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US-Malaysia relations move on after Al Gore

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FOR most of Malaysia's 44 years of independence, bilateral relations between Malaysia and the US have been strong in trade, investment, defence, people-to-people, and even on the political front.

An unwelcome lacuna occurred only during the Clinton Administration through inept meddling in our domestic politics by the colourless Vice-President Al Gore who, while he was Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's guest, called on Malaysians to take to the streets against his host in November 1998.

We had tolerated various statements questioning our governance but Al Gore's diplomatic faux pas, political gaffe and bad manners were the last straw.

I wrote various columns criticising Al Gore. I wished and predicted he would lose to George W. Bush and he did.

All that is behind us now. We now look forward to building our relations on the basis of two equal and sovereign nations even though we are of unequal wealth, power and influence.

What I heard of the meeting between Dr Mahathir and President Bush in Shanghai is very encouraging. We have entered into a period of mutual respect, accommodation and co-operation.

Bush, responding to Dr Mahathir's parting wish, gave a clear indication that the relations between KL and Washington are clearly not only on the mend, but also to be enhanced.

Though the President did not say as much, he appeared to have indicated that relations could only be better now that the bete noire of Malaysians is no longer around.

A friendlier and more pragmatic administration now rules Washington which links globalisation with what causes terrorism and wants Apec nations to continue being a model with a choice: openness, freedom and prosperity over fear, stagnation and resentment.

While differences of opinion on the war in Afghanistan between the two leaders exist and will continue to exist, they disagree on few other issues. Even that is more on method than objective.

Bush and Dr Mahathir, I believe, made it clear during their meeting that the contrasting policies over Afghanistan are not going to be an obstacle to co-operation; they need not cloud the burgeoning future of KL-Washington relations.

The war on terrorism and our firm commitment to fight it - although we also want an international conference to discuss terrorism - has added a new dimension to co-operation.

This is an area where we can be of considerable help, born of long experience in fighting militant communist terrorism.

We reiterate we will be united against terror, help reverse the economic malaise, but beg to differ over US assaults on Afghanistan.

Unlike China and the US, which are both strategic partners and strategic competitors, we have only an element of co-operation in our relationship with the lone superpower.

There are, of course, nations that acknowledge we are a moderate Muslim nation held in high esteem by them. This will not lead to conflicts of interest with the US; it may perhaps complement and even strengthen the American effort in building the coalition against terrorism that it has been assembling since September 11.

Malaysia desires good relations with all nations, more so with the US because it is our largest trading partner. Though we are small, we are the US' 12th largest customer in terms of imports.

American investments here are big and we welcome new and larger investment, trade and exchange of person-to-person visits via tourism and education.

I am glad at this apparent shift in US policy; it no longer wants to cling to old patterns of interference in our domestic politics. And we, in turn, co-operate and even support American initiatives to encourage trade, investment and in maintaining a stable and prosperous world order.

The Shanghai Asia Pacific Economic Conference meeting of 21 nations (minus Taiwan which boycotted the conference) for the first time since its inception in 1989 was dominated by politics instead of the usual discussion on the economy, its future and possibilities.

Taiwan's absence was hardly noticed as Apec leaders talked, dined and watched a dazzling fireworks extravaganza over the banks of the Huangpu river which brightened the Shanghai skyline and lightened the hearts of the Chinese and their guests.

The Asian and Pacific Rim nations devoted much time to terrorism. Many nations, the host included, gave strong rhetorical support to the American campaign against terrorism. Bush thanked them for sharing intelligence, commitment and advice.

The American President urged his colleagues to choose openness, trade and tolerance, and "you will find prosperity, liberty and knowledge, freedom over fear. Terrorists want to turn the global economy against themselves".

Dr Mahathir was consistent when he criticised globalisation and many at the conference privately agreed with him that it was a myth that the poor benefited as much as the rich.

Like us, China and Russia continued to insist on a major role for the United Nations in Afghanistan. But they did not offer to send peace-keeping troops. Malaysia, I am sure, will respond positively to requests for peace-keeping troops in Afghanistan.

Bush, in oblique remarks supposedly meant for his host (President Jiang Zemin) and President Vladimir Putin, stated that coalition partners should not use the war against terrorism as an excuse for repression of their minorities fighting for independence in Xinjiang and Chechnya.

While Russia and the US can co-operate closely against Osama bin Laden, they appear unable to come to agreement as yet about amending the treaty to permit reasonable limited missile defences.

As expected, Bush did not get full support from his colleagues for his war in Afghanistan. Dr Mahathir, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei and President Megawati Sukarnoputri opposed the assault. Contrary to an earlier popular belief, the three Malay leaders did not waver in their support for the suppression of terrorists.

While the Shanghai summit provided a general condemnation of terrorism and pledged support and co-operation to combat it, the leaders balked at endorsing the American-led war in Afghanistan.

As I see it, the US should have a serious agenda for improving its image and standing in the Islamic world.

The US cannot succeed unless it helps to bring democracy in places where there is none, improve the lives of oppressed Muslims living under repressive feudal regimes supported by and on whose behalf the US went to war.

It would be well for Bush to ponder very seriously what Dr Mahathir sincerely told him. I have no doubt about Bush's personal commitment and honesty that he and his country want to see the establishment of a

Palestine state along that of Israel.

Until that occurs and it had better be soon, I do not believe there will be peace in the Holy Land nor will terrorism diminish any time soon. There is an important linkage between the two.

There will be potentially horrendous consequences if an all-out Israeli assault against the Palestinian authority takes place. The injustices suffered by the Palestinians provide the central theme for angry Muslims.

Their grievances and anger over what is perceived as the West's bias against Islam is what causes the Islamic world to rally behind them.

Bush's reiteration that he is not waging a war against Islam, the religion and its followers is noted. But few believe him in the Islamic heartland.

A genuine desire accompanied by a determined political will to finding a political solution, a lasting settlement and peace in Palestine would do more to undermine the calls for jihad and volunteers for suicide squads than any number of bombs, air attacks and tanks will ever do.

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