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The hand that gives, gathers

WE have always had a symbiotic relation with our neighbour across the causeway. With Singapore we have a shared history, traditions and culture. Indeed once we were united as one nation. Unfortunately, that bond did not prevail. Singapore had to go its own way. The island-State weathered and it is among the developed of developing nations, a status that we too aspire to achieve. But their relationship has not been the best. Discussions on key issues have been stalled by intractable stances. But positions can change and must change. We are confident as is Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew that thorny issues can be resolved if ministers of both sides foster friendships and adopt a give-and-take stance in bilateral talks. That is the way both countries can move on, clearing differences and binding ties.

As he expressed in the Press conference at the end of a four-day working visit, Lee is confident agreements can be reached on water, Customs, immigration and quarantine stations as well as Malaysian withdrawals from the Central Provident Fund. He rightly declared that the talks should not be left to the civil servants. They are executors of policy which is pronounced by ministers. If ministers from both sides meet more often, give and take, problematic issues can be ironed out. Like Lee, we hope a resolution emerges within two or three months.

Lee sees himself as a "facilitator" in building a new (close) bilateral relationship. Mending fences and building bridges require the right tools of the trade. But nothing is impossible in a smart partnership, given time and the willingness to rationalise and accommodate each other's wishes in the true spirit of friendship and co-operation. Even the best of friends have their differences. And it is in treading through turbulent times that the hand of friendship is tested and tried.

The friendship between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Lee goes back a long way. The fine diplomat that he is, Lee has even proposed that Ministers from both countries meet regularly on personal terms to enable them to cultivate friendships. Clearly, Lee, as much as Malaysia does, places great store by friendship and has enough faith and optimism that all's well that ends well if both sides are willing to "give".

Friendships can be rekindled and honoured. If the issues are handled with the dexterity of gentlemen, the bugbears can be erased and the outcome will also augur well for the region. Asean, as a region, has immense economic potential waiting to be tapped. Troubles in member countries have been perceived by some potential investors in developed countries as political disarray. If they cannot see the wood for the trees, Asean in its true tradition of consensus and co-operation can show the way.

Even as countries sort out their own problems, few will deny that Asean as a region has a shared destiny. While changes alter bilateral, regional and global changes, destiny is not a matter of change; rather, it is a matter of choice.

History is littered with case-studies of co-operation and conflict which countries can learn from or ignore. Though 35 years is not a long history Singapore and Malaysia do share a bond and a future as well. By necessity or by proclivity, both countries will have to meet half-way if they are to catch up with developments and progress. The hand that gives, gathers.

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