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Resolving issues binds ties

MALAYSIA and Singapore have long had a symbiotic relationship that goes beyond trade. The relationship has been in the main cordial except for the political hiccup in the mid-1960s when Singapore had to leave the then-newly formed nation of Malaysia.

Nevertheless, several issues have dogged bilateral relations for years - some minor like the not-so-kind comments on security along the streets of Johor Baru which the shifting sands of time have since erased; others, more contentious and longstanding. So it must be welcomed that both Governments have agreed on Tuesday to resume negotiations to resolve the outstanding differences on Malaysian railway land in Singapore and water supply to the island state as well as the claims by both countries on Pulau Batu Puteh.

A key word that underlines the import of the agreements is contained in the joint communique issued after the meeting of the two Prime Ministers. Both Governments have agreed to intensify efforts to resolve outstanding matters on the status of the Malayan Railway land in Singapore.

The bone of contention is the interpretation of the Points of Agreement on the railway land reached in 1990. The differing interpretations can surely be resolved if discussions are held in a spirit of goodwill and understanding for mutual benefit of both countries.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Goh Chok Thong decided to refer the dispute over the island of Pulau Batu Puteh to the International Court of Justice during talks in Langkawi last September. On Tuesday, they shifted the gears of negotiations by agreeing to have both Governments resume talks within 60 days to finalise an agreement on the claims to the island before referring the issue to the ICJ. Hopefully what could not be resolved over the negotiation table can be adjudicated justly by the ICJ.

As for water, Malaysia has long agreed to ensure a steady supply of water to the island state. The commitment to make the provision of water available up to the year 2061 was made as early as 1962. That commitment has now been extended beyond 2061. The undertaking will be confirmed in an agreement within 60 days. This timeframe is necessary even though Dr Mahathir has given his commitment since water comes under the purview of State Governments and their views have to be sought. In this particular case, the consent of the Johor State Government is a prerequisite. But given the Prime Minister's word, an agreement could be signed within two months.

But negotiations on the terms of the agreement cannot start immediately as Singapore initially desired. It has realised after the talks between the two Prime Ministers that it is neither wise nor good commerce to agree to terms that would only apply more than 60 years from now. The simple reason is that a water agreement has too many mutable factors like costs, price, exchange rate, and more importantly, the supply of water and demand for water within the state that has this resource. Clearly, understanding these intrinsic details is a manifestation of goodwill and co-operation.

Resolving bilateral issues or at least agreeing to continue to discuss means of finding solutions cements bilateral relationships. The close co-operation will enable Malaysia and Singapore to help their Asean partners, especially in these critical times, to restore stability to regional currencies.

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