

Forging crucial partnership

COMMENT
by Collins Chong Yew Keat

THE state visit by the Sultan of Brunei underscores the growing importance of bilateral ties that will form one of the cornerstones of regional solidarity and cooperation.

It coincides with the 24th Malaysia-Brunei Darussalam Annual Leaders' Consultation, which is a crucial annual platform to enhance bilateral and regional cooperative framework and strengthen joint understanding and synergy of capacities.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's trip to Brunei earlier this year proves the importance of maintaining a forward-driven relationship based on the longstanding historical bond, trust and confidence, aimed at fostering mutual interests and collaborative endeavours.

The economic front is of strategic importance for both nations as they face new non-traditional challenges in the form of economic uncertainties, supply chain resilience, food and energy security and climate impact.

Both countries also face similar challenges in security settings, especially in the South China Sea and rising regional and global geopolitical rivalry and tensions.

In 2022, Brunei was Malaysia's 26th largest trading partner and the sixth largest within Asean, with a total trade amounting to US\$2.98 billion (RM13.6 billion), an increase of 68.4% compared with the year before.

Both countries are also in the midst of transforming key economic fundamentals that will create a sustaining shield in facing future headwinds, especially in energy transition and carbon initiatives.

As Malaysia and Brunei rely heavily on oil and gas to fuel economic needs and progress, both will need a strategic synergy of interdependence and cultivation of shared interests and advantages to face future regional and global risks and challenges as a united front.

Areas of low-hanging fruits include spearheading greater exchanges in talent and expertise, economic and investment opportunities that will have strategic spillover effect, critical research and higher education mobility, tourism

and greater people-to-people connections.

The shift toward a digital and knowledge-driven economy based on the high-impact value chain of key sectors and technologies, such as green and renewable energy, the chip and semiconductor industry, artificial intelligence and digitally-driven innovation as well as scientific research, including space and quantum technologies, forms the foundational impetus for the transformative leap forward.

Both countries need the necessary tools and elements to propel the transition away from the conventional models and methods of economic growth.

The Brunei-Malaysia relationship holds considerable untapped potential, promising greater returns, especially in economic and security developments.

Both nations are in the Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East Asean Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) framework, which is an intergovernmental economic cooperation programme geared to promote growth led by the private sector and driven by market forces.

Launched in 1994, the BIMP-EAGA initiative consists of Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, with the objective to boost growth in trade, investments and tourism by creating new intra-regional shipping routes and air connections as well as power inter-connection projects.

Other key areas of cooperation include agribusiness, tourism, the environment and socio-cultural education.

Clean and renewable energy sectors have gained importance in this context, and the four nations strategically complement each other in forming a credible bulwark of strategic interdependence across key sectors, which will have lasting impact on regional growth and contribute to the economic development of the Asean region.

The new prospect for enhanced economic and progressive development in Indonesia's Nusantara capital relocation will add long-term value to this initiative and spur economic and infrastructure development in bridging the rural-urban divide, improve literacy and digital rate and enhance joint progressive development models in producing impactful and targeted



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progress in the area.

Brunei and Malaysia are also in the Washington-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity. This serves as the cornerstone for spearheading a value-based development model and upholding the main pillars of this framework, which include fair and resilient trade, supply chain resilience and infrastructure, clean energy and decarbonisation.

These elements provide a credible support for creating new incentivisation tools that prioritise progressive economic development in key future growth areas. This is crucial not only for Brunei and Malaysia but for regional stability.

Malaysia remains one of Brunei's closest and most crucial partners in maritime security.

Brunei's 2021 Defence White Paper underscores the strategic significance of its maritime region, in light of increasing security risks and vulnerabilities. Brunei has also enhanced its partnership with Malaysia in this regard.

Examples include the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) maritime exercise with the US, focusing on the full spectrum of naval capabilities and featuring cooperative evolutions that highlight the ability of the US and

Brunei to work together towards ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific maritime security environment.

Given the swift evolution of the security landscape in the South China Sea, Asean and its associated conflict prevention mechanisms remain one of the most important regional platforms for both countries. These platforms yield economic and peace benefits and will persist as vital avenues not only for safeguarding the interests of both countries, but also for maintaining a unified and harmonious stance in ensuring stability, prosperity and adherence to rules by external powers and internal stakeholders.

Enhancing the synergy and integration of collaborative endeavours for mutual benefits will stand as a cornerstone, underscoring the significance of common origins, trust and understanding, while capitalising on collective strengths.

The relationship between Malaysia and Brunei demands further augmentation and safeguarding as it remains the bedrock of bilateral and regional strength.

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