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Diplomatic language muddled by might

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THE convoluted diplomatic language has become unbelievably muddled, wrapped in glib-talk, euphemisms and gross exaggeration.

Nonplussed casual observers like you and I are unable to figure out what precisely constitutes "international outcry" or when does a certain feeling surge beyond the cut-off point to become an "outcry".

The brunt of "mounting" international fury the past few days is Austria, where Jorg Haider's Freedom Party is not supposed to be part of the coalition Government, ostensibly, over its attitude towards the Nazis.

Despite the party being elected by voters in Austria, Israel has threatened to withdraw its ambassador.

Pakistan, already a bad boy, is facing "growing international criticism" to crackdown on militants, but beneath all the fuss over the coup d'etat and all, the immediate concern of the US administration lies elsewhere.

The international sheriff wants the Pakistani Government to do more in persuading the Taliban regime to hand over Osama Laden.

He is accused of ordering the 1998 bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

Logic precludes the possibility of a panel of peering international jurists deciding whether an expression of disquiet is an outcry, determine when an objection becomes an international condemnation or whether a number of countries saying all these things matters.

We vaguely believe we have all the answers. Zoom in into the declining clarity of diplomatic language, the enlarged picture is doubtlessly the US ascendancy.

It is the powers-that-be. They unilaterally determine what shall be righteousness and hence tone of diplomatic language.

It is safe to assume that unless the US or the western world in general, is unhappy over something, there can never be an outcry nor can international "pressure" be applied.

Everyone else going by this logic will be cavorting about if the US does not frown.

Fittingly, the Newsweek essay of Jan 31 had the title of "The Superpower They Love To Hate".

While readers will doubtlessly feel that Newsweek was in a hurry to exonerate the US, it is difficult to try not to resent a self-appointed and a biased Government of the world.

In remarks recently, chairman of the powerful US Senate Foreign Affairs Committee Jesse Helms did not attempt to appease those unable to fathom the ambivalence and ambiguities in US foreign policy.

As the US continues to ruthlessly punish Iraq "in the interest of its neighbours" and display paranoia over Islam, Helms said it was strictly the business of America should it decide to back "nations struggling to break the chains of tyranny".

Helms warned that the US might withdraw from the United Nations if the later imposes its "presumed authority".

The US is indeed basking in a prolonged economic growth and uninterrupted hegemony. It insists on having a part in everything that moves.

It thus browbeats a "recalcitrant" leader here, it gives a little nudge there aimed at a "pugnacious" Third World figure, showers Iraq with a carpet bombing and warns Indonesian soldiers to stay in their barracks.

Such display of might leaves the rest of the world cowered.

Question - how does one satisfy the powers-that-be of the world?

Do meritocracy and democracy figure in the ways of the world?

Supposing Malaysia gets the backing of 100 member-countries of the United Nations, will its nominee get to be next UN secretary-general?

They will mutter that only the haplessly naive will ask such questions.

At the same time, it is pointless to try looking for a "code of acceptable conduct and mannerisms".

Malaysia conducts fair and free elections, allows the political parties much space and yet is incessantly criticised.

The Egyptian style of election is curious as the president has always been the sole presidential candidate. Does that make Egypt one of the pariah States?

The Suharto regime was for decades a model of a stable, friendly and fast-developing country.

Suddenly, Suharto turned into villain. Some believe Indonesia is now on the verge of a break-up even though the white supremacists now contend it will be selfish for the oil-rich Aceh to secede.

The west seems to be jealously guarding the reign of Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid who makes overtures to Israel and who dances to the tunes of the West like threatening to sack a powerful Minister from abroad.

In the meantime, we are unable to name any one Islamic nation that is democratic, prosperous, stable and ambitious except, yes, Malaysia.

And, the US combs the whole wide world to identify "moderate" Islamic leaders and Governments, without hinting whether "moderate" must also mean "progressive" and "prosperous".

The recalcitrant ones are branded "terrorists States".

Another question - does the US police or terrorise the world?

"I don't understand the western world," Mustafa Raza wrote to the Time magazine from Lahore.

He said the West demanded the then Nawaz Sharif Government stopped cracking down on journalism and judiciaries, but now wanted it reinstated.

Herein lie the paradoxes and ambiguities in US foreign policy.

Take Pakistan and Afghanistan. Does the US want them to emerge as prosperous and stable countries so that bilateral trade and investments will flourish as President Clinton routinely articulates?

Or is all it wants Osama, and the two Islamic countries can retrogress for all they care.

The west now spreads its tentacles worldwide through various means, one of which is the NGOs.

The scrutiny on the NGOs came after their conduct at the WTO meeting in Seattle.

A report in the Economist on the rise of well-funded NGOs including in ending wars posed an enchanting poser - do some of the NGOs become a conduit for espionage?

One senses that one is under siege by the towering, stifling power.

Intrigues of today's international politics can fit into the grim images of George Orwell's 1984.

The Big Brother is watching you! Newsweek succinctly but not so reassuringly points out that despite the rise in anti-American feelings, most countries try not to get into the bad books of the US.

In the same way as it is taboo to offend Jewish interest, it is actually disconcerting to think that speaking out against the champion of democracy and free speech would invite torment.

There is not the woeful mourning of someone bogged down by the past miseries or from any hangups.

This is about destiny, and about accentuating the obvious - we are not hapless.

We grew up on a diet of Wisma Putra pronouncements on Malaysia "mengecam" (condemns) this or that belligerent nation, cynically wondering whether those brave words would make a ripple in the sea of foreign diplomacy.

In the intervening years, as a nation, we have all worked hard to improve our self-esteem and actually get more mentions in the international media.

It is folly to contemplate challenging the might of the superpowers.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, variously described as the "prickliest PM in the world" and "pugnacious" by the international media, is not advocating confrontation.

We should instead have towering ambitions, keep trying to better ourselves and, ultimately, earn everyone's grudging respect.

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