

Malaysia-India ties set for next level

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■ From Mahendra Ved in New Delhi

A VISIT to Malaysia by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is on the cards this year.

This year happens to be the 50th anniversary of diplomatic ties between the two countries and also of Malaysian independence.

Manmohan and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who have by now come to know each other well, could well be meeting again — this time bilaterally, in Kuala Lumpur.

This was disclosed at the end of Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar's visit here last week.

He was here for the fourth meeting of the Malaysia-India Joint Commission.

Bilateral relations came in for a complete review here at the commission meeting last week.

Improved trade, co-operation in defence, space and information technology, an MoU for Indian workers in Malaysia, joint projects

in third countries, more flights and tourists, better banking facilities — these were among the many subjects that figured, according to official sources.

The meeting took place after a gap of almost five years. A firm decision was taken that the gap should not be repeated and that future meetings would be held annually or at least biennially.

The next meeting would thus be in early 2009, if not next year.

Syed Hamid led a high-level team of officials to the meeting. The Indian side was led by External Affairs Minister Pranab Kumar Mukherjee.

A significant point Mukherjee made at the meeting was that Malaysia-India trade in 2006 stood at US\$5.7 billion (RM20.6 billion), an increase of 21.59 per cent from the previous year. But it was heavily in Malaysia's favour. One sure way of balancing it could be facilitating industrial projects.

Thousands of Indians work in Malaysia and India has been pressing for an MoU for their

movement.

On the defence front, both have MiG-29s and Sukhois in their inventories that need flying, training and maintaining. This could open a fresh vista for co-operation.

India is already engaged in the guarding of the Straits of Malacca and has offered its services for the surveillance of the sea lane.

Prior to his visit here, Syed Hamid hinted at a joint military exercise, something Malaysia does not conduct with very many countries. A fuller discussion might pave the way for such an exercise, sources said.

Besides official interactions, the tone of the visit was set by Syed Hamid in the course of an interview he gave to *The Hindu*: "Now, (India) is an emerging economy as well as a superpower. I do not see any reason why Malaysia and India should be seen not to be close."

He pointed out that India was "strategically located to provide the necessary umbrella as a big

country. We can benefit from India's economic growth. On many issues, say (in the) World Trade Organisation, we move with India".

The Indian leadership and Syed Hamid have known each other well. It was Syed Hamid who, in 2003 at the 13th Non-Aligned Movement Summit in Kuala Lumpur, put a graceful end to a war of words between Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf.

Syed Hamid has met and talked to Manmohan as well.

As Syed Hamid told *The Hindu*: "India is now more settled politically to be a player that makes a difference. Why do people feel excited about today's relationship between Malaysia and India?"

"Because, (Prime Ministers) Manmohan (Singh) and Abdullah get along well. There seems to be good chemistry between them. I have these words to describe Malaysia-India relations: Very close and friendly."