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Sharing the best of Apec

WHEN Malaysia hosts the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation leaders' meeting next year, the US would be banking on Mr John Wolf to ensure that everything is in order. As the former US envoy to Malaysia and now its ambassador to Apec, Wolf will be a key player, indeed. Malaysia, after all, had been regarded as a thorn in the flesh: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad declined to attend the "inaugural summit" on Blake Island, Seattle, called by President Bill Clinton; the meeting in Bogor, Indonesia, where the US told of its dream of a level playing field within Apec was denied total success because of Malaysian opposition; the Osaka, Japan, meeting witnessed Malaysia playing a bigger role against the free-trade dream; and in Subic Bay, the Philippines, everyone was looking around if Malaysia was going to blow to pieces the US-sponsored Information Technology Agreement. Wolf, having served in Malaysia, would therefore be expected to know the Malaysian psychology more than the average American.

Perhaps he would be of use to Malaysia as well. It is time that the misconception about Malaysia's position in Apec is corrected. Despite having played "spoiler" in the Apec leaders' meetings thus far, it must be stressed that Malaysia's intentions never included slowing down the Apec process towards freer trade and enhanced cooperation. Its role to date has been to stop the more advanced countries in Apec from making the mistake of forcing the less developed ones to run as fast as them. The result, Dr Mahathir and International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz have repeated over and over again, would be to the detriment of the developing members. Malaysia's actions since Blake Island have been consistent and that is Apec should give due regard to the impact of its actions on the developing countries and that no one country should dominate the Apec process.

This is the same stand that Malaysia has adopted in other international forums, from the United Nations to the International Monetary Fund. The tendency for the developed countries to dominate may be a natural phenomenon for them but someone has to tell the ex-colonial masters that the South is rejecting any form of neo-colonialism. At the UN, Malaysia is leading efforts to reform the Security Council and to add the voice of the South to the North-dominated world stage. At the Non-Aligned Movement, Malaysia was left almost on its own to convince the movement that Yugoslavia was no longer a sovereign nation in 1992 when ethnic-cleansing was still a term hardly understood by the world community. At the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Group of 15 (G-15), Malaysia has been known to be critical of its fellow members for not doing enough for themselves and others.

At Apec, Malaysia can be expected to champion such issues that most developed countries would probably not give a second thought. Certainly, when it hosts the Apec leaders' meeting in Kuala Lumpur next year, there will be South-centric issues and matters that affect developing countries. It will be wrong, though, to suspect or to fear that the Apec process will grind to a halt next year simply because Malaysia will have more spanners at home to throw at the Apec works. In his interview with this newspaper, Wolf said he was sure this will not happen. Such faith, one must believe, is what strong foundations of Apec will be built on.

Wolf has also said that the important thing is not that everybody in

Apec has to agree and move at the same time, that no one can strenuously disagree, and that in Apec everyone is equal but not everyone is equally interested all the time. Thus far, Malaysia has played its role to ensure that Apec move in unison and that no country within Apec will be left behind or penalised because of its economic backwardness. Wolf will be with old friends at the meeting next year. The host country can perhaps also count on Wolf to be more sympathetic with any course of action it takes, especially if it seems to fall out of line with US interests. The most important thing is that Malaysia would not want the best in Apec to be enjoyed only by a few. That would beat the purpose of having the forum in the first place.

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