



Malaysia-France Relations: A Renewed Momentum for Deeper Engagement?

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SYNOPSIS

Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's recent official visit to France – the first by a Malaysian head of government in 15 years – marked a diplomatic renewal in the two countries' relationship following occasional constraints. Ties are now being reinvigorated through renewed high-level political dialogue and expanded cooperation in the fields of defence, economy, energy and emerging technologies. As France seeks to consolidate its role in the Indo-Pacific and Malaysia currently exercises the role of ASEAN chair, both sides aim to build on this momentum to strengthen broader Europe–Southeast Asia engagement.

COMMENTARY

Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim concluded a two-day official visit to Paris from 4 to 5 July 2025. His agenda featured high-level talks with President Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister François Bayrou, a visit and prayers at the [Grand Mosque of Paris](#), a keynote address at Sorbonne University, the signing of a landmark contract with [Airbus](#), and meetings with French businesses operating in Malaysia. The high-level visit by the premier is in line with his administration's intention of enhancing and deepening trade relations with its partners. It was previously reported that Anwar has visited [31 countries](#) (including only two from the European Union) since coming into power with the "primary objective to attract potential investors" into Malaysia to enhance its national economy.

For its part, France has a longstanding presence in Southeast Asia but has had limited recent engagements with the region. In May 2025, however, President Macron visited three countries during [his tour](#) of Southeast Asia: Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam, skipping Malaysia despite Anwar's reported [willingness to host](#) him.

Macron's "[neither US nor China](#)" rhetoric that emphasises cooperation over dependence with the major powers is not at odds with Malaysia's avowed stance of neutrality and non-alignment. Furthermore, the leaders of both countries have expressed broad agreement on global issues such as the need to contribute to peacebuilding efforts in the Middle East.

There is evidence and reason to believe that relations between the two countries will minimally continue on their current trajectory. They are longtime partners in the defence industry and have signalled intentions to deepen bilateral trade in a variety of sectors.

A Deep Bilateral Relationship Anchored in Defence Cooperation

Franco-Malayan relations date back to the late [16th century](#), with the arrival of the first French missionaries and traders in Southeast Asia. These ties were formalised after Malaysia's independence in 1957 and now [span](#) the cultural, economic and political domains. Defence cooperation has remained the most structured and dynamic pillar of the bilateral relationship.

Since the 1990s, French defence industry actors have established a strong presence in Malaysia through major [arms programmes](#), including the sale of Scorpène submarines, A400M transport aircraft, H225M helicopters, and GM400 radar systems. These partnerships were politically institutionalised in 2014 through the establishment of the [Malaysia-France Defence Joint High Strategic Committee \(DJHSC\)](#).

Operational engagements have also deepened with regular joint exercises such as [Malfrench Daggert](#) and the Royal Malaysian Navy's participation in the [La Pérouse](#) exercise organised by France in 2025. Furthermore, Malaysia remains a crucial logistical hub for French operations in the Indo-Pacific, supporting missions like the [PEGASE air operations](#) (2023–2024) and regular naval [port calls](#).

A Period of Bilateral Restraint

Despite a robust institutional framework, France–Malaysia defence relations have slowed in recent years due to political, economic and industrial obstacles. France's 2018 [decision](#) to remove palm oil from its list of tax-exempt biofuels was seen in Kuala Lumpur as a hidden protectionist move that hurt an important sector of Malaysia's economy.

Domestically, Malaysia's political instability between 2018 and 2022 – marked by a rapid succession of governments and four defence ministers in less than three years – greatly slowed the pace of strategic dialogue. Key bilateral mechanisms, including the DJHSC, remained dormant from 2019 to 2024.

On the industrial front, flagship programmes encountered challenges. [Technical issues](#) with the Scorpène submarines, alongside contract uncertainties surrounding the delivery of five littoral combat ships involving France's [Naval Group](#), have impeded the development of bilateral cooperation. In parallel, Malaysia deepened defence ties with other new partners such as [Turkey](#) and [Italy](#), undermining French companies' market share.

This gradual disengagement has been reinforced by a Malaysian foreign policy pivot towards greater influence in the [Muslim world](#) and the [Global South](#), limiting high-level engagement opportunities with European countries in general, including France. Meanwhile, French diplomatic and military attention has increasingly focused on other [regional partners](#) such as Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines.

Geopolitical Convergences

Despite recent setbacks, France and Malaysia seem determined to inject new momentum into their political and strategic partnership. A string of high-level engagements reflects this intent: France's Armed Forces Minister Sébastien Lecornu [visited](#) Kuala Lumpur in 2023; in March 2024, Malaysia's Minister of Investment, Trade and Industry Zafrul Abdul Aziz led a trade and investment [mission](#) to France (as well as Germany); Prime Minister Anwar and President Macron [met](#) during the G20 summit in November 2024; and in March 2025, Malaysian Defence Minister Mohamed Khaled Nordin [embarked](#) aboard the French aircraft carrier during Mission Clémenceau 25. Prime Minister Anwar's July 2025 visit to Paris confirms this trend.

For Malaysia, France remains a valued partner as a global international player with EU credentials, permanent membership of the UN Security Council, and a distinct vision for strategic autonomy. Macron's recent push for a "[third way](#)" at the Shangri-La Dialogue resonates with Anwar's pursuit of [active non-alignment](#) and Malaysia's ambition of acting as a bridging power in a fragmented order.

In Paris, Macron and Anwar [emphasised](#) the renewal of their bilateral relationship and the growing convergence between Europe and Southeast Asia – two regions sharing a common commitment to strategic autonomy, a rules-based international order and the rejection of double standards in global governance. The two leaders also underscored their shared positions on key international issues, including support for a two-state solution amid the Israel-Gaza conflict, a call for a negotiated solution to Iran's nuclear ambitions, and the need for an immediate ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine.



Malaysia and France are revitalising their relationship through high-level dialogue and by expanding cooperation across defence, trade and technology, reflecting a growing convergence between Europe and Southeast Asia. *Image source: [MEAE/Jonathan Sarago](#).*

Conclusion

Described as a [success](#) by both parties, Anwar's Paris visit confirmed the ongoing diplomatic and political rapprochement between the two countries. However, movements on more sensitive issues were noticeably absent from public discussions – the previously stalled and recently resumed EU–Malaysia free trade agreement (FTA) negotiations and the contentious question of the European Union's palm oil import restrictions. Speaking at Sorbonne University, and at a time when Malaysia is the ASEAN Chair, Anwar was [emphatic](#) about the European Union's trade regulations and layers of certification: “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”, he said.

As Prime Minister Anwar and his administration continue efforts to attract and expand foreign investment from European partners, smoother FTA negotiations may well be in preparation, possibly for a future visit by President Macron to Malaysia. Prime Minister Anwar has extended an invitation for an official visit in 2026, ahead of the Francophonie Summit scheduled to take place in Cambodia.

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