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Still learning from the East

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IT'S 57 years distant now, and the Japanese wartime occupation of Malaya has faded from public memory. A recent Malay language movie gives a portrayal of the period, but it doesn't quite capture the national imagination.

At the time, however, the Occupation left a collective imprint out of all proportion to its duration.

In just under four years, between 1941 and the end of the Second World War in 1945, the Japanese Imperial Army did not just overthrow the British but over-turned the psychosis of a colonised people.

Some Malaysians remembered the Occupation as a time of hardship and cruelty, many others of deprivation. But it was also proved before their eyes that there was nothing pre-ordained about their subjugation as the "white man's burden".

True, the Japanese were ruthless occupiers, too. But they were Asian, like us. Even as they made their Malayan subjects sing the Kimigayo, they induced the germ of an aspiration that, one day, we might compose and sing our own national anthem. We did, 12 years later.

I was eight, and for my generation the ending of the Occupation was the beginning of a nascent Malay nationalism, at first benignly ignored as an occasional irritant by both the colonial establishment and its local cohorts.

Then it stirred the national conscience rather quickly, surprising (and alarming) the British and their Malayan subordinates.

The independence movement was strengthened when the British, in their prime folly and arrogance, despite the loss of prestige in the eyes of the locals by the ease and speed with which the Japanese overran them, unilaterally converted Malaya into a direct British colony.

Worse, they abolished the Malays' special position, privileges and rights due them as the definitive people of the land. The Malays rose under Umno, fearing Anglo-Chinese domination in the making.

Across the Straits of Malacca the Indonesians, encouraged by the departing Japanese, declared independence from the Dutch on August 17, 1945. This in no small measure emboldened the Malays.

The excesses of the Chinese communist guerillas after the Japanese surrender and before the British formally reoccupied Malaya and the declaration of the Emergency in 1948 aroused intense Malay feelings. The die was cast.

The Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was a teenager selling goreng pisang in Pekan Rabu, Alor Star, during the Occupation, joined Umno to fight the much-hated Malayan Union and for eventual independence. He must have covertly, if not openly, admired the Japanese abilities and kamikaze nationalism as something to emulate.

In his recent book, Reflections on Asia, Dr Mahathir writes: "When Japan occupied Malaya during World War II, the soldiers were very disciplined and patriotic, which I admire.

"I used to sell goods in the market; Japanese soldiers always paid for all they bought. The cultivation of good values that will contribute towards achieving one's goals is something that must be learnt by everyone."

Dr Mahathir visited Japan in 1961 - his second overseas trip - and saw first-hand how the qualities that brought the Japanese victory in the

early part of the war worked equally well in defeat and breakneck national reconstruction.

"As a result of what I observed in Japan, in 1981, after I was appointed Prime Minister of Malaysia, I introduced the Look East policy," he says.

Look East, however, was not just the construct of one man's visionary experience. Japan was then Malaysia's largest trading partner (bar Singapore, which still served as the country's biggest conduit for imports and exports), largest investor (even larger if we count in Japanese-inspired investment, such as from Taiwan) and biggest provider of official aid.

Bundling all that into a coherent policy or, more accurately, a guiding principle with Japan as economic role model was not such a big leap.

Critics (and there were many) at the time couldn't turn their heads from looking West, and seeing Japan through its prism as an incompletely rehabilitated wicked nation.

But the policy's boosters could tell that in order for Malaysia to industrialise rapidly, it had to remake itself from an economy still governed - as in most of the Third World, then and now - by colonialist relationships and terms of trade. The risk was that the country could turn into the manufacturing sweatshop of an economic juggernaut.

At one point, with a large and growing Japanese expatriate community ensconced in their own enclaves, it did seem as if Malaysia was being transformed into a factory base for the sogososha or business conglomerate.

That didn't happen, for the Government, as hard as it stared East was, above all pragmatic. Dr Mahathir, in a speech in Tokyo last week marking the 20th anniversary of the policy, said that Look East did not mean a Japan-centric monopoly in economic and foreign policy.

It meant that Malaysia had more to learn from Japan than any other country and coveted its economic leadership (rather than patronage). In any event, in the early 60s there was only one Japanese restaurant in Kuala Lumpur (in Bukit Bintang). Now there are between 30 and 40, genuine or otherwise.

In my book Tunku Abdul Rahman and Malaysia's Foreign Policy 1963-1970, I noted that "Malaysia's relations with Japan had always been correct and the Tunku was one of the earliest statesmen in Southeast Asia to make a political goodwill gesture towards Japan when it was still politically isolated as a result of Japanese atrocities during their occupation of Southeast Asia."

The gesture concretised into more extensive economic relations as the country edged towards geopolitical neutrality and moved away from an Anglo-American-centred foreign policy in the subsequent decades.

Look East was thus not merely reflective of an anti-Western bias, but an anticipation of a growing strategic reality forged by Japan's economic might.

Japan was the nexus of the Asian "renaissance" of the late 80s and 90s. Even America stood to learn from it, as attested by numerous books on the subject.

At their height, Japanese firms were buying up blue chip American corporations and prime real estate, such as the Rockefeller Centre in New York. There looked to be no stopping them.

Even with hindsight it is easy to overlook how prescient Dr Mahathir was. It is also easy to overlook how the policy shaped Malaysia's success in the ensuing years.

In the form of Malaysia Inc, it contributed substantially to economic growth though not nearly as much as Japan Inc did for Japan in transforming the warravaged country into the world's second largest

economy.

In spite of Japan and Malaysia Inc's latterday labelling as "cronyism", it is hard to see how any less developed country could have caught up faster without such a close partnership between government and industry.

The potential for abuse is always present, as Dr Mahathir himself readily admits, but that does not refute the soundness of the policy. In the global economic rat race and against the overweening power of the rich Western countries, poor nations have no real choice but to synergise their assets, resources and competitive advantages for the singular purpose of economic development.

As faded as the Japanese model looks at present, it is equally hard to see how Asia can return to its ascendance prior to the 1997 financial crisis without Japanese leadership, even with a rapidly growing China itching to fill what is perceptibly becoming a vacuum.

It is a vacuum that has been willingly abetted by an American-induced Japanese reluctance to take its place on the world stage.

The Look East policy, for all its merits, hasn't been easy going. Japanese firms were niggardly with technology transfer, until it became moot as soon as Malaysian entrepreneurs found that technology could be bought, rented or licensed.

Malaysian trainees returning from Japan have not, for the most part, lived up to their potential.

Even so, Malaysia has been Japan's most enthusiastic supporter in Asia. For now, Japan has no better friend in a region which, despite half a century, has been grudging about forgiving its past.

Dr Mahathir's affection has been amply reciprocated in Japan. But such love might not last forever if it should fall short of Malaysian pragmatism and be impoverished of results.

It will be difficult following someone as lauded (and maligned) as Dr Mahathir. Likewise, it is somewhat implausible to think the Look East policy, which has served us for what it is worth, will be diminished any more than our commitment to greater political and economic liberalisation, democracy and openness.

For sure, Japan will not have a better Malaysian friend than Dr Mahathir, perhaps for another century. However, I do believe that much of what his successors - Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak - will do (and pursue) should meet with general approval in Tokyo.

Still, Japan should become less inflexible to ensure that what Dr Mahathir has carefully crafted for two decades remains sturdy.