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Cool look at neighbourly ties

By Cheah Boon Kheng

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Across The Causeway: A Multi-Dimensional Study of Malaysia-Singapore Relations

Editor: Takashi Shiraishi

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Rating: A

DESPITE their occasional spats over a range of issues, Singapore and Malaysia have become interdependent and complementary to one another. One theme of this book is the high level of trade dependence between the two countries, as discussed in the essays by Filipino economist Teofilo C Daquila and Malaysian economist Mahani Zainal Abidin.

Mr Mahani views Malaysia's new regional initiative - the Iskandar Development Region - as offering more opportunities for cooperation, in real estate, logistics, manufacturing industries, health and education services.

Twelve other scholars - British, Australian, Singaporean and Malaysian - from their different disciplinary perspectives of history, politics, regional security, law and economics assess Singapore-Malaysia relations. This book therefore takes an eclectic approach to the issue, and it has a 'neutral' editor in Japan's Takashi Shiraishi, a non-specialist in Singapore-Malaysia relations.

Mr Shiraishi observes that the two countries' history, political union and subsequent separation not only continues to cast a shadow over their ongoing transactions and negotiations, but also imposes burdens on scholars of Singapore-Malaysia relations.

Seven essays in this book deal with contentious issues of the past, especially Singapore's merger with Malaysia and subsequent separation. Singaporean and Malaysian historians inevitably present the two countries as the products of two competing models of politics.

Fortunately, they avoid making moral judgments or asserting the superiority of one system over another.

Singaporean historian Albert Lau, looking back at Singapore's separation from Malaysia, says that Singapore's relentless pursuit of success since 1965 has been driven as much by its determination to assert its right to sovereignty as by a resolve to eschew the 'ominous prospects' of a re-merger with Malaysia on the latter's terms.

Malaysian historian Ooi Keat Gin thinks a re-merger 'is very unlikely, but a less confrontational scenario and closer ties are foreseeable between the two neighbours'.

Malaysia's Kamarulnizam Abdullah also argues for more cooperation, discussing Johor's gains from the spillover of Singapore's economic growth in one essay and how both countries are cooperating to manage the threats of Muslim radicalism and terrorism in another.

Most of the writers in this volume skirt the ethno-religious issues both countries face as well as the unresolved issues of airspace, water supply, former railway land and the territorial dispute over Pedra Branca.

In sum, Mr Shiraishi's volume presents a sober, cool and nuanced account of how scholars can identify not only the forces and initiatives that shaped the two countries' historical links, but also how the latter can confront the problems relating to their mutual dependence in economic and security issues.

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