

Common ground in

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THE primary focus of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's official visit to Washington last week was to improve bilateral political relations although, in this globalised world, international issues impinge upon bilateral relations and can affect them for better or for worse.

The Americans were equally committed to entering a new chapter in Malaysia-US relations.

In his remarks to the media at the Oval Office in the White House before his talks with Dr Mahathir, President George W. Bush was warm in his praise of Malaysia and its leader, describing the country as a modern, moderate and prosperous Muslim country the US could deal with.

It was also clear from his attitude that there were no political differences in the way of improved and closer relations. The talks with the US leader and the meetings with an array of top administration leaders, senators and congressmen were successful for the purpose on hand.

There was enough common ground between the two countries despite different perspectives on a number of issues.

Indeed, the common ground has been firmed up by the fight against international terrorism, in a sense ironic because there are also important differences between the two countries on how to most effectively combat it.

Even on this point, I detected a slight but significant shift in the American position in Bush's reply to a question about addressing the root causes of terrorism.

While he still was still heavy on taking direct action against those who perpetrated acts of terror, he did concede the US would address the conditions that gave rise to terrorism, as long as there was a stop to, or an absence of, acts of terror.

Clearly Malaysia's no-nonsense approach on terrorism and extremist activities finds appreciation in a Washington exercised by the threat of terrorism, the previous holier-than-thou attitude not now sustainable because of the sweeping American response to the threat when confronted with it.

Dr Mahathir has been consistent and steadfast in dealing with extremist and terrorist threats to peace, order and stability. That condition, in turn, has been used to develop a prosperous Malaysia, a moderate, successful and tolerant Muslim country.

This has a certain resonance in a Washington which has made rather a hash of dealing with Muslim countries in the fight against terrorism.

Don't forget causes

HAVING found common ground in zero-tolerance for acts of terrorism, and established a basis for close political relations, Malaysia should now consistently put across the point that the root causes of terrorism should also be addressed.

This should be done in a manner that does not, in any way, suggest justification for acts of terror. Malaysia is well placed to do this. We have both acted against terrorists as well as addressed the root causes of terrorism.

The US, on the other hand, despite some little indications, has taken a narrow-vision view of terrorism by emphasising the military option in fighting it.

When meeting the media last Tuesday President Bush only had a brief flirt with the causes-of-terrorism thing, quickly and strongly reverting to don't-forget-what-

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The world will never forget. However, the Americans will have to cool and calm down. If nothing else, the heightened level of neurosis since Sept 11 will be hard to sustain. In the closer relations between the two countries, and the two leaders, Malaysia may be of some help in the therapeutic process.

It is going to be a long haul. Quite apart from the trauma, there is the should-we-have-acted-decisively factor. The furore in the US just last Thursday over alleged unheeded warnings of hijackings before Sept 11 is not going to make it easy for Washington to appear to be weakening in its resolve to fight terrorism without compromise.

So the best that can be expected is a two-pronged affair: Fight but also address causes where possible.

In his speech at Capitol Hill to the US Congress Malaysia-America Friendship Caucus last Tuesday, Dr Mahathir called for a gentleness, patience and tolerance in

The Big Picture

By Munir Majid

US foreign policy that would work towards a restoration of international respect and liking for America, a past feature of America's greatness.

Again, in a stirring speech later that evening at the US-Asean Business Council dinner, while emphasising the common ground with the US, Dr Mahathir also pointed out that grievances had to be addressed to achieve peace and stability.

Malaysia, after all, is clearly not trying to pull a fast one. The Americans appreciate Dr Mahathir's proffered definition of terrorism at the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) Foreign Ministers Conference on Terrorism in April which Ma-

laysia initiated and hosted, as acts of violence against civilians coming from any quarter and in any form.

Even if this definition captured Israeli acts of state terrorism against Palestinian civilians, the US took comfort from the fact that it would encompass Palestinian suicide bombings --- an even-handed definition by a Muslim leader before a conference of Muslim states at precisely the time when emotions were running high.

