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A great power in the making

MAO Zedong's thoughts have actually come alive in Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's current visit to China. In his little red book, the late Chinese Communist Party chairman spoke about how the country and its people should be modest "not only now but 45 years hence" and that in international relations, the Chinese people "should get rid of great-power chauvinism resolutely, thoroughly, wholly and completely".

It has been 47 years since Chairman Mao said that. And China, as Abdullah has found out, is as modest as ever and doesn't show any sign of great-power chauvinism that some countries fear. In fact, the Deputy Prime Minister recognised that China should be seen as a land of economic opportunity and not a military or political threat, by anyone including Malaysians, now and in the future. With a population of more than a billion, a gradual open policy and constant double-digit economic growth, China could afford to be cocky and arrogant if it wanted to. But Abdullah has been accorded the greatest respect in his five-day visit, including the rare opportunity of meeting all three top Chinese leaders who took the helm in March - President Hu Jintao, Premier Wen Jiabao and National People's Congress chairman Wu Bangguo.

The track has been laid ever since 1974 when Malaysia's second Prime Minister Tun Razak visited China to establish relations that were further enhanced during Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's tenure. And now, with leader of the two countries describing each other as not just friends but great friends, the opportunities are wide open for the people to benefit from.

As Abdullah said, the Malaysian and Chinese private sectors should exploit the economic synergy between both nations which had seen Malaysians being one of the first to invest in China. Already Malaysia has emerged as China's largest trading partner in Asean, overtaking Singapore.

The prospects for a long-lasting fruitful and prosperous relationship between Malaysia and China are too important to let pass. But for that to materialise, Malaysians must not look at China as a political threat or an economic competitor. The dragon can be, and is, a partner in a widening spectrum of bilateral ties. The current good relations augur well - the opportunities must be seized.