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A new start for old neighbours

The high-speed rail project is a chance to move forward cross-border relations, but we must be prepared to negotiate well.

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It would be hard to ignore the fact that bilateral ties between Malaysia and Singapore were thorny for decades.

For many years, there was mistrust among officials, ministers and leaders, especially when they tried to resolve outstanding issues including the KTM Bhd land in Singapore, sale of water from Johor and a new bridge to replace the Causeway.

The animosity was evident, so much so that during the signing of a special agreement to refer a disputed island (Batu Puteh/Pedra Branca) to an international court 13 years ago, the foreign ministers of Malaysia and Singapore got into a verbal sparring match as they tried to explain each country's stand on exercising their rights over the rocky island.

Sure, they cracked jokes with each other during the lunch that followed, but for many who witnessed the sparring during an event that was broadcast live on RTM, it was evident relations were not well. It was undiplomatic and ugly.

It was a roller-coaster ride for bilateral relations and an unpleasant one between countries deeply divided on issues.

Fast forward to 2016. It is ironic that today, the love for a thorny fruit has, in a way, brought ties onto a stronger and firmer footing.

Durian diplomacy seems to work the magic to put ties back on track.

Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien-Loong's "obsession" for durian is well known and during one working trip to Malaysia, one of the first things he asked about on arrival was the Musang King durian.

When he became Prime Minister in 2009, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak made it clear he

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wanted a bilateral relationship that is bold, imaginative and courageous.

"If we take the attitude that as members of a new generation, that both Prime Minister Lee and I are young, we're not part of that generation, we should not be encumbered with the baggage of history," Najib had said.

The two leaders struck a personal close relationship over the years and this has made things a lot easier to manage.

On Tuesday, as the two leaders attended the seventh leaders' retreat, history was made again by the signing of the bilateral agreement to construct the high-speed rail line between Jurong East and Bandar Malaysia.

Much has been said about the project, which was only brought to the table in 2013.

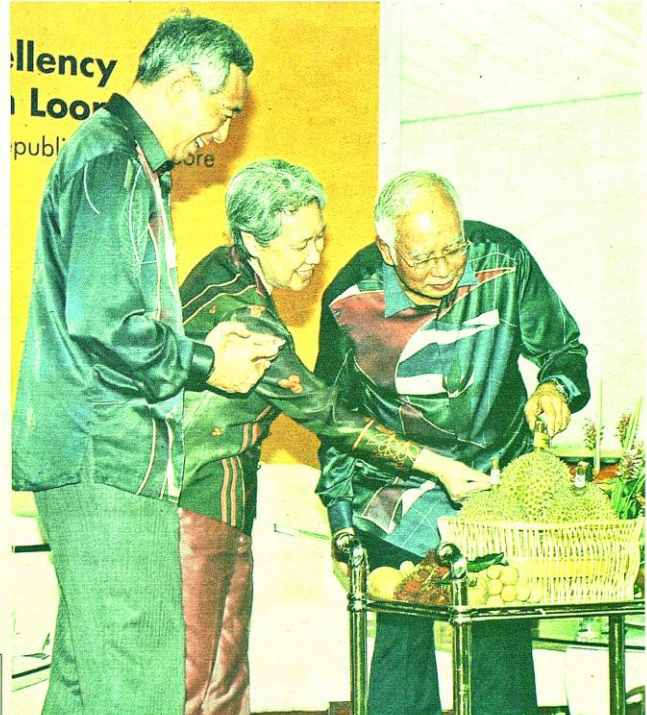
The "marquee project" will bring the two countries closer together, improve connectivity, deepen people-to-people ties and catalyse further economic cooperation.

The vibes are definitely good between the leaders and it has a spiral effect on the ministers and officials, too.

Yes, gone are the days of confrontations, the language used is different and the talk now is more on cooperation.

Putrajaya's less confrontational approach in dealing with Singapore is bearing fruit.

Yet, we need to be reminded that while



Durian diplomacy: Najib checking out the Musang King durian on display during the Malaysia Agrobazaar in Singapore in 2014 as Lee and his wife Ho Ching look on. — Bernama

If you are not going to ask from them, Singapore will not volunteer and negotiate what Malaysia wants.

A Malaysian official

several issues have been resolved, including the Points of Agreement on KTM land in Singapore, resulting in joint venture projects between Khazanah Nasional and Temasek Holdings in Singapore and Iskandar, there are still many issues on the table.

In any negotiations, despite the good vibes that are flowing across the Causeway, Malaysia should never take Singapore for granted.

A Malaysian official was rather blunt when he said that Singapore still plays hardball when it matters.

"Their DNA hasn't changed. What they stand for hasn't changed. What you see is never what you get," the official added.

Over the years, Malaysian officials who have had dealings with Singapore agree on this - their counterparts will ask, "What will Singapore get?"

"Charity is not in their vocabulary, forget about the spirit of neighbourliness," said an official.

Back to the HSR project that is targeted to start service in 10 years: we know it will cut travel time to 90 minutes, we know it is supposed to spin economic activities along the stations and we know the project, the first of its kind in the region, is being followed closely by other countries wanting a piece of the multibillion project.

The two leaders keep saying the HSR is a game changer but what we want to know is, exactly how are citizens going to benefit?

Firstly, the fare, already speculated to be

hundreds of ringgit between Bandar Malaysia and Singapore, is an amount that only business people may be willing to pay. It may be too steep for ordinary citizens.

The service will benefit a certain population and group of people, but what about the larger population? Are there any real conversations on efforts to create jobs in the smaller towns that the train passes by?

Will the agency tasked to create economic activities have a conversation with Singapore on what sort of businesses can be set up so that the Government can spur economic growth along the corridor?

Is Singapore willing to relocate factories so that people do not have to travel all the way there for work? After all, it will help relieve congestion at the border crossings, something Singapore has always wanted.

While the Land Public Transport Commission and MyHSR are dealing with their Singapore counterparts on the HSR, there must be parallel negotiations on the economic impact to the people living along the rail line.

"If you are not going to ask from them, Singapore will not volunteer and negotiate what Malaysia wants," said an official.

"Singapore is a small country and they know they can only go so far," he said.

"So what do you do? They actually need us, their neighbours and we are the most immediate."

"They have a glossy veneer and if you don't cut through, you don't see the 'naughtiness'. They look polite and professional but yet they are waiting to 'kill you' off."

But is Malaysia ruthless enough and willing to take advantage of the situation? Maybe Malaysians do not have that kind of DNA but we must bear in mind that when others sense you are weak, they will go for the kill.

At the end of the day, Malaysia-Singapore ties must be really a win-win situation and not just to make one country flourish. Isn't it better to survive together, especially in this challenging and changing global environment?