

## AN OBSERVATION ON THE MAJOR ISSUES OF SINGAPORE-MALAYSIA RELATIONS

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### ABSTRACT

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#### **Keywords:**

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Malaysia and Singapore have a unique relationship since it breaks ties with the federation of Malaysia on 9 August 1965. Since, the Separation in 1965, both countries enjoyed a mix relationship due to so many unresolved issues. But it was started when both of Prime Ministers which are Mr. Lee Kuan Yew and Dr Mahathir Mohamad attempted to make a combination of meaningful understanding. When Malaysia published a Map including Pulau Batu Puteh (an island) was protested by Singapore. Singapore claimed the sovereignty over the island had passed due to the consistent exercise of authority by Singapore and its predecessor, the United Kingdom. Therefore, both countries have suffered from so many issues that can disrupt their bilateral relationships but there were never serious actions from both parties that can really threaten to the relations. So this article has shown how the both try to settle on the issues in a peaceful and friendly manner when the problems raised up by officials or top leader meetings. Basically, this paper has prepared on base of the secondary sources.

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## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia and Singapore have a unique relationship since it breaks ties with the federation of Malaysia on 9 August 1965. This two neighboring countries were in a deep chaotic relation due to various issues such as the sell of untreated water from Malaysia to Singapore, KTM land at Tanjong Pagar station, the dispute of Pulau Batu Putih or “Pedra Branca”, the replacement of Causeway, request from Singapore air force to access Malaysia airspace, land reclamation by Singapore and Malaysia border and the return of central provident fund (CPF).Contribution to Malaysian workers who works in Singapore.

Although they have many round of negotiations and talks, these issues never been solved and instead, it resulting in bitter exchange of words between government. These attitudes become obvious during the tenure of Dr. Mahathir Mohammad who was accused of having an ill-fated feeling towards Singaporean. However, as the reign of Dr Mahathir ended in 2003, Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi who was then became the Prime Minister, developed a much soften stance towards Singapore and attempt to fixing the bilateral damage done during previous administration. His attitude was well received by the Singapore government.

In addition, the trade of terrorist such as Jemaah Islamiah(JI) and the spread of epidemic repertory syndrome SARS as well as the avian influenza have brought both countries to tie a good relationship in order to erase such problems. In terms of economies relationship between Singapore and Malaysia, both countries are prone in making investments cross border with each other. Likely to be said that, Malaysia is known among the country who still in lists that remaining top trading partner. It is estimated that the total values resulting in the trade was at 88.3 billion or 15 percent of the latter trade with the world in 2004. It clearly shows that the root causes of the well-established relationship between both countries are partly from economies aspect. These are all accidentally contributed to the major issues relationship between both these countries.

## RESOLVING BILATERAL ISSUES

First of all that needs to be taken into account was ever the since Separation in 1965, both countries enjoyed a mix relationship due to unresolved issues. It was started where both of Prime Ministers which are Mr. Lee Kuan Yew and Dr Mahathir Mohamad attempted to make a combination of understanding between both Prime Ministers. In result, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was achieved between these countries. Particularly the agreement was discussed in four issues such as water, gas, a ferry service and a new bridge on 28 June 1988. Afterward,

the agreement was extended by signing the Points of Agreements (POA) particularly on railway land and the Customs, Immigration and Quarantine (CIQ) was also inserted under the agreement of POA. Besides that, there were other issues that attached together. However, after the several attempts towards the improvement of the cooperation led to stalemate.

