



# From Rhetoric to Realignment? Anwar Ibrahim and the BRICS Question

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## From Rhetoric to Realignment? Anwar Ibrahim and the BRICS Question

*By Ilango Karuppannan*

### SYNOPSIS

*At the BRICS Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim described BRICS as a “new frontier” for Malaysian business and called for fairer global economic rules. Yet, Malaysia remains only a “partner country” of BRICS. Back home, key ministries are adopting a cautious, deliberate approach. This commentary examines whether Malaysia is truly shifting its foreign policy – or simply testing the waters amid broader geopolitical uncertainty.*

### COMMENTARY

Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's speech at the BRICS Summit in Rio de Janeiro in July 2025 marked his most direct effort yet to frame BRICS as an opportunity for Malaysia. He urged Malaysian businesses to see BRICS as a “new frontier” for trade and investment, while calling for a fairer global economic order.

Yet this public enthusiasm contrasts with the cautious approach at home. Malaysia's path toward BRICS membership began in June 2024, when Anwar first declared that Malaysia would seek to join. That announcement caught many observers off guard.

In many ways, though, it reflected his consistent worldview. Anwar has long criticised Western double standards, particularly on issues like Palestine. The BRICS' agenda of multipolarity and reform of global governance aligns with his advocacy of South-South cooperation.

What made the 2024 announcement especially striking was its timing: BRICS had just expanded to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the UAE, positioning itself more openly as a counterweight to Western-led institutions. Anwar's move signalled what appeared to be a bold repositioning of Malaysia's strategic outlook.

Malaysian media and think tanks quickly highlighted BRICS' appeal, citing its combined GDP exceeding 40 per cent of the global total and suggesting that membership could strengthen Malaysia's economic standing.

However, there has been no report of substantive follow-up consultations, inter-agency study, or policy paper on the matter. Institutional actors, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Wisma Putra) and the Ministry of Investment, Trade, and Industry (MITI), responded cautiously. MITI Minister Tengku Zafrul Aziz told Parliament that any move would require a full cost-benefit analysis.

### **“Partner Country” Status: A Foot in the Door or a Stalled Position?**

Anwar continued to express to Russia, the 2024 BRICS Chair, Malaysia's interest in joining BRICS. He raised the matter with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Kuala Lumpur in July 2024 and again during his working visit to Vladivostok in September.

Despite these diplomatic exchanges, Malaysia was not granted full membership. Instead, at the Kazan Summit in October 2024, it was designated a “partner country” – a new category seen as a possible stepping stone toward future membership. This status offers limited engagement, allowing participation in selected meetings without any real decision-making power.

Some analysts have tried to frame this as a diplomatic victory, suggesting it may open doors to alternative financing through the New Development Bank or facilitate South-South cooperation in sectors such as digital technology, green energy, and infrastructure. But without a seat at the table, such benefits will be contingent on further progress.

More importantly, full membership, even if it were to happen, is not imminent. The Brazilian BRICS Presidency has confirmed that the July 2025 summit will not discuss membership expansion. The earliest consideration would be in 2026.

Even then, Malaysia cannot assume that its admission is assured. Despite expressing interest later than Malaysia, Indonesia was the sole Southeast Asian country admitted as a member – its application was fast-tracked. Even if China and Russia support Malaysia's candidacy, others may not. India may object due to Malaysia's stance on Kashmir and its perceived closeness with Beijing. Regional partners, such as Indonesia, may view Malaysia's potential BRICS membership as competition to their strategic interests in the bloc and may hesitate to support its admission. Given that BRICS decisions on new members require unanimous approval, these dynamics make Malaysia's path to membership a particularly high bar.

Despite not yet being accorded membership, Anwar believes Malaysia stands to gain from engagement with BRICS. At the Rio Summit in July 2025, he described BRICS as a “new frontier” for Malaysian businesses, encouraging private sector participation to explore opportunities in trade, investment, technology, and energy. He characterised Malaysia's partner country role as a deliberate stepping stone toward deeper economic engagement and called on BRICS to boost intra-trade and champion a fairer, more just global economic order.

The Rio Summit's joint declaration signalled growing cohesion within the expanded bloc. It addressed Middle East conflicts, criticised US protectionism, and advanced an IMF reform proposal, underscoring BRICS' ambition to play a greater role in global governance. These outcomes align with Malaysia's calls for a fairer, more balanced international order.

