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A fruitful trip to India

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POLICY MATTERS

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's trip to India on March 30 strikes a curious pitch because it follows several other notable diplomatic visits.

Najib went to China in October 2016. That was a whirlwind trip that stirred considerable speculation in Malaysia. The China trip was followed by a visit from the Saudi king, Salman Abdulaziz Al-Saud not too long later.

Within this setting, one can legitimately ask, was Najib's visit to India of special significance?

First, Najib's ties with Modi have been good, starting with the bright and friendly overtones they took when the Indian prime minister first visited Kuala Lumpur in November 2015.

Second, Najib seems to have been keen to deepen Malaysia's trade and investment ties with India. The economic relationship has not been as upbeat as it possibly could be.

Although India has long spoken of increasing its engagement with Asean, in reality this has not gone too far beyond the level of rhetoric. This does not mean that Malaysia's trade and investment with India should be left to languish. Mindful of the need to keep the flames going, Najib seems to have taken along with him a whole agenda covering related issues. Tourism, for instance, could be further developed with a more adventurous and growing Indian middle-class. Also, India's growing appetite for infrastructure offers a niche area that Malaysia could fill.

Of course, Najib realises that a trip to India could rock some appeal with Malaysian citizens of Indian descent. This objective was carefully satisfied with a well-planned visit to Chennai and a visit to Superstar Rajnikanth's residence. Rajnikanth, also known as



Najib and Modi at Hyderabad House in New Delhi on April 1.

Thalaiva (or Boss) has a spell-bound fan base the world over, with a good section of them coming from the Indians in Malaysia. Most would react to the meeting with cynicism, but one cannot firmly assert that it will have no significance at all on the voters in this country. The meeting with the *Thalaiva* could have some impact on some members of the Indian electorate in the coming general election.

But all of these are rather obvious reasons for a visit to India. If that was all that motivated the trip, then it was not a significant mission; there was nothing spectacular to it. These could have been important factors, but they are rather run of the mill.

There are two possible reasons that could make Najib's six-day tour one that is laden with more gravitas. First, there is his

expression of interest that the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) negotiations be concluded by the end of this year, although he offered 2018 as an alternate target. This could be taken as a veiled reference calling upon India to lower its negotiating stance in the regional talks. For various reasons, it may not be possible to deliver solid outcomes by that time, and surely Najib knows that it is not. He definitely is aware that India is not in a hurry to liberalise. India can see no reason to adopt a position that brings it no special advantages.

Still, Najib did make known his interest that the Asean agenda be pushed forward. Why? He could be an emissary of Chinese interests. That, however, is improbable. It is more likely that he wants to be seen as a statesman who has Asean's interest at heart.

Conveying his concern for the slow-moving negotiations prepares him for a position of leadership in the region.

There is a more enigmatic statement that Najib made while in India which deserves unpacking. Najib made it clear that China should abide by international law in its handling of the South China Sea problem. Malaysia and India issued a joint statement urging all parties to show the utmost respect to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) 1982.

Prima facie, this statement is consistent with the position Malaysia has always taken on the South China Sea. Although it is not the first time Malaysia has said this, the recent call while in India draws attention to itself because it is contiguous with Najib's visit to China.

There has been much speculation on the advisability of having welcomed the kind of Chinese investment into Malaysia that we have. If there is doubt and anxiety about the investments it is simply because of China's questionable track record in Africa, Myanmar, Cambodia and Sri Lanka. As a consequence of these concerns, the joint statement with India runs the risk of being criticised for its potential emptiness. Rather than to have a joint statement that rings deeply, one is more likely to ask a koan-type question: what is the significance of sounds created in the absence of any air?

One thing is undeniable: the visit has commercial import. Malaysia will build a 250-acre fourth generation technology park in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. It will bid to build roads worth US\$1.2 billion in Rajasthan. In total, Malaysia has signed investment deals amounting to a staggering US\$36 billion.

However, for many of *Thalaiva's* fans, Najib's selfie with the legend justifies the visit. They will search no deeper.

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