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United in the face of globalisation

THERE are many reasons why Pakistan and Malaysia must hasten efforts to extend their excellent diplomatic ties to economic areas. Both are Islamic countries capable of improving the lot of the Islamic world. As members of the Developing Eight (D-8), the economic branch of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) that had its first summit earlier this year, Pakistan and Malaysia agreed to lead the way for other Islamic countries to intensify cooperation and help one another prosper.

Their success in establishing closer economic ties, instead of just diplomatic, cultural or people-to-people, is crucial to convince others that Islamic countries can prosper one another. Certainly, the fruits of Nawaz's visit to Malaysia will not be ripe for harvest overnight. But success will indeed give strong encouragement to other Islamic governments as to how far and deep ties between Islamic countries can go. At the D-8 summit in Turkey, leaders of the participating nations acknowledged that the Islamic world should have had more say in global trade. With their combined reserves, the Islamic countries have the financial muscles to move markets and currencies, or at least promote the Islamic financial system as a viable international mechanism.

Much was agreed upon during the visit by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif last week. A memorandum of understanding on defence was signed and the two countries have promised to look into other areas of cooperation. Companies from both countries also held the first Malaysia-Pakistan gathering to identify opportunities for joint ventures and to analyse the strengths and weaknesses in their current state of relations. The Pakistani Government is keen to learn from Malaysia's privatization programmes.

Pakistan, with some 130 million people, is by far the larger country although Malaysia, which is located in the dynamic Asean region, has enjoyed great fortune and an economic boom in the last decade. For Pakistan, peace and harmony will continue to be elusive in the coming years. Years of military rule and political turmoil have slowed down development and economic growth. Years of being at odds with neighbour India have not only dampened the economic development of Pakistan but also that of India. But as Nawaz said, the key to prosperity and security is economic strength. Pakistan's resolve to choose the economic path towards security and prosperity is, therefore, encouraging. This is certainly in line with Malaysia's own vision. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in his address to Asean foreign ministers who met in Kuala Lumpur last month, underscored economic strength as the key to security in the region.

In the same vein, the future security of Islamic countries will depend on their economic strength. Individually, many Muslim nations are wealthy with high per capita incomes and great affluence. There are probably more Rolls-Royces and palaces in Islamic countries than in the entire Western world. Collectively, though, there is little effort to merge resources and help each other. Historically, Islamic countries and Muslim factions waged war with one another more often than they made peace. They depend on the US and other world powers - none of them Islamic countries - for arms to fight and kill one another. They also have to depend on these economic powers for technology, job-creating investments, and mediation for peace.

The Pakistan-Malaysia relations can be seen as just another bilateral effort. But it could also be viewed as the first concrete step by members

of the D-8 to carry out what they have agreed to accomplish. More trade and investment missions must be sent to each other's shores and the council representing Malaysia-Pakistan entrepreneurs must convene regular meetings. Joint ventures in each other's countries as well as in third Islamic countries must be pursued with vigour. The objective must not be simply bilateral, it should aim at starting an effort that would result in all Islamic countries working together as a united force in the face of globalisation.

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