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Time's ripe for S'pore to boost regional ties

This will benefit private sector and help resolve bilateral issues

By William Choong

A CRITICAL window of opportunity has opened for Singapore to boost its ties with its two immediate neighbours, which it should seize to put relations on a firmer footing, said panellists at a conference yesterday.

Singapore's relationship with Malaysia, which has been rocky in recent years, enjoyed a boost last year, said Mr K. Kesavapany, director of the Institute of South-east Asian Studies, and a former Singapore envoy to Malaysia.

Leaders on both sides of the Causeway expressed the view that bilateral issues 'should not remain unresolved'. This led to substantive exchanges at ministerial and officials' levels, he noted.

He was speaking at the Institute of Policy Studies' annual Singapore Perspectives seminar yesterday, which had a special focus on foreign affairs this year.

The day-long seminar was attended by academics, civil servants and businessmen.

It touched on political and economic developments that are likely to take place in Singapore in the year ahead, with much discussion as well on how these would be affected by improvements in relations between Singapore and its neighbours.

The greatest beneficiary of this upturn in relations, said Mr Kesavapany, was the private sector.

In November, for example, the Government of Singapore Investment Corp bagged a 5 per cent stake in Malaysia's Proton - a marked difference from May 2000, when SingTel's bid to purchase a stake in telco Time Engineering was foiled.

Another speaker, Tan Sri Dr Noordin Sopiee, head of Malaysia's Institute of Strategic and International Studies, said both sides needed to adopt a new mindset and work for mutual benefits as they seek to resolve difficult bilateral issues.

'It's not high noon, where somebody has to back down. Both sides must be prepared to try every way to solve problems,' he said.

Singapore has also accelerated the warming of relations with Indonesia, with its recent tsunami relief efforts there, said Mr Jusuf Wanandi, senior fellow at Jakarta's Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

Relations were already on the mend with the installation of new leaders on both sides - Mr Lee and recently-installed Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

'I really think that Singapore's relief effort in Aceh signifies a new phase of the bilateral relationship,' he said.

Singapore is now in a 'marvellous position' to reap more goodwill as it contributes to the rebuilding effort in tsunami-hit parts of Indonesia, said Dr Leonard Sebastian, senior fellow at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies.

Singapore should adopt a 'focused aid' strategy, such as using its expertise in the form of electricians, contractors for building reconstruction, and communications specialists.

In particular, Singapore can help with the rebuilding of school infrastructure in Aceh, where 70 per cent of university lecturers were wiped out by the killer waves.

More importantly, Singapore could reduce the threat of piracy in the Malacca Strait by reaching out to poverty-stricken coastal communities in Aceh which have traditionally depended on piracy as a form of livelihood, Dr Sebastian said.

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