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## Prosper-thy-neighbour relations

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MY APPOINTMENT as Singapore's High Commissioner to Malaysia in May 1997 was a balik kampung of sorts. Born in Kuala Lumpur, and having spent a significant part of my childhood years in the tranquil setting of Kuala Lipis in Pahang, I have always had great affection for Malaysia. Like many of my friends in Malaysia, I grew up in a kampung environment and received much of my schooling in Malaysia. Before settling in Singapore, I taught at a number of schools in Malaysia, including Westland Secondary School in Penang. My posting to Kuala Lumpur as Singapore's High Commissioner to Malaysia has given me a wonderful opportunity to renew my ties with many old friends, acquaintances, and even former students of Westland.

Now, more than 30 years later, these reunions have served as a reminder of the common history, shared cultural heritage and joint struggles that the peoples of Malaysia and Singapore had undergone over the past three and half decades.

Since Singapore's independence 34 years ago, Malaysia and Singapore have followed different developmental paths and pursued their own goals. Both, however, have prospered and thrived. In fact, prior to the financial crisis that hit the region in July 1997, Singapore and Malaysia were lauded as among the famous Asian Dragon and Tiger economies respectively. Many other developing countries around the world continue to draw inspiration from the achievements of our two economies. In short, Singapore's and Malaysia's separate performance records have demonstrated that there can be different paths towards achieving success.

Notwithstanding the different approaches taken by the Governments of Singapore and Malaysia, cooperation between the two countries, especially in trade and commerce, has always been strong.

The two economies continue to be closely intertwined - today, Singapore is Malaysia's second-largest trading partner (with total trade amounting to about RM 79.63 billion, or 15.5 per cent of Malaysia's total trade in 1998). Singapore is also the fourth-largest foreign investor in Malaysia, with more than RM 385.5 million channelled into 81 projects in 1998 alone. In the tourism sector, more than half of Malaysia's current annual tourist arrivals originate from Singapore.

Singaporeans enjoy the relatively vast space and diverse opportunities for recreation and relaxation that Malaysia offers. Both Malaysia and Singapore have benefited from their strong trade and investment links. Apart from generating income to fuel economic development, the close economic cooperation between Singapore and Malaysia has also created numerous employment opportunities for the people of both countries, thus contributing towards their mutual prosperity.

This notwithstanding, it is inevitable that the two countries, as close neighbours sharing a common border, will not always see eye-to-eye on every issue.

Occasional hiccups in bilateral relations are unavoidable, but these should be taken in stride. As Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, in his 1998 National Day Rally Speech, stated, "we should not over-react or let disagreements on individual issues spill over to affect the overall relationship. We should try to resolve, or at least contain, the issues". In this spirit, Prime Minister Goh and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed decided in December 1998 to resolve outstanding bilateral

issues as a package. Negotiations are currently ongoing at the senior officials' level. They have already had three rounds of discussions. They will continue to work towards narrowing the gaps on the issues, so as to arrive at a "win-win" package deal.

Singapore values its close relationship with Malaysia, and is keen to work towards stronger bilateral relations based on the principles of sovereign equality, mutual respect and reciprocity.

As long as the leaders of both countries remain committed towards maximising the potential benefits of bilateral cooperation, I have no doubt that together, we would be able to overcome the occasional obstacles and bring about greater progress and prosperity for our two peoples.

As the new millennium approaches, the people of both countries should give some thought to the future direction of bilateral relations. While both countries would stand to gain by maintaining our pragmatic and mutually beneficial economic relationship, the more important question to explore is what other opportunities exist for mutually beneficial cooperation?

On the bilateral front, there is room for closer cooperation in tourism, for a start. Given the shared history and common heritage of the two countries, there is great potential for joint marketing efforts to promote Singapore and Malaysia as a single tourism destination.

Greater efforts in this direction could increase the total number of tourist arrivals to the whole region, thereby enlarging the economic pie to the benefit of both countries. There are also many opportunities for cooperation in education through regular exchanges between the universities and institutions of higher learning.

The two countries can also work closely to find common approaches to tackling problems on the environmental front. Such cooperative activities would also help to promote stronger people-to-people ties. Hence, we should consciously look for new areas where we can turn such opportunities into joint achievements that will strengthen the bonds between us. Such efforts will remain very much a part of my endeavours here as Singapore's High Commissioner to Malaysia.

Given the increasing pace of globalisation, Malaysia-Singapore cooperation should be actively extended to the regional context. As the highly competitive international environment makes it increasingly tougher for Asean countries to compete individually against much stronger players in the global arena, the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) countries should strengthen their efforts to gain a greater combined voice on the international stage.

In this regard, Singapore and Malaysia could take the lead in marketing the region to the rest of the world through a series of joint 'roadshows' as Prime Minister Goh had suggested at the Opening of the 32nd Asean Ministerial Meeting last month.

This is certainly an area where Singapore and Malaysia could take the lead in helping to speed up the recovery of not just our two economies, but those of our neighbours in Asean as well.

Historical and political forces determined that Singapore and Malaysia would become two separate countries. However, there is nothing that prevents us from working together to advance our common interests and goals.

The destinies of Singapore and Malaysia are intertwined and inseparable. It is in this belief that as I receive good wishes from my Malaysian friends on the occasion of the 34th National day of Singapore, I would like to reciprocate by wishing my Malaysian friends continued peace and prosperity.