

Fresh priorities on a well-travelled road

N.S.T. 22/2/09 M/S 16

Datuk Seri Najib Razak's visit to China next week, 35 years after his father's groundbreaking visit, speaks volumes about the importance Malaysia attaches to its ties with the country, writes MOHAMED JAWHAR HASSAN

DATUK Seri Najib Razak's official visit to China next week is rightly attracting much attention. It will be significant in several respects.

The timing, coinciding with the anniversary of his late father Tun Abdul Razak Hussein's visit to China 35 years ago, is to commemorate that historic and groundbreaking visit.

That visit stands out as perhaps the boldest initiative that Malaysia has ever taken in its eventful external policy. It was also among the most visionary, given the enormous benefits that continue to accrue not only for Malaysia but also to Asean, China and the wider region.

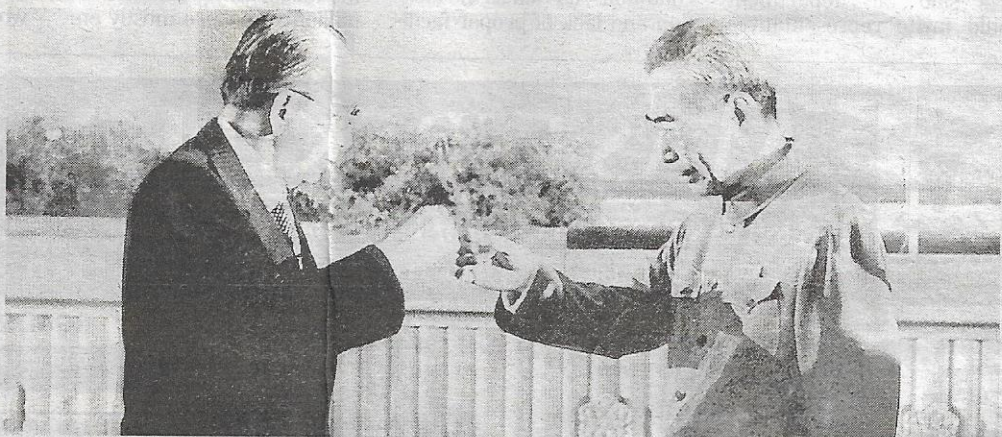
At a time when the Cold War was raging in the region, the estrangement between communist China and non-communist Asean was complete, and the Chinese Communist Party was supporting the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), Malaysia's second prime minister defied conventional wisdom to ink a joint communiqué establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries.

The other countries of the then Asean soon followed Malaysia's example — the Philippines and Thailand in July 1975, Singapore in 1990 and Brunei in 1991. Indonesia, which had suspended diplomatic relations with China in October 1967, restored them in July 1990.

In other words, Najib's father's inspired action pioneered the closing of the Cold War divide between Asean and China and set the scene for the blossoming of mutually productive relations between the largest power in the region and the countries of Southeast Asia.

Besides signalling a policy shift from Tunku Abdul Rahman's pro-West, anti-communist stance to a neutral, non-communist foreign policy posture, Razak's initiative was also a shrewd move calculated to strengthen local Chinese support for the newly-formed Barisan Nasional in the general election in August that year.

The picture of Razak with Mao Zedong was widely displayed in the election cam-



Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein and China's premier Zhou Enlai in 1974.

paign, which was won handsomely by the party.

It is, therefore, an event worth reprising, and who better to do it than the son of the father? However, Najib's visit should not be perceived only in its commemorative light. His visit is significant in its own right. Being the first country outside Asean that Najib is visiting officially in a bilateral capacity, it speaks volumes about the importance Malaysia attaches to its relations with China.

The visit is taking place in a strategic context that, 35 years on, is profoundly different. There is a different set of challenges, and more importantly, opportunities. Though the China threat perception persists in some parts of the wider region, and is indeed being stoked by some countries, in Malaysia, it has essentially died down.

Malaysia continues to be mindful of possibilities of future confrontation over disputed claims in the South China Sea, but it does not regard the resurgent China as a threat to itself or to the region.

China will go to war only over Taiwan, and only if provoked by an imminent declaration of independence.

The CPM is also no more, and irritations over China's policies towards "overseas Chinese" are a thing of the past.

Bilateral relations with China are strong and friendly, based on mutual respect and many shared principles. They have progressed from somewhat guarded state-to-state rela-

tions to extensive business and intimate people-to-people relations. There have been four joint communiqués, 14 agreements and 12 memorandums of understanding since 1974, covering the gamut of bilateral cooperation.

They include MoUs on defence cooperation and maritime cooperation.

Malaysia and China are also extensively engaged in a number of broader regional cooperation processes that have developed into critical platforms for promoting cooperative prosperity and peace. These include Asean+3, the East Asia Summit and the Asean Regional Forum.

If China was a big power in the 1970s, today it is propelling itself inexorably towards becoming the largest (though not the richest) economy in the world.

Its strategic influence is growing in tandem, and it is playing a highly constructive and stabilising role in regional political and economic affairs. Its role on the North Korean issue and in the present economic crisis is testimony to this.

Malaysia, and assuredly China as well, will look to leverage the coming visit to build on the strong relationship that already exists. Malaysia and China share commitments to regionalism and multilateralism.

Najib has made it clear that he is committed to "widening, deepening and strengthening" relations with China.

This will certainly be the objective of the representatives

from the Malaysia-China Business Council, Matrade and the Malaysia-China Friendship Association who will be in the Malaysian delegation.

The Chinese economy is effectively becoming the engine of growth for the region. China is Malaysia's fourth-largest trading partner. Total trade has expanded rapidly, from RM53 billion in 2003 to RM130 billion last year. Tourist arrivals from China more than doubled from 2003, numbering almost 950,000 last year.

Going forward, Malaysia and China may also want to discuss additional strategies and measures to respond to the financial and economic crisis. They will conceivably address issues of regional security, including the latest developments on the Korean peninsula.

They may want to reassure each other on pacific approaches to resolving disputes over claims in the South China Sea.

This subject has become current due to China's objection to Malaysia's recent joint submission with Vietnam to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf extending their continental shelf.

Above all, they will explore additional opportunities to prosper each other. Were he still alive, Razak would be pleased.

■ The writer is chairman and CEO of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies, Malaysia. The views expressed here are his own.