

17/03/1997

Building better bridges for world peace and stability

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LAST week another brick was laid in the foundations of the steadily growing Malaysia-France relations. It is clear that the growing trade and co-operation are being further buttressed by joint ventures in other fields.

During the three-day visit of France's Defence Minister Charles Millon, a proposed security arrangement, within the scope of Defence Agreement signed in 1993, was initialled.

"It makes possible the exchange of confidential documents and information on strategic issues," said Millon in an interview in Kuala Lumpur shortly before leaving for home on Tuesday.

The scope of co-operation includes exchanges in defence concepts and exchange of information on techniques, new equipment and "also in terms of training".

Of course, Millon was quick to stress, all this formed only a small part of the overall on-going co-operation between Malaysia and France.

But the former economics assistant professor and legal consultant added:

"In Malaysia's rapid growth, there is no denying the influence of its enterprises. In view of this, Malaysia has a definite significant role to play in the security balance of this area."

Millon believes that the way of maintaining peace in Southeast Asia is through the scope of Asean and other regional forums. So confident is France in these forums, especially in the Asean Regional Forum, that it is seeking to be a member of the ARF.

At the moment, it attends the ARF as part of the European Union delegation. It now wants an individual role in the forum. Millon said he conveyed this to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad during their meeting.

Millon agrees that the path Malaysia has chosen - that is, of consultation and exchange of information - is the best way for countries to avert conflicts and threats.

He said Dr Mahathir also believed that Malaysia's defence role was reinforced through its economic development which gave a country a determining political power which deterred and averted any military conflict.

When asked what he thinks are the possible conflicts that may arise in this region, he said: "Fortunately, I am unable to describe any possible conflict that can threaten this part of the world."

He is sure that further economic development between major regions of the world and the exchanges of both products and people will make it possible to strengthen and develop peace and security in the region.

Millon said: "In France there is a long tradition, which is that of national independence.

"Since the time of President Charles de Gaulle, the major principal is that the people are supposed to take their own life in their own hands in terms of politics, economics, diplomacy and everything else.

"This philosophy has made it possible for France to, at times, take original positions in terms of its diplomacy."

It seemed to him that Dr Mahathir shared the same point of view and the same approach: that is, Dr Mahathir wants his own country to have a sense of autonomy, to have political independence and play its own role to defend peace.

"In this way, you can sign real alliances throughout the world," Millon, who has been described as a Gaullist, said.

Malaysia and France shared the same point of view and have been defending the same approach to peace in the region, that peace and peacekeeping in the world should be under the aegis of a truly international organisation and co-operation.

"With the collapse of the Berlin wall and the Soviet empire, it makes it necessary for the world to stabilise itself, not around a single power but through many alliances that would strengthen the ties throughout the major regions of the world," Millon said.

On the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, he said: "The organisation is also going through a transformation and that the European identity should parallel itself to this transformation.

"The European defence identity must be able to assert itself and keep a certain autonomy in terms of its action and participation in the command structures within Nato.

"Some progress has been made in the direction of a European defence identity, but they are still exchanges and talks that have to take place between the United States and the rest of Nato before we can reach a conclusion that matches the transformation that France is expecting."

With regards to the enlargement of the alliance, he said a charter or agreement should be signed between Russia and Nato which guarantees peace and stability throughout Europe.

This is because the alliance must participate in the security and stability of Europe with other European countries like Russia and the Ukraine.

It is France's view that if there is a better balance among the organisations of the common defence system, then the outcome will be a better quality of peace.

"It is better in today's world to have good alliances rather than a dominant country situation. Stability will be stronger if the agreements are built on the common wills of various countries coming together," Millon said.

On Africa, he said that because of the continent's long history with France it was "very dear to the hearts of the French people".

At the moment, Africa is faced with very difficult problems. There should be a mobilisation throughout the world, where countries which enjoy a certain richness and economic growth can help these countries that are preoccupied with structural difficulties.

He was happy to see that Malaysia is beginning to be interested in economic investment in Africa.

When asked for his opinion on the Islamic movement in Africa and other parts of the world, he said: "Islam is a significant religion. Unfortunately today, religion is being used by extremists to bring intolerance.

"Extremism is a threat to all religions, but it expresses itself violently in a certain number of countries. It roots itself in extreme poverty, in misery and in frustration."

He said that Malaysia, which had Islam as a major religion, and France, a country with a Catholic majority, were tolerant of all the different religions that reside within their borders.

And since both countries have achieved a certain level of economic growth, they must be able to help those countries faced with more difficult economic problems.

Other issues Millon discussed with Dr Mahathir, Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Defence Minister Datuk Syed Hamid Albar are the state of co-operation between the two countries, which has been raised to

a special level recently with the two heads of government appointing a personal envoy each to handle the bilateral relations, and other possible areas of co-operation.

The two countries are now interested in developing co-operation between their universities, colleges and training centres.

Millon said the Prime Minister would like to extend co-operation so that there would be established an Asian-European university.

They also discussed possible joint ventures and other areas of co-operation that could be mutually beneficial to both countries.

For example, he visited the Thomson-Sapura plant.

The joint venture to manufacture communication and telecommunication equipment for the Malaysian armed forces enables Malaysia to gain technical expertise in this area and for France to continue to develop its defence industry in light of the Government's policy of cutting the defence budget.

Millon added that because this was a joint venture in which both countries had assets, it was possible that in future, the company would not only produce equipment for Malaysia but for other parts of the world as well.

Asked if this type of joint venture would lead to Malaysia's dependence on France for technical expertise, he said that the development of the Malaysian auto industry for the past 20 years showed that it was not so.

He said it was good to note that despite historical and geographical differences between France and Malaysia, it was still possible for both countries to co-operate closely and to agree on the approach to peace and security in the world.

"And this brings about a mutual trust in each country that can be built upon and utilised in our common goals to bring peace to the people of the world," said the defence minister.

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