

29/01/2001

## A resurgent Malaysia-India relations

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DESPITE their poor state, India first and later Pakistan - two arch enemies - now have nuclear weapons, dangerously raising the levels of future nuclear war on the subcontinent. I believe their decisions to produce the weapons were legitimate and there was a clear enough rationale.

India, in particular, resents how it is regarded by the world at large despite being a stable democracy, a resurgent economy and viewed by many as moving towards becoming an IT superpower of sorts.

Atal Behari Vajpayee will arrive in Kuala Lumpur next week on an official visit, the first by an Indian Prime Minister in five years. Narasimha Rao came in August 1995 and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahahir Mohamad made a reciprocal visit the following year.

India, it is said, is starting a new diplomacy on how it should be looked upon in the new millennium: a makeover, a new image that it is a serious contender for a bigger role in international relations as it once was under Jawaharlal Nehru.

Foreign policy, under Dr Mahathir is and has played a bigger role when he recognised that it was and is a relevant economic asset; it is not just an afterthought.

Malaysia-India historical links are centuries old. Their bilateral relations have always been strong. New Delhi was one of the few select capitals where we set up diplomatic missions at ambassadorial level at Independence. We have no problems in our relations with India.

India continues to be Malaysia's largest trading partner in the subcontinent and in 1999, bilateral trade amounted to RM9.759 billion. The balance of trade has always been in Kuala Lumpur's favour, slightly more than half the amount.

Malaysia's single biggest export is palm oil, contributing RM3.4 billion, making India our biggest importer.

India has 179 industrial projects in Malaysia, worth RM106.5 million (between 1988 and 1999), while we are one of India's top foreign investors (RM1.715 billion). We have invested largely in power generation, telecommunications, highway construction (including part of the Mumbai-Pune Highway), and India's most modern LPG facility in Haldia in southwest Calcutta, which I visited last Wednesday. It will be operational in May. Malaysians have also invested in the plantation and manufacturing sectors.

I have been informed that bilateral agreements and memoranda of understanding will be signed during Vajpayee's visit involving Avoidance of Double Taxation, Extradition Treaty and several MoUs on Civil Service Cooperation, among others.

In a week's stay which has taken me to Mumbai, Calcutta and New Delhi, I have only sighted one news item in the Indian media regarding Malaysia which was about the extradition proceedings of Ottavio Quattrocchi, an Italian who lives in KL, for allegedly being involved in the Bofors arms scandal. He is now free on bail pending court hearing.

Vajpayee and Dr Mahathir are also expected to discuss the Asean Regional Forum (ARF). Perhaps, Pakistan's application to join the ARF will be reviewed. There is no consensus on the subject. India, which has been a full dialogue partner of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) since 1996 and a participant in the ARF, is pushing hard for an Asean-India summit. Presently, Pakistan is only a sectoral dialogue

partner.

I understand that Malaysia and several of the members believe that for the time being, Asean should focus on consolidation rather than expansion, besides it does appear there is a "little difficulty" here in that Asean cannot consider any enhancement of its relations with India without taking into account the Pakistan factor.

Whatever the case, India-Malaysia bilateral relations are burgeoning. Elsewhere in Asia, India is moving on a fast track diplomacy. I believe this is only the beginning of New Delhi's efforts to integrate itself into the Asian economy, political aspirations in the face of a new world order.

I welcome what seems to be the Indian leadership's new script for India, a revisiting of the East as it were. It is done, of course, as much for economic as for geopolitical reasons.

Vajpayee's visit, his first and also the first of the most senior Indian leaders to do so since India conducted its nuclear tests in May 1998 and another recently, I expect, will cement a stronger bilateral relationship.

There are vast areas of potential cooperation and even synergy between the two countries. I am sure the Indians will like the quality and cost-effectiveness of our highways, roads, bridges and other infrastructure and the KL International Airport, Putrajaya and the Petronas Twin Towers.

And on our part, we are impressed with the Indian genius in computers, mathematics, science, telecommunications, the ability to maintain a high standard of English even after 53 years of Independence when it was relegated to a second language, its film-making industry and cricket.

The good thing is that both Dr Mahathir and Vajpayee are heads of coalition governments, and they are therefore, very conversant with the politics of compromise and in any relationship, there must be give and take.

The friendship between India and Malaysia has always been very good. The only potential outcome, and a certain one, is bright indeed.

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