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A step towards closer ties

THE wave of superlatives describing the successful construction of the Second Link, a 1.9 km bridge over the Johore Straits which is the culmination of three years' collaboration between the private sectors of Malaysia and Singapore, is not mere rhetoric. Its functional perspective aside, the bridge stands proudly as a testimony to the long-term and warm relationship between the neighbouring countries. And rightly so. Prime Ministers Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Goh Chok Tong see it beyond its role of providing a physical linkage between the two countries.

Both leaders said it would serve to strengthen existing bilateral relations and also, more significant, as the "bridge" that will carry both countries into the 21st century. That the bridge is euphorically hailed as such should not be construed as an attempt by both countries at stroking each other's ego. Indeed, relations between Malaysia and Singapore have surpassed, and admirably so, the stage where one needs to appease or patronise the other, or be acquiescent all the time. Both have been equally clear of the need to build a relationship of equals. And if both have been vocal from time to time about such a need, it is due to the fact that none wishes to weaken the long-term relationship between the two sovereign nations which is based on mutual respect, trust, reciprocity and mutual benefit.

It is, of course, impossible to ignore some similar features enjoyed by both. Nor is it possible to ignore the historical roots shared by both. As a matter of fact, all the countries in the South-East Asia region share many historical and cultural similarities. But these traits should not be exploited to inject disharmony into the relationship. In the case of Malaysia and Singapore, they should be utilised as an advantageous asset to bring both nations even closer than ever. It is worth remembering at all times that the two neighbours have evolved differently and adopted different political styles and approaches in the 33 years after their separation. Inevitably, these differences are bound to spill over into bilateral ties from time to time. But, as evidenced from past experience, both strive to bridge the gap and work together for common benefit in spite of this complicating factor. The second road link is only one of the many examples of the ongoing efforts by both countries to strengthen their warm relations and foster greater harmony.

The political maturity of both governments have ensured that hiccups, which arose along the way, do not yield any debilitating or corrosive effects on the countries' relationship. Both governments have always shown admirable calm and restraint during times of strain. This, however, should not be misconstrued as a willingness to be cowed or intimidated. Rather, it takes immense strength to exercise calm and measured restraint in the face of a crisis. This explains why hitherto, no irritant in bilateral ties has escalated to an acrimonious point. With consultation and dialogue, it is possible to avoid all seeds of friction. As pointed out by Dr Mahathir, "Frequent consultations have made us more aware of sensitivities and the problems we face. Of greater importance is the fact that it has made us more aware of the strengths that both possess and how these can be harnessed for the benefit of our people."

There is no overstating the need to nurture and sustain bilateral relations. At no time should we take each other for granted.

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