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Reaping the success of a 25-year union via the GBC

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WHEN a couple has spent a quarter of a century together, it is certainly an occasion to celebrate. In the case of two countries with a litany of problems their legion of officials have had to attend to over no less than this period of time, the call to rejoice becomes that much greater.

Such being the case it is therefore not incomprehensible for Malaysian and Indonesian leaders attending the General Border Committee meeting today in Parapat, Indonesia, to want the occasion to be something to be remembered ... for a long, long time to come.

The meeting, to be held not far from the scenic and picturesque Lake Toba, will see joint chairmen Malaysian Defence Minister Datuk Syed Hamid Albar and Indonesian Defence Forces chief General Feisal Tanjung laying a foundation stone to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the GBC.

The festivities are expected to continue later in the night with the launching of a book detailing the history and achievements attained by the committee.

Syed Hamid and Feisal, who have in the past said the border security cooperation between both countries was good, are expected to reiterate their stand on the matter.

They are expected to stress the importance of cooperating even more closely to ensure there will be no reason for both nations to be drawn into conflicts, military or otherwise, with such a platform to negotiate in place.

Formed in 1972 as a follow-up to the Security Regulations Agreement between both countries following the bloody 1966 Confrontation, the GBC has come a long way since its inception.

Much of the committee's success is linked to the close bond between Indonesian President Suharto, who has ruled the republic for more than two decades, and past and present Malaysian leaders like Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Furthermore, Indonesia and Malaysia are not neighbours bonded purely by geographical coincidence.

The peoples of the two countries have shared close personal, cultural and religious ties, dating back several centuries.

There were periods of political instability in pre- and post-sovereign Indonesia and Malaysia but, generally, the ties are said to be good.

From a body committed solely to security along mutual borders, the GBC has evolved to include search and rescue operations and socio-economic development.

So it is hardly surprising that the committee regarded the Tebedu-Entikong border crossing on the Sarawak-Kalimantan border which was opened in 1993 as more than just entry and exit points for the peoples of the two countries.

With the crossing, and security afforded by police and military forces of the two countries, the area is seeing rapid socio-economic growth in line with the vision of Malaysian and Indonesian leaders to promote stronger intra-Asean trade.

Given the success of the Tebedu-Entikong border complex, plans are under way to establish a second crossing in Sabah to link the Malaysian state with Indonesia's East Kalimantan.

This new border security complex will serve as the catalyst towards economic independence for small towns along the Sabah-East Kalimantan

border.

Syed Hamid, while describing the cooperation between both countries in the past as excellent, wants more to be done.

For a start, the Minister strongly believes that the scope of cooperation should go beyond security arrangements.

"In the absence of any crisis and conflict between us and the Indonesians, the GBC should look at other ways of exploiting the close ties for the benefit of the people along the common border."

He proposed that the GBC be more active in planning future trans-border posts complete with immigration, police, Customs and military inspection facilities that would facilitate the flow of people and goods.

In addition, the GBC would be tasked with identifying more border towns to be developed.

Given the vast expanse of Malaysian and Indonesian waters to be patrolled, the next priority for the GBC will be finding the best way to tackle maritime pollution and piracy.

The Straits of Malacca offers the two countries the best opportunity to implement a joint operational plan of keeping the world's busiest waterway free of pollution.

Now, enforcement is very much unilateral, and occasionally, there are the joint operations or exercises.

What should be considered is a joint command and operation to send a strong message to the polluters that the two countries mean business.

Piracy, which is under control with the move to step up naval patrols, is difficult to stamp out. But all is not lost.

The GBC can call for greater exchange of intelligence and joint operations to end the reign of terror of the modern day buccaneers.

The problem is not confined to purely robbery on the high seas. In fact, shippers have warned governments that ships with their crews tied up enjoy a high risk of collisions and running aground.

Imagine the catastrophe if that ship happens to be a supertanker loaded with crude oil. Such fears had nevertheless been put on the table at the GBC meeting in Kuala Lumpur last year.

But, as some maritime experts say, a lot more needs to be done, considering the number of ships using the waterway daily and discharging their sludge without fear of being nabbed.

On maritime search and rescue, the GBC is expected to fine tune its joint operations entailing the use of each country's equipment and expertise. In this respect, joint exercises are being planned.

Joint military exercises, under the auspices of the GBC, will be continued despite the end of the Cold War.

Just like the couple, who both look forward to many more blissful years together, it will not be off the mark to say that the GBC shares the same sentiments.

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