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Accord with Monash triumphs over political contentions

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THE visit is long in the planning - and in the happening. Days before he was to fly to Kuala Lumpur, advisers in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet were confident there was nothing in the way of John Howard going ahead with his first official visit to Malaysia.

Iraq was not on the Australian agenda, even though it was acknowledged the issue might well surface in discussions. Australia and Malaysia are at polar opposites on Iraq.

Australia has committed fighting men and logistical, administrative and intelligence-gathering support for a United States-led military strike against Iraq; Malaysia is opposed to the use of arms, and is pursuing a diplomatic resolution.

In the event, the day before Howard was to fly out, he cancelled. Howard telephoned Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, saying he had to be in Australia to make the decisions on Iraq.

On the surface, both sides are sanguine about the cancellation. There is no more significance to the decision than the usual hazard of diplomatic scheduling.

(Clashing schedules and domestic commitments have bugged a Howard visit since he played host to Dr Mahathir within the month of his Liberal-National conservative coalition coming into government in March 1996. That was when Dr Mahathir stopped over briefly in Brisbane, on his return journey from a visit to New Zealand.)

Among Howard's advisers, there is as much cause for relief as there is disappointment that the visit did not go ahead. The overriding sentiment is that there is no bilateral dimension to the postponement of the visit; no problems to bilateral relations.

The impetus to visit another day was purely domestic. As Howard said at the time: "I don't think it is appropriate for the Prime Minister of this country to be out of Australia when decisions are taken that could directly lead to the involvement of Australian forces in military action."

The view in Canberra is that the response from Malaysia has been neutral, as reflected in Dr Mahathir's announcement in Kuala Lumpur of the cancellation. Already, as Robert Cotton, Australia's High Commissioner to Malaysia, said at the time, officials in Malaysia and Australia were looking for new dates for a Howard visit.

Which is not to say there is no disappointment over the cancelled visit. As much as Howard's mission had been to tend a good relationship, one eye had been very much on a demonstration of faith and confidence in the region, and to reaffirm the Government's "Asia first" policy.

The object was to strengthen Australia's credentials in the region, and to build goodwill, as well as lend a hand to turn around the economic reversal in the region.

There were domestic imperatives. Increasingly, the realisation is that the fallout to the Australian economy is going to be much worse than imagined initially.

The Howard visit had been geared to nurse the confidence of Australian businesses to carry on as usual in Malaysia. Howard was to be present at the signing of several commercial agreements involving Australian and Malaysian interests.

Significant among them was the invitation to Monash University in Melbourne to set up a campus in Malaysia. It would be the first foreign

university to be invited to establish a campus in Malaysia under the Private Higher Educational Institutions Act.

The Monash protocols went ahead. Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak presented the letter of invitation to Professor David Robinson, Vice-Chancellor of Monash. Robinson exchanged letters of agreement with Tan Sri Dr Jeffrey Cheah, the founder of Sunway College, the joint-venture partner with Monash.

The Monash venture did not miss media attention in Australia. Still, Howard's presence would have enhanced public interest. From that perspective, the cancelled visit was a missed opportunity to make the most of signals that the economic reversal in the region notwithstanding, co-operative ventures go on between Malaysian and Australian interests.

The relief over Howard's decision to call off the scheduled visit centred on concerns over the likely distraction posed by Iraq. The opposing positions Canberra and Kuala Lumpur had on the issue had the potential to hijack attention from bilateral and regional concerns.

In hindsight, the anxiety may well have been misplaced, obviated by the deal with Iraq brokered by United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan on the very day Howard was to start his official engagements in Malaysia.

But the Annan breakthrough came a day or two too late. Among Howard's advisers, particularly the economic boffins from the Treasury, prudence would have seemed a better course at the time Howard had to make a decision on the visit.

Among the Treasury advisers, the Howard visit is viewed beyond Australian-Malaysian interests. Indonesia looms large.

The political and social ramifications of the decimation of Indonesia's economy are shared interests for Australia and Malaysia.

Canberra sees Kuala Lumpur as a valuable conduit to Jakarta. Howard in Kuala Lumpur would have sought to reinforce Canberra's sentiments on Indonesia - expressed both in messages Howard has directly conveyed to President Suharto, and in approaches Howard planned to take to the International Monetary Fund on Indonesia's behalf.

The Canberra view is that while Australia supports the IMF rescue package for Indonesia, the IMF has to be sensitive to the need for political stability in the republic.

Howard claims for Australia a special understanding of Indonesia "because of where we are and the way in which the history of (our) relationship has evolved". He was planning to lobby the IMF to go easy on aspects of the financial rescue package, to avert civil unrest.

The potential for spillover of Indonesia's problems is not to be ignored. With close to 200 million people scattered over 13,677 islands, at the least the social impact of millions of Indonesians turning up on neighbouring shores is not to be underestimated.

There are implications for regional stability posed by sentiments against the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia. Such sentiments reflect on the diaspora in the region. They could put pressure on China to respond.

There is relief that points of difference in the way Australia and Malaysia view Iraq have subsided, to allow attention to stay focused on regional concerns.

Co-operative endeavours such as that involving Monash University give cause for confidence that the maturity of the relationship will ride out contentions of difference.

Malaysia's invitation to Monash is seen here as significant to bilateral relations. As Robinson tells the New Straits Times, it signals the desire for a long-term, continuing relationship.

"Universities are long-term institutions," says Robinson. "(The invitation to Monash) is an important signal of the desire for a shared

future."

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