

24/07/2003

United against unilateralism

THE fascinating thing about relations between Malaysia and France is the warmth you can almost feel whenever Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and President Jacques Chirac meet. The same sort of chemistry can be seen on a much broader plane given the two countries' united opposition to the war in Iraq. This is a little ironic since, unlike Malaysia and Britain, there is a lack of linguistic, cultural and historical ties between Malaysians and the French.

Chirac's whirlwind visit to Malaysia on Tuesday is testimony to the fact that there is indeed a lot of common ground between the two countries. Though he had been here once before - coming to Langkawi on a private visit six years ago - this trip is made all the more significant if we take into account the order of the day in the world and the French leader's stiff opposition to unilateralism that is creeping in and threatening to break the international system advocated by the United Nations. In fact, Chirac's criticism of countries practising the law of the jungle through their unilateral action couldn't have sounded better for having been delivered on Malaysian soil while receiving the inaugural Kuala Lumpur World Peace Award from Dr Mahathir.

Malaysia-France ties are set to skyrocket after this following the solid groundwork already laid by the two leaders. The proposal for more dialogue and interaction between groups in both countries, including the business community, and plans for a French language school in Malaysia to enhance co-operation in the scientific and technical fields indicate that things are looking up in bilateral relations in years to come, even beyond the tenures of the present leaderships.

Chirac's outing has also further boosted Malaysia's relations with "old" Europe, coming just two months after German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's visit to the country. Given Malaysia's historical ties, these are less likely visits than one coming from, say, the British Prime Minister. But the world is turning and "never the twain shall meet" no longer applies in international relations.