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Looking forward together

UNDOUBTEDLY, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit to Indonesia underscores the diplomatic progress that has taken place over the last decade. The departure from protocol, wherein President Abdurrahman Wahid personally received Dr Mahathir on arrival is among the many gestures intimating at the warmth and closeness between the two nations.

In a larger dimension, the trip is significant as it is made at a time when Indonesia is at the threshold of a new stage under Abdurrahman's leadership. Dr Mahathir is the second Asean leader to visit Indonesia since Abdurrahman was elected to office.

The archipelago state has taken a great leap toward genuine representative politics and, as seen recently, Abdurrahman had acted decisively to ensure that the military establishment is no longer a burden on the Government as it walks down a democratic path. Given the nature of the economic environment, battered as it was by the mid-1997 economic crisis and exacerbated by the ill-prescribed International Monetary Fund's fiscal remedies, its Government is faced with numerous daunting tasks. But none of these internal developments has blurred or affected Malaysia's foreign policy toward the republic. Nor have the political and economic changes submerged the fact that Indonesia remains an important country in the region.

Dr Mahathir acknowledged the fact that the republic's policies and actions have contributed to regional co-operation and stability in both Southeast Asia and Asia Pacific. A weakened Indonesia is in nobody's interest in the region and, hence, the utmost must be done by its neighbours to lend a helping hand.

Malaysia's readiness to help the republic with its economic recovery efforts shows that it clearly values its long-established relations with the latter. The bilateral ties have evolved from the paternalistic pattern of the old days to one where both countries are friends and partners on an equal footing. Both nations have more in common than in divergence. There is only one way to further strengthen the relations - move forward in new areas of collaboration and seek new synergies.

The mutual trust and spirit of give and take between the two must be enhanced to make both parties more secure and prosperous. The decision to hold high-level meetings between the leaders of the two countries once in six months is momentous for it proves that both countries are intent on taking the bilateral relations to new heights. It demonstrates the confidence in each other. More importantly, frequency of meetings is necessary to put substance in all the agreed areas of co-operation.

Malaysia and Indonesia were the embodiment of the risks and hazards of financial liberalisation and globalisation when the economy plunged into a crisis in mid-1997. Such experience and, in particular, the discord in the international policy on globalisation made it necessary for both nations to adopt a common stand and formulate alternatives to the dominant notion of liberalisation in international fora.

But for those who misjudged Abdurrahman as being under the tutelage of the US, his moves to strengthen ties with Malaysia and other Asean nations show that he is, above all, pragmatic. Like the other leaders in the region, he realises the dynamics of inter-dependence in the region. Diplomacy is not a zero-sum game.

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