

Diálogos

Nur Azman bin ABDUL RAHIM¹

Entrevista realizada por Lic. Ezequiel Ramoneda²

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1. *Under Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysia is pursuing a more active foreign policy, approaching not only regional countries but also non-traditional partners. In your opinion, how has the Malaysia Madani policy framework influenced the country's current foreign policy?*

Malaysia's foreign policy has remained consistent since gaining independence in 1957, continuing to pursue an independent, principled, and pragmatic approach based on the values of peace, humanity, justice, and equality.

I wish to take this opportunity to highlight that, under the leadership of Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, we continue to focus on the main aspects of Malaysian foreign policy, which are as follows:

- **Neutrality and Non-Alignment:** Malaysia maintains a policy of neutrality and non-alignment, avoiding entanglement in the conflicts of major powers. In fact, this principle is rooted in the country's history and its diverse ethnic composition, which necessitates a balanced approach to international relations;
- **Playing a leading role in ASEAN:** As one of the founders, a cornerstone of Malaysia's foreign policy is active participation in regional organizations, particularly the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Malaysia promotes regional integration, economic cooperation, and peaceful resolution of conflicts within Southeast Asia.
- **Economic diplomacy:** Economic diplomacy is crucial for us, as Malaysia is a trading nation. We focus on economic diplomacy to attract foreign investment, expand trade,

¹ Embajador de Malasia en Argentina (concurrente con Paraguay y Uruguay).

² Coordinador Centro de Estudios del Sudeste Asiático y Secretario del Departamento de Asia y el Pacífico del IRI

and foster economic partnerships. Malaysia pursues free trade agreements and participates in regional economic initiatives, like the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). In fact, in the context of the Latin America region, we have expressed our interest in establishing a free trade agreement (FTA) with MERCOSUR countries. As economic diplomacy is important to us, I also wish to highlight that Prime Minister Anwar has recently announced Malaysia's intention to join BRICS.

- Malaysia as an influential middle power: Malaysia's foreign policy is characterised by a pragmatic and proactive approach, leveraging its strategic location, economic strengths, and diplomatic networks to promote national interests and contribute to global and regional stability. This approach has positioned Malaysia as an influential middle power on the international stage.
2. *Which are, in your opinion, the main opportunities and challenges for closer relations between ASEAN and MERCOSUR?*

Let me start by briefly highlighting the history of ASEAN-MERCOSUR relations.

The first ASEAN–MERCOSUR Ministerial Meeting took place on 24 November 2008 in Brasilia, Brazil. During the meeting, the Ministers acknowledged that economic cooperation between the two sides could lead to tangible benefits through collaboration in energy security, food security, intellectual property, agriculture, transportation, tourism, environment, and people-to-people contacts.

However, there was a nine-year hiatus before the Second ASEAN-MERCOSUR Ministerial Meeting was held on 22 September 2017 on the sidelines of the 72nd United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York, USA.

The nine-year gap highlights the need for increased engagement between ASEAN and MERCOSUR. A more robust institutional framework is necessary to facilitate regular interactions, dialogue, and cooperation in various areas.

Nevertheless, recently we have observed positive developments between our two regions, particularly in terms of economic engagements. In 2023, the first Free Trade Agreement (FTA) was signed between MERCOSUR and Singapore, a member country of ASEAN. Additionally, other ASEAN nations, like Indonesia and Vietnam, have initiated negotiations on FTAs with MERCOSUR. As mentioned earlier, Malaysia has also expressed an interest in establishing an FTA with MERCOSUR.

Another positive development in MERCOSUR-ASEAN engagements was a Trade Mission organised by the MERCOSUR-ASEAN Chamber of Commerce (MACC) to three ASEAN countries in March 2023: Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines. This trade mission successfully attracted nearly 30 companies from MERCOSUR countries.

For Malaysia, the MACC Trade Mission was a success; following the mission, we managed to establish the MACC-Malaysia Chapter to enhance engagement between business communities from both sides.

In fact, I was made to understand that in November this year, MACC will be organising another Trade Mission to three more ASEAN countries: Indonesia, Vietnam, and Singapore.

For me, the main challenge for MERCOSUR-ASEAN relations is not geographical distance but rather the lack of awareness about ASEAN's potential in this region. As you may be aware, five ASEAN countries with embassies in Buenos Aires established the ASEAN Committee in Buenos Aires (ACBA) in 2018 to promote ASEAN in Argentina. Through our series of activities and programs, the Argentine public has gradually become more familiar of ASEAN.

Another important point I wish to highlight is Argentina's interest in becoming a Development Partner of ASEAN, which I hope can be materialised during Malaysia's Chairmanship next year.

- 3. Malaysia has one of the most dynamic Islamic economic systems in the world while being a peaceful multi-faith society. Could you mention any specific initiative that the government of Malaysia is carrying out to promote Islamic trade and investment internationally? (for instance, MIHAS)*

Malaysia has gained international recognition for its vibrant Islamic economic system and proactive efforts to foster Islamic trade and investment worldwide. The Malaysian government has implemented various strategic initiatives to solidify its position as a prominent Islamic finance and trade centre.

MIHAS

MIHAS is an annual trade exhibition organised by the Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE) to promote the global halal industry. The 20th edition will be held from 17 to 20 September 2024. MIHAS showcases halal products and services from Malaysia and worldwide, bringing together industry players, entrepreneurs, and buyers to explore business opportunities in the halal market. The event features various sectors, including food and beverages, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, Islamic finance, and more. Additionally, MIHAS includes conferences, forums, and business matching sessions to facilitate networking and knowledge sharing.

