

Relations between the United States and Malaysia have been bumpy over the past few years. WONG CHUN WAI, who covered the visit of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to the White House last week, looks into that patchy period and tells why the stage is now set for better ties.

Cementing the holes in US-Malaysia ties

WHITE House presidential aides are sticklers for keeping to schedule. No one gets a minute more than the allotted time when it comes to an appointment with Bill Clinton.

Last week, however, it was different. The American President was not just in the mood to talk but he was all ears. His visitor was Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The informal meeting of the two leaders went on for over 80 minutes, including a 10-minute four-eyed talk.

Looking visibly pleased at the outcome of the meeting, Dr Mahathir declared that "as a result of this meeting, relations between Malaysia and the United States will be much easier."

He added: "It has been a useful discussion on many issues. We

agreed on most things."

It now appears that the stage is set for a new era in US-Malaysia relations, which have been patchy over the past few years.

The outcome of the Clinton-Mahathir meeting was vastly different from another meeting, involving another President, a few years back.

In what has been termed as the "locker-room disaster" among US and Malaysian officials, then President George Bush reportedly met Dr Mahathir at a hurriedly-arranged informal meeting.

Dr Mahathir was then attending a convocation in Houston. Bush was also present at the function and it was decided that the two should meet.

It appeared that US officials

hastily arranged for a locker room to be used for the meeting.

Until today, no one is willing to confirm what really transpired but the result was disastrous.

The fiasco did not end there. Word got back to Dr Mahathir that then Secretary of State James Baker was making undiplomatic remarks against the Prime Minister.

Understandably upset, Dr Mahathir tried to find out what had irked Baker. To his surprise, he found that Baker was running him down because of the latter's dislike for the Malay dress.

According to Dr Mahathir, he had turned up for a meeting with Baker in Kuala Lumpur in his *baju Melayu* because it was a Friday and he wanted to be ready for prayers.

When Baker reached Tokyo after

Kuala Lumpur, he told the Japanese how Dr Mahathir had "turned up in his native garb" for their meeting.

More trouble followed. When Malaysia mooted the East Asia Economic Caucus, Baker threatened South Korea and Japan against joining the EAEC.

To the South Koreans, Baker invoked bitter memories of the Korean War, saying the Americans had "spilled their blood" for the Koreans.

At an international conference in Singapore, the US lashed out at the EAEC again — only this time, it was Bush himself.

Along the way, certain US interest groups ruffled feathers further with protests against the position of Malaysian electronics workers and palm oil.

And when industrialist Tan Sri Eric Chia was assaulted at Kennedy Airport in New York, relations worsened. Ambassador John Wolf, freshly posted to Kuala Lumpur, was summoned to Wisma Putra.

Personality clashes aside, differing views between the US and Malaysia on numerous other issues did not help matters.

Last year, Dr Mahathir declined to attend the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (Apec) summit in Seattle.

And when Dr Mahathir visited the US again — this time to accompany his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Ali who was conferred an honorary doctorate — officials made sure the occasion did not just slip by.

US officials said both sides spent months putting the Clinton-Mahathir meeting together. Every muscle, including seeking the help of top businessmen, was utilised.

And even after setting up the meeting, officials were jittery until the last minute as to whether the timing would fit the busy schedules of both leaders.

Under fire at home for the handling of his foreign policy, Clinton sought Dr Mahathir's views on China and the region.

Asia, Dr Mahathir told his host, was culturally developed and it was essential to allow the natural forces to evolve towards the desired objectives, whether it is on the basis of human rights or democracy.

Malaysia's permanent representative to the United Nations Tan Sri Razali Ismail, who was in the Malaysian delegation at the meeting, said Clinton was "genuinely interested in Dr Mahathir's views and his sincerity came through."

On Clinton's part, the former Arkansas governor assured Dr Mahathir that the US was not out to dominate Asia but wanted to pursue a credible partnership with Asian countries — one which he described as "leadership with partnership."

Aware of the region's economic and political importance, long-time Asian watcher Winston Lord sounded to the Clinton administration last week that Washington "ought to be careful in treating Asians, who are increasingly conscious and proud of their accomplishments."

The Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs advised that negative US rhetoric against Asia be toned down and that the administration "weigh more carefully the costs/benefits of taking unilateral action."

While complaining that some administration officials had been over-zealous in pursuing narrow goals without consideration for longer-term policy towards the region, Lord pointed out that steps had been taken to restore ties between Malaysia and the US.

Dr Mahathir and Clinton appeared to have covered much ground. It will be unrealistic to expect overnight changes but the right step has been taken. It is now for the officials to find ways to cement the holes in US-Malaysia relations.