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Better ties: Ball now in Hsien Loong's court

By Chow Kum Hor

LEE Hsien Loong's elevation as Prime Minister of Singapore is generally viewed in positive light by Malaysians. Efforts to thaw the cold relationship between the two countries began soon after Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi assumed the top job in Malaysia, writes CHOW KUM HOR, and how this is reciprocated across the Causeway is left to be seen.

IT is not difficult to see why Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Abdul Ghani Othman is so eager to "straighten things out" with Singapore's new leadership led by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

Barely was Hsien Loong sworn into office when Ghani said he hoped the republic's leadership would quickly agree to build a straight bridge across the Johor Straits.

The link between Singaporeans and Malaysians could not have been more evident than on Aug 7.

A record 90,000 Singaporeans, taking advantage of their long weekend National Day celebrations, came to Malaysia via the Causeway and the Second Link. The previous record was 50,000 Singaporean visitors in a single day.

Johor Baru, the first Malaysian city across the Causeway, was flooded with Singaporean holiday-makers and bumper-to-bumper traffic choked major roads.

This problem, Ghani had said, could be substantially alleviated if construction of the new bridge to replace the Causeway is expedited.

As it stands, the bridge's proposed design is crooked - a stark reminder of troubled relationship over the years between the countries.

The bridge plan, as mooted during the tenures of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Goh Chok Tong, the previous Prime Ministers of the two countries, required each side to undertake the construction in their respective territories.

Singapore, however, was reluctant to do that, but Dr Mahathir went ahead to declare in August last year that Malaysia would go ahead with its half of the project which, when completed, would cause the link to be a crooked bridge.

One of the reasons Goh gave was that he had a nostalgic attachment and didn't want the Causeway demolished.

If it's any consolation, the new leaders of both countries have toned down the stand on this issue and have asked the architects to go back to the drawing board.

Hsien Loong, who is now settling into the post of Singapore's third Prime Minister, had yet to respond to Ghani's request to literally straighten things out.

But beyond the "crooked bridge", how different can Hsien Loong's policies on Malaysia be, given the fact that he was also a key figure in the administrations of his predecessors?

In broad terms, Hsien Loong, a Deputy Prime Minister in Goh's Cabinet, had pledged to continue with the island state's policies.

Can Hsien Loong get into sync, so to speak, with his Malaysian counterpart Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who is also a new leader, having assumed office some 10 months earlier?

As a general rule, international diplomacy is influenced as much by history and pursuit of national interests as the personalities involved.

Malaysia's love-hate ties with the republic stems from rivalry that

dates back to the time when they went separate ways in 1965.

On the economic front, Johor's Port of Tanjung Pelepas has over the years succeeded in luring away some of Port of Singapore Authority's biggest clients, including Maersk Sealand and Evergreen.

Malaysia's efforts to turn Kuala Lumpur International Airport into a regional aviation hub is also giving Changi Airport a run for its money.

Politically, both countries have differing views on how to ensure safety in the Straits of Malacca.

The island state wants the United States navy to patrol the waters while Malaysia is in favour of the littoral states enhancing security in the world's busiest straits.

And then, there are several thorny outstanding issues, including:

- * the price of water supplied from Johor to the republic;
- * the shifting of Keretapi Tanah Melayu Bhd's station from Tanjung Pagar to Woodlands;
- * Central Provident Fund withdrawals by workers from Peninsular Malaysia; and,
- * the use of Malaysian airspace by low-flying Singapore air force jets.

"I personally don't foresee a quick resolution to these problems. So far, we have only seen Pak Lah's (Abdullah) goodwill," says Abdul Razak Baginda, head of the Malaysian Strategic Research Centre.

Hsien Loong, who is the son of Singapore's first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, he adds, is seen as a chip off the old block.

In Malaysia, Kuan Yew's reputation as an "ultra" and blunt leader unfortunately precedes his stature as a respected international statesman.

Hsien Loong's decision on Tuesday to name Kuan Yew as Minister Mentor in the new Cabinet only raises questions about how much the son will emulate the father's style of leadership via-a-vis Malaysia.

Razak describes Hsien Loong as "officious" and seemingly "lacking in personal skills".

"It did not help that Hsien Loong, in the 1980s, has made remarks about the loyalty of Malays in Singapore's armed forces.

"Somehow, the issue has turned into a racial controversy between Malaysia and Singapore."

On Malaysia's part, however, Abdullah, known for his gentle demeanour, is committed to forging closer ties with his southern neighbour following years of quarrel-and-make-up cycles.

In his first trip to Singapore in January after becoming Prime Minister, Abdullah had resolved to "untie the dead knots" in bilateral relations.

Weeks later, over a flurry of "golf diplomacy", power luncheons and a reciprocal visit by Singapore leaders to celebrate "Kongsi Raya" in Johor Baru, years of simmering mistrust gradually eased.

On a personal level, Abdullah, a former Foreign Minister, is known to enjoy closer rapport with Singaporean leaders than his predecessor.

A few years ago when he just took over as Deputy Prime Minister, Singapore's Home Affairs Minister Wong Kan Seng paid a courtesy call on Abdullah at the Prime Minister's Office.

Abdullah, to the surprise of many, broke protocol and came down from his office to greet Wong at the reception area.

The two apparently go back a long way when both were Foreign Ministers.

Just how much will Hsien Loong, a former brigadier-general, reciprocate Abdullah's gestures?

Singapore-based political analyst Seah Chiang Nee says global developments like threats of terrorism have sent Singapore a wake-up call about the need to maintain good relations with her neighbours.

"In the last six months, Singapore leaders have visited at least 26 countries to enhance ties. They include China, India, the United States

and Iran.

"I believe Singapore leaders now know how much they depend on their neighbours," says Seah who runs the littlespeck.com website.

In a globalised world where diseases like SARS know no political boundaries and threats of terrorism in one country can drive away tourists from the entire region, no man is an island, and the island state is no exception.

In any case, historian Emeritus Professor Datuk Dr Khoo Kay Kim says Hsien Loong and Abdullah represent a new generation of leaders and do not carry historical baggage like their predecessors did.

He adds that given Hsien Loong's illustrious "internship" in the two previous administrations, the younger Lee would have had sufficient time to learn from the mistakes of his predecessors.

Still, Razak says until and unless Hsien Loong makes a categorical statement about wanting to enhance Malaysia-Singapore relations - and follows up on it - Abdullah is just going it alone in mending bilateral ties.

"The Malaysian Prime Minister has done his part. The ball is now in Hsien Loong's court," he says.

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