

07/09/2003

Kazakhstan comes into its own out of the cold

Balan Moses

IT must surely have been the natural symbiosis between Kazakhstan - the most influential of former Soviet satellite states - and Malaysia that drew Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to the fabled land seven years ago.

The Prime Minister's visit to the second largest of the 20-member Commonwealth of Independent States stirred the interest of many Malaysians.

What was it that Dr Mahathir saw in Kazakhstan that earned his abiding interest?

It may have been the fact that it has 2.9 billion tonnes in oil reserves (equal to that of Iran), substantial natural gas reserves and 90 per cent of all known minerals on earth.

That it has the ninth largest land area (roughly half of the United States), a nine per cent growth rate and an educated labour force may have convinced him of its potential.

What may have truly done the trick, however, must have been the friendly government's open invitation to Malaysians to participate in its future.

The parallels between the two countries are there for all to see: a plural society, a Muslim majority, a history of colonisation and a land rich with natural reserves.

Today, Malaysian businessmen, albeit limited in number, have already seized the day and entered the Kazakh market in pursuit of trade and investment opportunities.

Malaysians, and indeed others worldwide, should however not be blamed for their ignorance of the landlocked nation of 15 million people of Turkic-Mongol descent whose ancestors once fought their way to the gates of Europe.

With military might in the distant past and the restive days of horse-borne soldiers galloping across the Russias for bounty, a lull came upon Kazakh society.

This saw it increasingly coming under the influence of Russia which eventually made Kazakhstan one of its states in 1917.

The "Russianisation" of Kazakhstan left the Kazakhs almost strangers in their own land with the advent of the Second World War seeing them for the first time as a minority race.

"It was a most difficult time for the Kazakhs with Russians, Germans and Poles, among others, outnumbering us. The Soviet occupation of our land led to our language and culture becoming secondary.

"All this, however, came to an abrupt end in 1991 when Kazakhstan became a sovereign nation with the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

"It has been an uphill task since then restoring the national culture, language and pride," Kazakhstan Ambassador to Malaysia, Dr Ikram Adyrbekov, said in a recent interview.

Dr Mahathir's visit has also led to something intangible that cannot be measured in fiscal terms: a strategic political and economic relationship that has placed Malaysia in a preeminent position to share in Kazakhstan's prosperity.

Quite simply, his trip led to Kuala Lumpur becoming home to the only Kazakh mission in SouthEast Asia. This has provided Malaysians with an umbilical cord to what many believe is among the richest nations in the world.

A variety of business ventures have sprouted, buoyed by the fact that

Kazakhs no longer want to pay two or three times the cost for Malaysian products bought through third parties.

"There are so many fields that Malaysians can invest in in Kazakhstan.

"Some have entered the cement industry and others are exploring the construction trade," says Adyrbekov, who adds that the sky is the limit as far as trade potential is concerned.

"Petronas has been among the early birds where oil production is concerned.

"I think that we need a major project where Petronas and our national oil company, Mazmunaigas, are concerned. This would provide the opportunity for an atmosphere of confidence among potential investors from Malaysia," he says.

Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (Matrade) officers recently visited Kazakhstan on a mission to identify trade possibilities and define opportunities available.

"We have held several round-table conferences with heads of various local companies to explain our government's policy."

Last year, Malaysia imported RM42.6 million worth of products including metals like silver, platinum and fish while exporting RM10.4 million in vegetable oils, wood products, apparel and coffee.

One nagging problem in bilateral trade is that of transportation - or the lack of it - of goods between both nations.

The 53-year-old Adyrbekov does not see an early answer to this, adding succinctly that this may only be overcome when rail links between Singapore and Kunming in China are established.

And it is anybody's guess when this will occur.

Suffice to say, it will take a very long time for rail links between Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, and Kunming, in China, to be laid.

Direct air links are however in the offing. The Kazakh national carrier, Air Astana, is negotiating with Malaysia Airlines on links between Astana and the Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

For a perspective on Kazakhstan, one has to look at the fact that it is a new country, a rarity in a world used to established nations comfortable with history and achievements.

And with its newfound identity has come the complex task of establishing a national culture and character, a facet of life that continues to elude this land even 12 years after leaving the erstwhile Soviet Union.

Adyrbekov says efforts are being made to revive the Kazakh language and bring it back to pre-Soviet pre-eminence.

There are other problems to be faced in terms of rationalising the plurality of other cultures and languages in the country.

The population comprises of an ethnic Russian minority of at least 30 per cent, and a small but influential Russian-German group, Koreans, Poles, Iranians, and others from surrounding countries.

Russian continues to be the language of business, a natural consequence arising out of the culture bequeathed by the former colonialists and the close trade links that exist till today.

The firsttime envoy with a doctorate in economics stresses that Kazakhs are thirsting for development.

It is a reflection of the relative underdevelopment that is the mark of most of the pre-Perestroika Soviet countries.

"After years of being under the Russians, we are slowly but surely tackling the challenges that come our way. In many ways, we are like Malaysia when it became independent and had to find a place for itself in the international arena," says the plenipotentiary who impresses with his parsimony in words.

With the stoicism that is obvious with this statement is an undercurrent

of determination that probably personifies the Kazakh psyche.

Adyrbekov's family is in itself testimony of the perseverance and patience that is another feature of the Kazakh.

His was a wealthy clan that was forced to leave when the Russian army invaded in the 1930s on a diet of communist fervour. They embarked on a journey that took them thousands of kilometres to Afghanistan and later to Uzbekistan.

It was only two decades later that his clan and others like them returned to Kazakhstan which explains why Adyrbekov was born in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan.

Is there any rancour among Kazakhs towards Russia in the light of the colonial history?

"There is no way one can be unfriendly with a country whose common border with yours runs thousands of kilometres.

"At least 20 per cent of our trade is with the Russians.

"We have always tried to live peacefully with the Russians. We are continuing to do so," he says of the nation that has coloured the history of the Kazakhs for the last 300 years.

A transformation indeed for a people finally free of centuries of economic and political subjugation.