

Fruits harvested from seeds of trust

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By Najib Tun Razak

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Forty-two years ago, in 1974, and then Prime Minister of Malaysia Tun Abdul Razak embarked on what he called a "journey into the unknown, to sow the seeds of mutual understanding and trust".

He did so in the face of questions and criticism, as many thought that he was wrong to lead Malaysia towards becoming the first country in the region to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China.

But Tun Razak, my father, was steadfast in his belief that the way of peace and cooperation among neighbours was the right path. When I asked him, as a young man at the time, why he was so sure, he replied: "Because Zhou Enlai is a man I can trust".

Decades later, my father's decision to place his trust in China has been validated, and we have harvested the fruits of his vision. Economic and trade relations between Malaysia and China have grown from strength to strength, helped by close political and business exchanges at the highest levels.

China was Malaysia's largest trading partner in 2015, a position it has maintained since 2009, with trade last year between our countries totalling approximately USD 100 billion. Malaysia is also China's eighth largest trading partner worldwide. And among ASEAN countries, we are China's largest trading partner, the largest source of imports, and its second largest export destination.

Over the past twenty two years, I have visited China in many different capacities, including as Defense Minister, Education Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and Prime Minister. On each visit, I have been struck by the strength of our relationship, how it has grown over time, and the depth of future opportunities.

I have seen how China has retaken its place on the world stage as a great power, while in Malaysia we have progressed from being an agricultural based to an upper-middle income economy, well on the path to becoming a high-income developed nation.

Ties between our two countries are now set to reach new highs. Over the course of my visit, which will involve discussions with their Excellencies President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang, we will sign many new agreements and memorandums of understanding that will elevate the relationship between our two nations even higher.

Joint ventures with Chinese companies have already led to the Qinzhou Industrial Park in Guangxi, and the Kuantan Industrial Park, creating new jobs and opportunities for our peoples.

Now we have the deepwater port at Melaka, a project that was inaugurated just last month. Plans for the futuristic underground metropolis of Bandar Malaysia—which will be the largest underground city in the world when it is built in Kuala Lumpur—have been unveiled. And we are delighted that Malaysia has been chosen to host Xiamen University Malaysia, the first overseas branch of any public Chinese university.

These are just a few of the partnerships across sectors as diverse as railways, real estate and energy that are on-going. Looking ahead, we are committed to expanding these, both bilaterally through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and as part of President Xi's visionary One Belt One Road initiative.

Furthermore, we are now taking new steps in military cooperation with China. Nearly two years ago, we undertook our first-ever bilateral military exercise, and last year our first joint live-troop exercise. Now we have agreed the first significant defence deal between our two countries, with Malaysia purchasing littoral mission ships from China—the first two of which will be built in China, then two in Malaysia, and further Malaysian-built ships subject to government financing. This deal will enhance the Malaysian shipbuilding and defence industry.

The relationship between China and Malaysia is based on mutual trust and respect. At the same time, we recognise that there can be issues where even the closest of friends may disagree. When it comes to the South China Sea, we firmly believe that overlapping territorial and maritime disputes should be managed calmly and rationally through dialogue, in accordance with the rule of law and peaceful negotiations.

More generally, we believe it is incumbent upon larger countries to treat smaller ones fairly. And this includes former colonial powers. It is not for them to lecture countries they once exploited on how to conduct their own internal affairs today. Malaysia and China are united in agreeing on the need to defend the sovereignty of the nation state and in the belief that the individual histories, values and governance systems of different countries

must be respected.

This is particularly relevant as the world's fulcrum shifts East. It is crucial that global institutions reflect the legitimate desires and viewpoints of countries that were given no say in the legal and security infrastructure that was set up by the victors of the Second World War.

This is why we welcome China's initiative in creating the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. We need new institutions for a new era: of peaceful dialogue, not foreign intervention in sovereign states, and of "win-win" cooperation that benefits all, not just the few.

This will be the Asian Century, and few countries represent the potential of our region better than China and Malaysia. Working together, we must build on the partnership reformed by Tun Razak in 1974, which stretches back through the centuries to the early Ming Dynasty when the first Chinese trade envoys arrived in Melaka.

The opportunity is there-it remains only for us to take it. And in doing so, I am confident that we can transform the lives of our peoples and reshape the region and the world for the better.

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