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When push comes to shove

SINGAPORE'S spin doctors seem to be engaging Malaysia in a game of spinning the coin these days. And Malaysia always appears to be on the losing end as the land reclamation issue at Pulau Tekong and Tuas indicates. Not surprisingly, the republic's rules usually read "heads we win and tails you lose". Of late, almost all contentious issues between the two nations have been protracted into a no-win situation for Malaysia. This is sufficient reason for third-party intervention whenever any room for negotiation is closed out by Singaporean self-interest.

Malaysia, and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, cannot be faulted for seeking arbitration on an issue that Singapore insists can be negotiated bilaterally but has been vacillating on. With no meaningful solution in sight, Malaysia has been left with a Hobson's choice. Arbitration is the only way forward on the reclamation project and other disputes that point to a clear failure of diplomacy in contending with our southern neighbour.

The failure was evident in the issue of sovereignty over Pulau Batu Putih and the ongoing water controversy. Singapore's statement that Malaysia was "premature" in seeking arbitration on the reclamation issue is a vain attempt at procrastination. Without an agreement on a suspension of the project pending discussions, further talks would be useless.

The Tekong and Tuas project to increase Singapore's land mass in the best interests of its citizens is being undertaken at the expense of poor Malaysian fishermen whose livelihood has been affected. There are also early signs that reclamation will result in narrowing of the Tebrau Straits. Malaysia is acting responsibly in safeguarding the future of Tanjung Pelepas and Pasir Gudang, which stand to become white elephants if reclamation continues.

Singapore should not be allowed to hide behind technicalities or engage in word play to get its own way in bilateral matters. Nor should it extract sympathy as an underdog with a persecution complex. It should decide once and for all if civility should be the order of the day in dealings with Malaysia. Mere lip service will not do. Like justice, friendship must not only be maintained but be seen to be accomplished.