Thus, while there are clear differences of emphases, there is enough common ground between the two countries to allow the signing of the Declaration on Co-operation to Combat International Terrorism by the Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and Acting US Secretary of State Richard Armitage during Dr Mahathir's visit.

Role on world stage

ALSO, it wouldn't have escaped the

Malaysia-US relations

Americans that Dr Mahathir will become Chairman of the OIC in the latter part of next year and Chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in February. The Prime Minister will be playing a pivotal role on the world stage at a critical period in international history.

The contribution Dr Mahathir, and Malaysia, can make to world peace should not be under-estimated.

The Palestine-Israeli conflict is the central issue in the world today, however reluctant the Americans have been to admit it. Indeed it has been forced upon the US that it is an issue that cannot be ignored without dire peril to world peace and stability.

And, yes, in the fight against international terrorism — again, however difficult it has been for the US to swallow the bitter pill encapsulating the Middle eastern conflict and the spread of international terrorism.

Dr Mahathir can help Washington make that synaptic jump from denial to enlightenment. While talking about the causes of the spread of terrorism, Dr Mahathir has never, not once, ever suggested there is any justification for acts of terror.

He condemned without reservation the Sept 11 attacks. He has identified, in equal measure, all acts of violence against civilians as acts of terrorism, whatever the source, including suicide bombings which, now, the Arab states have also intoned against in the search for a peaceful settlement of the Middle eastern conflict.

Having said that, there are wide differences between Malaysia and the US on the issue. Malaysia is not alone. Almost the whole of the rest of the world feel the Americans are not even-handed in dealing with the conflict, sustaining the Israelis and letting them get away with murder while being hard and harsh on the Palestinians.

Given the strength of the Jewish lobby in the US, it is not likely that the Americans will exert too much pressure on the Israelis, but it must be hoped that enough compromise will be made for peace and the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Just as the Arabs and Palestinians are getting more conciliatory, the Israelis have, through the central committee of the Likud Party, hardened their position to the point of denying the setting up of a Palestinian state.

This will make it impossible to move towards any kind of peaceful settlement of the conflict, if it is adopted as the policy of the Israeli Government. It is incumbent upon the US to get the Israelis to make an irrevocable commitment to recognising the Palestinian right to statehood, just as Israel's right of existence was extracted from the Arabs and Palestinians.

As Dr Mahathir indicated on coming out of his meeting with President Bush, the two leaders discussed the Middle East issue and I know this point was made. Malaysia, like most Arab states, accepts the existence of two independent states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace in the Middle East.

The Americans will have to do more to ensure this becomes a reality, as it is the US position as well (repeated by President Bush during the course of Dr Mahathir's visit) — sooner rather than later.

On an even keel

WHILE Malaysia will not abandon the Palestinian cause, it will also have to ensure relations with the US are not paralysed by the issue. Those who want bilateral relations to be held hostage by the conflict are plain stupid, as even the Arab states work with the US to achieve national objectives.

Closer relations will not only serve Malaysia's interest, but also help to address the whole matrix of intertwined national and global issues — of which terrorism and the Middle East conflict are the most important.

With relations on an even keel, there could be the influence that comes with mutual respect and mutual confidence. There is every indication from Dr Mahathir's visit to Washington that the Americans are ready to play ball.

The successful talks with President Bush, and other top administration and Congressional leaders, actually do mark a new chapter in relations between Malaysia and the US, which have sometimes been difficult in the past few years. As in the opening of any such new chapter, both countries have had to leave some baggage behind.

Whether or not all this will herald a new era in relations between the two countries will, of course, depend on how they evolve from now on.

What is clear, however, is that the two leaders have indicated their commitment to improving and developing relations.

This is the most important outcome of Dr Mahathir's US visit last week, the desire to have a close political relationship.

That relationship, in turn, will underscore the already extensive economic, trade, educational and cultural links between the two countries.

With a new political closeness, it can be expected many other benefits will flow from those links as well.

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