such a rare and invaluable currency in international diplomacy to forge even deeper and more enduring bilateral cooperation.

The three-day official visit to Turkiye couldn’t have been timelier or more strategic and underscores a paradigm shift. To be sure, he did not go to Ankara as a passing sojourner, for this was the third visit to Turkiye since becoming Prime Minister.

Undoubtedly, Anwar’s long-standing engagement and friendship with Erdogan is a key factor. But crucial as they are, personal relationships are not the be-all and end-all in the realm of international diplomacy.

As Anwar put it, Malaysia-Turkiye engagements manifest “a strategic judgement about the kind of world we now inhabit, and about the choices that countries like ours must make to preserve

autonomy, stability and growth”.

It is a paradigm shift, one that not only elevates diplomatic ties to a more strategic level, which would entail enhanced cooperation across the board, but also underscores a more definitive geopolitical positioning in the global arena.

To be sure, it is not a shift away from Malaysia’s foreign policy of active non-alignment, as was made clear by Anwar’s articulation of balanced relations with the United States and China, while deepening ties with Turkiye.

Nevertheless, what could be discerned is a palpable reordering of strategic priorities alongside governance guardrails.

This is exemplified in the inaugural Malaysia-Turkiye High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HLSCC), underlining the key word “strategic” and signifying the transition from mere cooperation (seen as being contingent on the vagaries of leadership status) to one that is more secure and predictable.

Naturally, it demands long-term commitment across a broad spectrum of interests, not the least being the core sectors in trade, defence and security, and technology.

In light of this, it wouldn’t be frivolous to ask what Malaysia could offer to Turkiye, and what Turkiye could offer to Malaysia, predicating this question on the basis that we share broad perspectives and possess complementary capacities.

Without attempting to cover the entire terrain, in terms of trade and investment, Malaysia offers strategic access to Turkiye not just to its domestic market but

also as a gateway to other Asean economies.

While that could be a cliched motive, flogged to near meaninglessness, it’s suffice to say that Turkiye could export more goods and services, while its economy could benefit from investment opportunities, particularly in infrastructure, energy and technology sectors.

Although not spoken of, even as Turkiye remains a Nato member, by enhancing ties with Malaysia, it could garner brownie points on the geopolitical influence scorecard in South-East Asia, thereby fortifying its geopolitical positioning in the region.

The kicker here would be a boost for Turkiye’s already burgeoning defence exports to Malaysia, including done deals on technology transfer and joint production, not to mention contracts for military hardware and other collaborations.

In short, a defence partnership primed to grow even more robust.

Turkiye could work hand in hand with Malaysia on a vast array of joint collaborative efforts on cross-cutting issues of global importance, not the least being SDGs, climate change initiatives, and a myriad of other pressing global concerns.

What, then, could Turkiye offer to Malaysia that would count as geopolitically impactful?

Both, being emerging economies, share more commonalities than differences, with diversified industrial bases, including vibrant manufacturing and service sectors, not to mention Muslim-majority nations and vociferous - in a good way - OIC members.

It stands to reason to explore

the possibility of Malaysia looking up to Turkiye, not as some patronising big brother, but as a strategic safeguard on the European side of the Bosphorus.

On trade and investments, Malaysia could leverage on Turkiye and avail of the multiplier effects in engaging emerging markets and Muslim-majority states for its myriad products in the halal sector as well as the Islamic capital market, effectively a gateway to venture beyond Asean and East Asia.

From the prism of bilateral trade, there is an ambitious target of US\$10bil (RM40.7bil) for 2026, a major surge from the US\$4.92bil recorded from January to November 2025, leveraging the integral, high-value sectors such as semiconductors, AI, data centres, energy, advanced E&E, agri-commodities, halal food and rare earths from Malaysia.

On Turkiye’s side, there is advanced defence manufacturing, automotive and construction, R&D, higher education and industrial design.

The HLSSC, defence procurements and other agreements mean that we already have the mechanisms in place to explore further avenues towards doubling the trade volume goal.

This reset encapsulates both nations’ commitment to long-term exploration of mutual cooperation aimed at benefiting both economies while further strengthening the bonds of kinship well into the future.

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