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Enhancing Franco-Malaysian ties

PRESIDENT JACQUES Chirac's presentation of an ambitious project of a new French policy for Asia marked the beginning of a new era for Franco-Malaysian relations. Bilateral relations gained momentum with France's renewed interest in Asia and its desire to improve relations with countries in the region without historical links, such as Malaysia. Today, relations between France and Malaysia have reached a level of maturity. Malaysia is increasingly making itself known.

Both sides agree that there is need to enhance relations between the two nations and to go beyond the existing framework of cooperation. At the international level, there exists a common will to defend, in the face of globalisation and uniformity of ideas and culture, the plurality of ideas and ways of thinking as well as a concern for the protection of a nation's identity with its culture, language and religion.

In trade and economy, France has become one of Malaysia's major partners and wishes to strengthen industrial and commercial cooperation with it. French Minister for Foreign Trade Franinisterois Huwart, when he visited Malaysia last year with a large delegation of French businessmen, said France is also encouraging greater investment in Malaysia in view of the fast pace of its economic recovery.

In March, a trade delegation from Medef (French Business Confederation) visited Malaysia to confirm that trend and establish new joint ventures with Malaysian companies.

Bilateral ties between the two countries are excellent, and can extend to many areas. Among areas in which France can contribute are the water and space technology sectors.

For example, one-third of Malaysians drink tap water processed by subsidiaries of French water groups, namely Ondeo Group (formerly Suez-Lyonnaise des Eaux) and Vivendi.

One of the major achievements in the water and environment sector is the Water Academy, created jointly by the Malaysia-France Institute in Bangi and Vivendi group, to train young Malaysian engineers in the maintenance of the water treatment plants installed by the French company.

MFI, a joint venture between MARA and the AFPI in Lyon, was established in 1995 to run specialised courses on industrial technology.

Malaysia is France's second largest partner in Asean, after Singapore and before Thailand, with trade worth RM9.6 billion last year.

With Malaysian exports to France totalling RM6.5 billion, France is the fourth largest buyer of Malaysian products in Europe, mainly in electrical and electronic, and in consumer products and air-conditioning systems.

Malaysia's central location in Southeast Asia, coupled with its strong economic development and high skill of its workers, makes it an ideal market opportunity not to be missed.

With nearly 250 companies here, France is contributing to the development of a promising country that has bounced back to a high level of growth after the recent Asian financial crisis. The fact that only a few French companies left Malaysia during these difficult times should be considered as proof of this commitment.

The Lafarge Group which owns eight roofing tiles factories in Malaysia, and Tbf Saint Gobain, which manufactures tiles in Johor, are key players in the building materials sector.

Once it has completed its acquisition of Blue Circle, which owns Malaya

Cement, Lafarge will become a leader in the Malaysian cement industry. In the automotive sector, Renault produces a Malaysian vehicle in association with the Berjaya Group and supplies Proton with 1.8 liter engines and gearboxes, due to be equipped in its latest model, the Waja.

French electronic firms such as ST-Microelectronics, Thales (ex Thomson-Csf, which operates a local joint venture with Sapura), Alcatel and TPC in Penang, employ several thousand Malaysians in their factories, contributing to the industrial development of this country.

The French multimedia company Canal Plus acts behind the scenes in Astro: it provides the satellite TV network with the latest software technology to manage its interactive services to online customers.

As confirmation of France's strong involvement in IT in Malaysia, a seminar on space technologies took place in March in Kuala Lumpur. This event was a follow-up to the Industrial Partnership Agreement signed in 1998 between CFME Actim and MIDA to strengthen bilateral industrial and technological cooperation.

Ten French companies, along with 150 Malaysian representatives of the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment, its related government agencies and the private sector participated in this event, which was divided into two main sessions: French products and technologies, and a specific Malaysian-French industrial meeting to develop links between the companies from both countries.

This seminar determined that Malaysian is a top priority for the French space industry, especially as it is in the process of establishing its own space agency. Another avenue of cooperation is the use of French smart card technology and its applications; the card is expected to be implemented in Kuala Lumpur by the end of this year.

As a large city and regional capital, Kuala Lumpur has important infrastructure requirements. Dragages et Travaux publics (Bouygues Group) is completing the KL Sentral project, which opened recently.

In the energy sector, Alstom is building the 2,100 MW Manjung power plant on the west coast, which is one of the most important contracts ever awarded by Tenaga Nasional in electricity generation.

