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MALAYSIA-CHINA RELATIONS BETTER THAN BEFORE

By: Yong Soo Heong

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 30 (Bernama) -- Bilateral ties between Malaysia and China have been further cemented following the latest visit of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to China recently.

The visit, which saw mult-million ringgit Sino-Malaysian ventures in power, automobiles and auto components, telecommunications and food-related industries, will take economic linkages to a significantly higher plane.

Without doubt, relations between Malaysia and China are better than before as such visits often provide an avenue for leaders to understand each other better.

All in all, Dr Mahathir had visited China four times in his capacity as the Malaysian premier, more than any other Malaysian leader in the country's history.

Dr Mahathir's maiden visit was in November 1985, the second in June 1993 and the third in May 1994. These visits reflect his pragmatism as well as his vision to forge better relations between Malaysia and another dynamic East Asian nation.

Chinese President, Jiang Zemin, describing Dr. Mahathir as a familiar old friend of the Chinese, praised the latter's efforts in smoothening Sino-Malaysian ties.

He was quoted as saying in the "China Daily" that Dr. Mahathir's latest visit, where various trade agreements were signed while a understanding was reached to develop the Mekong Basin and a Pan-Asia rail network, symbolised Sino-Malaysian relations as having reached a new level.

Both leaders agreed that what Malaysia and China want is cooperation, instead of confrontation, contacts instead of containment, dialogues instead of resorting to forces.

Ever since Malaysia became the first Asean nation to establish diplomatic links with China on May 31, 1974, bilateral ties between the two countries have grown from strength to strength.

When relations were established 22 years ago, both countries pledged to have mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity; mutual non-aggression; non-interference in each other's internal affairs; and having equality, mutual benefit and peaceful co-existence.

Following the inaugural visit by Malaysia's second premier, the late Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, to China in 1974, many Malaysian leaders had visited China officially to reinforce the existing friendly relations. They include Malaysia's third premier, the late Tun Hussein Onn, former deputy prime minister Tun Abdul Ghafar Baba, and deputy prime minister, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

By the same token, Chinese leaders who had visited Malaysia include former president Yang Shangkun and then prime minister Zhao Ziyang in 1992 and 1981 as well as premier Li Peng in 1990, President Jiang Zemin in Nov 1994, and vice president Zhu Rongji in May 1996.

These visits had served to further strengthen bonds of friendship and enabled the leaders of both countries to understand each other and on issues of mutual concern better.

Besides signing agreements pertaining to avoidance of double taxation, shipping and aviation, one of the most far-reaching decisions was the removal of travel restrictions to China and the relaxation of conditions for Chinese nationals to visit Malaysia.

Trade and investment between the two countries had also been on an

upswing. Over the last two decades, Malaysia and China have formed close to 100 joint ventures valued at more than RM2.5 billion.

According to the Statistics Department, total trade between Malaysia and China last year rose to RM9.21 billion from RM8.64 billion in 1994.

Malaysia's increasing trade and investment with China serves to reflect one important issue -- China's emergence as an economic power and Malaysia's recognition that it is mutually beneficial to have active relations in the economic sphere.

Dr Mahathir was also the first Asean leader to come out in full support of China as a friendly nation as opposed to the widely-held Western belief that China could be a military threat.

Dr Mahathir, in stressing repeatedly that this perception is far from correct, had even ventured to say that what the West now feared was not a militarist China but a resurgent, economically powerful China, a large market which could dictate to those countries wanting to sell their goods to it.

The Malaysian premier had said that it was high time to stop seeing China through the lenses of threat and to fully view China as the enormous opportunity that it is.

This is the Malaysian stand which it believes could be mutually rewarding for both countries as they progress on to the new Millennium. --

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