

## Malaysia: A New Foreign Policy

### DIRECTION OF NEW FOREIGN POLICY

For the first time since independence in 1957, Malaysia appears set for a major change in its foreign policy. Although changes had appeared previously, it can be discerned that the bases and thrusts of this 'new' foreign policy contain elements of a philosophy that underlies the *raison d'être* of the Malaysian nation-state as understood by its present leadership. A primary thrust of this new foreign policy is the extension in the external diplomatic environment of the *domestic* considerations of the Malaysian nation-state. As simply but succinctly put by the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr MAHATHIR MOHAMAD himself when he addressed the first-ever gathering of all Malaysian diplomatic representatives assembled in Kuala Lumpur in December 1981, "(our) foreign policy is an extension of domestic policy". Thus, the 'new' foreign policy would be one that cannot be dissociated from domestic policies.

### NEW PACE SET

The new government was recently returned in a nationwide poll (see ASEAN FORECAST, Special Supplement, May 1982) but had held the reins of power since July 1981 when Tun HUSSEIN ONN stepped down as Prime Minister. Within the domestic setting, the government has set a pace that is markedly different from previous regimes: an emphasis on a "clean, efficient and trustworthy" government, a premium on performance and technocratic skills rather than lackadaisical attitudes and political patronage, and a renewed vigour in the implementation of public policy. These emphases are now stressed in the foreign policy sector as well.

### INDUSTRIALISATION KEY FACTOR

A key factor in these emphases is Malaysia's desire to industrialise and attain the status of a modern society. That itself, it is felt by the administration, would promote Malaysia's self-esteem and image in the external environment thus enabling it to play a more enhanced and respected international role. But, to attain industrialisation and modernity, there is a need as well to be internationally active—to trade with others and to learn from others. As such, a strong linkage exists between the external and domestic situations of the country, which Dr Mahathir would like to have understood.

### MAHATHIR'S DOMINANT ROLE

Although the latest cabinet line-up has Tan Sri GHAZALI SHAFIE as the Foreign Minister, it is certain that Dr Mahathir will be steering the helm of the country's foreign policy. To be sure, this is not the first time a Prime Minister has been in charge of foreign policy—in the first independence cabinet, Tunku ABDUL RAHMAN was Prime Minister but also held the portfolio for foreign affairs and did have substantial inputs in foreign policy formulation.

However, Ghazali, who is known for a flamboyant and much publicised ministerial style, is now deemed to be playing a lesser role. In the Hussein Onn cabinet, Ghazali was the Home Minister but clearly played a role in foreign affairs such that at times it appeared he was the Foreign Affairs Minister as well and not the then incumbent Tengku AHMAD RITHAUDEEN. Ghazali even claimed, on becoming Foreign Minister last year that he had been privy to every WISMA PUTRA (the Malay name of the building of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and popularly used to refer to the ministry) cable, even when he was not the minister.

If Mahathir would not want Ghazali to be seen as "calling the shots" in foreign affairs as was visibly apparent during the former's visit to the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia in March this year, why would the latter be retained in the cabinet? The

answer to this is that Ghazali's expertise and experience are still valued and that his services are indispensable at this point. Certainly, there are particular qualities of Ghazali that are efficacious in the foreign policy domain, but it should be apparent that foreign policy is as much, if not more, the prerogative of Dr Mahathir.

## **MORE PRAGMATIC POLICY**

One indication that Dr Mahathir is superseding Ghazali's role was made apparent during the Prime Minister's visit to the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia, as already mentioned. Mahathir has tended to downplay the non-aligned/neutral posture of Malaysia and would seem to seek a foreign policy stand that is more "realistic" to the prevailing international circumstances. Although this changing orientation is not yet clear, it may be that the policy of "equidistance" between the two communist powers, the Soviet Union and China, may now be modified. Not that the country will not continue to be anti-communist but that perceptions of the threat from either communist country may not now be equated as being of the same magnitude. As opposed to a non-aligned role, Malaysia under Mahathir might seek to play a more positive or assertive role in diplomatic affairs which would enhance its international status.