The company was also awarded the construction of the latest IPPs projects, such as the Perlis and Segari power station.

As Malaysia remains an important producer and player in the oil and gas industry, several French engineering companies such as Technip, Bocard and Spie Capag are participating in the development of Malaysian oil and gas fields, refineries, petrochemical industry and pipeline network.

For example, Technip is taking part in the development of the Cakerawala gas field in the Malaysian-Thai Joint Development Area, which is scheduled to be operational and to supply Kerteh petrochemical industries in mid-2002.

French companies, with their technical expertise, will contribute to the development of the Malaysian agri-food industry. Danone and Clouet are players in the manufacturing of biscuits and canned food locally.

After opening its sixth hypermarket in the Mid-Valley Megamall in Kuala Lumpur, Carrefour will open a seventh in Subang by the end of the year and another in mid-2002.

Ninety-five per cent of its products are Malaysian-made, thus allowing local farmers and manufacturers to increase their business.

As the third largest rubber producer, Malaysia has attracted French companies in this sector. Mapa-Hutchinson, which is established in Ipoh, Bentong and Penang, manufactures 76 per cent of its worldwide production of latex surgical gloves in Malaysia. Other companies such as Joubert and Safic-Alcan are also active in the rubber industry.

Another likely factor helping Franco-Malaysian relations would be in

education and the growing number of Malaysians studying in France.

From 1988 to 1994, 228 Malaysian undergraduates were sent to France by the Malaysian Government to study there. In 2000, a new undergraduate and pluriannual programme was launched to produce French-trained engineers in mechanical, electrical, computer, telecommunications, chemical, and electronics.

Beyond the framework of intergovernment agreements, French universities have also established strong bonds with their Malaysian counterparts. Today, over 20 agreements have been signed between French universities and their Malaysian counterparts. These agreements - concerning mainly post-graduate programmes in France in computer science, chemistry, pharmacy and mechanical engineering - are implemented between French and Malaysian private and public universities.

Finally, it is interesting to note that Malaysians can follow French studies by studying courses from French universities taught in Malaysian institutions, for example the Diploma, Higher Diploma and Bachelor with Honours in Tourism and Hotel Management at the Taylor's College School of Hotel Management, Kuala Lumpur, in collaboration with the University of Toulouse Le Mirail in France, or an MBA in Euro-Asian Management at the Malaysian Graduate School of Management (UPM) in collaboration with the University of Aix-Marseille and the French Foundation for Management education.

France, located at Europe's cultural crossroads, with its global outlook and openness to diversity, makes it a special destination for students from all over the world. Today, more than 130,000 foreigners study in France, accounting for about 10 per cent of the total student population.

Universities and college are well integrated into their surrounding economic environment and produce skilled and, more importantly, immediately operational technicians, engineers, scientists and managers.

Highly-qualified professors as well as engineers and managers from the private sector teach in these institutions. Long-term and mid-term internships in industrial/service sectors, an important part of training, are for the most part compulsory in obtaining a degree.

This combination of academic knowledge and job competence ensure that fresh graduates are equipped to face real working-world realities.

There are 200 engineering schools and 50 business schools offering undergraduate and graduate degrees. The duration is five years, with a selective nation-wide entrance exam following a two-year preparatory period in specialised institutions and three years of training in the school itself.

Also, there are 800 higher technical and vocational colleges or BTS, which offer more than 300 vocational programmes in two years (some in three years, depending on specialisations.)

Meanwhile, at the inter-regional level, the development of Franco-Malaysian relations are connected to their respective memberships within the European Union and Association of South East Asian Nations.

As one of the leading member states of the EU, France cultivates its relationship with Malaysia within the framework of EU-ASEAN co-operation and is an active participant in interregional dialogue through forums such as Asem. Likewise, France encourages Malaysia to play a similar role in Asean.

Malaysia and France have a lot more to learn from each other by way of exchange of experiences in the future. While one is a relatively young multiethnic and multireligious nation, with great potential for development, the other is an old nation moulded by a long history of cultural amalgamation that has become its trademark.

There is no doubt that both countries will come out stronger and richer

from such exchanges. There is room for progress and judging from the events during the past few years, the best has yet to come for Franco-Malaysian relations.

On this note, may I add my sincere wishes of happiness and prosperity to the Yang di Pertuan Agong Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and members of the Government, the people of Malaysia and to the French community.