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Dr M's China visit reaffirms KL-Beijing ties

Kamarul Yunus in Beijing

BEIJING: China and Malaysia are geographically thousands of kilometres apart but people from both countries need not worry about adjusting their watches when they visit either nation. The reason is that both countries have the same time zone.

This is one of the similarities that both Malaysia and China share, apart from the fact that the forefathers of the Malaysian Chinese community hail from the land which is famous for its "Great Wall", one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

Such similarities should serve as a platform to forge greater cooperation and relations between the peoples of the two countries, whose relations date back some 500 years.

The cordial relationship between the Chinese and the Malays actually grew stronger during the Malacca Sultanate period but deteriorated when Western powers came to colonise the land in the 16th Century.

It was only when the late Tun Abdul Razak, Malaysia's second Prime Minister, visited China in 1974 that friendship and cooperation between the two countries were revived. Since then, significant progress has been achieved with ties between the two countries growing stronger.

Initially, cooperation was limited to trade but spread later to other fields such as investment, education, tourism and air services.

These cordial and mutual relations were evident during the three-day working visit by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad which began last Wednesday.

Dr Mahathir's visit this year, his fifth to China after taking the helm of the prime ministership about 18 years ago, is considered important as it commemorates the Silver Jubilee anniversary of Malaysia-China diplomatic relations (the official celebration was on May 31).

At the end of his visit last Friday, the Prime Minister said a lot of progress had been made in terms of forging closer ties with China in the past 25 years.

Dr Mahathir, however, stressed that there is room for improvement and urged China to work with Malaysia and other East Asian economies to weather whatever challenges that lie ahead, as well as grab the opportunities available in the next millennium.

It is crucial for China to play a leading role among Asian countries, and Malaysia in particular, views China as a superpower in the region.

"In Malaysia, we are watching China's progress very closely because it has great importance for the development of our country," Dr Mahathir had said prior to the official meeting with Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji during his visit.

The region's financial and economic turmoil, which had affected the economies of East and South-East Asian countries in the past two years has taught Asians they need to unite and face challenges. In this regard, Malaysia considers China's influence as an important factor not only in the region's stability but also the economic field.

Admitting that Malaysia seeks China's support to formalise the pending East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC), Dr Mahathir said he feels the financial and economic crisis affecting East Asian economies could have been avoided if such a forum had been formalised earlier.

"I cannot help but feel that had there been an EAEC comprising Asean (Association of South-East Asian Nations) countries plus China, Japan and

South Korea which met frequently to discuss issues pertinent to the region, the first recourse for Thailand, Indonesia and South Korea would not have been the IMF (International Monetary Fund) but the EAEC," he had said.

Dr Mahathir also emphasised the importance of realising the Japan-initiated proposed Asian Monetary Fund (AMF), which was shot down earlier by the US and IMF. Japan revived the idea recently and such a proposal will do Asia good, with China's backing.

Malaysia also hopes that with Chinese cooperation as well as that of other East and South-East Asian nations, there will be a stronger regional voice which can call on developed nations to work towards a new global financial architecture.

Beijing can also work with other East Asian countries in areas such as science and information technology, setting up Asian media, restructuring the UN Security Council, promoting the Asean Regional Forum and building the East Asian community of common peace and prosperity.

Dr Mahathir's visit also reaffirmed greater cooperation between Malaysia and China. Indeed, the approval given by the Chinese Government to Malaysia to open a consulate office in Shanghai will encourage more people-to-people contacts as well as business links between Malaysia and China. At present, visas are issued at the consulate office in Guangzhou and the Malaysian embassy in Beijing.

According to statistics, the consulate in Guangzhou and embassy in Beijing issued a total of 263,950 visas to Chinese nationals last year, against 220,284 in the previous year. Such figures show more Chinese nationals are visiting Malaysia.

Besides the opening of consulate offices, Malaysia's ties with China received a further boost, following the signing of four documents during Dr Mahathir's visit. Three of the documents were on a government-to-government basis, while one related to the private sector.

Two of the three government-to-government documents signed were memorandums of understanding on cooperation in sciences and engineering, while the private sector initiative pertained to the development of forest plantations and setting up a pulp and paper mill in Sabah costing about US\$1.2 billion (US\$1 = RM3.80).

Signed on a different occasion, was the memorandum of understanding between Padiberas Nasional Bhd (Bernas) and the China National Credit Cereals, Oils and Foodstuffs Import and Export Corporation or Cofco on counter barter trade aimed at increasing bilateral trade between both countries.

Dr Mahathir's visit to China has certainly been very successful and fruitful, and China and Malaysia have taken some concrete measures to boost ties and can look ahead to greater and closer collaboration in the new millennium.

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