Banish ghosts of the past to forge ahead

BY Shashank Nigam
Columnist

They preferred not to be bogged down by thorny issues.

After the Langkawi talks last week with Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was asked whether the potentially-controversial issues like the Causeway bridge and the price of raw water to Singapore had been discussed.

He said: "Yes, Lee did bring them up. We understand the issues. Those are old issues. We don't want to be bogged down with those issues. We will resolve them."

The most important thing, he said, was to address "issues that are urgent enough for us to decide".

In spite of the occasional diplomatic spats between the two countries, the leaders of Singapore and Malaysia have decided not to step into that minefield and relied on good old diplomacy.

They are willing to not get bogged down by ghosts of the past and concentrate on what is urgent and important – capitalising on the economic growth of their respective countries.

Too often, there are countries that put solving the difficult issues as a pre-condition for any other forms of cooperation with another nation. Perhaps, if they can think long-term and prioritise, they may be able to make substantial progress in bilateral relations.

Many leaders seek to strengthen the economic health of their nations, for if a country's people are getting richer, most other things fall into place.

In dealing with other countries, when a nation decides to work out win-win scenarios that are based on economic factors, more often than not, other issues get worked out over time as well.

India and Pakistan have been at loggerheads for over half a century. Every time they meet each other at the negotiating table, one or the other puts a thorny issue as the pre-condition for resolving differences.

Is this the right way to progress?

They have shown they can do it right with other countries.

Both have healthy relationships with China, even though they may differ at an ideological level.

India's borders with China are still disputed, but trade between the two has reached unprecedented levels.

This has certainly helped to bring the two sides closer to resolving some long-standing issues.

In the case of Iran and the US, during negotiations on the nuclear issue, both sides were unwilling to concede.

US lawmakers have introduced legislation designed to step up financial pressures on Iran.

How about trying something different for a change? How about giving Iran economic incentives for putting nuclear power to non-violent uses?

Sanctions have been tried and tested, and Iran has got over them before, in 1979. Maybe trying a different approach may yield better results.

Very often, leaders do not choose to think "win-win".

But in building stronger ties with neighbours, helping each other is the more positive way to go.

The writer is a final-year student at the School of Information Systems at Singapore Management University