

Closer Japan-Malaysia ties among

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Look East policy: Its

tangible effects, say experts
context, impact

It has been a decade since Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad re-aligned the perspective of the nation to take in the hard work ethics of Asian countries like Japan. JOCELINE TAN went to have a look at the East, and in the first of a four-part series, examines the context and impact of the Look East policy.

MY cheap watch (not made in Japan) reads 8pm as I emerge from the Monbusho, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, into a light autumn drizzle.

I have just been through an exceedingly detailed treatise of the Japanese education system by a senior Monbusho official. It is an impressive account, but far more so was that the official had arranged to meet me at 6pm, an hour quite unthinkable for the average and even the not-so-average Malaysian civil servant.

Japanese --- whether in the private or public sector --- work exceedingly long hours. The lights along "Ministerial row" in central Tokyo were still on. With the Diet in (deadlocked) session, some civil servants would be lucky to get home before midnight, if at all, the official said.

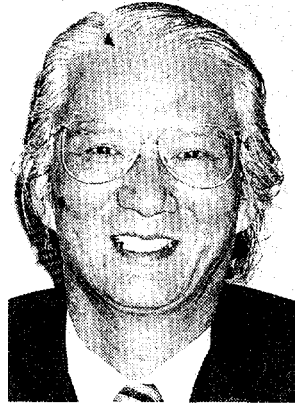
If his intention was to impress, he had succeeded. I was in Tokyo to meet Japanese policy-shapers, think-tankers and academicians on the subject of Malaysia's decade-old quest to learn from the East, that is, the Look East policy.

They had a great deal to say, though not so much of the policy as of the Malaysian political economy.

The policy, it would appear, is about to glide past its 10th year with a great deal less comment than when it was launched in 1982 by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The Look East policy had been among several other controversial policy changes --- controversial more for their departure from past practices than for being radical --- that blew in with the Mahathir administration.

By the time Dr Mahathir came into office, the sun



UEDA
pillar to better ties

had not only long flopped beneath the horizon of the British empire, but an overall disillusion with the West as a development model had begun to seep into the minds of those seeking solutions to national problems.

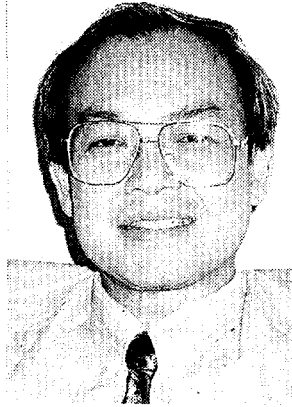
Dr Mahathir, the first Prime Minister not to have received his higher education in the West, was one of those less than enchanted with the economic performance of the West in general, and Britain in particular.

He told some journalists then that if Malaysia were to send its young to train in British factories, they would only learn to strike and shout slogans like: "Down with capitalism!"

To another group, he related how embarrassed a Japanese woman would be if her husband returned early from work as that would mean how unimportant he was at the office.

He admired the Japanese for their remarkable recovery in rebuilding from the rubble of World War II. And he attributed their success to the Japanese people's dynamic and forward-looking attitude, the seeds of which he sought to sow through the policy.

The policy, said Universiti



LEONG
a means to an end

Malaya economist Professor Lee Poh Ping, produced a "quantum leap" in public interest for all things Japanese

The precise content of the policy was less clearly enunciated and for some time, there existed the notion that it would encompass virtually all aspects of the two countries' bilateral relations.

That the policy coincided with the "Buy British Last" policy and the award of several showcase construction jobs to Japanese contractors further etched the impression

Lee said: "In strict theoretical terms, the Look East policy is not related to bilateral Japan-Malaysia relations because the former pertains to emulation while the latter is concerned with the international relations of two nations."

The policy, as the Prime Minister was to elaborate in an early memorandum to senior government officials, could be taken to mean emulating the rapidly developing countries of the East in developing Malaysia. Matters deserving attention, according to the memorandum, were:

● diligence and discipline

in work;

- loyalty to the nation, enterprise or business where the worker is employed;

- priority of group over individual interest;

- emphasis on productivity and high quality;

- upgrading efficiency;

- narrowing differentials between executives and workers; and,

- management systems which concentrate on long-term achievement rather than short-term dividends or incomes.