The conciliation between both countries however, led to an unsuccessfully results in terms of financial aid offered because both countries were disagreed among each others. There were a lot of attempt made by both sides; it can be divided on many issues including water issues and so on. Efforts were taken in order to reach the better understanding among both sides. Dr Mahathir wrote in his letter to SM Lee dated 21 February 2001, as been stated in the letter, Dr Mahathir took a several step by offering to sell untreated water to Singapore at an “affordable price” of 60 cents per mgd in return for the permissions on other basics. In respond to that letter where SM Lee stated that the agreement may be achieved wholeheartedly by taking and giving from both sides. In order to fulfill the realization of the dreams, SM Lee departed to Kuala Lumpur in September 2001 as his second visit. In result of the visitation initiated by SM Lee was confirmed by the Singapore government publication, as follows:

On September 4, 2001, Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew went to Kuala Lumpur to meet Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. They reached a skeletal agreement on a range of issues. Singapore agrees to pay more for raw water under the current agreements, to Malaysia’s idea for a new bridge to replace the Causeway, and to the relocation of the KTM railway station from Tanjong Pagar to Kranji. In return, Malaysia agrees to supply Singapore with water after the 1962 Water Agreement expires in 2006 and to allow the Republic’s air force to use its airspace.

There were actually something occur that can’t be explained pertaining the matters involving these two countries where the Malaysian government demanded to raise the price from RM3 per thousands gallons, and leading to 100 times from the actual prices raw water. However this event led to an impasse and it was stuck between both sides in order to achieve an understanding in an agreement.

In result, the outcome of the meeting dragged Dr Mahathir to interfere where he replied to Singapore government in his letters dated 18 October 2001, “I have mentioned at the press conference that the officials would need to work out the details. I was not prepared to look into the practical details of all the issues. However, I could go along with most of the items that we have discussed. I believe that it is only when the details have been worked out, I would be able to obtain the whole package deal in its entirety.”

Another issue that led to another event was about the bent bridge appeared in the New Year on 26 January 2006 when it was reported by *New Straits Times*. It stated that the continuation of the bridge construction will be preceded by Malaysian government eventhough the Singapore government didn't give the green light yet whether to build or not the bridge. Many reporters wandered what to fill in their news paper as headline and in the same time where The Minister for Works, Samy Vellu, ended the questions where he provided the answers by saying that the government is in progress to prepare the letter to be submitted to the Gerbang Perdana, the responsible contractor for the project, and the contruction will be continued after the Chinese New Year and it was truly confirmed by Deputy Prime Ministers, Najib Razak, and he fully hoped that Singapore government will directly involve regarding the construction matters.

However the miracle finally occurred when the Singapore finally agreed to build the bridge and for the Malaysia government, that was a corner stone for both countries to gain the achievement for the bilateral matters. Serious preparations were quickly taken by Malaysia government on 29 January, such as the well-planned of how to avoid the excessive cost for the construction and how to make it the water through from the coastal area in South Johore without affecting the causeway and in the same times remaining the Causeway as it be.

Sadly to be said that there was something unhappy events occurred on April 2006, when the Malaysian government suddenly declared that they wanted to discontinue the plan regarding the bridge construction and for Singapore government, this is something that quite hurts for them. Responses made by the Prime Minister's office mentioned:

“The Malaysian government has decided not to continue with the building of a bridge to replace the Causeway. The decision has been made after taking into account the opinions and sentiment of the Malaysian people with regard to the issues of sand supply and airspace. It has also been decided that all discussions concerning the bridge will be stopped.”

Several unpleased things have happened in Malaysia where all Malaysian regarded this as domestic issues pertaining the reluctance of Abdullah government to continue the bridge construction. One of the major leading criticisms towards the Abdullah government was the former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad where he accused Abdullah as weak and also “leader with no guts”. And the criticism still keep going on after the five months and it was publicly published in Malaysiakini.com on May 2006. Mahathir was really disappointed with the unwise action taken by Abdullah.

So, pertaining to these issues where it actually gave bad impact to Malaysian particularly in UMNO where Mahathir started to attack the premiership of Abdullah since the issues of the bridge construction. Abdullah would have felt more distraction due to the interference initiated by Mahathir which actually the decision of the bridge construction quite in peace at first.

