



ROOM TO GROW THE PUTRAJAYA-NEW DELHI PARTNERSHIP

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The early days of the pandemic in 2020 were also a time when Malaysia-India relations were at an all-time low. Former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad had angered India with remarks on Kashmir and India's Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) at the end of 2019¹ and New Delhi responded by asking palm oil refiners and traders to avoid buying Malaysian palm oil.

This diplomatic row even brought about trade-related repercussions. In January 2020, India's palm oil imports from Malaysia dropped to 46,876 tonnes, the lowest since 2011.² A thaw in relations came with Putrajaya's change in leadership. In March 2020, New Delhi took steps to reset ties with Putrajaya. Then Indian high commissioner Shri Mridul Kumar paid a call to former prime minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and former foreign minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein shortly after they took office. This "start-over" was crucial, considering how the next few months required that Malaysia and India work to address several pandemic-related issues.

It can be said that the pandemic necessitated a restoration of "normal" bilateral relations. Since the onset of the pandemic, relations are slowly but surely returning to normalcy with several top-level engagements and even a visit by the foreign minister to India on the cards.

This article will attempt to capture (1) the state of Malaysia-India relations with an emphasis on how it evolved during the pandemic after the diplomatic row, (2) developments and shared challenges arising throughout the pandemic, and (3) the road ahead for the Putrajaya-New Delhi partnership.

Start of pandemic, end of row

The diplomatic row between Malaysia and India in 2019 and breakdown in trade relations resulted from a marked deviance in the "Malaysian way" of non-interference in the domestic affairs of its partners.³ Dr Mahathir's criticism of New Delhi's domestic policies, particularly the CAA and the revocation of Article 370 did not go down well with the Modi government and this, in no time at all, turned into a full-blown diplomatic spat.

In January 2020, India imposed restrictions on imports of refined palm oil and palm olein but not crude palm oil.⁴ As Malaysia is the main supplier of refined palm oil to India, this move was interpreted as a retaliation to the prime minister's criticism. In March 2020, when governments began to take stock of problems the novel coronavirus might bring, Malaysia underwent a change in government.

Putrajaya's change of leadership was an opportunity to reset Malaysia-India relations. New Delhi recognised this, and during Shri Mridul's meeting with Muhyiddin and Hishammuddin, he presented congratulatory letters from Prime Minister Narendra Modi⁵ and Minister of External Affairs, S. Jaishankar. The Malaysian side reciprocated by expressing interest to enhance the strategic partnership between both nations and strengthen ties.

On 16 March 2020, Putrajaya announced the first movement-control order (MCO) for two weeks (18 March – 31 March). The MCO shut Malaysia's borders, restricting tourists and foreign visitors from entering the country. It was around the same time that the Indian government issued an order announcing restrictions on international travel as part of measures to combat the Covid-19 outbreak. Multiple scheduled flights between India and Malaysia were cancelled, stranding hundreds of Malaysian and Indian citizens in both countries.

After a period of tense relations, it was at this juncture that working relations intensified to address the issues of border control.⁶ This cooperative effort continued throughout 2020 and 2021.

Malaysia was also among the first set of 12 countries included in the Vande Bharat Mission⁷ (VBM), India's largest repatriation exercise launched during the initial months of the pandemic. The increased coordination and cooperation between several Malaysian and Indian government agencies and officials for this repatriation exercise was lauded as a step in the right direction towards restoring amicable relations.

Covid-19, shared challenges and cooperation

During the first year of the pandemic, cooperation between Putrajaya and New Delhi focused on the repatriation exercises. By the end of 2020, a total of 166 flights had operated from Malaysia to various destinations in India.⁸ The passengers were not only Indian nationals travelling home, but also Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) card holders and Malaysians facing emergencies. The VBM flights also enabled many Malaysians in India to return.⁹

The two governments facilitated the operation of 42 flights on the Malaysian side to enable more than 4,700 Malaysians stranded in India to return home.¹⁰ These repatriation exercises, however, had their own set of challenges. One was the challenge of repatriating Malaysian Tablighi Jamaat group members. As of July 2020, 189 members were stranded in India, and most were charged with flouting their social visa pass. Described as a "critical" situation, they were eventually brought home through a series of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions. Another challenge was India's devastating second Covid-19 wave that began in April 2021. In view of the rapidly rising cases, the government had to act fast to facilitate the return of Malaysians in India using specially chartered flights.

However, the repatriation of migrant workers, including those from India, presented a different set of challenges. A number of the workers were undocumented and opted to participate in the repatriation recalibration programme. This allowed undocumented immigrants to volunteer to return to their respective home countries. Although the programme

was designed to account for migrant workers and provide them with safe options either to stay and legalise their employment status or return to their homeland, the process exposed the pitfalls in Malaysia's management of labour migration and the role sender countries play.

Besides repatriation exercises, India also sold hydroxychloroquine tablets to Malaysia. While an export ban was previously held for New Delhi to secure supplies for local consumption and donations to less-developed countries, the Indian authorities responded to Malaysia's request and approved a sale of 89,100 tablets in April 2020.¹¹ According to Putrajaya's treatment protocol in the first few months of the pandemic, hydroxychloroquine along with other drugs were to be administered for mild to severe Covid-19 cases (Putrajaya later dropped hydroxychloroquine as a treatment modality in June 2020, since it was ineffective against the coronavirus.)

