

31/07/1997

Pakistan PM seeks to enhance bilateral ties with Malaysia

PAKISTAN's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif arrives in Kuala Lumpur today for a four-day official visit, during which he will seek to strengthen relations between the two countries. It will be his first visit to Malaysia since being elected premier in February.

Question: During his visit to Pakistan in April, Dr Mahathir called for greater economic cooperation between Malaysia and Pakistan. As far as Pakistan is concerned, what are the areas that need to be looked into?

Answer: Pakistan and Malaysia enjoy a long history of cordial relations. Therefore, there is an institutional basis for enhancing and expanding economic cooperation between the two countries.

My meeting in April 1997 Dr Mahathir was very useful in identifying specific areas of interest i.e the narrowing of the trade deficit, the relocating of labour intensive industries from Malaysia to Pakistan, etc.

We intend to broaden our export base to Malaysia and to encourage the private sectors of the two countries to go-ahead and develop economic and commercial linkages for mutual benefit.

Q: Malaysia enjoys a trade surplus with Pakistan, but this can be balanced by increasing trade between the two countries. However, not many Pakistanis are venturing into Malaysia. Do you think Malaysia is an expensive place in which to invest?

A: Malaysia has a trade surplus with Pakistan because of the massive imports of palm oil from Malaysia. Malaysia has a free market economy and imports a large quantity of consumer and luxury goods, machinery and sports goods, and our exporters/businessmen are therefore in a good position to secure a firm foot-hold for long term exports to Malaysia.

We do not believe that Malaysia is an expensive place in which to invest. In fact, one of the purposes of my visit is to explore investment opportunities. I have brought leading investors from Pakistan with me for this purpose.

Besides, Pakistan is fully poised to take advantage of the investment opportunities in Malaysia because the Pakistan Railways, Telecom Corporation, Frontier Works Organisation and National Power Construction Company, all have the requisite capability to implement turnkey development projects in Malaysia.

Q: In the international arena, Malaysia supports Pakistan's efforts to participate in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) in the near future. How would Pakistan like to contribute to such a big forum?

A: Apec is a major economic organisation covering developing and developed economies within the very dynamic pacific rim.

Pakistan attaches great importance to its relations with Apec members and is desirous to be part of the organisation.

Pakistan has guest status within the Energy Working Group (EWG) and in the near future is expected to achieve similar status within the Working Groups on Trade and Investment Data (TID) and Trade Promotion (TP).

We believe that Pakistan's participation in the activities of Apec will be beneficial to both Pakistan as well as the other member nations of the organisation.

Pakistan greatly appreciates the support given by the Malaysian Government to its membership of various regional forums including Apec.

Considering the friendly bilateral relations, Pakistan will continue to seek the support of Malaysia in its endeavour to become an active part of

Apec.

Q: During your speech at the D-8 inaugural summit meeting in Istanbul in July, you mentioned the possibility of threats from India. Do you think both nations should sit down more often to address such discords?

A: Pakistan-India relations have remained mired in tensions and hostilities ever since the independence of the two countries. For the past five decades it has been our earnest belief that in the interest of our two countries and in the interest of the region, Pakistan and India must resolve all outstanding issues.

We wish to improve relations with India. If there is sincerity and a serious desire to resolve all outstanding issues including the Jammu and Kashmir ones, a sustained dialogue ought to be able to bring about an overall improvement in bilateral relations.

It was in this spirit that I took the initiative to resume the stalled Foreign Secretaries level talks between Pakistan and India.

I am satisfied that after the second round of Foreign Secretary level talks in Islamabad, the two sides have managed to agree on an agenda that includes Working Groups at appropriate levels to address all outstanding issues in an integrated manner. This is an important step and a positive development.

On our part we will continue the dialogue with sincerity and a serious desire to end all conflict.

Q: Dr Mahathir has said that Malaysia does not believe in confrontation as a solution to common disputes. Should Pakistan and India fail to resolve their problems, what would happen to the spirit of SAARC?

A: Since our independence, we have sought cooperative, tension free and good neighbourly relations with India. Unfortunately in the absence of a resolution in the Jammu and Kashmir dispute, relations between our two countries have remained mired in hostilities.

We are committed to trying to improve relations with India. We do not want confrontation. We believe that with sincerity and a serious purpose, we can resolve all outstanding issues including the core issue of Jammu and Kashmir.

We are also committed to the realisation of the aims and objectives of SAARC and have worked assiduously for the establishment and development of the institutions within SAARC. We believe that it is in the interest of our two countries and in the interest of the region that Pakistan and India should resolve all outstanding issues to ensure they focus their energies and resources on economic development and the well-being of their people.

Q: As a member of the OIC, Pakistan has played an important role in enhancing cooperation among member nations. How do you perceive the current situation within the OIC especially with regards to the consolidation of Muslim countries which are separated by indifference in ideology about the West Asian peace process?

A: There is no disagreement in the Arab and Islamic world about the need for the full realisation of the inalienable national rights of the Palestinian people including their right to return to self-determination and to the establishment of their independent state on their national soil with Al-Quds Al-Sharif as its capital.

The OIC has been unanimous in expressing its solidarity with the Palestinian people and has repeatedly called for the full withdrawal of Israeli forces from all occupied territories including the city of Al-Quds Al-Sharif in accordance with Security Council Resolutions 242, 338, 425 and the land-for-peace formula.

This was reiterated by the OIC special Summit held in Islamabad on 23 March, 1997 which adopted a Special Declaration on Palestine and Al-Quds

Al-Sharif.

Recent setbacks to the West Asian peace process, resulting from Israeli intransigence and provocative action in the occupied territories, are cause for serious concern. The Arab and Islamic countries will continue to coordinate their efforts to resolve this issue at the United Nations.

Q: What do you hope to achieve by further enhancing Pakistan-Malaysia relations and do you think Malaysia can contribute to the development your country?

A: We would like to deepen our political relations by joining organisations like Asean, Apec, ARF and Asem. We are desirous of expanding bilateral trade as well as increasing industrial and defence cooperation.

An important objective of my visit would be to stimulate and seek an early realisation of mutually beneficial projects in the commercial, industrial and financial sectors which had been identified in my previous discussions with Dr Mahathir.

There have been high level talks among officials as well as between the private sectors of our two countries on this subject.

Q: The leadership of Pakistan seems to have changed hands rather frequently recently. In view of this situation, how are you going to secure your foreign policy with regards to maintaining a good relationship with friendly countries, like Malaysia for instance?

A: I do agree with you - over the past few years leadership changes have been too swift to allow democracy take firm root.

However, we do hope that our Government will complete its tenure successfully since we are driven by a sincerity of purpose and to better the country and its people. We are taking steps in the right direction as even many of our critics will acknowledge.

You will agree that foreign policy is not something which undergoes a concomitant variation/change.

The broad framework is hardly altered - because here too the ruling factor is not personal whim but what is good for Pakistan.

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