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The sky is still the only limit

THE sky's the limit for Malaysia's ambitions in the aerospace and aviation industry. The regional financial crisis, which has brought economies down to earth, will slow down the nation's rush towards developing its aerospace capabilities and that is to be expected. However, this only means that it will probably take the nation longer to achieve its goals, with the goals themselves remaining unchanged. In fact, from his remarks yesterday about bringing together aerospace companies into a consortium to eliminate duplication, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad seemed to indicate that the Government is already in the process of implementing one of the recommendations made out in the Blueprint for the Aerospace Industry in Malaysia, which he launched last December.

The timing for the launch of the blueprint itself proves the nation's determination. Like the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) project which shoulders the task of launching Malaysia into the forefront of the information technology age, the aerospace industry involves the kind of high technology that Dr Mahathir said Malaysians will have to master to become a developed race by the year 2020. When he launched the blueprint that is to chart the course of the industry right up to the year 2015, the country was already feeling the effects of the regional crisis. However, the crisis presents a possible blessing for the industry and the Government to take stock of the progress that has been made so far and, perhaps, review some of the strategies to include the current economic outlook.

Some of the recommendations, such as the setting up of the consortium, may need to be implemented sooner rather than later in view of the need to be more efficient and competitive in these difficult times. The aerospace industry is synonymous with big investments, high risks and, of course, mega profits. Having two companies making light aircraft at this early stage of the industry's development, for example, is perhaps no longer practical. SME Aviation Sdn Bhd and Eagle Aircraft Malaysia, both licenced to build light aircraft, can merge to form a bigger entity doing the same thing or even venturing into other related activities. According to the Ministry of International Trade and Industry, there are 24 companies in the aviation sector, 11 of them making parts and components. Perhaps the proposed vendor system recommended by the blueprint can already be activated, with one umbrella company or consortium in charge of these operations. In this way, not only will duplications not arise, but the various resources can be combined to create a more efficient and larger entity. Alternatively, these component and part manufacturers could come under one roof with the aircraft manufacturers and this could lead to the creation of an even bigger company. The Government may also want to reconsider plans to expand the number of key domestic players in advanced composites; instead, it may want to limit the number of players to a few big ones, or even a single major player that can attract foreign participation.

The industry players themselves should take the lead in studying these and other possibilities. Since it organised the first Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace (Lima) exhibition in 1991, where Dr Mahathir's vision of a Malaysian aerospace industry caught the imagination of Malaysians, the country has invested a great deal of money and energy into developing the industry. Apart from Lima making a name for itself as

a premier world event, Malaysia ventured into light aircraft manufacturing, upgraded its capabilities in general aviation maintenance and overhaul operations, launched satellites into orbit and constructed one of the most technologically-advanced airports in the world.

On the ground, however, awareness among the average Malaysian is still lacking, the education system is not adequately preparing young people to take on the aerospace challenge and there is a lack of culture. Even the basic culture of flying a plane has not caught up although the number flying clubs and schools has increased. Such awareness and interest among the people needs to be nurtured to help realise the nation's dream.

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