

'Seek new areas to boost ties further'

Global crisis offers new chances for S'pore-Japan cooperation: Mr Nathan

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TOKYO: Singapore should identify new areas of cooperation with Japan to strengthen their already very close ties, President S R Nathan said here yesterday at the conclusion of the first leg of his state visit.

During the past three days, the President has had the opportunity to exchange views with his host Emperor Akihito, Prime Minister Taro Aso and a wide spectrum of Japanese politicians and business leaders.

Briefing Singapore media on the outcome of those meetings, Mr Nathan said the financial crisis may offer new opportunities for the two sides to forge closer

ties. "We should now address our minds to it. What is the next thing that we should do economically, in terms of trade or manufacturing or science and technology," he said.

Singapore, he said, also looked forward to stepping up cooperation with Japan in countries in which they currently provide aid, mainly for developing human resources.

Mr Aso had also suggested to Mr Nathan during their talks that young people could work together in subcultures such as manga, a favourite subject with the Japanese leader.

Mr Nathan said yesterday that such collaboration could be fostered by the Japan Creative Centre, the product of a 2007 bilateral agreement that is due to open in Singapore in November. Meanwhile, Japan is also keen to work with Singapore, including in non-economic areas.

At a banquet in honour of Mr Nathan on Monday, Emperor Akihito noted that bilateral ties had now gone beyond politi-

cal and economic relations to encompass a wide range of activities, including cultural exchanges.

"Today, it is increasingly important for us to address jointly the various issues facing our region, as well as challenges posed to the entire global community," urged the emperor.

Mr Nathan said he discovered through his meetings that the Japanese were very appreciative of Singapore's ability to come up with various ideas on how the two countries could work together, despite the small size of the Republic.

One example cited by the Japanese was the signing of an enhanced free trade agreement (FTA) with Singapore, Japan's first such pact with any country.

The FTA negotiations with Singapore had proved immensely useful for Japan in its subsequent negotiations with other countries for similar accords.

Yesterday, Mr Nathan also said he was very impressed by what he saw during a visit on Tuesday to the Panasonic Centre, a facility showcasing innovative products

and leading-edge technology of Japan's biggest electronics maker Panasonic.

"They have thought ahead, even to the extent of creating a bicycle that can climb the hills," said Mr Nathan.

When asked for his first-hand impression on how the Japanese were coping with the current recession, Mr Nathan said he believed they were seriously addressing the issue.

"History has shown time and again how they have risen, how they have overcome difficulties. As a homogeneous people, they are very resolute in what they want to do. We who have had dealings with them – the good and the bad – know how strong they are when they make up their minds," he said.

Asked what he thought Singaporeans could learn from the Japanese, especially in these trying economic times, he said: "It is the strength of their character to endure pain and not (moan) about it, but to strive to overcome it."

This state visit, the first by a Singapore president since the two countries

forged diplomatic ties 43 years ago, also gave Mr Nathan a chance to practise his skills in Japanese, a language he acquired during World War II. "The more you listen to it, (the more) your vocabulary returns," he said. "I could get the general tenor of the conversations. So I am encouraged that it hasn't gone astray," he added with obvious pleasure.

Meanwhile, Foreign Minister George Yeo expressed admiration for the Japanese obsession with cleanliness and attention to detail. "You take the wonderful toilets they have here. For me, it is always a special pleasure to use those toilets."

Referring to the latest thin-screen displays and three-dimensional television technology that the delegation saw at the Panasonic Centre, Mr Yeo said: "They are very good, but the technology behind it, the attention to detail, that's not easy at all for other people to copy."

Mr Nathan left for Kyoto yesterday and would end his week-long trip, which began last Saturday, in Hiroshima.

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SPEAKING JAPANESE

"When I speak to the men, they reply to me in English. When I speak to the women, they think I am trying to get fresh. So I never try with them."

President Nathan, on the pitfalls of speaking Japanese

HIGH-TECH TOILETS

"It is not just the hardware. These toilets require a very high degree of maintenance and a lot of discipline in your use of them."

Foreign Minister George Yeo, waxing lyrical about Japan's high-tech toilets