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Asia can do it its way

ONE can think of a lot of pop numbers to describe Malaysia's progress thus far, apart from the evergreen "My Way" that Frank Sinatra popularised and that was assumed to be a favourite of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. But one thing for certain, the task of taking Malaysia to where it is today has not been a song. In the 40 years since this country achieved its Independence, the people have seen good times and bad times, and the leaders have had to overcome many pitfalls and obstacles that seemed at times formidable. The May 1969 racial incidence will always serve as a reminder to this peaceful nation that it had once been near a potential socio-political calamity. The nation survived other tests before and after 1969 though none as major as trying to overcome the self-doubt and the inferiority complex left by centuries of colonialism.

Indeed, it has been a long and winding road to success. The "Sinatra Principle" coined by Dr Mahathir is a way to describe that Malaysia did it its way. The larger picture here is Asia can do it its way; hence, the Prime Minister's call to countries in West Asia to work with their Asian neighbours for a better life in the next millennium. In the current search for an Asian Renaissance, countries in the Gulf have inadvertently been left out of the picture. The focus on Asia has been largely on East Asia, on Japan, the newly-industrialised countries, and the next pack of emerging economic powers including Malaysia. But Malaysia has had little trade and investment relations with West Asian countries. In Manama, Bahrain, Dr Mahathir admitted that Malaysia had been neglecting the countries in the Gulf region. "It is time for us to forge relations with countries in this region," he said.

The song opens with the end being near, and perhaps at bilateral level, and in the context of the Sinatra Principle, Malaysia and its friends in West Asia should view it as the end of a relationship that lacked substantial trade and investment activities. There are vast opportunities to tap, from petroleum and manufacturing to Islamic banking and finance. Dr Mahathir's call that Islamic countries seek a consensus among them on matters pertaining to Islamic banking and finance, for example, could be a turning point for reconstructing ties. With Malaysia's drive for reverse investment, especially in the South, the oil-rich Gulf states could also consider the suggestion that they take up equity participation. These will go a long way to enhancing ties.

But as Dr Mahathir stressed, these efforts will require a great deal of toil, tears and sweat. Future endeavours between Gulf states and their neighbours in Asia, he said, can succeed if they are built on humility, not arrogance; on hard work, not complacency; and on a shared prosperity basis, not on the principle of zero sum game where the winner takes all. Based on its vast experience with South countries, though, a great deal of impediments can be expected. One major obstacle, of course, is political will on the part of individual countries and another will be political support for one another.

There is need to formalise relations between the two regions, and this can be done bilaterally or through the regional groupings that countries belong to. There is no reason why Malaysia and Asean should not cooperate with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) when formal relations have been established years ago with groupings like the EU, Nafta, Anzec, and Mercosur. Dr Mahathir has said Malaysia will take this possibility up with

Asean countries and encourage them to have some kind of relations with the GCC and its members like Bahrain. As usual, there will also be need to enhance people-to-people relations by encouraging cultural exchange programmes and visiting one another's country. The private sectors will also have to come in and assume a role, perhaps by organising dialogues at their level and forming genuine joint ventures in projects that will benefit both countries. It is important for both parties to realise that it is not going to be plain sailing. But neither would anyone need the mystery of magic to achieve peace and prosperity. If none would take the initiative, there would be regrets and not too few to mention.

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