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Two neighbours in contrast

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THAILAND is the only country in Asean that has never been colonised. There has been plenty of Western influence, of course, but underneath the frenetic modernity of Bangkok, the imprint of the foreigner is not much more than that of Anna Leonowens' on the monarch in *The King and I* (which I loved, the book more than the romanticised Hollywood version).

For the country's many tourists, the Thai Kingdom's charm is still a Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, transplanted as much in its gorgeous temples as in the bars of Patpong.

Coming from Kelantan, however, I take Thailand far more seriously than that. While I was growing up, Bangkok's city lights often shone brighter than those of Kuala Lumpur; my village shared closer kinship with the famed southern Thai region of Pattani than the southern Malaysian State of Johor.

The Thai court was grander than anything in the Malay Peninsula, in deference to which the Kelantan Sultan once paid tribute.

If I had been born with princely blood, I might have followed the boyhood footsteps of Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra, who lived and went to school in Thailand.

His elder brother Tengku Yusuf (1890-1915) was given a commission in the Thai army and died in Bangkok. Anyway, Thailand was the first foreign country I visited.

Malaysia's regal neighbour to the north, I felt, always looked upon us as a younger brother - liberated and sometimes brash yet always respectful - while it dealt with its own troubles at home.

Thus preoccupied, it didn't have much in the way of a foreign or regional policy and was content to leave much of the early impetus for Asean (and its forerunner ASA, the Association of Southeast Asia) to Malaysia. Our policy predispositions were shaped by our historical experiences, which were vastly different. Unitary Thailand could always rely on diplomacy to hold off the outsider, whereas the fragmented States of the Malay archipelago easily fell victim to foreign domination.

In the unravelling of imperialism at Merdeka, Thailand was a steadfast friend. Unlike Indonesia and the Philippines, it did not make claims that challenged Malaysian sovereignty and territorial integrity after the British left in 1957, and when Malaya was enlarged into Malaysia by the inclusion of Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak. (Singapore left the federation in August 1965.)

Asean, like the European Community before it, was formed to unite Southeast Asia as much as to keep its contending powers and politics apart. Like Europe too, the post-imperial, post-Cold War task for the regional grouping is now the first rather than the second of the twin challenges.

However, by definition, Asean can only move as fast as its slowest member, at least among its big four nations. Indonesia and the Philippines are still engrossed with internal dissent, with their Acehs and southern Mindanaos. Unlike them, Thailand has been able to maintain its national identity and cohesion against all comers. But like them, Thailand had a hard time with the biggest foreign import of all - democracy.

In Bangkok last week, I saw no trace of the disruptive street activism that brought democracy at great cost to the three countries. Once its means had been transferred from the mass demonstration to the ballot box,

I had no doubt that Thai democracy would throw up a leader worthy of the country's place in the region and the world. At an interview last Wednesday, I found such a leader in Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Thaksin admires and is a close friend of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, whose vision for Asia he largely shares. He is the embodiment of the hyper-successful businessman - driven, gung-ho, impatient, focused and uncompromising on what it takes to achieve results.

He wants a more strategically consolidated Asean, taking his country, perhaps for the first time, ahead of the glacial consensus on regional integration. Thaksin's Thailand is fast shaping up into a confederate Malaysia can do business with.

Just like Japan, although its reluctance to take on a role in keeping with its economic might and influence continues to disappoint many in the region, including myself. Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was there last week to reassure businessmen and bureaucrats that the "Look East" policy will remain as a foundation of bilateral relations as well as to prod Tokyo towards the economic leadership of the Far East.

What a contrast Bangkok is providing from Singapore, historically Malaysia's closest partner in the region, yet today our thorniest neighbour.

Let me say this: For good or ill, Singapore is a product of imperialism, and Malaysia's relations with it continue to be dogged by the unequal treaties and arrangements that constitute an uneasy umbilical cord between the two countries.

If relations are to go forward and overcome the past, these treaties and arrangements must be replaced by contemporary versions that strike a fair balance between the interests of the two independent and sovereign nations.

Probably the most stubborn and unequal of these arrangements are the water agreements, which oblige Malaysia to supply the resource to Singapore at the outrageously unequal price of three sen per thousand gallons. There is no question that this must be put right, for Singapore is not just dependent on Malaysian water for its survival, as it feverishly contends, but is gouging a profit from both ends - from an unrealistically low buying price fixed by antiquated agreement and from high selling prices rigged by monopoly.

Singapore Foreign Minister S. Jayakumar, in the unyielding tone of the law professor that he was, told his Parliament in January that "the fundamental issue for us is not the price of water as such. The vital issue is not how much we pay, but how any price revision is decided upon. Malaysia wants Singapore to pay more for water. But the price cannot be revised at the will or dictate of Malaysia.

"The 1961 and 1962 Water Agreements were enshrined in the Separation Agreement which was registered at the United Nations. They are fundamental to our very existence as an independent nation. Neither Singapore nor Malaysia can unilaterally change them. This is the root of the dispute between us."

Malaysia has never so much as hinted that it would be willing even to consider breaching the agreements, and Jayakumar's allegation was grossly unfair, just as his ministry's decision to divulge official correspondence was a betrayal of trust. Singapore's "very existence" is surely not dependent on the charitable purchase of water at three sen per thousand gallons.

On the other hand, Malaysia is entitled to do whatever it legitimately can in pursuit of a fresh agreement on a fair price, including the removal of the water dispute from the package of outstanding issues between the

two countries.

After all, the parallel negotiations within the packaging were meant to be an exercise in mutual goodwill. Since there hasn't been any on Singapore's part, the bargaining on a new price for water must be treated apart and forthwith, even though an immediate opportunity for a price revision after 25 years provided in the agreements was missed by then-Johor Menteri Besar Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

According to the latest clarifications provided by the National Economic Action Council: "Twenty-five years after 1961 and 1962 respectively means any time after 1986 and 1987. It does not mean the review must take place in 1986 and 1987.

"If Malaysia has lost the right to review the price of water, why did Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew come to Kuala Lumpur to negotiate the price of water?"

If "the root of the dispute" is not about money but about the sanctity of the agreements, then nothing should stand between the two parties in arriving at a market-based price. A willing-buyer-willing-seller agreement is far more reliable than one forced by the lapsed circumstances of four decades ago.

The truth is that Singapore wants to continue to gain lavishly from what was a substantial concession at the time of Separation. What should be more "fundamental to its very existence as an independent nation" would be to rid itself of such unwarranted beneficence and pay a fair price.