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Bridge that's more than just a link for crossing over

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THINGS happen when you bring two bodies together. Be they individuals or whole nations, interaction between two separate entities is bound to lead to a mutual activity.

Whether or not it turns out to be a happy union is usually anyone's guess, but the proposed bridge linking Malaysia and Indonesia by straddling the Straits of Malacca sells itself to those who see its lucrative economic spin-offs.

Much like how the construction of the North-South Expressway played a role in the country's economic turnaround in the late 1980s, the bridge can have the power to open doors to opportunity.

Its potential ability to increase bilateral trade, encourage co-operation in projects and facilitate transport of materials needed by both sides are some of the bridge's biggest plus points.

Malaysia is already Indonesia's second largest trading partner after Singapore.

Last year, Indonesian authorities reported that bilateral trade volume with Malaysia stood at US\$1.66 billion (RM4.15 billion), with Indonesia enjoying a surplus of US\$183 million.

Since 1990, Indonesian investments in Malaysia have totalled RM3.2 billion in various sectors, including textiles, wood products, food manufacturing, paper printing, chemicals and plastic products.

Bank Negara released figures last year to show that of the RM6.6 billion that Malaysia had invested overseas, RM400 million went to Indonesia.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had also said that beyond providing a link for vehicles to cross over, the bridge could be a means to a rail service, and even a way of channelling electricity and gas.

The connection to Sumatra can also allow Malaysia to overcome land shortage for its industrial and agricultural projects, leading to investments that in turn would benefit Indonesia.

Its potential also embraces greater abilities for both countries to regulate the heavy marine traffic that plies the Malacca Straits.

Ships that have used, and continue to use the waterway as a dumping ground, may have to think twice in the future if the bridge is built. As a monitoring station, the bridge can help marine authorities firm up their surveillance and keep better track of what goes on on the water.

It could also be a boon to immigration authorities. While the bridge might initially sound like just another doorway for illegal workers, in theory it should be a carefully-monitored gateway.

Benefits can also trickle down on the ground, providing an attractive space for traders to set up businesses, and eventually bigger economic players who might develop the area for development into commercial centres.

Talk about the bridge came to the fore in July last year when then Malacca Chief Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Zin Abdul Ghani proposed the idea.

The State Government, he said, was prepared to allocate an 80-hectare site in Kuala Linggi.

Renong is now studying the project's feasibility and results are expected within a month. A senior official has already mentioned tentative plans to site the bridge from Malacca to Dumai in Southern Sumatra.

The State Government has begun lobbying the Federal Government to have the bridge built in Kuala Linggi to help expedite the development of the

Kuala Linggi and Merlimau Industrial Corridor.

Based on early findings, Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu has said the bridge would be about 24 or 25km long and will come with a price tag of about RM6 billion.

Though at the outset it looks rosy, an infrastructural project of this nature inevitably has several stumbling blocks to overcome before it becomes a reality.

The Malaysian Institute of Engineers, while declaring the proposal technically valid, made it clear that the bridge's impact on marine life must also be factored into any decision on its feasibility.

Environmental conservation is an increasingly strong battle cry from the ranks of the people, and ensuring that the bridge would have minimal effect on its marine surroundings would go a long way in ensuring its success.

Above and beyond pure dollars and cents, the bridge will also give tangible shape to the historical, cultural and blood lines that already tie Malaysia and Indonesia together.

The idea of strengthening geographical proximity can be further expanded to a regional rather than a merely bilateral perspective.

Existing rail links within each country in the region is already undergoing the process of being hooked up to form a seamless track, a kind of Asean union in railway terms.

The Sumatra bridge could be a part of that vision, which sees a future Southeast Asia that is unified not just by history, but also by infrastructural links already seen in continents like Europe.

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