

22/02/2004

Friends or foes - the debate continues

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HOW could two nations share so many similarities yet hold totally contrasting views on a whole range of issues ranging from geo-politics to security?

Australia-Malaysia ties, by design in a unique category in international affairs, have and will most probably continue to befuddle nation watchers with their unique tenor and tone.

Friends since the 1950s when Australian soldiers came over to help fight the communists and later in the 1960s when Indonesia declared konfrontasi against Malaysia, they remained allies in most matters for a long time.

Defence was the cornerstone on which both nations built their ties, with the presence of Australian flyers an almost permanent feature in Butterworth where the Royal Australian Air Force maintained a presence for many years.

The Five-Power Defence Agreement is still in force with Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom, Singapore and Malaysia working on joint exercises.

Educational ties (there are more than 200,000 graduates from Australian universities here) and cultural links are also strong with a huge alumni of graduates from Australian universities in Malaysia.

The Australian influence is distinct in places like Sarawak where Australia was almost a second home for many, with several serving and past state ministers from Australian universities.

But things changed over time and the countries fell out in the 1990s.

Few are clear on exactly when the chill set in but the estrangement soon became apparent with bilateral ties going downhill from then on - the natural symbiosis of traditional allies giving way to mutual suspicion.

This culminated in former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating describing then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad as recalcitrant over the question of Dr Mahathir's attendance at the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation summit.

Caustic exchanges have been the order of the day until recently with little room for constructive efforts to repair the relationship.

All this is refreshingly history to Australian High Commissioner to Malaysia, James Wise, who prefers to look at the brighter side of things.

He is not content spending time mulling over differences when there is so much to be gained from the symbiosis between the nations.

"There have been periods when the relationship, at the political level, has been a little strained. As a professional diplomat, that makes my work (in improving relations) challenging, interesting and rewarding," he said in an interview at his Jalan Langgak Golf home in Kuala Lumpur recently.

"It is only at the level of the Prime Ministers that we have not been able to have the intimate contact which has been possible at the people-to-people level."

To be sure, it has been a little more than strained with the only semblance of a thaw coming from the warm exchange of letters between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his Australian counterpart John Howard.

This may have set the tone for future relations which, going by the happenings of the recent past, gives room for optimism.

Wise brushes aside the rhetoric of the past year which included Malaysia's open show of unhappiness over US President George Bush's

alleged description of Australia as America's sheriff in the region as par for the course.

"I came here fully aware of the pattern to the political relationship but knowing also that at many other levels, the relationship was very substantial and sound," says the first-time ambassador.

Like US Ambassador Marie Huhtala who was second in command in Bangkok before assuming her posting here, Wise, who was also number two at his mission in the Thai capital, had the edge over other first-timers with regards to developments in Malaysia.

The 48-year-old Wise, who paints a friendly picture at social gatherings with his wife Teresa, feels there is a constructiveness to the tone of bilateral ties.

It is his view that Australians and Malaysians are looking forward to a deepening of the relationship with a sense of expectation.

"Once your elections and our elections are out of the way, there should be scope for resumption of visits between ministers and leaders on both sides."

Wise feels it too early to predict what Abdullah will bring into the bilateral relationship, save for the fact that the Prime Minister knows Australia well.

"He was Foreign Minister for so many years and in that capacity visited Australia many times. He has on more than one vacation chosen to holiday there, including his last which was last year.

"He is also well-known to Australian ministers and is highly regarded by Australian leaders and people in Australia find him a very engaging, friendly and personable figure."

Wise probably echoes the sentiments of leaders Down Under in saying that Australians look forward to working with Abdullah.

The "feel good" feeling notwithstanding, there are real issues that need to be resolved before the relationship can truly move forward.

Two obvious sore points need attention. One is the 25 per cent drop in Australian tourists here last year. The other is the 22 per cent fall in Australian investments in that same year.

Australian investments here fell from RM1.572 billion in 2002 to RM1.230 billion last year although it increased across the board elsewhere by at least one per cent.

Wise clearly does not want to dwell on the reasons behind these problems save to say that there is something about the Australian perception of Malaysia that needs to be looked at and addressed.

The distancing by the Australians has not been reciprocated by Malaysians who continued to visit and trade with them with only a negligible drop in travel last year.

And the two per cent fall in Malaysian tourists to Australia was ostensibly due to reasons like the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome and the fear of terrorist activities in the region.

While Wise feels that Malaysia has to do its bit to woo Australians here, the Australian Government has also been working at it.

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer is expected here later this year, a visit that augers well for strengthening of relations.

On the Malaysian side, Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz is taking a trade delegation to Australia for the annual Joint Trade Committee meeting in June.

"The agenda itself is not set yet but what we are trying to do is to focus on a couple of sectors, particularly where we think there is scope for enhanced commercial co-operation between the two countries or where we think the governments can make a contribution to the promotion of commercial activity."

Wise, who has been here for 13 months, is doing his bit to improve bilateral ties.

An avid collector of Malaysian objets d'art, he has bought several pieces from an elderly Kelantanese man. These are exhibited around the spacious hall in his house.

His priority now is to improve Australian investment and tourism flow into Malaysia using skills fine-tuned over 22 years of involvement in the world of diplomacy.