The policy, in a nutshell, pertained to the application of Japanese work ethics and management within the **Malaysian** work context, said **Abdul Aziz Yusof** of the Public Services Department's Look East Policy Programme.

"The thrust of its implementation, as such, **has** been the development of human resources and this ties up well with the objectives of Vision 2020," he said.

To this end, a programme focused on the training and education of Malaysians has been in effect since 1982. A total of 5,353 Malaysians, riding on sponsorship from either **the Malaysian** or **Japanese authorities**, has gone

for courses and training of various sorts in Japanese educational institutions, organisations and plants.

"The volume, compared with sponsored students in the United States and Britain, is admittedly but a drop in the bucket. The point to make here is that Japan is slowly, but surely, gaining a reputation as a destination for further education of a more relevant kind. This itself is a milestone of sorts," said **Abdul Aziz**.

But Japan expert, Dr Stephen Leong, prefers a broader perspective to the Look East policy.

"The policy is a means to an end. The end is not just to look East but to assist in the national objective to industrialise and develop the country, and in a more general sense, I cannot help but feel that the policy has **improved** bilateral relations," he said.

This is a view generally shared by the Japanese authorities who think that the policy has helped to increase the **knowledge** of Japan in the minds of **Malaysians**.

"The policy has given Malaysians a choice in development," said **Tohru Kura-**

mata, assistant director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Second Southeast Asia Division,

"Every time the Prime Ministers of our countries meet, our side always says we are willing to co-operate as far as possible, that as long as the Malaysian Government is willing to promote the policy, we are willing to co-operate."

Others like **Atsuo Ueda**, public affairs director of the influential Japan Federation of Economic Organisations (Keidanren), describes the policy as "a pillar" to better Japan-Malaysia bilateral relations.

The policy, he claimed, has made it "much, much easier" for Japanese entrepreneurs to do business in Malaysia.

"This is the feedback we get from our members for nowhere else in the world has another country adopted a similar policy," he said.

Ueda's view is shared by Professor Mohamed Ariff who believes that Malaysia has come to be seen as an "East Asian-friendly" country as a result of the policy.

"The policy removed the mental block that many of us have regarding matters Asian, and at the same time,

made us a more attractive place to invest in, to trade and to share technology with. I do not think the **Japanese, Taiwanese or South Koreans** would have paid us that much attention otherwise," he said.

But while many people would agree that the Look East policy has easily been one of the most aired policies of the **Government**, it is less easy trying to put a **finger** on its impact.

Even the Japan watchers, **Leong** not **excluded**, think long and hard when pressed to elaborate on the policy's impact. Apart from its most visible effect — the study and training programmes — the experts agree that the impact has been more of an intangible nature.

Lee believes the impact has been more psychological than anything else. The policy, he said, presented Malaysians with an alternative model of development as opposed to the free market model of the **capitalist system or the centralised planning model of the socialist system**.

"Basically, it is a model loosely called Japan Inc, that is, business and Government having a co-operative rather than a **confronta-**

tional relationship. The premise here is for the Government to be effective rather than dominant, to encourage the sunrise industries while discouraging the sunset industries," he said.

Professor K.S. Jomo of Universiti Malaya's Institute of Advanced Studies, who had previously described Southeast Asia's embrace of the Japanese model as a mark of Japanese diplomatic achievement, **has this** to say: "**An important impact** of the policy **has** been to encourage Malaysians to be less Western and Anglo-American in their cultural and economic orientation.

"The policy brought home the point that the most impressive growth rate in the 1970s and 1980s has not been in the West, but in the East, particularly East Asia.

"It reminded Malaysians that people elsewhere were **doing** far better than the **Anglo-Americans**. In that sense, the Look East policy has also helped Malaysians to be more nationalistic and also to look South for solutions."

CI Next: Studying in Japan