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## Malaysian-French ties grow stronger

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MALAYSIAN-French ties today appear to have all the makings of a love affair progressing exceedingly well. Paris and Kuala Lumpur have wooed each other relentlessly over time, identifying commonalities and points of agreement to validate their mutual interest. This has been on the accepted premise that there is sufficient compatibility for a long-term relationship that can only grow stronger with time.

The ingredients are all there for a successful intertwining of destinies: Malaysia is an acknowledged leader in Southeast Asia while France has gained respect in the European theatre with its brave stand on regional issues.

What can bring both nations closer towards realising this eventuality is the fact that France understands Asia at large, its colonial experience of the last century in Indo-China providing valuable lessons on the Asian psyche.

Malaysia, on the other hand, has come to see France as a dialogue partner willing to listen to views representing the South from a nation many feel is a spokesman for the developing world.

This affaire d'amour will culminate on Tuesday with the six-hour working visit of French President Jacques Chirac to Malaysia en route to Paris after an obligatory visit to French territories in the South Pacific besides attending a summit of island nations in the region.

It will be an epoch-making event in itself, being the first time ever that a French head of state is visiting the country - inconceivable as it may seem, given the very old and quite visible French presence in Malaysia.

Forty-six years after the cementing of political ties and many generations of Peugeot, Citroen and Renault later, Malaysian-French relations are at an all-time high.

French Ambassador to Malaysia, Jacques Lapouge, concurs with typical French understatement that bilateral ties, though excellent, stand to get even better with Chirac's visit.

"The president of France has never officially come to Malaysia. That is a purpose in itself (for the visit).

"It is a momentous occasion. This is a very important moment for me and for the relationship between our countries," the 45-year-old first-time envoy said in a recent interview.

To be sure, Chirac has visited Malaysia before, albeit on a private basis while holidaying in Pulau Langkawi in 1997.

He also took the opportunity to meet Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The forthcoming visit may also assume special importance for Lapouge for the simple reason that he used to be an advisor to Chirac for four years prior to his posting to Kuala Lumpur.

And this is also perhaps why he is working very hard to ensure that everything goes well, despite the limited duration of the visit.

"It is a short visit. The president would have preferred to stay longer definitely but you have very strong constraints when you are a head of state and out of the country," he said, adding, however, that it would be a packed six hours.

The peaking of ties did not come about without substantial effort from Dr Mahathir and Chirac, who persevered at gaining a better understanding

of their positions on various international and bilateral issues.

The Prime Minister, who must have had a special place in his heart for France given the number of semi-official and private visits there in recent years, has met Chirac four times in different forums over the span of a year.

The latest visits and encounters with Chirac began with lunch with the French President in April this year during a holiday in Paris.

Their next meeting came quickly enough the following month, when Dr Mahathir attended the Enlarged Group of Eight (G8 summit) in Evian, France.

They had also met last November at the "Reconstruction of Lebanon" or Paris Conference 11, besides the 4th Asia-Europe meeting in Copenhagen two months before that.

In Lapouge's own words, Chirac "wanted to return all these visits (by Dr Mahathir) by coming here.

"The president may want to take stock of our good relationship and say hello to Dr Mahathir. It is a signal of the friendship of France."

The envoy who has been busy over the past two weeks with ground arrangements for the visit was spot on when he underlined the fact that Chirac and Dr Mahathir "had clicked (on several issues) in their four recent encounters over the last year."

In the interim, the bilateral relationship was aided by the unscheduled convergence of positions when the United States and its allies invaded Iraq without the approval of the United Nations Security Council.

It was a veritable tour de force for Chirac and his administration when France skillfully manoeuvred itself out of the pale of traditional US allies strong-armed into supporting the superpower in the Iraq campaign, which many today describe as an act of folly.

It was also to France, and Chirac's credit, that the nation had the political will to withstand the allure of US promises and, equally, the threat of retribution - a commonality between France and Malaysia not missed by the international community.

Lapouge takes pains to explain where the unanimity of views occurred, underlining the fact that it was restricted to the point relating to security council approval.

This is ostensibly to make it clear that the commonality in positions should not be construed as having extended to every issue related to Iraq.

This time around, Malaysian-French collaboration on Iraq may be taken to the next dimension with Dr Mahathir and Chirac expected to discuss recent developments in Iraq, especially the United States' inability to administer the country.

The leaders are also expected to extend their concern to the Middle-East at large, especially in the light of threats over time from various quarters in the US administration of the possibility of military intervention in nations that do not toe the US line.

Diplomatic sources indicate that Myanmar may also be a talking point between the leaders given the leading role assigned to Malaysia by the United Nations in seeking a resolution to the issue involving Aung San Suu Kyi.

It appears that UN special envoy to Myanmar, Tan Sri Razali Ismail's role in the matter has been acknowledged by European countries including France which want to see an equitable solution that will see the country being accepted once again by the international community.

The sources also say that North Korea may feature on the agenda, given the prominence that the belligerent nation has gained in recent days and the implications of any possible hostility with South Korea on the region.

Chirac's visit, notwithstanding, both nations have enjoyed generations

of good ties which began with the import of French cars into the country after the Second World War, which also saw the entry of French Catholic missionaries.

Today, French products line the shelves at supermarkets while high-class gourmet restaurants flourish along with more affordable food outlets like Delifrance.

Names like Carrefour in hypermarkets, L'oreal in cosmetics, Alcatel in mobile phones and Total in oil exploration easily slip off the tongues of Malaysians these days.

Trade is also a great motivator for better bilateral relations as evidenced in the burgeoning trade relationship which saw total trade touching the RM9.43 billion mark last year according to Wisma Putra figures.

Between January and May this year, bilateral trade stood at RM4.64 billion with more than 50 per cent of Malaysian exports comprising semiconductor devices.

There are more than 170 French companies in Malaysia, hiring about 22,000 workers. The Malaysia-France Chamber of Commerce is also active in facilitating trade between both nations.

There is also an active trade in armaments with Malaysia agreeing to buy two Scorpene submarines, a purchase befitting France's role as one of the first providers of arms to Malaysia.

"One particularly interesting area of co-operation is military co-operation with strategic dialogue, military co-operation per se with exchange of officers between the two armies and sending of experts from France to Malaysia."

There has also been an exchange of students from military academies from both sides, a development that has extended to the establishment of the Malaysia-French Institute in Bangi.

"Malaysia seems to be interested in sending more students to France. We also now have more than 20 partnerships between French and Malaysian institutions of higher learning in high tech, bio-technology and Information Technology."

Not surprisingly, French is gaining in popularity in Malaysia.

What the Alliance Francaise started years ago is being nurtured by 28 fully-residential schools nationwide where French is being studied as a second language.

Lapouge estimates that almost 9,000 Malaysians are currently studying French, a growing testimony to the language's international appeal in the business and political arenas.

Military co-operation has been rightfully extended to anti-terrorist activities with possible collaboration between the embassy and the newly-established Southeast Asian Centre for Counter Terrorism.

"Another field of co-operation is anti-terrorism."

"The head of French counter terrorism was in Kuala Lumpur last week to install a new attache in charge of security in the embassy to work with SEARCCT. We are ready to co-operate."

With unlimited potential ahead for the bilateral relationship, it is not difficult to predict a deepening of ties for mutual benefit with a warming of ties between new generations of leaders on both sides.

It will thus only be au revoir (goodbye until we meet again) and not adieu (farewell) to Chirac when he leaves for home on Wednesday.