

Knocking foreign policy into shape

NSI 23 1988

Personally speaking A COLUMN OF PERSONAL OPINION

By MUNIR MAJID

WHEN Dr. Mahathir became Prime Minister in July 1981, it was remarked that he lacked experience in foreign affairs. Yet, in less than two years, Dr. Mahathir has initiated a series of innovations in Malaysian foreign policy whose implications are no less significant than his more widely commented upon domestic policies.

Of course, the foreign policy aristocrats — at home and abroad, practitioners and their journalistic fellow-travellers — were less than accurate when they referred to Dr. Mahathir's limited foreign policy exposure. Indeed what they revealed by their comment was their own limited grasp of foreign policy, a failing common among traditionalists in the foreign policy establishment.

For it is astounding that Dr. Mahathir, who was an internationally active Minister of Trade and In-

dustry and had attended numerous international conferences both as Deputy Prime Minister and as a parliamentarian in the 60s, should be considered as having little foreign policy experience. But he talked economics and business, not the hallowed balance of power and spheres of influence; therefore he was a foreign policy novice.

Almost two years on, it would be interesting to know what the commentators now think. To help them, let's go over what Dr. Mahathir has done in the field of foreign policy.

He has re-ordered the priorities of Malaysia's international relations. Emphasising first

Asean, next the Islamic countries, followed by the non-aligned movement before the Commonwealth and relations with other countries.

Although this series of concentric circles is too neat to be adhered to strictly in the complex field of foreign policy, it nevertheless — for the first time — provides Malaysian foreign policy executives with an ordered sense of priorities. It shapes the amount of time they give to and the emphasis they put on relations with clearly defined countries, though it will not necessarily command their every decision.

It is true that Malaysian foreign policy previously had already placed some kind of premium on relations with States in the categories Dr. Mahathir defines, but it was in something of a jumble which did not give a proper backbone to poli-

cy — with some pulling the traditional Anglo-Saxon way, others the resurgent Islamic, still others in the non-aligned direction.

Dr. Mahathir has provided a stance for foreign policy which gives it a truly independent look and which identifies Malaysia squarely with other developing countries. Malaysia's standing with the developing world has not been better than at present. Indeed, Dr. Mahathir has become one of Malaysia's better known Prime Ministers in the world.



But the object of the exercise is not mere appearance. Dr. Mahathir is after real substance in relations with countries accorded priority.

Through bilateral links and with a functional approach — establishing trade, economic and cultural co-operation — Dr. Mahathir is developing a true sense of community among States whose only common ground previously was a shared sense of grievance and deprivation in an international system dominated by metropolitan powers centred in Europe and America.

This sense of community is not intended to be a wallowing ground for common misery, but rather a platform to help each other get out of it.

Developing countries do not have the links of ethnicity, religion, history, even trade — like the WASP (White, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant) countries for instance — upon which to forge such a community. Where there is trade between them, it is usually indirect through third parties, primarily the metropolitan centres in Europe and America. They hardly know anything about each other's history, politics, economic capabilities and needs; and where they come to know about such things, it is usually through third metropolitan parties.

Their direct links are largely with the major Western countries. The evolution of regional groupings, such as Asean, is an historic process away from this entrapment which leads to policy paralysis as the options appear to be foreclosed.

Dr. Mahathir is leading the break away from this stranglehold, as he describes it, with his emphasis on South-South relations, to be painstafl-

ingly developed bilaterally. This is significant, not only as a foreign policy initiative but also as an effort to galvanise the potential and strength of developing countries.

As far as Malaysia is concerned, for instance, dependence on export markets in the West could be reduced. Neither can the Malaysian market be taken for granted by the West. Prices cannot be so easily and freely determined in and by the West.

We may not be able to supply all the rubber or tin that the West needs, as we would have other requirements coming from new trading partners to meet. Slowly, we will also not be able to accommodate all Western exports as our requirements may be met elsewhere, probably at a lower price.

Now this can be the beginning of a new ball game altogether. It is the stuff of foreign policy, is it not, to transform the constellation of forces in the international system to your advantage? Especially when your position is an inherently disadvantaged one, as is the case with the developing countries in the world today.