### **Institutional Caution: External Conditions and Domestic Considerations**

Malaysia's institutional caution is not accidental. It reflects two key drivers: external geopolitical conditions that have become more complicated, and domestic political and economic considerations that limit the government's room to manoeuvre.

Externally, BRICS itself has become more political, promoting de-dollarisation and parallel financial systems as alternatives to Western dominance. In April 2025, US President Donald Trump warned that countries supporting BRICS' currency initiatives could face punitive tariffs of up to 100 per cent and recently announced an additional 10 per cent tariff on countries he accused of aligning with anti-American policies. For Malaysia, whose economy heavily depends on US markets, especially in electronics, that threat cannot be dismissed lightly.

Complicating matters further, Iran – a new BRICS member – is now deeply embroiled in a widening conflict with Israel, drawing in the United States. Any Malaysian move toward full BRICS membership could be interpreted in Washington as aligning with a bloc that includes a country in direct conflict with its closest ally. For Malaysia, which has long sought balanced ties with all major powers, this new BRICS dynamic makes the path forward even more complicated.

Domestically, the government faces political constraints. Anwar leads a unity government with diverse coalition partners and competing interests. Any major foreign policy shift must deliver clear economic benefits or risk a political backlash. With rising living costs and fiscal pressures, symbolic foreign policy moves carry limited political currency. Voters are more likely to support initiatives that create jobs, attract investment, and deliver measurable outcomes than abstract geopolitical signalling.

Amidst these concerns, the government has not been able to demonstrate clear benefits of joining BRICS. Currently, most of Malaysia's trade with BRICS members is with China and India. It is uncertain how much additional value full membership would actually confer. Moreover, its immediate priority is to negotiate reductions in the tariffs imposed by the Trump administration on Malaysian exports, given their direct impact on the national economy.

Malaysia's experience with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) also offers a cautionary lesson. Several high-profile BRI projects faced cost overruns, delays, and renegotiations, sparking public debate about transparency and national interest. Such experiences have made agencies more cautious about the political downsides of ambitious international commitments and encouraged ministries to exercise due diligence before committing to multilateral initiatives, such as BRICS, ensuring that future engagements deliver clear, long-term benefits.

Cognizant of these institutional concerns, Anwar sought to steer the conversation

away from being overtly anti-American by arguing that BRICS offers its members a chance to hedge against external shocks by diversifying their trade relationships among themselves, thereby reducing overreliance on single markets or currencies.

### **ASEAN Centrality and Diplomatic Balance**

Malaysia's caution also reflects its enduring commitment to ASEAN centrality – a principle that guides its regional diplomacy. While BRICS offers an alternative platform, Malaysia prioritises maintaining ASEAN as the core framework for cooperation in Southeast Asia.

This cautious approach was also evident during the ASEAN Summit it hosted in May 2025. BRICS was notably absent from the official communique. Despite holding the ASEAN Chairmanship, Anwar has not used this platform to institutionalise any ASEAN-BRICS links or elevate the bloc within regional discussions.

His remarks at the Partner Country Dialogue in July reinforced this approach, emphasising inclusive multilateralism and signalling Malaysia's preference for gradual, consultative alignment that respects ASEAN centrality while exploring opportunities for deeper cooperation with BRICS.

### **Conclusion: Balancing Rhetoric With Realism**

Anwar Ibrahim's BRICS announcement was bold, signalling Malaysia's intent to engage with a shifting global order. External conditions and domestic needs may have initially appeared to be aligned, justifying the pursuit of BRICS membership.

The bureaucracy has signalled the need for careful evaluation before endorsing the Prime Minister's strategic signalling. So far, however, that alignment has not materialised. If anything, external conditions have deteriorated, making BRICS membership less urgent or attractive. Meanwhile, questions remain about what real economic or strategic benefits membership would actually deliver.

For now, Malaysia has opted for cautious engagement, expressing rhetorical support for multipolarity while avoiding commitments that could undermine vital economic or diplomatic interests.

Malaysia's foreign policy strength lies in its ability to balance competing power centres while maintaining autonomy. As global rivalries intensify – including new tensions in the Middle East and within the BRICS itself – this balancing act will become more difficult, but also more essential.

Anwar's statements in Rio suggest that Malaysia will continue to use its partner country status to test and shape engagement carefully, avoiding commitments that could compromise its balanced foreign policy or ASEAN role.

The real question is not simply whether Malaysia should join BRICS. It is whether membership would meaningfully advance Malaysia's long-term strategic and economic interests – a question that requires careful, collective consideration.

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