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Can Jokowi and Najib bring Indonesia and Malaysia closer?

THINGS TO IRON OUT: Unresolved border issues and the plight of Indonesian workers in Malaysia continue to complicate ties, write Emirza Adi Syailendra, Oh Ei Sun and Santi H. Paramitha

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CONTRADICTION attitudes that are at times cooperative, and at times cavalier, have dominated Indonesia-Malaysia relations in recent years.

After President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) assumed office, however, Jakarta displayed an urgency in building closer relations with Kuala Lumpur. Jokowi had already visited Malaysia four times last year: an inaugural state visit in February, two Asean Summits in April and November, as well as the wedding of Najib's daughter in May. In October, Najib also made a two-day working visit to

Indonesia. Other than increasing cooperation so as to prevent a relapse of the haze epidemic, the two leaders sought to bring bilateral economic cooperation to new heights.

One of the most prolific projects between the two close neighbours currently is the establishment of the Council of Palm Oil Producers. Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur both understand that their global contribution as palm-oil producing countries had reached a significant 85 per cent.

Both signed an agreement on Nov 21 last year to establish the council. Membership has since expanded to other palm-oil producing countries, such as Brazil, Colombia, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, the Philippines and Thailand. Although the scheme is still work-in-progress, Indonesia and Malaysia have already declared the principles that encapsulate the Framework of Principles for Sustainable Palm Oil, called e+POP.

It is set to formulate a common eco-

friendly standard to comply with global benchmarks in the palm oil industry. Nonetheless, doubts have arisen as to whether the economy-driven cooperation is sustainable amidst occasional tensions between the two countries.

After the International Court of Justice awarded the Sipadan and Ligitan islands to Malaysia in 2002, Indonesia has taken a more cautious approach towards its borders. Reflecting the nationalistic mood, Jokowi has sought to increase his country's military presence along the border with Malaysia.

Indonesia currently views its northern Kalimantan border as the most important source of threat and conflict. Some border disputes remain unresolved, including the Ambalat area in East Kalimantan.

Indonesia is also concerned about the overlapping identities among its inhabitants along the common border. Following the creation of Indonesia and Malaysia, displaced identities have increasingly become a contentious issue among traditional communities living near the borders. These communities are highly mobile. For example, the Iban and Kenyah people in the mountainous regions of Kalimantan often cross into Malaysia to sell their commodities or labour in the forestry industry in Sarawak. With better economic opportunities in Sarawak, there is concern that the national identity of these people will be compromised.

Responding to the above-mentioned issues, Indonesia increased its military presence at the borders.

On April 27 last year, the Development and Public Housing Ministry, as well as the military, embarked on a project to build infrastructure along the border with Sarawak. In addition, the Indonesian military is also spearheading the development of a 1,580km road in the west, east and north Kalimantan between last year and 2019.

This project is accompanied by increased civic education to promote nationalism among the border communities as well as improving local economic opportunities — Indonesia's bid to encourage its people to earn a living within its territory.

Some lingering negative mutual perceptions between Malaysians and Indonesians, partly a consequence of a freer but more prickly Indonesian media, have also become important challenges in bilateral relations.

The issue of pride, especially in relation to the treatment of In-

donesian domestic workers in Malaysia, has contributed to the deterioration in Indonesian opinion. Its after-effects can be felt.

In February last year, the Indonesian embassy in Kuala Lumpur issued a protest to the Malaysian government over an advertisement for a vacuum cleaner (Robovac) that allegedly contained derogatory references to Indonesian domestic workers. Although this was clearly a private sector matter, for which the Malaysian government could not be held responsible, the embassy protest reflected the growing Indonesian sensitivity.

People-to-people frictions between Malaysians and Indonesians have also been on the rise. This will become an increasingly hot-button issue for Indonesia as Malaysia is one of the top destinations for Indonesian workers working abroad. From January to September alone last year, the number of Indonesian workers sent to Malaysia had reached a whopping 75,000, people, adding to the huge numbers of those already in Malaysia.

Thus far, Jokowi has framed issues surrounding the plight of Indonesian migrant workers as a matter of dignity, instead of the protection of workers' rights. He intends to gradually decrease the number of Indonesian workers in the informal sector abroad in the next three to four years. To compensate for this, he promised to create a multisector employment field, facilitating the workers to earn a living within Indonesia, for which the Manpower Ministry has developed a road map.

Indonesia had recently struggled to extinguish forest fires emanating from Sumatra and Kalimantan. Malaysia reportedly chipped in with aid worth more than US\$400 million (RM1.7 billion) and deployed three aircraft to assist in combating the haze. Despite the seemingly cautious attitude of the Indonesian government towards accepting foreign aid in curbing forest fires, the proactive stance that Najib had shown towards Jokowi did contribute to the betterment of Indonesia-Malaysia relations.

The personal affinity between Jokowi and Najib has indeed provided windows of opportunity for the two countries to contain their occasional frictions and deepen relations. However, the sustainability of close ties needs to be supported by ameliorating the negative perceptions between citizens of the two close neighbours. So far, the elites of the two countries have taken their cultural and linguistic affinity as a unifying factor for granted, while allowing grievances among the people to fester. This needs to be changed.

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The personal affinity between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak and President Joko Widodo has provided windows of opportunity for the two countries to contain their frictions and deepen relations. Pic by Yazit Razali

