

# Retract uncalled for remark to mend ties with Asian neighbours

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AUSTRALIAN-Malaysian ties have taken another hard knock following John Howard's remark that his government was prepared to make pre-emptive strikes against any country being used to organise terrorist attacks against Australian interests and endangering the lives of his people.

Many people, including governments in the region and Australian groups, have condemned his uncalled for statement and his refusal to retract it has only deepened misunderstanding with his neighbours.

While serious damage has been done to relations with the regional governments, yet Howard must be the only one who did not believe this to be the case. He may not be a racist but perhaps just a bit anti-Asian.

If as his foreign minister Alexander Downer had pointed out that his prime minister's remark was not aimed at any neighbour in particular, then why had Howard refused to retract it and undo the damage already done?

As a seasoned politician and a senior lawyer when he was in the opposition, Howard should realise the significance of his statement on his immediate neighbours. His administration's explanation that the possible perpetrators were outside the region also lacks credibility.

It is quite obvious that his targets are Muslim nations such as Malaysia and Indonesia as well as those with a strong Islamic separatist movement

such as the Philippines and Thailand.

Surely he cannot be referring to Pakistan, Africa or the Middle East where such terrorist groups operate with some impunity? To conduct a military operation so far away from home is well beyond Canberra's capability.

Or does he have in mind China and other East Asian states in his calculation as well? When he talks about countries beyond the region, surely it will lead to all sorts of speculation. So it is better for Howard, like a true plain-speaking Aussie, to call a spade a spade.

Australia must be reminded, if it needs reminding, that it is just a middling power though it is trying hard to project itself as a major player. It can only do so by riding on the coat tails of the United States, with which Howard has been behaving like a faithful servant in recent years.

So long as he remains obstinate and refuses to clear the air, Howard is going to have a problem with countries in the region especially Malaysia as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had described the

pre-emptive strikes as "an act of war."

Dr Mahathir has gone so far as to say that Malaysia would review its co-operation with Australia since Canberra has no confidence in his government's ability to handle the terrorist problem.

Whether he likes it or not, the Australian leader will have to depend on the co-operation of his close neighbours especially Malaysia and Indonesia in his government's campaign to protect Australia.

The government has shown its ability in dealing with the terrorist threat and the best proof of this is that nothing untoward has taken place in Malaysia so far.

Howard may not think much of his Asian neighbours but Malaysia will continue to do whatever is necessary to protect its own people as well as foreigners, including Australians, from terrorist attacks.

All members of such militant extremist groups either home-grown or from overseas, are enemies of the state and the people and all measures must be taken to ensure that they are not allowed to create chaos and instability in the country.