

# A clash of wills that led to won't

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THE bridge issue is now settled. We will not be building one, curved or otherwise. But I guess for many Malaysians, issues surrounding the on-again-off-again bridge are murkier than the still, polluted waters of the Johor Strait.

For the past couple of weeks, there have been many interpretations and explanations of how the decision to stop work on the bridge came about. Blame was being passed all around on why we had ventured to build it in the first place and later why we scrapped it.

There are many who question the wisdom of going ahead with the project when it was obvious that Singapore was not keen on having a bridge to replace the Causeway that had linked the two nations for more than eight decades. It was foolish to begin

work on a multi-billion ringgit project, in which the bridge was one of the components, that was essentially a court case waiting to happen, some argued.

For those who were for the bridge and are disappointed that it will not be built, the arguments are largely rooted on the fact that it is our sovereign right, within our territory, and we should be able to do damn well as we please. Calling off the bridge is like us kowtowing to another nation, which many of us cannot take, especially when the other nation is Singapore. Such is our love-hate relationship.

Many of us were surprised when it was decided that the bridge would be scrapped, and were more surprised still by the series of events that followed.

We were not aware, until

lately, that Singapore wanted our sand and airspace in return for a bridge. These, on their own, obviously were deal breakers.

Then it was revealed to us that Singapore would have taken us to court if we had decided to do anything on the Causeway. Since it is shared infrastructure, and Singapore is sentimentally attached to it, Malaysia cannot arbitrarily do anything unless it wants to be held back, and potentially disappointed, by an international court decision against it.

It is stranger still that we scrapped the bridge even with officials saying we could have won anyway had we gone for international arbitration.

Trying to make sense of the whole thing can be quite taxing. Minus the details of the project and its eventual scrapping, the ordinary citizens

were often left wondering what was going on.

Presumably, the scrapping of the bridge was a wise choice, as it also got the support of opposition leaders like Lim Kit Siang and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. This was a rare moment of solidarity only seen during national tragedies. Is this one of them?

I believe the decision to build the bridge then was right because Singapore wanted no part of it and had no objection if Malaysia were to do it alone. Malaysia had wanted it because it would ease potentially crippling congestion in Johor Baru, as well as improve our southern gateway, through which about 70 per cent of foreigners enter the country.

The bridge also would have solved the 80-year-old pollution problem in the strait by letting natural tides return, and unlocked the economic potential of the coastal areas of southern Johor, valued in the billions of ringgit.

With this in mind, the decision by the previous administration to go ahead with a curved bridge and the Customs, Immigration and Quarantine complex in Johor Baru was natural and right.

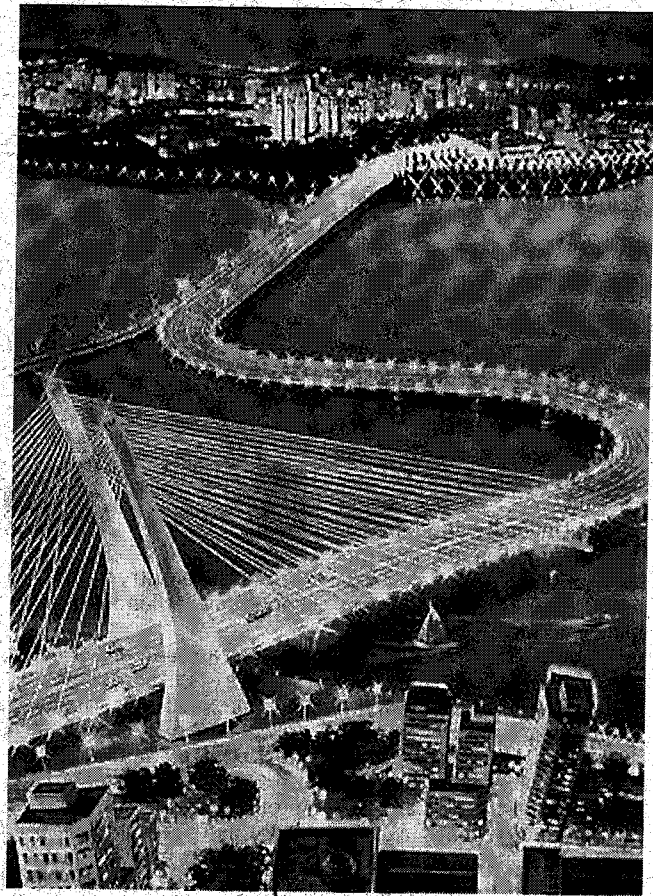
If ever, it seemed that Singapore was willing to let the crooked, re-branded later as "scenic bridge" be a symbol of its unyielding stance in bilateral relations.

However, the bridge project was halted when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad came to power. Presumably, like most Malaysians and Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad before him, Pak Lah too wanted a straight bridge.

Pak Lah perhaps felt that Singapore could still be convinced of the benefits of the project, not only to Malaysia but also to Singapore, as a better land link with the peninsula had always been an integral part of and a plus to the republic's economy.

It can be argued that Singapore knew very well the benefits of a bridge, but what it did was to try and get something more from it. It had never adopted a bridge-over-my-dead-body kind of stance.

When previously it wanted no part of the bridge, it later was even willing to support a straight bridge if Malaysia agreed to sell it sand and give its jet fighters access to



The bridge proved to be a most divisive issue.

will. Either way it would "win". If Malaysia agreed to its terms, then it could get something, like sand, that previously was not even on the table when the two countries talked. If Malaysia disagreed, it would be no skin off the republic's nose.

Obviously, Malaysia would not agree to those terms. So negotiations came to a halt, again. Then a few months ago, we decided to go ahead with the bridge, before recently calling it off.

What if we had not stopped the bridge project? By now, Singapore would be complaining to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea about us being bad neighbours and planning to partially demolish something dear to them. Well, Malaysia could win or it could lose. But, if Wisma Putra is to be believed, we were on solid legal ground.

In the case of Singapore's reclamation work near its Pulau Tekong and Tuas, which Putrajaya claimed have affected Malaysia, the tribunal agreed that while Singapore could do as it pleased in its waters, it should have

sate Malaysian fishermen and revised some of its reclamation plans. More importantly, the tribunal did not ask Singapore to dredge back the reclaimed area.

I suppose, faced with a calculative and win-at-all-cost neighbour which wanted to take advantage of Pak Lah's willingness to be neighbourly, Malaysia decided to scrap the bridge project.

I believe Singapore was surprised, too. It had figured out that we wanted a bridge for greater efficiency in Johor and our southern gateway. The bridge would also have improved the environment in the Johor Strait, which both countries share. But it was asking for its pound of flesh.

There has been a lot of soul-searching, public debate and a blame game about the bridge, whether we are for it or against it. But let us not forget that the half and crooked bridge as well as its eventual scrapping were the consequence of Singapore's unwillingness to look at things from our perspective. It was not even willing to help Malaysia