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Game-changer from China visit

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Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's state visit to China has yielded an amazing buffet of MoUs that could set the momentum for an economic spur ahead of the general election next year.

It was late afternoon by the time Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak touched down in Beijing earlier this week.

The late autumn temperature had dipped to about four degrees Celsius and the hem of his heavy overcoat fluttered in the blustery wind as he walked the red carpet past the impressive guard of honour.

He was the head of government but China had prepared a welcoming ceremony on a scale befitting a head of state.

The warmth on the part of his Chinese hosts was in contrast to the weather. China Premier Li Keqiang greeted him like an old friend, both of them shaking hands with one palm over the other.

The seed planted by Tun Abdul Razak Hussein has matured into a tree. And, as evident from Najib's relations with China since becoming Prime Minister, the tree is bearing fruit.

China has never forgotten that Malaysia was the first country in the region to set up diplomatic relations with the Communist regime. The Chinese often talk about not forgetting the source of the water where you drink and they see Najib committing to what his father had put in place 42 years ago.

The Chinese government had invited his family along for the state visit and he was accompanied by a delegation that included seven ministers, two Mentris Besar and a Chief Minister. Among the delegation were the presidents of MCA and Gerakan, Datuk Seri Liow Tiong Lai and Datuk Seri Mah Siew Keong.

Najib flew home yesterday after a state banquet hosted by President Xi Jinping during which they toasted their special friendship and heaped accolades upon each other.

"It was mission accomplished. It was not only about our country's shared past, both sides have their eye on the future," said Datuk Seri Idris Haron, the Chief Minister of Malacca where Chinese companies are building a new deep sea port.

The state visit has brought Malaysia-China ties to a new level and generated MoUs and investments totalling some RM414bil. The investments generated have been mind-boggling in terms of numbers and also in its multi-faceted mix.

Liow, who is also Transport Minister, has been particularly elated with the planned East Coast Rail Line costing RM55bil.

He told *The Star's* journalist covering the China visit that the project, believed to be the single biggest deal signed with China, will open up the east coast.

"That big step towards China all those years ago, the long ties, the fact that the two countries are the largest trading partners, all these were repeatedly highlighted by leaders in their speeches, in the Chinese newspaper and TV," said Ivanpal S. Grewal, the political secretary to Mah who is also Plantation Industries and



Old friends: Najib was feted like an old and dear friend by the China government during his six-day state visit to China. He is seen here with his China counterpart Li Keqiang.



Liow: 'Rail project will open up the east coast'.



Idris: 'Both sides have their eye on the future'.



Soong: 'Difficult for opposition to criticise'.

Commodities Minister.

It was Ivanpal's first time in China and he found it "great to be part of a history-making visit".

In terms of the Chinese diaspora, Malaysia has the third largest Chinese population outside of China.

Najib has visited China a number of times since becoming Prime Minister but the latest visit has cemented the fact that China-Malaysia ties have grown from a relationship to a friendship.

It is quite ironic that the man whom Chinese Malaysians have so much issue with is so highly regarded by Beijing.

Several months after Najib's father established diplomatic ties with China in 1974, he swept to victory in the general election.

Some see Najib's China visit as a warm-up to the general election but the impact of Razak's game-changer visit can never be replicated.

As political and economic affairs analyst Prof Hoo Ke Ping put it, the projects will provide an important stimulus for growth.

All those MoUs and intended investments will help form the basis for the country's future economic growth and lend Najib the much-needed feel-good factor.

"The long-term impact is not clear but the ruling coalition will now have a feel-good thing to sell. To all intents and purposes, it is a political comeback of sorts for Najib and his government," said Cense think tank CEO Fui K. Soong.

The magnitude of the China trip has stunned the opposition parties. They are at a loss on how to react or to take on Najib on this count.

Every single opposition party is riding on the Chinese vote to survive the next general election. It would have been suicidal for any politician depending on Chinese support to diminish or criticise the China deals. They would definitely suffer a backlash.

There has been a muted response among the opposition politicians apart from the two leading figures, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

The former Premier warned that the mega deals will threaten Malaysia's sovereignty and put the country in debt. He said it was not a wise way to manage the country's finances and that it was sending the wrong signal to China on the South China Sea issue.

A day later, Anwar said Malaysia was economically desperate. He

welcomed the Chinese investments but warned against being too dependent on China.

"The dependence of Malaysia's economy on another country is not wise as this will affect Malaysia's interests and make it dependent on the other country's foreign policy and geopolitical strategies," said Anwar.

It is quite novel to see the opposition side at a loss on how to criticise Najib on the China deals.

The comment that took the cake came from Amanah strategic director Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad who claimed that Najib was tilting towards China because of the United States' Department of Justice investigation into the 1MDB issue.

Dr Dzulkefly also slammed Najib for getting sucked into "China's supremacism doctrine" and accused him of putting all the eggs in the Chinese basket.

Much of the reaction so far has been described as "a lot of misguided commentary" by an analyst.

"It also sounds like sour grapes. The opposition sees politics as a zero sum game. They want us to fail so that they can succeed," said Ivanpal.

The other side of the coin saw Tourism Minister Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz shrugging off Dr Mahathir's comments as that of a jealous man.

"He (Dr Mahathir) doesn't like this because he keeps saying investor confidence is lost and we are going to be bankrupt," said Nazri. Nazri, who is hungry for more China tourist arrivals, went on to claim that: "When China invests that much in Malaysia, it shows China is confident about how Najib is running the country."

Pakatan Harapan component parties were worried enough to invite a corporate analyst to brief them on the economic and geo-political implications of the China deals.

They are concerned about the west coast seats where the Chinese vote is concentrated and which form the nerve centre of their strength and success. They are worried that the mega deals and investments will tilt the political equation against them.

"Whatever the source, when you have that much investments coming in, there will be a stimulus that motivates local consumption. It poses a threat to us on the west coast," said a Pakatan politician.

The Pakatan component party representatives who attended the briefing have been asked to come back in a week's time with strategies on how to respond to the China initiative which has been described as a "clear and present danger" to Pakatan's election hopes.

Will Najib's love affair with China swing the Chinese vote back into his arms?

The west coast Chinese ground is still quite cold towards Barisan and Najib despite signs of a thaw during the recent by-elections in Sungai Besar and Kuala Kangsar.

But, said a strategist from a research group studying Chinese voters, the "craziness of 2013" has dissipated.

"The dream is cracked. The Chinese middle class is disillusioned with both sides," said the strategist.

The Chinese pendulum is now lodged somewhere in the centre after swinging all the way to the opposition in the past two general elections.

The impact of the China deals will be clearer over the next one year.

"It's hard to say how it will benefit the ruling coalition but it locks in the DAP because how do you criticise investments that will benefit the community? It will also be more difficult for them to condemn Najib," said Soong.

According to Soong, it may soften the Chinese mood and the traditional Chinese Barisan supporters who ran over to the other side will likely return to the fold now that they can justify their vote.

The thing is this - China is the next super power after the United States. This is more so considering the controversial presidential election campaign going on which some joke is about choosing the "less worse of the deplorable's".

The China money, said Soong, is irresistible and China is buying friends in a big way. Or as Dr Mahathir would put it, cash is king.

Every country in South-East Asia wants to be a 21st century state but the region is suffering from an outflow of American investments and funds.

The mighty and holier-than-thou policies of the United States have often left a bad taste in the mouth of many Asian leaders.

Najib has chosen to play ball with China at a time when the superpower is seeking friendship in the region and if all goes well, he may score a winning goal.