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Partners in progress

IT is significant that Japanese Premier Ryutaro Hashimoto on his Wednesday visit to Kuala Lumpur in the course of his whirlwind tour of Asean nations stresses the increasing importance for Japan to "widen and deepen" its co-operative relationship with the grouping.

The statement stemmed from recognising that Asean, with its burgeoning economic development and political stability, is indeed a region to reckon with in the next millennium. Hashimoto, describing Asean's history as "a history of success", is particularly impressed with Malaysia's phenomenal growth. He declared his firm belief that peace and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region in the next century can be achieved through close co-operation between Japan and Asean.

That the Japanese leader chose Kuala Lumpur to voice his conviction is indeed appropriate for Malaysia is currently the Asean Standing Committee chairman. It will soon host the ministerial conference which is expected to see the admission of Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos, making it Asean 10 on the occasion of the grouping's 30th anniversary. Although Hashimoto did express his reservation politely by stating that the new members will pose challenges to Asean, Japan must have privately acknowledged that it cannot stem the tide of events. An Asean 10, encompassing all the countries of the Southeast Asian region, offers tremendous potential with its huge population and impressive growth. Malaysia views an Asean 10 as a monumental achievement, empowering it to realise its full potential.

In the wider Asian context, the usefulness of the exchange of views on vital issues between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Hashimoto cannot be overemphasised. The two leaders have been able to convey the aspirations of the interests they represent, enhancing understanding of each other's positions. As G-15 chairman, Dr Mahathir conveyed an urgent message through Hashimoto calling for a dialogue mechanism between the grouping and G-7 to ensure that the interests of developing countries are taken into account in decisions made by the industrialised nations. A pressing issue is currency fluctuations, particularly the appreciation of the yen, which is burdening many debtor countries, including Malaysia. Dr Mahathir, who has strongly advocated a World Century and called for a stop to making a bogey of Asian countries, reiterates Malaysia's belief that a policy of friendship with China is better than confrontation.

Malaysia welcomes Japan's desire for bilateral co-operation in accelerating growth in other developing countries. Japan has been urged to import more of Malaysian products and materials to help address the trade imbalance and reflect growing trade ties. Given its economic and technological superiority, Japan's co-operation is also sought to help Malaysia achieve the goals under the Second Industrial Master Plan. Japan, in wanting to work closely with Asean as partners to promote regional co-operation and hence a better world, is moving in the right direction as the Asian maxim goes: Distant waters cannot help extinguish the fire at one's doorstep. A neighbour is invariably better than a relative in a distant land in times of need. In helping to build a strong region, particularly East Asia, Japan will undoubtedly enhance its own strength and position as a major world economic power.

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