## **LOOKING EAST**

It might well be speculated that Dr Mahathir's recent calls for the country to "look east"—specifically to Japan and Korea—represents a departure in orientation from Malaysia's established links with its former colonial master, Great Britain. This is, however, a simplification and one which is erroneous. "Looking east" does not mean at the same time "not looking to Europe or Great Britain" and, besides, even under the Tunku who was pro-British in many ways, there had been stirrings of an anti-British genre. But there is clearly an orientation to emulate from the Japanese and the Koreans to enable Malaysia to be "an equal" to the industrialised countries in the community of nations. What this actually means in the conduct of foreign policy, however, is nebulous. It probably does not mean that ties with Europe or the West should be eliminated, albeit Dr Mahathir might want it to be understood that there is little to learn from a Great Britain that is in the process of decline.

Malaysia still continues to look to the West for investment, as attested by a recent mission to woo European investors led by the deputy Prime Minister Datuk MUSA HITAM. In this regard, European interest in Malaysia and ASEAN cannot be ruled out as an explanation for the continued bilateral relationships, but certainly there is a realistic appreciation of the benefits that can be accrued from commercial and trading ties with "non-East" countries.

## **DESIRE TO BE EQUAL**

But, Dr Mahathir clearly wants it to be established that Malaysia is not just another developing country begging for the indulgence of the liberal West. An example of this line of thinking is evident in his analysis of British objections to Malaysian corporate take-overs in the open business world and the seeming inability of developed countries to understand Malaysia's stand on the sale of tin and the price fluctuations of that commodity which are detrimental to the country's economy. These two instances indicate a notion in the Prime Minister's mind that Malaysia is not seen as being an "equal" and that what happens to Malaysia is irrelevant to the industrialised countries.

## **INDUSTRIAL PROGRESS AND ISLAMIC RESILIENCE**

The emphasis on discipline should therefore mean a need to project Malaysia's image as a country that is bent on achieving industrialisation, social progress and high international status. Rather than ape the West and wallow in the ills or social degeneration of modern society as evidenced in certain countries, a high premium would be placed on social order and behaviour. To this end, perhaps, the emphasis on Islamic values might be seen as a guarantee against spiritual decline at the price of progress. The quest in the foreign arena might then be a Malaysia that is spiritually sound but yet having achieved industrial progress.

Emphasis on discipline has other connotations as well. Dr Mahathir did not go to the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Australia last year, claiming there were too many things to do at home. Here, Dr Mahathir is probably not convinced talking is useful and that deed is more important than words. He thus ex-

pects *action* to be an important element of any foreign policy posture or activity—not only from WISMA PUTRA but from other foreign agencies as well.

## CORNERSTONES OF FOREIGN POLICY

Toward the end of last year, Dr Mahathir spelt out the prongs of the country's foreign policy. Great importance is attached to the participation of Malaysia as an Islamic country and that ASEAN must remain a cornerstone of foreign policy. The King and Dr Mahathir have made visits to various Arab countries in recent months. Malaysia is a member of the Islamic Nations' Task Force to resolve the Iran-Iraq war. As a projection of this Islamic emphasis, the government will soon be establishing an international Islamic university that will be teaching in English and not in the national language, Malay, which is decreed for all the country's educational institutions.

## SUPPORT FOR ASEAN

Malaysia's position in ASEAN remains as a commitment that will be hard to dislodge. Although Dr Mahathir announced a few months ago that Malaysia (and ASEAN) might withhold support for the ousted Khmer Rouge regime of Kampuchea if the coalition among the three resistance factions could not be effected, this is not a policy position that is contrary to the so-called ASEAN position on the matter. That announcement would be more Dr Mahathir "thinking out aloud" but it underscores his desire to get things done and not play the diplomatic game of patience and perseverance. Nonetheless, support for ASEAN notwithstanding, Dr Mahathir has not yet acknowledged his recognition of the Philippine position on Sabah. The Philippines' Sabah claim remains a matter Malaysia has not yet deemed to be adequately resolved; since becoming Prime Minister Dr Mahathir has made visits to all the ASEAN capitals except Manila. The Malaysians feel that President FERDINAND E MARCOS has not instituted constitutional steps to drop the claim as he had promised to do in 1977.

