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A lot riding on KL-Jakarta AC

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Najib and Jokowi to have first annual consultation

THE recent arrests of fishermen for intrusion into foreign waters will be among the topics of discussion when leaders of Indonesia and Malaysia meet for their 11th annual consultation in Jakarta tomorrow.

This is the first consultation between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and Indonesian President Joko Widodo although they have met several times at Asean or Apec summits and when Joko made his first official trip to Malaysia after being elected president in 2014.

The AC, as it is normally referred to, is an important platform in managing bilateral relations between two countries, especially on sensitive issues involving the sovereignty, territory and the well-being of citizens in the two countries.

When officials or ministers are unable to be on the same page, they would refer to the leaders for guidance and more importantly political decision on important issues.

Hence, such consultation is necessary because good rapport between two leaders can contribute to solving problems that arise at ministers or officials, level. Sometimes, it takes just a phone call between the two leaders to get things going.

Over the last decade or so, bilateral spats between Malaysia and Indonesia became serious with incidents like maid abuse, the arrest of fishermen, and even accusations of stealing Indonesia's dance, food,

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songs or even batik, sparking protests and hateful statements from across the border.

There have been times when the Malaysian embassy in Jakarta became the target of local demonstrations, that at one stage protests were held almost daily.

Since he became Prime Minister, one of the priorities placed by Najib in managing bilateral relations with Jakarta is finding quicker solutions to overlapping maritime territorial claims.

Najib has reportedly told officials that negotiations must continue for a win-win solution and more importantly, be accepted by the people of both countries, mindful that when Indonesia lost Sipadan and Ligitan after the International Court of Justice decided in favour of Malaysia, the decision was not well accepted by the Indonesians.

Both countries began talks in 2005 on maritime boundaries in Sulawesi Sea, Singapore Strait and the southern part of the Straits of Malacca following cases of encroachment, fishing and enforcement.

There have been cases of fishermen detained from both sides purportedly for encroaching into the other country's waters.

There have been allegations that Malaysian fishing boats were dragged into Indonesian waters by the republic's maritime agencies and then detained for encroachment.

These incidents have also caused angry reactions from both sides. To stop the situation from spinning out of control, an MoU was signed in 2012, establishing standard operating procedures for law enforcement agencies of both countries in carrying out their duties in overlapping maritime areas.

At the same time, the technical team involving officials from Wisma Putra, Defence Ministry, Attorney-General's Chambers, National Security Council and Mapping Department have been holding meetings with their Indonesian counterparts. So far, 30 meetings have been held.

The progress of the technical meetings have not been made public but the fact that the officials continue to hold meetings can be seen as an indication of progress.

At the same time, the Prime Minister decided to introduce a new mechanism to the border talks. He appointed a special envoy - Tan Sri Mohd Radzi Rahman - last year to accelerate the process of finding a solution to maritime border disputes.

It is understood that Mohd Radzi, who is former Wisma Putra secretary-general, has met Indonesia's presidential envoy Eddy Pratomo

three times.

How much has been achieved by these two former diplomats is unclear. One question is whether their role is actually contributing to accelerating the process.

A little problem may have arisen because the Indonesian envoy has to report directly to the president while the technical team reports to the foreign minister.

It may have created unnecessary tension as no clear line has been defined on the role between the envoy and the technical team.

Overlapping claims is a complex issue, one for which no deadline can be fixed. This involves Malaysian and Indonesian sovereignty and territories.

While both countries want to resolve matters quickly, the governments want to ensure the interest of all is covered. There is no room for mistakes.

On the positive side, if this issue is settled, the end result will enable Malaysia and Indonesia to move forward.

Once the border lines are defined and settled, it will pave the way for other issues like fishermen encroachment or smuggling activities to be resolved.

There will also be a clear line for enforcement duties by the local authorities.

There is still a long way to go, more meetings have to be held and a sincere and genuine desire to resolve this emotive issue is needed.