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Don't resist globalisation but try to influence its process

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IT was in Shakespeare's Hamlet that the famous question was asked: "To be or not to be, that is the question". The issue today is whether we should be globalised or not.

Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad recently expressed some doubts about globalisation. Indeed, serious questions have been raised on this thing called globalisation. What are the main issues that need to be addressed and to begin with, what exactly is globalisation?

Globalisation means different things to different people. To the business community, globalisation means an expanded international global market, where there exists a free flow of goods and capital. To these people, globalisation should be encouraged as it means a bigger market share and expanded business opportunities.

Tied to this notion is the inherent idea of free trade with little or no tariff barriers. It has been argued that this is the philosophy of globalisation. For instance, free trade is often being advocated and encouraged by economic organisations, including the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation forum.

However, this has to be rethought and some members of Apec should not go along with this notion, just because it is considered fashionable. What does free trade really mean?

To most, it basically means that countries must reduce their trade barriers and open up their markets. As the playing field is never even, the strong will always be at an advantage over the weak.

The economic crisis has forced open the financial sectors of a number of affected countries, especially those that are obliged to the IMF. Malaysia is fortunate in that it can still protect its financial market.

Therefore, within the Apec community, when members talk of free trade, there should be more clarification and even resistance to this notion. Before the crisis, many, if not all, had come to accept the idea of free trade. The crisis has certainly highlighted the downside of free trade and its real impact on developing economies.

It seems that globalisation is akin to an ideology of the global powers that be. Unlike the many 'isms' that make up the known ideologies, such as capitalism and communism, globalisation is less clear and even less dogmatic.

However, it does generate that kind of following that warrants attention and focus. There are some who have argued that due to the enormous power that the United States wields, globalisation is a euphemism for Americanisation.

There is no doubt that we are living in what is often referred to as a unipolar world, where with the end of the Cold War, the US has emerged as the undisputed leader of the world.

Not only is the US the most powerful country on earth, its economy is also the most influential and potent. US leadership, although sometimes loathed, is seldom disputed. There is some sense of helplessness. You just have to accept today's reality. The critical question is what do you do about it? Do you resist globalisation or do you follow the adage, "if you can't beat them, join them"?

Malaysia is a rapidly developing country, even despite the economic crisis. In retrospect, the crisis is not systemic in nature, as it was

very much influenced by external factors, although domestic weaknesses do exist. It is clear that if one were to look at Malaysia's economic profile, clearly, it is part and parcel of the global market.

Just look at our export pattern. Malaysia's external trade is large and will continue to remain so. Malaysia continues to play an effective role in the international arena.

Within the span of one decade, Malaysia has become a member of the UN Security Council twice. It is certainly seen as representing a moderate as well as a second view or voice. Malaysia has and will always be a country that has progressed by being international.

Are we really doomed in as far as globalisation is concerned? Is globalisation like a juggernaut that will trample all in its path? I don't think so. We certainly should not resist it, but rather we should try and influence this process.

We are certainly not alone in expressing our reservations on globalisation. It is not a question of the West versus the East either. The French leadership often talks of the threat of globalisation.

Therefore, collectively, we should address this issue and confront the powers that be on it.

As the Malaysian economy recovers and gets back on its feet again, we must however take heed of the note of caution voiced by our Prime Minister.

We must learn from the crisis as to the real impact of globalisation. We have all witnessed the ugly side of it, especially in terms of being exposed to the rigours and vigours of the free financial flow of funds.

The Prime Minister's call for international control and regulation of such funds has been hailed by many and yet it has remained an illusive goal.

What is really required is much more international co-operation and consensus, cutting across economic boundaries.

It is only when there is sufficient consensus that we will really be able to influence globalisation and be drivers rather than merely passengers.