

13/11/2000

Relations now on an even keel

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MALAYSIA and Singapore are separated by only a relatively slim swathe of calm waters.

But the nature of bilateral ties between the countries sometimes make them seem like they are on different ends of the world map.

Tempers have flared on occasion, and caustic exchanges have followed. This will then peter out and a time of relative calm will follow, to then shatter again with the next "provocative" word or action.

What are also stubborn creases in the ties of both countries is a package of unresolved issues: the supply of water to Singapore; disagreements over the Points of Agreement; Customs, Immigration and Quarantine status at Tanjung Pagar; the use of Malaysian airspace by the Singapore Air Force; and Singapore Provident Fund withdrawals by people from Peninsular Malaysia working in the republic.

The deadlock over all five issues is said to be caused by the failure to compromise.

The republic's elder Statesman Lee Kuan Yew, in his visit to Malaysia recently, his first after 10 years, expressed confidence that the Prime Ministers of both countries would be able to meet soon to resolve outstanding bilateral issues.

An optimistic prospect, but his subsequent remarks caught many Malaysians off-guard. The Senior Minister - to the surprise and discomfort of many - made several remarks about Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's predicament vis-a-vis Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's arrest.

And not too long after he returned to Singapore, Lee, alluding to his country's recent purchase of medium-range guided missiles, had apparently extended an invitation for attacks against the republic.

The Asian Wall Street Journal has insisted that Lee's remarks could set back efforts to resolve long-standing bilateral issues. Some political analysts in Malaysia have also agreed, but not all felt Lee did more damage than good to the sensitive political situation.

What of the climate in Singapore? Besides Lee, not much is known of the views of its other leaders and people about Malaysia and Malaysians, and ties between the two countries.

But if the recent statement of the republic's Trade Development Board director was anything to go by, things are looking up for ties between the countries on both sides of the Causeway.

The board's international operations (Southeast Asia) director said whatever problems between the two countries was just a perception.

"We in Singapore feel that the Senior Minister's visit had helped iron out many matters. His visit was very, very good according to feedback from Singaporean businessmen."

The island-state's Foreign Affairs Minister, Professor S. Jayakumar, however, did not dismiss the problems as a perception. In his view, they are real but just "hiccups" which do not, in any way, affect the general tone of bilateral relations.

"Because we are close neighbours, from time to time there will be hiccups.

"If you look at countries which are geographically close around the world, issues can be blown out of proportion.

"So, the key is managing the issues so they never affect the general tone of bilateral relations."

Jayakumar feels that relations between Singapore and Malaysia are now on "an even keel" and is optimistic that outstanding issues will be resolved soon.

But he is also quick to add that much more remains to be done to improve ties.