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Separated siblings bicker

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BILATERAL relations between Malaysia and Singapore, having sunk to their lowest ebb in recent times, now bump disconsolately along the bottom of a sea of woes. Psychologists know of a neurosis in which the devil you know becomes more of an intimate personal friend than the angel you don't. This is how it often seems with Malaysia and Singapore.

Yet, Singapore has always prospered on its good relations with Malaysia. We have been the island's hinterland; the source of the natural and human resources upon which Singapore's economic miracle has been based.

Singapore has also been good for Malaysia. For nearly 40 years, our amity has conduced to the progress and prosperity of both nations.

In navigating the recently choppy waters between us, however, Singapore has paid punctilious attention to the letter of the 1965 Separation Agreement establishing it as a sovereign nation.

The issue of the water Malaysia supplies to Singapore has been particularly intractable because it is contained in the island republic's articles of independence.

Malaysian officials bemoaned what they saw as Singapore's recourse to legalisms in preventing a redrafting of the 1961 and 1962 Water Agreements between Johor and Singapore. Where Malaysia saw matters that ought to be open to negotiated solutions, Singapore saw points of sovereign principle.

But Malaysia would be the last to decry Singapore's defensiveness in this regard. In their third generation of independence, both nations rank among the world's leading advocates of national sovereignty and selfdetermination.

The tragedy is that this should obscure the clear sighted realism that would enable Malaysia and Singapore to regard each other as we truly are: Siblings separated at birth.

Overlaying the protocols of international diplomacy on our shared historical bedrock has been sociopolitically effective. The value of separation, so bitterly contentious four decades ago, has been amply proved.

Malaysia and Singapore have each been free to construct their sovereign political realities while remaining intimately bound to each other's societies and economies.

That concord has suffered in recent times. The 1997-1998 regional financial crisis and the subsequent series of globe-girding calamities left Singapore much the worse for wear.

The city state's prosperity has faded. Unemployment today is climbing above five per cent, while Singapore's once-ex-emplary growth rate has crawled painfully up from a recessionary low of -2 per cent in 2001 to a positive but still anaemic 2.7 per cent so far this year. This year's projected fiscal deficit of nearly RM200 million is expected to deepen to some RM2.5 billion next year.

In such gloomy times, it's unsurprising that Singapore's dealings with its closest partner and nearest neighbour should have foundered.

The nowinfamous package of bilateral issues dominated by the water supply question but encompassing old railway land, border protocols, overflights, the Tebrau Strait and disputed offshore territory entangled us in a Gordian Knot.

The Points of Agreement reached by the two nations' top officials in December 1998 fell by the wayside. The package approach itself has been

discarded. On almost all points, we are back to square one if not on an entirely new board.

This has been distressing for Malaysia. The water agreements between Singapore and Johor were drawn up more than 40 years ago, when the island was a state of the federation.

Malaysia chose not to revise those terms and conditions after 25 years, in the mid-Eighties, as allowed for in the Agreements. Today, ludicrously, they remain in force for two independent nations.

It would have been better for Singapore to have cut to the chase on this. Instead of invoking principles of national sovereignty in defence of deals drawn for the exigencies of 40 years ago, the issue should have been approached in light of how Malaysia wanted to amend these arrangements for the 21st century.

There was never any question of Malaysia not continuing to supply water to Singapore, as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has made abundantly clear. It was a matter of price and process, not do or die.

Singapore crossed a particularly inviolable line earlier this year, in making public the toplevel correspondence on this matter.

Revealing the private exchanges of government leaders in order to depict Malaysia as indecisive and recalcitrant was uncalledfor.

It is normal in negotiations for alternative proposals to be discussed. It was unnecessary for Singapore to have attempted to embarrass Malaysia with such a breach of confidence. No matter how well this played to the gallery in Singapore, over here it went down like a lead balloon.

At heart, however, Singaporeans and Malaysians alike know how to read between these bellicose lines. This is our shared vaudeville.

When internecine bickering escalates to military stand-offs over disputed maritime territory, however, the burlesque bluster has gone far enough.

It is worth recalling, therefore, that in the dispute over Pulau Batu Puteh, the lighthouse rock off Johor which Singapore calls Pedra Branca, Fate served up an unmistakable reminder to both countries of their true relationship.

Last January, after ominous warnings against intrusions or encroachments, four Singapore Navy personnel patrolling those disputed waters died in a tragic collision with a container ship. Immediately, their Malaysian Navy and Marine Police counterparts joined in the search-and-rescue and salvage operations.

No matter how testily Malaysia and Singapore may quarrel over their quotidian problems, each knows the other will be first in line to help in any real crisis or emergency. This gives the lie to any talk of irreconcilable differences between us, never mind outright hostilities.

On the contrary, both nations will proceed with joint military exercises this September, continuing their co-operation in regional security.

Both nations have also ratified their agreement to refer the Pulau Batu Puteh dispute to the International Court of Justice in The Hague.

Other sticking points may not be so definitively resolved. Singapore has not gone along with Malaysia's proposal to replace the Causeway with a bridge to allow maritime traffic through the Tebrau Strait.

As a result, our current artist's impressions of the proposed structure depict a weird hybrid of bridge and causeway; a chimera that would be as much a symbol of our estrangement as the Causeway was of our partnership.

The water issue, however, has been taken to a whole new level by Singapore's decision to turn away from seeking a new deal with Malaysia to source alternative water through recycling and desalination.

Ironically, Malaysia should be relieved. All along, both parties insisted it wasn't about money, relatively paltry by any calculation for

the two prosperous partners, but principle.

Both should therefore welcome the diminution of the water agreement's disproportionate effect on relations. Singapore will seek its technological fixes, while Malaysia will continue to supply water to Singapore under the existing arrangements.

That, too, is the way we are. Our mutual survival depends on it. We should speak with each other as friends and partners, not as adversaries.

Our recent ructions will have served a decent purpose if they result in a more mature and mutually respectful relationship between Malaysia and Singapore.