### **DISPUTE OVER PULAU BATU PUTEH**

The long saga over this dispute island can be tracked date back in early 1980s when Malaysia publishes a Map that included Pulau Batu Puteh. This is however was protested by Singapore who then urged Malaysia to settle this claims by handing over this case to International Court of Justice. This proposal only agreed by Malaysia in 1994.

The cases for Singapore to claim this tiny island was that Singapore challenge that sovereignty over the island had passed to Singapore due to the consistent exercise of authority over the island by Singapore and its predecessor, the United Kingdom. This is evident with a lighthouse was built and supervised by them, any Malaysian officials wishing to visit the island need to obtain permits, installing a military rebroadcast station on the island, and studying the possibility of reclaiming land around the island. Malaysia had remained silent in the face of these activities. In addition, it had confirmed in a 1953 letter that Johor did not claim ownership of the island, and had published official reports and maps indicating that it regarded Pedra Branca as Singapore territory. Middle Rocks and South Ledge should be regarded as dependencies of Pedra Branca.

Malaysia on other hands claims that Johor had original title to Pedra Branca, Middle Rocks and South Ledge. Johor had not ceded Pedra Branca to the United Kingdom, but had merely granted permission for the lighthouse to be built and maintained on it. The actions of the United Kingdom and Singapore in respect of the Horsburgh Lighthouse and the waters surrounding the island were not actions of the island's sovereign. Further, the 1953 letter had been unauthorized and the official reports and maps it had issued were either irrelevant or inconclusive.

After a length of argument and debates, on 23 May 2008, the Court ruled that Pedra Branca is under the Singapore's sovereignty, while Middle Rocks belongs to Malaysia. As regards to South Ledge, the Court noted that it falls within the overlapping territorial waters generated by mainland Malaysia, Pedra Branca and Middle Rocks. As it is a maritime feature evident only at low tide, it belongs to the state in the territorial waters of which it is located. Malaysia and Singapore have establish what they have named the Joint Technical Committee to restrict the maritime

boundary in the area around Pedra Branca and Middle Rocks, and to determine the which countries legally the owner of South Ledge.

## CONCLUSION

Although both countries have suffered from issues that can disrupt their bilateral relations, there is never a serious action from both parties that can really threaten the relations. This is because when an issue is raised up, both will try to settle it in a peaceful and friendly manner, which is discussion through official or top leader meetings.

After became a Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi for example, has made several visits to Singapore regarding the courtesy visits to neighboring countries in the ASEAN region. After the visit, Singapore also sends their envoy to Malaysia and among the Singaporean officials in the visit was Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

The Human Resources Minister of Malaysia, Fong Chan Onn has made an official visit to Singapore to discuss several issues and one of them is regarding the labour issues. The aim of this visit is to learn on how Singapore deals with its foreign labor issues. On the other hand the Minister of Education of Malaysia visited Singapore on December 2004. The purpose of this meeting is to establish a program to bring students from secondary school level and upward to engage in joint activities between the two countries. Not long after that, the Singapore Minister for Information visited Malaysia and meets his colleague, Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzil, which is the Minister of Information in Malaysia and they both agreed on agreement to re-start joint television productions after a pause of seven years.

In 2005, the President of Singapore Republic S.R Nathan and Mrs. Nathan visited Malaysia which has brought the level of intensifying to the higher level. On his speech, Mr. Nathan has mentioned that the relationship between Singapore and Malaysia has been very close just because of the terrorism and economic competitiveness globally. On behalf of Malaysia, the Yang di-Pertuan Agung described the relationship as “bagaikan aur dengan tebing” (like the bamboo grove and the river bank). Sultan of Perak, Sultan Azlan Shah, the Chancellor of University Malaya, who was in the same meeting also discussed with President Nathan who also the Chancellor of National University of Singapore regarding the issues of joining the research between the two universities and student exchange. In the visit President Nathan also included staying in Sarawak for two days, which has never been done by any of Singaporean President before this.

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