

A special relationship
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As economic miracles go, none can hold a lantern to Japan — an earthquake and typhoon-prone, resource-poor arc of islands that had modernised by fiat in the 19th century and risen in less than a generation from the rubble of the Second World War into the world's second largest economy.

Scanning the seas for a new dawn, nations freshly awoken from the long night of imperialism found a success story they could chase after in the Land of the Rising Sun. Malaysia was among the earliest to look east, forging a distant admiration into active policy 25 years ago. Japan was happy to oblige, and has probably done more than any other to midwife this country's industrialisation since bilateral relations began within weeks of independence in 1957. That friendship has not just been summed up in aid, investment, technology transfers and the various forms of tutelage. Above all, the Japanese example has bestowed confidence and self-esteem to Malaysia and the rest of post-colonial Southeast Asia.

There was thus plenty of back-slapping to go round during Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's three-day visit here last week. Mutual congratulations on a 50th anniversary commemoration aside, Japan's relations with Malaysia must count as a big two-way plus in any foreign policy-maker's cost-benefit analysis. Unlike the moral dues that have forced Tokyo to write enormous blank cheques for undertakings it had little to do with, such as the first Gulf War and the reconstruction of Afghanistan, the money spent on Malaysia has paid dividends — in investment income, trade and as an ally in international diplomacy. So cushy is the comfort level between the two countries that a free trade agreement was quickly concluded last year, with almost none of the contention and controversy that usually accompany such market opening endeavours. Investment has quintupled as a result, despite the growing attraction of Malaysian competitors such as China and Vietnam.

Japan's miracle, and the coattails it extended in Southeast Asia, once formed the foundation of "Asian values" as an alternative to the Western work ethic. Although the 1997 financial crisis has largely zipped up the gloating, Japanese technological and economic leadership remains as central to the region in general as it has been to Malaysia in particular. The maturing bilateral relationship has been morphing gently into a much more multifaceted one, involving Asean and the grouping's evolution into an economic community and single market. Japan's wartime ambition of a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere is being achieved in the nicest possible way.