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`Crooked' bridge would be poor symbol of neighbours' ties

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THE maverick Johor politician, Datuk Shahrir Abdul Samad, spoke for the majority in Johor Baru last week when he said Malaysia and Singapore should resume talks to straighten the "crooked" bridge being built across the Tebrau Straits.

It was a subject close to the heart of most people, although nobody hitherto had dared to speak out, lest the powers-that-be in Kuala Lumpur be offended.

But true to his outspoken reputation, Shahrir spat it out in the open. And what an impact it has had.

Suddenly, everybody is joining in the chorus.

And yes, the overwhelming sentiment is that a crooked bridge does not bode well for future Malaysia-Singapore relations.

The New Paper across the Causeway puts it succinctly in an article on Dec 14, when it asked: "Will a twisted wonder come to symbolise ties between Singapore and its closest neighbour? If only the two could straighten things out..."

The Straits Times was more direct.

In a front-page lead story last Sunday, it carried the headline: "Call to shelve the Causeway bridge project."

Quoting Shahrir, it said Malaysia should rethink the plans and resume talks with Singapore to build a proper bridge.

Shahrir, undoubtedly, is an influential politician in Johor.

Even though an elected member of the powerful Umno supreme council, he is considered an outsider, and by some accounts, represents the voice of dissent in the party.

He has also been a strong critic of Singapore and has on more than one occasion in the past, hit out at the republic for its patronising and condescending ways, and arrogance in its dealings with both Johor and Malaysia in general.

Hence, his call for a straight bridge has indeed raised eyebrows on both sides of the Causeway.

His point was simple - a twisted bridge would be an eyesore and a constant reminder of poor ties between neighbours.

"I want the crooked bridge to be straight. I believe it is not too late to pull back.

"It just requires Singapore to say `yes'. Let's talk about building a straight bridge," he said.

The reaction from Singapore was surprisingly positive.

Deputy Prime Minister Tony Tan said the republic was willing to discuss the idea.

"I look at this as a game where Singapore and Malaysia can co-operate, both of us will benefit and that is the stuff of a win-win solution we are looking for," he was quoted as saying.

In the past, Singapore had said it was willing to work with Malaysia on the new bridge - but only if it was included in a package of bilateral issues to be discussed, including Malaysia's supply of water to Singapore after 2061.

When the water issue was separated from the package in October last year, Singapore called off its plans for a new bridge.

It was this stand-off that prompted Malaysia to go it alone, with then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad saying there was no choice but to

opt for a "crooked" bridge because of environmental and commercial necessities.

He said an elevated bridge was imperative to improve water quality and allow the passage of cargo between the ports of Tanjung Pelepas and Pasir Gudang in Johor.

Indeed, work on the RM460 million bridge, measuring 1.4km from the Johor-Singapore boundary to the new Customs, Immigration and Quarantine Complex in Johor Baru, is already under way.

Gerbang Perdana Sdn Bhd, the project developer, has commenced rock-fill works in the Tebrau Straits to strengthen the sea-bed to create a foundation for the bridge abutment.

According to project engineers, it is definitely not too late for Singapore to straighten things out with Malaysia.

A straight bridge would not only mean significant savings in time and money, but also be lasting testimony of the long-established political, economic and social ties that bind the two neighbours.

A project of this magnitude cannot be a zero-sum game, where one country has to lose out if the other win. It is also not about one-upmanship.

It must stand the test of time to symbolise a bridge of friendship between Malaysia and Singapore.

Generations to come must be able to marvel at this engineering feat and acclaim with pride that this is the product of Malaysia-Singapore collaboration.

It is left to be seen if the leaders on both sides will take up the issue. There are already indications of a warming of relations.

Indeed, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is scheduled to visit Singapore early next month.

His counterpart Goh Chok Tong and his Cabinet colleagues are also due to attend the Lunar New Year open house in Johor Baru on Jan 24.

Even Shahrir has been extended an invitation by the Singapore think-tank - Institute of Southeast Asian Studies - to given a luncheon talk on "The new politics in Malaysia" at the Regional Outlook Forum on Jan 7.

All these and more indeed bode well for improved bilateral relations.

And the hope is that good sense will prevail on both sides to straighten what is otherwise going to be a crooked bridge.