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Tirelessly improving ties with China

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IT is nearly one in the morning in Beijing and almost everyone associated with Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's official visit to China recently has retired for the night with the exception of perhaps two people who have not really noticed the passage of time for the past month or so.

With a mere five hours before the start of the next day, their minds are not on sleep but on ensuring a smooth schedule for the Deputy Prime Minister for the duration of his stay.

While Malaysian Ambassador to China, Datuk A.K. Majid, is full of thoughts about how to further Malaysia's interests in the few days left of the visit, Chinese Ambassador to Malaysia Hu Zhengyue is actively engaged in the arithmetic of getting the most for China.

While seemingly on tangential paths, the reality of the day is that they are actually working in unison towards a common objective: cementing already-good ties between China and Malaysia.

Both are determined that Malaysia-China ties should not suffer for want of trying on their part or that of others in the political and business hierarchy of their respective nations.

They fully realise that they are in the driver's seat of the bilateral vehicle of diplomacy that will provide the momentum for future Sino-Malaysia ties, both on a government-to-government basis and between the two private sectors.

Majid's rationale behind this realisation needs closer scrutiny, at least to understand the depth of his convictions on the matter.

An old China hand, having served once before in Beijing in the 1980s, he knows that Abdullah's visit will, for a large extent, dictate the tone and tenor of bilateral ties for the next four years when the latter is the Prime Minister, and beyond.

"This visit is a crucial one as it has revealed the intensity of the relationship at both governmental and non-governmental levels. We have come a long way since 1974 when Tun Razak laid the basis for modern day Malaysia-China relations with Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad fine-tuning it since 1981.

"Datuk Seri Abdullah's visit this time around is very important as it is aimed at cementing Malaysia's already excellent relations with China, a vital consideration given the fact that the whole world wants to get close to this nation, both politically and economically," says Majid who has seen several countries and their respective business sectors make mistakes, but more importantly, strike the right note in relations with China.

It is this benefit of hindsight that makes the 57-year-old a true Malaysian asset in China as he has seen the most populous nation on earth in its early days of joining the market economy and today as it is well on the road to becoming the economic powerhouse of the world.

"The Chinese leadership sees Datuk Seri Abdullah's visit as a very significant one as they want to get to know the person who will be the next Malaysian head of government," he said in an hour-long interview at midnight in his room at the New World Hotel in Beijing.

It is obvious that the Chinese are also impressed with Abdullah's commitment to the principle of engagement with and not containment of China, a consistent line which the Deputy Prime Minister has taken since his days as Foreign Minister.

Malaysia, for the record, played a crucial role in bringing China into dialogue with Asean in the 1990s, being one of the early birds world-wide in recognising China's potential as a trading nation and international political force.

Majid, delighted with the fact that Abdullah's visit has drawn a veritable who's who in the Malaysian business world, knows that their presence in large numbers in China in the future would be the key to even better bilateral ties.

There is really little to be done in terms of political relations which are at a high point in the relationship, Dr Mahathir having forged a link that will, most assuredly, withstand the test of time.

The Prime Minister has probably set a record of sorts with seven trips to China, probably more than any one contemporary leader, and in the process, convinced the Chinese leadership over the past 21 years of Malaysia's sincerity in becoming "close friends".

The ambassador is equally cognisant of the importance of the trade links with China as he is of the political relationship.

"If you are not doing business in China, you are not doing business," says Majid, delivering the biting truth in the frank statement with the trademark smile and tone of voice that assures one of the sincerity behind the remark.

Majid takes the point a set further by setting out a game plan for the Malaysian businessman interested in doing business in China: identify your strengths, pick a good Chinese partner, have a good marketing plan and keep abreast of local laws.

The ambassador, who retired last year after 32 years of service but has been recalled to active duty for obvious reasons, says the Government is concerned about this.

It has decided that all memoranda of understanding between Malaysian and Chinese businessmen will henceforth be closely vetted to preclude any possibility of hiccups in implementation.

