

Seeking a win-win solution

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The time is right, the chemistry is there and the stage has been set on a legendary isle. Relations between Malaysia and Singapore may become smoother when the two prime ministers meet in Langkawi.

LET'S get it straight - it is going to be a get-together. There is no agenda and no script. And any negotiation is a no-no.

Yet, expectations are high of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's meeting with his Singapore counterpart Lee Hsien Loong on Tuesday. Officials from both sides are quietly confident that the meeting (which they insist on calling a get-together) will bring about improved relations between the two neighbours.

The fact that the two PMs are visiting Langkawi together is a clear indication that ties are warming up.

It all started when Lee expressed his desire to meet Abdullah.

After much discussion, both sides agreed that a relaxed atmosphere should be created.

What better way than to have it on the island known for its sandy beaches and lush jungle apart from its legends and myths.

To most Malaysians, talks with Singapore would invariably mean issues of water, KTM land and the new bridge to replace the Causeway.

However, officials from both sides insist these matters are not on the table.

Malaysians officials felt that the two countries should take advantage of the feel good factor now.

"Strike while the iron is hot," said a



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diplomat who readily admits that past problems cannot be ignored.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar feels that it is up to the two leaders to touch on the outstanding issues.

"The get-together is very flexible. We really don't know what they are going to touch on.

"Even if those issues are raised, this meeting is not a negotiation process."

No matter how officials try to play down the expectations, it cannot be denied this get-together could achieve much more than other more formal attempts.

A point to note is that Singapore has been asking Malaysia to take relations to a higher level, something which Kuala Lumpur wants too.

Interestingly, unlike other Asean countries, Malaysia and Singapore do not have a joint commission. A joint commission is an annual consultation process where two countries discuss and review bilateral issues like security, economics or border issues.

"We have no formal mechanism like what we have with other Asean countries. So now is the time for us to sit and talk about what type of higher-level relations Singapore is referring to," said Syed Hamid.

Despite hiccups in the past administration, Singapore has traditionally been one of Malaysia's biggest investors.

Last year, Singapore firms invested a hefty US\$2.1bil (RM7.1bil) in 53 Malaysian firms, up from US\$238mil (RM809mil) in 2005.

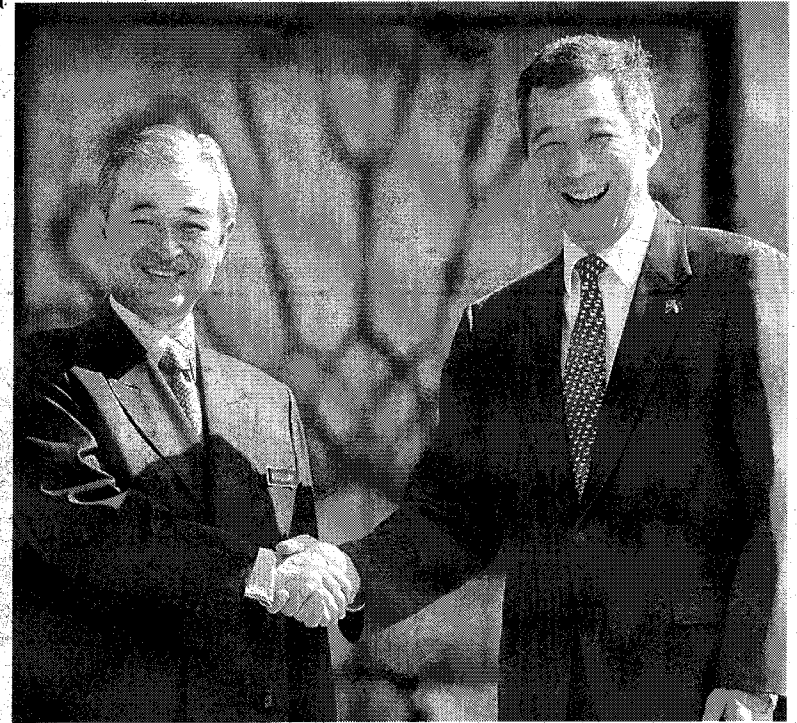
Malaysia is also wooing Singapore to invest in new economic zones especially the Iskandar Development Region.

To top this, officials from both sides are talking this week to expand bilateral air links including opening the busy Kuala Lumpur-Singapore route to carriers other than their respective national airlines.

Syed Hamid said Malaysia cannot ignore the fact that the tourist dollar from across the border contributes much to its coffers.

As for development corridors, he said, Singapore is familiar with investing in Malaysia and the opportunities available.

Still, in the minds of many Malaysians the outstanding bilateral issues should see finality at some point.



Warmer relations: Ties between Malaysia and Singapore have thawed significantly since Abdullah took over. Picture shows Abdullah greeting Lee on the latter's first official visit to Malaysia in October 2004.

Syed Hamid said he was happy that bilateral relations had improved.

"But at the same time, I would also like to see the other matters cleared.

"Ways must be found to resolve them forever so that there is no baggage for the future generation."

An official cautioned that relations could move forward only if there is no "victory-claiming" mindset.

"We hope that the current Singa-

porean leadership will discard old prejudices and mistrust.

"Win-win means it should be mutually beneficial whether politically, in security matters or economy wise," said the official.

So when Abdullah fetes Lee to a seafood lunch on Tuesday on board the Star Cruises' MegaStar Aries, maybe they will be able to discover that magic win-win formula.