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Military touch to art of diplomacy

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THE all-encompassing influence of the Armed Forces in Pakistan is, perhaps, best exemplified in its outgoing and incoming High Commissioners to Malaysia.

Both have been retired senior military men called upon to serve their nation (the grapevine has it that the incoming head of mission is a retired general too), the second time around, however, in a different theatre of operations.

While battle fatigues have given way to power suits, the cause is still the same - serving Pakistan to the best of their abilities.

Indeed, retired Master-General (equivalent to the Malaysian rank of Leftenan-Jeneral) Nasim Rana, who departed for his hometown of Rawalpindi last week after two years at the helm, leaves behind an air of military precision at Pakistan House along Jalan Ampang.

It is said that his ardour for discipline in all matters has rubbed off on the administration at the High Commission which functions like a well-oiled machine these days.

It could not have been otherwise for the 61-year-old first-time diplomat who has spent almost all his adult life in uniform since signing up in 1961 as a cadet officer.

The 38 years spent in various capacities in defence including Defence Ministry secretary (equal to the Malaysian secretary-general), director-general of the Inter-Services Intelligence agency and the head of Ordnance have most certainly been manifested in his private and public persona.

Sitting ramrod-straight in his spare but utility-oriented office at the stately mansion that has served as the Pakistani High Commission for the past 46 years, Nasim, who loves hunting, is a study in the symbiosis between diplomacy and defence.

Alluding to the fact that his brief encounter with the world of diplomacy was quite normal for former senior Armed Forces personnel, he likened it to an officer accepting an order from his chief.

In his case, it was a request from the Government of his old Armed Forces colleague and later chief, General Pervez Musharraf, which could not be declined.

"In Pakistan, with our army leadership and like any other country, we want to utilise the services of retired officers (of the Armed Forces). When we join the army we take an oath that we will obey all commands and that we will go wherever we are ordered to - land, air or sea," he said in a recent interview.

Whether by accident or design, the Malaysia High Commissioner to Pakistan is a retired four-star general Tan Sri Mohd Hashim Hussein.

And so Pakistan-Malaysia relations have also marched along in military style with a well-ordered agenda for growth of bilateral ties.

"Our bilateral relationship has grown from strength to strength since 1957. There has been a convergence and unanimity of views," he says with a measure of justified pride, adding that Pakistan saw Malaysia as a role model for the Islamic world.

That there are many Malaysians of Pakistani origin with several mosques around the country maintained by the community is testimony to their presence.

Some Malaysians of Pakistani descent, says the High Commissioner, are the children of those who came with the Indian Army during the Second

World War and later settled down.

"The relationship has roots there. There has also been a continuous relationship at the highest levels with (Datuk Seri) Dr Mahathir (Mohamad) visiting Pakistan last year and President Musharraf has been twice to Malaysia."

Malaysians in Pakistan were seen unfavourably for a short while in the wake of the Sept 11, 2001, incidents in the United States when it was revealed that some were studying at unregistered madrasah in Pakistan that were clearly fomenting anti-Western opinion.

Nasim, obviously, wants to forget this unfortunate chapter in bilateral ties which could have complicated the delicate relationship between the two Islamic nations, given the documented history of Pakistan's support for the US.

"Madrasah have historically been pillars for both the development of Islamic understanding and general education in Pakistan. But unfortunately, some became only associated with Islamic education. And so problems started."

"Things have improved," he says, adding that most of the Malaysian students in Pakistan were at authorised institutions of higher learning but then there were still Malaysians who enter as tourists and study at unregistered madrasah.

Nasim is keen about trade and investment possibilities between the two nations although the trade balance is in Malaysia's favour.

Pakistan imports RM1.7 billion worth of products, mostly crude rubber, palm oil, vegetable oil and machinery, exporting only about RM190 million largely in rice, leather, textiles and carpets to Malaysia.

The bilateral relationship can also be expected to see several new areas of co-operation, especially in trade and investment.

Names like Tenaga Nasional Berhad which is featuring prominently in the Liberty Power project and telecommunications player, Dancom, are becoming popular in Pakistan.

A joint venture in the field of oleochemicals in Malaysia is also being explored besides the possibility of Pakistani prowess in the field of railway systems, shipping and information technology being tapped. Petronas too has a presence in Pakistan, engaging in oil exploration in the Sind province.

Nasim also talks of a limited export to Malaysia of arms, largely in terms of anti-tank missiles and anti-aircraft weaponry.

It is difficult not to observe that the soldier is still there in Nasim, especially as terms used in ordnance like RPGs roll off his tongue with practiced ease.

He says there are plans to export Pakistani workers to Malaysia soon especially the world renowned craftsmen from the furniture industry in the Punjab province and those expert in construction activities.

It is also sending doctors to Malaysia with some senior Malaysian doctors being qualified from Pakistani medical colleges.

Pakistan is also looking at participating in the bio-valley project at Cyberjaya by bringing in a wealth of herbs for inclusion in the project.

"We have to move on this. It is on the drawing board. It has to be formalised and we can soon see Pakistani workers coming into Malaysia. Your Human Resource Minister (Datuk Dr Fong Chan Onn) can come to Pakistan or our Minister can visit your country."

Those interviewing Pakistani diplomats may try to steer clear of the topic of the nation's relations with India but invariably fail as was the fate of this reporter.

Nasim is passionate about Pakistan's stand on Kashmir, enunciating his country's position on the territory which has been a point of contention

for decades with clarity and feeling.

He is unhappy with India's opposition to Pakistan's inclusion as a dialogue partner in the Asean Regional Forum on technical grounds despite the recent thaw in relations.

"When India became a dialogue partner with Asean, it was done at the summit level. It is unfortunate that India had chosen to object to our inclusion," he said, adding that this had not, however, deterred Pakistan from pursuing healthy relations with India.

Nasim appreciates Malaysia's support, especially that of Dr Mahathir, for its attempt to enter into a constructive dialogue with Asean.

What are the retirement plans of the father of three daughters who has called it a day without completing the usual three-year term of most Pakistan envoys abroad?

"I asked to retire early and the Foreign Ministry was very kind to accept. I want a retired life. I have personal commitments and obligations back home which need to be addressed. I could obviously not do so while I was here."

Nasim will also obviously soldier on in his next mission, albeit one with filial undertones, with the same exactitude and commitment that has been the mark of his tenure as a diplomat.