

Dr M hails Seoul's looking south policy

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BUSAN: Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad has great expectations for this week's special summit between South Korea and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), saying that the two parties can further develop win-win partnerships.

"We welcome (South) Korea's looking south policy," he said in an exclusive interview with Yonhap News Agency and Yonhap News TV during his trip here for the Asean-Republic of Korea Commemorative Summit.

Dr Mahathir was referring to the Moon Jae-in administration's New Southern Policy aimed at strengthening Seoul's strategic ties with Asean.

He said South Korea had made tremendous progress over the years, especially in technology.

"So it is important that Asean develops good relations with

(South) Korea because we can benefit from (their) experience, (their) ways of doing things and also investments from Korea."

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia was "very suitable for interacting with (South) Korea", given Malaysia's English-speaking workforce and stable politics.

Reflecting on Malaysia's diplomatic pragmatism, he said his administration was reaching out to North Korea as well.

It was reported that Malaysia is preparing to reopen its embassy in Pyongyang, partially closed since the assassination of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's estranged half-brother at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport in February 2017.

"We want to be friendly with all countries in the world... Even North Korea can provide some trade for us. We don't like con-

frontation," Dr Mahathir said.

He described talk of the North Korean government being behind the assassination as "suspicion" and said the incident had not affected Malaysia's security.

"So, now, it is time to resume normal relations between Malaysia and North Korea," he said in the interview at his hotel room here.

Asked about the exact timing of the embassy's reopening, Dr Mahathir said: "We are meeting them, we are talking to them."

It was reported that North Korean officials plan to visit Malaysia.

"We will talk to them as to the appropriate time for us to reopen the embassy," Dr Mahathir said.

He said, however, that his government would be "more careful" to ensure that internal affairs of

other nations did not spill over into Malaysia.

He reaffirmed support for Moon's regional peace initiative.

"I appreciate President Moon's idea. He is making some progress."

But the international community should cease calling on North Korea to "do everything" before relieving sanctions.

Dr Mahathir arrived in this southern port city on Sunday. He visited Korea Aerospace Industries (KAI), a major aerospace and defence company. He is also planning to tour Hyundai Rotem, which produces defence goods.

He said Malaysia was looking for suitable partners for the supply of required weapons for the purpose of defence and security.

He spoke about prudence when referring to South Korea's push for a free trade agreement (FTA)

with Malaysia.

"FTAs are always good, but we have to understand the weaknesses and strengths of the countries involved," he said, adding that Malaysia's industrial strength was in the infancy stage.

He likened it to a golfer's "handicap". In order to compete with Tiger Woods, an amateur golfer might need to adjust his handicap to allow for a fair match, Dr Mahathir said.

On South Korea-Japan dispute over history, he suggested forward-looking efforts to resolve confrontations on the basis of what could contribute to their growth and development.

The prime minister is scheduled to head to Seoul after attending the Busan summit. He will have one-on-one summit talks with Moon in Cheong Wa Dae tomorrow. **Bernama**