Halal Industry Development Corporation (HDC)

HDC is a Malaysian government agency dedicated to developing and promoting the halal industry. It plays a crucial role in driving the growth of halal trade and investment by assisting businesses in obtaining halal certification, offering market intelligence and research, and organising programs to enhance the capabilities of industry players.

Islamic Finance Initiatives

Malaysia has established itself as a prominent Islamic finance centre by implementing a comprehensive legal and regulatory framework to support Islamic banking, takaful (Islamic insurance), sukuk (Islamic bonds), and other Islamic financial instruments. The country is home to Islamic banks and financial institutions serving domestic and international clients seeking Sharia-compliant financial solutions.

These efforts reflect Malaysia's dedication to promoting Islamic trade and investment by creating a conducive environment, endorsing halal certification and standards, and offering business networking and collaboration platforms. The government aims to position Malaysia as a global leader in the halal industry and Islamic finance, capitalising on its expertise and capabilities.

4. *2024 has marked the 57th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Argentina and Malaysia. What is your view on the current bilateral relations between the two countries?*

Diplomatic relations between Malaysia and Argentina were established in 1967, and bilateral relations have been consistently warm and cordial. Malaysia established its Embassy in Buenos Aires in 1989, while the Embassy of Argentina in Kuala Lumpur was established in 1983.

This year is also a special year for our bilateral ties as Malaysia is deeply honoured to have been chosen as the first country in Asia for Foreign Minister Mondino's visit. This choice underscores the importance both Malaysia and Argentina place on their bilateral relations. It reflects the growing recognition of Malaysia's strategic position in the region and the mutual desire to strengthen ties between our two countries. I believe this working visit will mark a new chapter in our bilateral relations, particularly under the auspices of the new administration. Furthermore, I am confident that the visit will serve to enhance our existing relations, fostering mutual benefits for both sides.

The total trade between both countries can be increased as Malaysia and Argentina have great potential in many areas to explore. In 2023, total trade between Malaysia and Argentina reached USD 1.85 billion, with Malaysia's exports to Argentina valued at USD 0.40 billion and imports from Argentina valued at USD 1.65 billion. Malaysia encourages companies from Argentina to use Malaysia as a gateway to explore business opportunities in South-east Asia. This can be achieved by opening up more avenues of dialogue and communication between the business communities.

In addition, with the approval of the Bases Law, particularly RIGI, I believe it will attract not only Malaysian investors but also other foreign investors to engage with Argentina in economic development.

5. *Which are the main areas / fields / issues in which Argentina and Malaysia could pursue deeper cooperation? (for instance, energy sector, relations between YPF and Petronas) Malaysia has always viewed Argentina as a strategic partner in this region. Our investments here not solely focus on the energy sector, but many are unaware that Malaysia has also invested in other sectors, such as construction and tourism in this country.*

In fact, we are currently exploring our investments into new areas, like security and agriculture, with a special emphasis on utilising drone technology. The total investment value of Malaysia in Argentina is more than USD 10 billion and, of course, a large portion comes from our existing energy sector investment of Petronas in Vaca Muerta.

Like other foreign investors in Argentina, Malaysia welcomes the approval of Bases

Law and RIGI as it will pave the way to more concentre economic engagements. At the same time, Malaysia looks forward for the new government to implement a strong legal and regulatory framework to protect investors' rights and ensures fair business practices. Clarity and transparency in regulations, along with effectiveness and consistency in implementation, will mitigate investment risks and make it easier for investors to navigate the business environment. In fact, I emphasised this point during my speech at the Annual Camara Del Asia Year End Cocktail Reception on 28 November last year, where both Foreign Minister Mondino and I were invited to speak.

6. *The government of Malaysia has been pursuing public diplomacy in order to increase awareness of Malaysia abroad. Could you mention any initiative that the Embassy of Malaysia is carrying out to promote Malaysia in Argentina? (for instance, MTCP, student internship at the Embassy, ASEAN Bazaar)*

The Malaysian Technical Cooperation Program (MTCP) was established in 1980 as Malaysia's commitment to South-South Cooperation, sharing our development experiences and expertise with other developing countries. I am pleased to announce that starting this year, MTCP courses will resume in-person rather than virtually, allowing participants from Argentina to travel to Kuala Lumpur, fully funded by the Malaysian Government, as was the practice before the pandemic. I encourage Argentine government officials to participate in these courses, which cover a range of topics, including diplomacy, human resources, economy, finance, halal industries and etc.

As you are fully aware, I am also actively involved in our outreach programs, delivering a series of speeches at various universities, think tanks and business chambers, as well as being interviewed by various media platforms from different agencies. These efforts aim to promote Malaysia and highlight the importance of our bilateral ties.

In addition, the Embassy actively promotes Malaysian culture in Argentina, including gastronomy and cultural shows. In March 2023, alongside other ASEAN Embassies in Buenos Aires, we organised the ASEAN Bazaar, where Malaysia showcased a variety of Malaysian food and drinks, cultural dances, and arts and crafts.

A reception was also held at my residence in conjunction with Eid, featuring traditional Malaysian foods served during the festivities. Furthermore, recently on 23 May 2024, the Embassy organised *the Fiesta de la Gastronomía de Malasia* at the Mercado de Belgrano to showcase our delicious cuisine. This event also included traditional dance performances and the Malaysian martial art, silat.

I truly believe Malaysia-Argentina relations are on the right track to deepen further in various fields for mutual benefit. In fact, our bilateral ties are particularly special, as the iconic Petronas Twin Towers were designed by the renowned Argentine architect César Pelli from the province of Tucumán. This unique connection highlights our special friendship!

Embassy of Malaysia, Buenos Aires
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