This will tell in the implementation of the 15 MoUs signed this time around between businessmen on both sides.

On their part, the two Governments have signed five MoUs in new areas such as labour recruitment, space research, remote sensing, tourism and agricultural co-operation.

"China, and the Chinese, have come to the realisation that Malaysia is a country that they can do business with. They are very impressed with Malaysia," says Majid, the eighth Malaysian envoy in China and possibly the one with the last word on bilateral ties.

Business being one of the pillars of the bilateral relationship, it is pertinent at this juncture to look at the direction that Malaysian businessmen should be looking at.

Majid says they should look to the western provinces of China where potential for trade is unlimited, given the fact that most businessmen, Malaysian and otherwise, have gravitated to the coastal areas of south-eastern China.

Hu, on the other hand, looks farther afield to the north-east and central provinces where he feels Malaysian businessmen can do better than in the coastal areas which have almost been saturated with business opportunities.

This has increasingly been on the mind of the soft-spoken plenipotentiary who prefers to use an interpreter but can hold his own in an interview in English.

"Malaysian businessmen need to explore new areas of opportunity in China, which is such a vast nation. The under-developed western, north-eastern and central Chinese provinces are ripe for participation by

Malaysians.

"It is almost theirs for the taking," he said in a 45-minute interview in his car en route to the Southern Natsteel Co Ltd factory in Xiamen which Abdullah is visiting after the Xiamen University.

He points out that Malaysian investment and professional skills are urgently required in areas such as Hu Bei Province, Chong Qing city and Yunnan Province.

Hu, who has been advising Malaysian businessmen in various forums on where and how to do business in China, feels that Malaysian hoteliers, construction companies, city planners, golf course builders and those involved in the agrobusiness industry have a bright future in the new areas that he has identified.

In a way, this is Hu's way of telling Malaysian businessmen to change their mindset where China is concerned.

The 50-year-old first-time ambassador echoes Majid in underlining the fact that Malaysian businessmen have to be more savvy when it comes to business partners, marketing links and the local business and legal culture.

"Being of Chinese descent is not enough for Malaysian businessmen. If you look Chinese and understand Mandarin or the local dialect, it does not mean you understand the Chinese. You have to learn how to do business in China from the basics as each province has its own laws and business tradition," he says.

He advises Malaysian businessmen to take things on a step-by-step basis, never hurrying into deals but fully researching everything before-hand.

Hu says the Chinese leadership was impressed with Abdullah's vision of the future Sino-Malaysia relationship, a fact borne out in the unusually long 60-minute meeting with Chinese President Hu Jintao.

The easy manner in which both leaders conversed and the wide spectrum of topics covered appeared to be the start of a personal friendship between the two leaders.

"There was an indepth exchange of views. Both leaders wanted to get toknow each other besides wanting to impress on the other their vision for the future," says the ambassador who has been engaged in discussions for months with Wisma Putra officials on preparations for Abdullah's visit.

The ever pragmatic Hu wants both sides to immediately get down to business by following up on decisions made during Abdullah's visit "as we should not lose time in charting out a plan of action for the near and long terms".

On his part, he is prepared to offer any assistance to Malaysians as "the Chinese embassy's doors in Kuala Lumpur are always open to Malaysians".

"My officers and I are ever ready to help with advice and assistance on business opportunities in China.

"We are willing to work with anyone in enhancing China-Malaysia relations. Time is ofthe essence as one has to exploitopportunities as they emerge."

Hu's willingness to go the extra mile reflects China's determination to open its doors to the world after centuries of isolation.

It also indicates the extent to which Malaysia's fourth largest trading partner is willing to go to take bilateral ties, which will turn 25 next year, to a new dimension.

Little would the 15th century Chinese voyager, Admiral Cheng Ho, have realised that the links he set out to forge with Malacca nearly 600 years ago would have blossomed to the degree of friendship which China and Malaysia share today.