

22/05/2000

They're what they were

Abdullah Ahmad

DURING his presidency, Richard Nixon opened the door to China, ended the United States' painful war in Vietnam and generally squared-off with Russian leaders.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard must resist the temptation to behave as if Australia were a big power, it's anything but.

Howard must also fight the desire to export his Aussie values to Asean for each of the 10-member nations has its own values and civilisation; longer and well-entrenched compared to Australia's.

He made many anti-Asian remarks when he was in the opposition, regarding them as lesser Australians than white Australians. As Prime Minister he has kept his deep-seated feelings close to his chest. His anti-Asian remarks now haunt him as he travels in Asia.

It is true he is received in several places (not in Malaysia), but not embraced.

Howard, like Western Liberals, spends too much time hand-wringing over developing countries and far too little time trying to understand them.

Western politicians of all hues even intellectuals and academicians still have a superior, "White man's burden" mentality towards Asians and Blacks.

The racist overtones persist half-a-century after the White imperialists abandoned their colonies.

The world has changed and is changing but racism is on the rise in the United States, Europe and Australia.

As Nixon was fond of saying - towards the end of his life - it was the height of arrogance even racism to suggest that the West knows all and can solve everything.

Nixon was considered the most knowledgeable in foreign affairs among all modern US presidents. What prompted him to say that, I think, was because he knew "the developing world is where the real world is and where the Third World War is being fought."

Howard's Australia is a second-class developed nation. And Dr Mahathir's Malaysia is first among the developing nations. Malaysia is in Asia and Australia is not.

Malaysia respects Australia by staying clear of its internal politics. On the contrary, Australia seems to enjoy interfering in Malaysian internal affairs.

As a result, the present state of relations is "comfortable but not warm".

A brief review of their relations is perhaps in order. The Malaysia-Australia relations were less than comfortable during Paul Keating's premiership inspite his latter "Asianisation Policy".

It reached a higher plane when John Howard became Prime Minister in 1996, a welcome breather which suffered when Howard and his deputy King Ficsher, clumsily intervned in the matter of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the sacked, tried and jailed deputy prime minister.

They breached the principle of no interference in the affairs of other sovereign nations for having the audacity to make the remarks they did.

One thing about Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that foreign leaders should know if they do not by now, is that he is consistent at least about his principle in pragmatism.

His "Buy British Last" policy was not something which had been planned

or meticulously thought out and prepared but it did nevertheless work splendidly.

"The Buy British Last Policy" succeeded because it has stemmed from a long-time discontent with the continuous and deliberate British insensitivity to Malaysian feelings and self-worth.

As a result, "in 1981 it had reached the point that something should be done to alter the situation", Dr Mahathir told Adhha Abdullah, an international relations student at Cambridge University who interviewed him in August, 1993 for his masters degree thesis on "Malaysian-British relations - the Mahathir Factor".

There was no official guideline to the policy, if it could be called one at all. In fact, Adhha asserts: "... a better word to describe 'Buy British Last' would be that it was a "campaign" rather than a "policy".

"It was a directive issued straight from Dr Mahathir, probably with little consultation, least of all with Wisma Putra (Foreign Ministry) and this was reflected by the fact that there was no official paper or documentation ever written on the subject of the 'Buy British Last' policy."

Australia, under Howard, if it continues to meddle in Malaysian affairs, is treading on dangerous ground. For one, Australia is more divided on race than us and there is no natural justice for Australia's sons of the soil.

Howard's "holier-than-thou" attitude and condescending remarks about Malaysian politics are resented as they come from the worst perpetrator of injustice.

To add insult to injury, Howard postponed the long-agreed-to-official visit to Malaysia at the very last minute, citing a lame excuse - the Gulf War crisis!

No new dates were agreed by both sides and I believe the visit will never take place.

Dr Mahathir had said Howard is not welcome in Malaysia. Whether Dr Mahathir's principle of pragmatism will over time change this particular situation remains to be seen.

Malaysia and Australia have traditionally had good relations, especially in defence cooperation and education. Bilateral trade relations are good and increasing. Australia was Malaysia's 11th largest trading partner in 1999, accounting for 2.3 per cent of Malaysia's global trade.

We export crude petroleum, telecommunications equipment, furniture, automatic data processing machines, aircraft and associated equipment and parts while we buy from Down Under sugar, molasses, honey, wheat, dairy products and aluminium.

For years bilateral trade has been in Australia's favour but since last year Malaysia recorded a trade surplus of RM1.135 billion between January to September 1999.

Australia's investments are welcome and on the increase. There are about 37 Malaysian companies operating in Australia and special incentives have been granted to promote Australian investments and participation in the Malaysian economy.

The economic, cultural and military relations between the two nations can be a win-win proposition, and all efforts must be made not to jeopardise all that by further clumsy and insensitive statements about a deposed politician.

I would imagine, good bilateral relations are more crucial than plodding the cause of Anwar which has preceipitated the present spat and can indeed worsen it, unless Australia works hard to prevent the situation from escalating.

Dr Mahathir had advised Australia to behave like the small nation it is,

instead of trying to teach other Asian nations how to go about their business. The Prime Minister has also called on the Australian Government to stop bullying its regional neighbours as it did to Indonesia over East Timor.

A united and prosperous Indonesia is conducive to a peaceful South-East Asia. What Howard started in East Timor via his bullying tactic is not acceptable.

What happened in East Timor offered other restive provinces the opportunity to dare think the impossible.

Indonesia is still at risk of disintegrating as a consequence. Howard's overposturing of Aussie military might, and his deference to Washington's needs and dictates can and will definitely cause a deterioration and a difficult relationship with its Asian neighbours, especially Indonesia and even Malaysia.

Australia should start minding its own business if it wants a good relationship with its neighbours.

If it wants to, it can drift closer to Washington, and even into the American arms and bosoms.

Keating was at least more aware of the need to be close to Asia, a policy which has been reversed by Howard. If the policy trend is not reversed, Australians can always blame Howard if things get bad, even when it might be too late for that.

An Australian source hinted to me that a thorough review of Australian defence and foreign policy had been made and would be released soon - and I hope minding Australia's own business is a major priority.

Australia should quickly - after the release of this new defence and foreign policy - pursue a closer relationship with Asian countries and attempt new dimensions following lessons learnt in East Timor and Indonesia.

Howard triggered the dismemberment of Indonesia, and he caused a major fear in Jakarta as well as among friends of Indonesia that he (Howard) wants to see the disintegration of Indonesia.

Australia wants many weak nation-states, preferably dependent on it as East Timor will be, as neighbours.

Australia, it seems, wants a new power equation in the Malay world. Howard has shown preference for larger American hegemony, in anticipation of getting a role for Australia, as a loyal and subservient sub-guardian of American strategic interests in the region.

Howard can improve KL-Canberra relations, making it stronger and closer in the political, economic and cultural fields, through useful engagement and desisting from making statements which seem calculated to irritate Dr Mahathir by defending the latter's former protege, now in prison for abuse of power and who is being tried for sodomy.

The good thing - depending on who says it - is that Dr Mahathir's constant and strident rhetoric against the West is usually not followed by any corresponding action with the exception of the "Buy British Last" policy.

For the moment Dr Mahathir has the best of both worlds. He is a nationalist, hailed as the fearless and effective spokesman of developing nations and he also maintains good relations at an even keel with major developed powers, successfully courting investments to Malaysia.

Adhha has expressed in his Cambridge thesis "a fervent hope" that Dr Mahathir's "dual-track foreign policy continues to be in Malaysia's favour". It has, up to a point.

(END)