## REGIONAL COOPERATION

It can be expected that regional cooperation within ASEAN will be promoted under Mahathir's leadership. Regional cooperation in turn is felt as an attribute of regional security. To this end, Mahathir has stressed the need for enhanced bilateral ties within ASEAN during his visits to Singapore, Bangkok and Jakarta which were effected soon after assuming office. That this has been stressed augurs well for ASEAN's cooperation because it reduces fears in the other ASEAN capitals about the possibility that Malaysia under Mahathir would deviate from its previous position and support for that regional grouping.

The sense of cooperation would probably be extended to non-ASEAN countries as well. It would seem Mahathir does believe technical and social cooperation with Vietnam is conducive to eradication of mutual fears and promotes regional peace and stability.

With Brunei, concrete steps have been taken to establish this notion of cooperation in educational, social and other fields.

In short, in terms of the region, a more assertive role is promised by the government to promote cooperation within ASEAN and without. Here, it might be surmised, this posture would not lay too much reliance on the concept of ZOPFAN ("Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality")—an idea originated by Malaysia—as a basis of regional stability, but to promote concrete areas of cooperation to enhance the sinews of ASEAN.

## BILATERAL RELATIONS EMPHASISED

Malaysia appears keen to play an important role as a Third World country willing to share its experience and expertise with other developing countries such as Brunei and the Southwest Pacific nations of Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, and Papua New Guinea. This is an area that will probably be a new thrust of the country's foreign policy as well.

At a press conference on 11 June 1982, Dr Mahathir emphasised the importance that bilateral relations will play in Malaysia's changing foreign policy.

## SECURITY COMPONENTS OF FOREIGN POLICY

Apart from cooperation and Third World linkages, security considerations can be regarded an important plank of Dr Mahathir's conceptions of foreign policy. This view is interesting if for no less than the fact that Dr Mahathir is also the Defence

Minister. Late last year, he announced that Vietnam was not the threat to Malaysia in that he did not believe it would invade the country. He made it clear instead that China posed a longer-term threat. Since both China and Vietnam are communist powers, and the latter is said to be the proxy of yet another emerging communist power in the region, the Soviet Union, Dr Mahathir's points are significant in outlining the perception of the threat to the country.

Nevertheless, the government is still anti-communist and treads gingerly vis-a-vis all communist countries, and there is yet to be a white paper on the foreign policy orientation of the government, especially on the perceptions of the external threat(s) to national security.

But, by underlining the foreign policy stand as an affirmation of the anti-communist orientation of the country since independence (and understandably so since the government faced a communist insurrection from 1948-60, and which has still not been totally eradicated), this premise also means the "free enterprise" underpinning of the polity. Indeed, on the eve of an official visit to the Southwest Pacific in early June, Dr Mahathir stressed the need to engender the free enterprise system, as opposed to a state-controlled economic system as practised in communist countries.

This notion indicates as well the democratic basis of the Malaysian nation-state. As to whether such a notion when translated into foreign policy action would mean a push for democratic ideals, however, is not clear at this point, although it could mean continuing Malaysian support for the democratic countries in "East-West" issues.

Thus, in perspective, though there is a fundamental shift in the premises of foreign policy under the Mahathir-Musa government, the exact elements or contents of this policy remain ambiguous. But, the shift has occurred, as opposed to earlier changes in foreign policy which evolved gradually. Especially significant is the impact of Dr Mahathir over the aims and conduct of foreign policy, and his conception of the unified and interlocking aspects of both domestic and foreign policies for the attainment of a united and progressive nation "equal" in the eyes of the community of nations. As opposed to earlier foreign policy stances, then, we may in fact be witnessing the emergence of a well-defined Malaysian foreign policy based on the parameters of a fast-developing and modernized nation, united in national purpose, and efficiently utilizing its human and natural resources. To be sure, the outward manifestations of this foreign policy remain virtually the same and would be so for some time to come yet, but beneath all the diplomatic activity, a conscious basis or framework of the policy is being worked out.

## STRENGTHENING FREE ENTERPRISE

## CONTENTS OF NEW POLICY EVOLVING



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