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Mission to tend to a friendship

K.C. Boey

DISQUIET reflects the public mood. The Prime Minister, John Howard, acknowledged the distress in committing young citizens to combat. He said as much in announcing Australia's decision to send men and equipment in support of a United States-led military strike against Iraq.

The gesture is as much symbolic as material: 110 Special Air Service troopers to help in search and rescue, other specialists in intelligence, and for medical and maintenance support, and two aircraft equipped for air-to-air refuelling. It adds up to a maximum of 250 personnel.

Among the political leadership, the issue is one of world security and the authority of the United Nations. The opposition Labour Party is of one voice with Howard's conservative coalition in Government.

There are misgivings among sectional interests, but the decision is grudgingly accepted as being consistent with Australia's national objectives as a member of the international community.

The hope - not least by Howard - is for a diplomatic resolution to Iraq's objection to UN inspection for weapons of mass destruction.

The timing is inconvenient. Days before Howard arrives in Kuala Lumpur for a long-deferred visit, the Prime Minister could do without the distraction.

Howard arrives on Sunday for a three-day visit long deferred by scheduling problems both in Canberra and in Kuala Lumpur. It would be his first official visit to Malaysia, two years after the last visit by an Australian Prime Minister, when Paul Keating came in January 1996.

And it comes two years after Howard played host to Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, on a brief stopover in Brisbane.

The visit holds significance at a bilateral and regional level, against a backdrop of a transformed economic landscape that bears on the complexion of regional relations.

The value of the relationship with Malaysia assumes broader significance as nations in the region work towards stemming the tide of economic uncertainty, and more generally seek an accommodation of their views in coming to terms with the globalised economy.

The problems of the regional economy have altered the focus of the Howard visit. Were the visit to have gone ahead on previously proposed dates, the emphasis might have been different.

The bilateral relationship has endured through the years, characterised by co-operation in the strategic environment of the region, growing bilateral trade and commerce, and close ties at the popular level built around the constant flow of Malaysian students to Australia since the days of the Colombo Plan in the 1950s.

Recent relations have been tested by the force of personalities of the national leaders. A Howard visit might have focused on reinforcing the repair after the Keating trip in 1996.

One concern might be to further Australia's aspiration to sit in council with Asia at the nascent Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem) linking East Asia and the European Union in dialogue.

The transformed economic landscape has altered the priorities. As Howard gets set for his arrival in Kuala Lumpur, the emphasis will be less on Australia's needs, as a demonstration of continued faith and confidence in the region, and the reaffirmation of Howard's "Asia first" policy.

Howard will be anxious to reaffirm what he and his senior ministers have

been eager to demonstrate, that Australia is no fair-weather friend.

As he put it in announcing his visit to Malaysia: "It is not a time to reduce our associations with countries of that region. Rather it's a time to extend the helping hand to demonstrate ... that Australia is a good regional neighbour."

Yet he will be mindful not to come across as being in any way patronising. Howard has been assiduous in cultivating a view that his Government will not lecture to the region.

Howard accepts that countries in the region will have differing views from that of Australia. He remains forthright in stating Australia's position, and accepts no less for other national leaders.

He put it thus in his first official visit abroad as Prime Minister, to Indonesia: "Like every other country in the Asia-Pacific, we bring our own distinct culture, attitudes and history to the region.

"I do not believe that Australia faces a choice between our history and our geography - between our links with European and North American societies on the one hand, and those with the nations of Asia on the other."

That apart, Howard has admiration for the economic achievements in the region, Malaysia among them, the recent setbacks notwithstanding.

Howard demonstrated his regard for Malaysia early in his administration. Within days of his coming into government in March 1996, a special envoy - the retired senior diplomat Richard Woolcott - was sent to Kuala Lumpur.

It had been known Dr Mahathir was visiting New Zealand. Woolcott came with the invitation for Dr Mahathir to stop over in Australia on the latter's journey back from Wellington.

New Zealand's then Prime Minister, Jim Bolger, was the first head of government to call on Howard in Canberra. Dr Mahathir was the next national leader Howard met as Prime Minister.

In contrast to the flamboyance of Keating - and Bob Hawke before Keating - Howard is reserved and modest in his manner.

Encouraging the view of himself as the new kid on the block, Howard deferred to Dr Mahathir's seniority among the region's leaders, when they met in Brisbane.

He acknowledged his respect for Malaysia's economic performance, and Dr Mahathir's achievement in compiling that record. He spoke of the regard he had for Dr Mahathir's knowledge of the region. That respect remains.

The altered regional economic landscape will be a central focus of Howard's visit. It will figure in his talks on Monday and Tuesday with Dr Mahathir and Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Howard will be candid. As much as Malaysia and other countries in the region have suffered the pain of economic reversal, Australia is not immune to the downturn in the region.

At a time when Australia is never more economically integrated in the region, the reality is sinking in that the impact of Asia on the Australian economy will be worse than first thought.

Austerity measures and the general squeeze on credit in Asia are hurting tourism, education and the export of other services and food from Australia. More worrying is the prospect of more general erosion of business and consumer confidence, threatening to undermine a still robust domestic economy.

Howard's visit is as much to signal confidence in the region. He is anxious that Australian business does not lose its nerve on the regional opportunities.

As an Austrade seminar in Sydney was keen to impress on Australian exporters and investors, there are as much opportunities in Asia today as there are risks.

Canberra is confident Malaysia will come out of this test of its economy and return to strong growth on a much sounder basis.

Canberra does not see Malaysia being in need of the sort of assistance Australia extended to Indonesia as part of International Monetary Fund initiatives.

Howard says he will offer support for Malaysia's efforts to adopt appropriate measures to get its economy back on track.

There are no plans for any major outcomes from the visit. The view from within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet is of a visit to tend to a good relationship.

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