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Japan enjoys warm relations with Asean

Yusof Hashim

THE recent visit by Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto to Malaysia and four other Asean countries meant that he has completed his visit to all Asean countries as he had visited the Philippines and Thailand last year.

The visit indicated that Japan considers relations with Asean as important. Japan has for a long time enjoyed favourable trade relations and has supplanted the United States as Asean's main partner in trade and investment.

Japan will have a pivotal role in the Asia-Pacific in the 21st century and beyond in its relations with the US, China and Asean.

Whereas Japan's exports to the US in 1985 were one-third more than to Asia, it is now the other way round. Japan also imports more from Asia than the US or the European Union. Accumulative Japanese investment totals US\$64 billion in Asia compared with US\$26 billion by the US. In the next few years 75 per cent of Japan's direct investment will be in Asia.

Increasingly though, Asian countries such as China and the NICs, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Asean, have begun to encroach into Japan's economic domain.

Whereas in the period 1994 to 1996 Japan accounted for 24 per cent of these country's imports, intra-regional market has increased from 22 per cent to 25 per cent. Since 1990 the Asian tigers - Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore - have become the main investors of Asean over Japan and the US.

The Japanese have therefore been actively promoting their diplomacy through economic and cultural cooperation. Visits at the highest levels by Japan's Prime Ministers and the members of the royal family have been encouraged and have promoted Japanese interest.

I remember when I was in Pakistan there was the official visit by the Japanese Prime Minister Kaifu when Benazir Bhutto was Prime Minister in her first Government. Both leaders tried to inject warm personal relations at their meetings. Kaifu, in his speech, referred to his student days when he was an active debater, just as Bhutto was at Oxford when she became the president of the Oxford Union.

The Japanese are active wherever they are in Pakistan. They take interest not only in the normal trade and economic relations but also in the cultural field. Japan has given grants for the restoration of historical sites such as at Moehanjodaro - the 4,000-year-old Indus Valley civilisation - and Taxila, the ancient Buddhist and Greek site.

The Japanese scholars too are active. I remember when I visited the ancient kingdom of Hunza perched on the mountainous region of Karakoram and Himalayas. I met a group of Japanese scholars who had braved the elements, traversing deep gorges and high peaks in search of knowledge and learning the ancient local languages. Japanese mountaineers too are active climbers sometimes at the cost of their lives.

Wherever they are the Japanese assiduously take recognition of the peculiar nature and character of the country. When I was in Morocco, where fishing is an important industry, Japan was active in promoting the fishing industry there. Japan provided training and established a technical fisheries school.

Nearer to home, in Malaysia, Japan has taken a serious interest in the Straits of Malacca through which large amounts of Japanese products and

its petroleum imports are channelled through. So to safeguard their interests the Japanese have established their agency on the straits.

The Japanese have spread their influence far and wide - to South America and Africa. Their diplomats are lucky in that they are trained in the areas and the language they like. At the same time as Japan has so many diplomatic missions they can be posted anywhere in between their specialised areas. It is incredible to observe the extent of cultural absorption in their areas of specialisation.

My recollection about doing business with Japanese officials was related to the airlines. I was in the team to negotiate an air service agreement and we were looking for additional landing rights for MAS. The negotiations took place just after the opening of Narita airport. While the Japanese side pointed to the inherent problem of the new airport we on our side pressed on the need for overall economic balance between our two countries. The two sides on that occasion stood their ground.

One of the difficulties in negotiating with the Japanese is reading their body language and they do not give any hint during social occasions. If at all, the delicious meals at a cosy Japanese restaurant tended to lull one's senses!

Malaysia has excellent relations with Japan. The Look East Policy has been warmly accepted by Japan. It can be viewed as a diplomatic plus, considering that Japan was given an emphatic endorsement by an industrialising country such as Malaysia.

During a recent visit to Malaysia, Japan's Education, Science, Sports and Culture Minister Takashi Kosugi said he wanted to see an increase in the exchange of students between the two countries.

Malaysia has risen to No. 6 where imports of manufactured items by Japan is concerned. In the No. 1 position is the US, followed by China, Germany, Korea and Taiwan. Malaysia is ahead of Thailand, at No. 7, Singapore is at No. 10 and Indonesia at No. 13.

Despite the close economic cooperation, there is still the problem associated with the yen and the balance of trade. The two countries have realised this and are determined to find a solution. A Malaysia-Japan task force has been set up to look into this issue, the result of the discussion between Prime Ministers Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Hashimoto during the latter's recent visit to Malaysia.

On the security aspect of relations, the visit of the chief of staff of the Japanese Maritime Defence Force Admiral Kazuya Natsukawa is noteworthy. On Feb 18 he gave a talk at the Malaysian Institute of Maritime Affairs (MIMA). It was the first time that a navy chief from Japan has addressed a MIMA gathering.

Japan is a delight to visiting officials and tourists alike. There are shows in Tokyo as good as any in Europe, New York or Las Vegas. There is also its cultural heritage which can be found in the old capital Kyoto. There are parks and gardens with serene architecture. One can enjoy Japanese ways at traditional Japanese inns, which are quaint and different from the modern trappings of international hotels.

Malaysia should look beyond economic and trade links with Japan, and consider the country's rich cultural heritage where nature is appreciated.

There is the need to incorporate parks and gardens with trees and flowers in our housing estates and cities, just as Kyoto has so successfully done throughout the ages.

\* Datuk Yusof Hashim was ambassador to Vietnam from 1988-1989, high commissioner to Pakistan from 1990-1994, and ambassador to Morocco from 1994-1996. His other postings include Minister in Washington DC (1987-1988), consul-general in Medan (1982-1985), counsellor in Vietnam (1980-1982) and first secretary in Bonn (1974-1978).

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