

Malaysia, China put on united front as they mark 40 years of diplomatic ties

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News > China DIPLOMACY

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Najib Razak (left) and Premier Li Keqiang meet. Photo: EPA

China and Malaysia yesterday presented a united front as they marked 40 years of diplomatic relations despite Beijing's souring relations with other Southeast Asian neighbours over disputes in the South China Sea.

A communiqué released by the two nations on the final day of Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak's state visit to China said both sides were committed to strengthening cooperation in various fields.

Regarding the South China Sea disputes, the document said both nations recognised that intervention or involvement of parties not directly concerned could be counterproductive and further complicate matters.

They agreed that all sovereign states directly involved should exercise self-restraint and settle their differences by peaceful means, and that Malaysia and China would make efforts to finalise a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.

Najib's visit, officially to commemorate the 40th anniversary of diplomatic ties, was overshadowed by a flare-up in the territorial dispute between China and Vietnam, which saw vessels clash off the Paracel Islands. The Philippines, too, is locked in disputes.

Vietnam and the Philippines are both members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), of which Malaysia will be the chairman from next year.

In his talks with Najib on Friday, President Xi Jinping said China would not stir up trouble in the disputed waters, but would react "in a necessary way to the provocations of countries involved".

"The current situation in the South China Sea is stable in general but signs deserving our attention have also emerged," Xi was quoted as saying by Xinhua.

Tang Siew Mun, of Malaysia's Institute of Strategic and International Studies, said both Beijing and Kuala Lumpur wanted tensions between China and Vietnam to ease.

Beijing did not want its ties with the 10 members of Asean to be affected by its row with Vietnam, nor did Malaysia want to be caught in an embarrassing position when it assumes the chairmanship of Asean next year.

"In this sense, Malaysia and China share the same view of the importance of improving relations between China and Asean," Tang said. "The challenge for Malaysia is to convince Beijing that it needs to take the first step to mending fences and repairing ties with Asean neighbours."

In a related development, Najib said the search for Malaysia Airlines flight 370, missing since March 8 with 239 passengers and crew including 154 Chinese nationals, would continue.

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