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Chinese premier's visit confirms strong ties with Malaysia

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WHEN China's Admiral Zheng Ho first visited the Malay World more than 500 years ago, he brought along with him a powerful naval fleet. But he had the least intention of conquering the region and merely wanted friendship with the Malacca Sultanate.

His journey in the 15th century was the first for any Chinese delegation to go out to sea to explore and make friends with its neighbours and countries as far as Africa. It was during his visit that China's relations with the Malay world started to bloom, only to be temporarily interrupted when the Chinese Emperor decided to close its doors and stop sending delegations to other countries in the 16th century.

But when China opened its door once again in the early 1970s, China did not forget its friendship with the Malay world. And Malaysia's second Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak, who was the first Malaysian leader to make contact with China, was given a rousing welcome by Chinese leaders when he visited the country.

Today, the long-standing relationship between the two countries has grown stronger with leaders from both countries exchanging visits. The latest was the four-day official visit by Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng to Malaysia last week.

Contrary to the negative thinking of some major Western powers that China is building up strength to control Asia, Malaysia prefers to maintain stronger ties with the Communist-ruled republic. Even with difference in ideologies, Malaysia feels that it can still make friends with its neighbours, including China.

In fact, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, when opening an exhibition to commemorate Admiral Zheng Ho last week, had said Malaysia has never doubted China's sincerity in wanting to make friends with its neighbours despite the negative thinking of the West.

"Why would we fear a Chinese threat when China could have easily conquered the Malay World 500 years ago. With strong naval fleet, Admiral Zheng Ho could easily conquer the region and yet he has no colonial arrogance attitude to do that but chose to make friends. But when the major powers of the West at that time such as the Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, French, Dutch and the British, came to this region, their specific ambition was to rule and colonise the countries," Anwar had said.

Malaysia believes that China will not try to display its strength to control Asia but will continue to cooperate and make friends with its neighbours. Its willingness to solve issues like the overlapping claims on Spratly Islands in South China Sea through proper means and divert the attention of the dispute to a more meaningful economic cooperation will be a boost towards peace and prosperity in the region.

Li, during his meeting with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Friday, agreed that the Spratlys issue be resolved through proper channels such as the Convention of the Law of the Sea. He also agreed with Dr Mahathir that there are other important matters that should be given priority such as cooperation among claiming countries to develop economic activities in the area.

China's willingness to talk and listen as well as share Malaysia's views on various international issues such as the political instability in Cambodia, proposed East Asia Economic Caucus, and Malaysia's call for a review of the 1948 Universal Declaration of the Human Rights is a positive

sign that China will not want to create trouble for its neighbours. China's willingness to listen and share views with other Asian countries showed that the country has a soft spot despite its "big brother" status among Asian nations. In fact, international and regional issues dominated the meeting between the two Malaysian and Chinese heads of government, showing China's seriousness in wanting to preserve relationship with neighbouring countries.

China's support for the proposed review of the Universal Declaration for Human Rights will undoubtedly boost Malaysia's efforts towards a review of the Declaration.

China is also willing to cooperate with Malaysia and participate in discussions, either at the expert or group level to address the human rights issue because it shares the view Malaysia that some of the provisions in the Declaration which was written years ago may not be relevant today.

Li had described Dr Mahathir's call for the review as one of "vision and courage".

If Admiral Zheng Ho had the courage to sail thousands of kilometres in the open seas just to bind ties between China and the rest of the world during his time, there is no reason why China will not lend its support to help its neighbours in ensuring fairness and peace in the region.

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