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US must not try to 'enforce' democracy on the rest of us

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APRIL 30, 2000, marks the 25th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War. The war was generally unpopular in the West but we in the region have a special reason to be grateful.

It must be remembered that those were dangerous times and the international communist threat was real; what with home-grown communist insurgencies across Southeast Asia and nuclear-armed China and the then Soviet Union bent on exporting revolution.

What the Vietnam War did was to buy time for the rest of the region and helped ensure that the so-called "Domino Theory" remained just that, a theory. In Malaysia's case, the war years allowed the late Tun Abdul Razak breathing space to lay the foundations of modern Malaysia.

It was upon these very foundations that Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has been able to build and to make our country what it is today.

The United States and its allies spent much in terms of blood, sweat and tears in defence of Southeast Asia through the war years. It should now be reaping a rich harvest of goodwill from the region. But it isn't. Why?

I think a good part of the reason for this lies in the fact that the US has not stopped fighting since and seems unlikely to do so.

For as long as the fight was against the evils of international communism, it was not difficult to argue that it was a noble cause. That cause is won with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fact that China is today largely communist only in name.

How else to explain the retention of that Cold War relic - the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation? Perhaps the US and its allies continue to believe there are other "noble" causes worth fighting for.

Today, the cause has shifted from anti-communism to pro-democracy and pro-human rights. It is no longer enough that other countries are now free from the terror of international communism.

An America triumphant nevertheless still has its insecurities. It is unsure, above all, that other countries will choose to follow the example of a good and democratic America unless a huge stick is still used once in a while.

In other words, it is not enough that others have the powerful model of America to follow. Others must be made in its image, by force, if necessary.

There appears no sense of irony on America's part that it cannot solely rely on its formidable persuasive powers to convince others of the superiority of democracy as America defines it.

Three-quarters of humanity today still lives in poverty. Pockets of this vast swathe of humanity, principally in East Asia, have climbed out of poverty either through non-democratic means or through their own variations of the democratic model.

They do not reject the Western democratic model. In fact, they understand why Westerners hold dear to their democracies as a value in and of itself. It is to the credit of the Western democratic model that thinking Asians are willing to postpone its enjoyment in order to build a more solid foundation.

They duly note that people in many democratic Asian countries enjoy it largely on empty stomachs and wonder if this is so precisely because they choose to enjoy their democracy too soon.

In fact, some Asians, emboldened by their current successes, are now

wondering if democracy needs to be an end in itself.

Democracy has until now been widely perceived to be the best bulwark against almost all man-made ills - inhumanity towards others and corruption.

Perhaps it is possible to establish a post-democratic society that is socially and economically equitable while simultaneously enjoying prosperity, that is corruption-free and where governments go about their jobs not because they want to be re-elected but because it is their job?

Then we will be spared the worry of having to expend so much in terms of public man-hours and general systems paralysis over a President's sexual indiscretions or a Cuban boy's family feud.

Which brings me to my original point. We certainly have a lot to be thankful to America over its sacrifices in Vietnam.

It is time for America to return to its original "purpose" as a beacon of freedom not only for itself but for the rest of the world. That freedom, however, will be besmirched, indeed violated, if it has to be "enforced".