Cooperation between Malaysia and India to tackle Covid-19 did not stop at the government level. At the peak of India's second wave, Unicef Malaysia launched an urgent appeal to aid India. Brickfields Asia College also worked with Unicef Malaysia and initiated the "Give BACK¹² for medical equipment, personal protective equipment, hygiene supplies and critical care to those in need in India.¹³

It must be stressed that while the many challenges of the pandemic remain, bilateral trade has been on a steady upwards trajectory since the events of 2019. India's exports to Malaysia in the first nine months of 2020 increased by 6.5% to US\$4.6 billion compared to the corresponding period in 2019. India's imports from Malaysia during the same period reached US\$5 billion. In 2021, bilateral trade between both countries expanded by 26% and overall trade reached US\$17 billion.¹⁴

For the Putrajaya-New Delhi partnership, the pandemic has not only been a challenge but also provided a solution to the breakdown in relations pre-Covid.

Cooperation between both countries ensured the safety and wellbeing of thousands of Malaysians and Indians alike and this is set to continue through future engagements and collaborations.

The road ahead

The Covid-19 pandemic has not only enriched our vocabulary with everyday words like "social distancing", "quarantine", "border control", "travel restrictions", "vaccine certificate" and "vaccine recognition" but has also created new baselines for countries to adapt to. In 2022, as countries start to open up and ease travel restrictions, bilateral cooperation and the movement of people are contingent upon the recognition of each other's vaccination status and quarantine requirements.

Malaysia and India have made great progress with Malaysia accepting travellers inoculated with India's indigenous Covid-19 vaccine, produced by Bharat Biotech.¹⁵ In early February this year, Malaysia approved Bharat Biotech's¹⁶ vaccine, making it the eighth Covid-19 vaccine authorised in Malaysia. India has, in fact, relaxed travel restrictions for Malaysian travellers with no mandatory quarantine or pre-flight RT-PCR test for the fully vaccinated entering India effective 14 February 2022.¹⁷ Despite having no formal Covid-19 vaccine agreements, both governments recognise the vaccination certificates in practice.

Travel and tourism, however, is just one aspect of restored people-to-people connectivity. The pandemic has, more importantly, brought to light several structural and functional challenges with the current state of labour migration, with India and Malaysia as sender and recipient. This is an opportunity to address issues, such as unscrupulous recruitment agencies and middlemen, in both countries. This is also a chance to revisit and assess the standard operating procedure of worker entry and exit with input from Indian agencies. A joint task force can be set up for this purpose and to work

towards developing a contingency plan for migrant workers in case of future border restrictions.

The Overseas Indian Affairs Division of India's Ministry of External Affairs recently launched a #SafeandLegalMigration campaign in collaboration with popular Indian media personalities like actors Sivakarthikeyan, Akkineni Nagarjuna and Suresh Gopi. Wisma Putra and the Human Resources Ministry can consider collaborating within this initiative to set the record straight on what a migrant worker can expect in Malaysia. This will also reiterate Malaysia's commitment to providing safe working conditions for foreigners.

In mid-January this year, Plantation Industries and Commodities Minister Datuk Zuraida Kamaruddin announced that Malaysia is in talks with India¹⁸ on bringing more foreign workers into the local plantation industry. Hence, this is the right time to increase high-level bilateral talks with agencies on both sides to address labour-related issues.

All said and done, Malaysia-India relations can and should improve. While the focus of this piece is on the bilateral relationship during the pandemic, it is worth mentioning that Putrajaya-New Delhi relations are still dynamic and volatile in nature, post the row in 2019. Besides trade and travel-related progress, there must be a mutual and conscious effort at trust-building.

The State of Southeast Asia: 2022 Survey Report published recently by the Asean Studies Centre at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute¹⁹ revealed that 30.3% of Malaysian respondents do not consider India a responsible or reliable power, a significant increase from 16.5% in 2021. The survey also revealed that 7.9% Malaysian respondents felt that the country's political culture and worldview were incompatible with India's.

The fact that there is little trust in a partner that has shared a diplomatic relationship for more than six decades is perturbing. In fact, it questions the efficacy of standing agreements and the prospects of future ones. Despite a growing narrative that says otherwise, India is and will remain one of Malaysia's most important partners.

There must be greater political will to improve bilateral ties through high-level engagements and accelerate the provisions of the Malaysia-India enhanced strategic partnership.²⁰

In the grand scheme of things, it must be internalised by both sides that while leaders, governments and political ideologies may come and go, people, businesses and economies stay connected and interlinked. It is for this reason only that Malaysia-India relations must be nurtured and elevated.

It can be said that the pandemic enhanced the Putrajaya-New Delhi partnership. Both countries cooperated to tackle several pandemic-related issues, mainly the repatriation of citizens to home countries. Fresh out of a diplomatic row at the end of 2019, bilateral relations improved to an extent, with increased opportunities to work together.

While Malaysia and India have achieved several pandemic-related baselines, such as restoring travel and recognition of vaccination certificates, there is scope to address other issues that came to light during the pandemic – such as labour migration. The year 2022 marks the 65th anniversary of bilateral relations, an important landmark year. Putrajaya and New Delhi must capitalise on this momentum and elevate ties further. Accelerating the provisions of the Malaysia-India enhanced strategic partnership is one way to do this.

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Endnotes

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