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Konishi is working to further enhance the Look-East policy

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IT would be an understatement to say that the last 17 months in Malaysia had been eventful for Japanese Ambassador Masaki Konishi.

Just a day after arriving in Kuala Lumpur, he had to handle the assignment that would usually cap the term of any other head of diplomatic mission - the arrival of their head of government.

In Konishi's case, it was all the more hectic as Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi was on a whirlwind tour of Southeast Asia and was maintaining a tight schedule.

Observers said the 60-year-old diplomat, after all those years serving his country at home and abroad, handled it with characteristic aplomb.

His zest in tackling anything that came his way, especially in building on already excellent Japan-Malaysia ties, was obvious since he assumed duty in January 2002.

And with Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad gaining the tag of being the Prime Minister with the most number of visits to Japan (more than 50 times at last count), Konishi certainly had his job cut out for him.

To the man on the street, the Prime Minister was just making a visit.

But the man in the street does not realise the painstaking planning and attention to details that that would have gone into the visit.

But Konishi, the former Japanese ambassador to the United Nations, takes it all in his stride.

More than the Prime Minister's visit, is the Look-East Policy adopted by Malaysia.

For Konishi, the policy is at the heart of the ties between the two nations.

"The LEP (Look-East Policy) has been a symbol of the firm relationship between Japan and Malaysia," Konishi said in a recent interview, reflecting the seriousness with which Japan views the policy.

Konishi wants to upgrade it to the next level by using Malaysia as a base to establish better Japan-Asean ties.

He envisages cultural and social programmes in Malaysia to woo participation from Asean nations.

"This year has been designated Asean-Japan Exchange Year. It is expected that exchanges between Asean and Japan as well as between Malaysia and Japan will be increased," he said.

Konishi, who has two children, places a great deal of importance on the role of youth in turning the world into a global village.

He sees a special role for the youths of Malaysian and Japan who he feels could help bring together the young people of Asean.

"We want to hold programmes in Malaysia that will attract others, especially youths, to come here and interact," he said.

"Malaysia can help improve Japan-Asean ties by allowing us to hold these social and cultural programmes here."

Konishi, a former senior vice-president of the Japan Foundation, says that both Japan and Malaysia have Dr Mahathir to thank for the excellent relations that they enjoy.

"I have no doubt in my mind that it has been due to Dr Mahathir's efforts that we enjoy such good ties today.

He has been instrumental in helping forge a relationship that is getting stronger by the day," he said.

How does he feel about the future of bilateral ties when Dr Mahathir

steps down in October in favour of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi?

"Dr Mahathir has been a great friend of Japan and has made tremendous contributions to bilateral relations," said Konishi.

"His retirement is much regretted but we would like to build excellent and firm relations so that Dr Mahathir can rest assured after his retirement."

Konishi makes no secret of his admiration for the Prime Minister who he thinks has a special place in the history of Japan-Malaysia relations.

He is equally confident of Abdullah who he feels will acquit himself with the same mark of excellence as Dr Mahathir.

This is largely due to Abdullah's familiarity with Japan which "he has visited several times and of which he has a deep understanding".

Konishi feels Japan-Malaysia ties can be further enhanced in the cultural, economic, educational and political areas.

It will not be a surprise if Konishi, who speaks a smattering of Bahasa Malaysia, ends his Malaysian tour of duty speaking the language fluently, considering that he is at home with Russian, German, French, English and Mandarin.

Konishi, who is taking Mandarin classes to further improve his command of that language, believes in cultural exchanges to foster better people-to-people ties.

He has brought in a ryukyu dance troupe and a kyogen traditional comedy group which have entranced local audiences.

The ambassador understands that any relationship should yield tangible results.

It is in this respect that he is pursuing the possible financing of infrastructural projects, like the water supply project between Pahang and Selangor using a yen loan which saw an exchange of notes between Malaysia and Japan in March.

Another is the positive reaction of the Japanese Government to Dr Mahathir's proposal to establish a Malaysia-Japan technical university.

A study is being undertaken at the moment by a team of two Malaysian and two Japanese educationists who are looking at issues like the type of faculties to be set up, number of students and financing.

It has not been smooth sailing all the way for Konishi with a few thorny issues, notably involving educational loans for Malaysians and falling investment from Japan, to be handled last year.

"Admittedly, there are some difficulties surrounding investment in Malaysia due to the global economic slowdown and the emergence of China as an alternate investment point," he said.

"However, Malaysia remains an attractive place for Japanese investors due to its stable multi-ethnic society."

He notes that Japan is Malaysia's second largest trading partner (RM93.7 billion trade volume last year) to underline his contention that the future can only get better for bilateral relations.

Konishi, who established in his very first media interview that he wanted wider bilateral relations, may have achieved this and with greater dividends than expected.