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National interest, security and Dr Mahathir's leadership

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MALAYSIA, as announced by the Minister of Defence recently, will be signing a Letter of Intent for the purchase of Polish-made battle tanks, making this the country's latest military hardware procurement.

The decision to buy was made during the Prime Minister's visit to Poland earlier this year.

This buying is necessary as the Government has not been making any sizeable purchase of major defence equipment in a long time.

Consequently, the Armed Forces has not undergone any capability upgrading, a problem made urgent by the quantum leap in warfare technology over the last two decades.

America's Afghan adventure is a clear demonstration of not just a huge advance in military technology, it showed too an ominous development in the art of modern warfare.

No longer is command and control done insitu.

Instead, the locations of war theatres have become increasingly more incidental to effective strategic control.

In the Afghan instance, the Taliban were defeated from a control centre located in, as far away as, Florida.

The change has been so dramatic that the current military buzzword is "transformation", indicating a move "from heavy, slow-moving forces to lighter, more agile units employing the latest information technology to wage computerised warfare," to quote a recent edition of the Economist.

Such a development must, therefore, demand an immediate response on Malaysia's part, one made imperative by current developments in the politics of international relations that threaten to destabilise many parts of the world.

Apathy is no longer an option given the Bali blasts, whoever the perpetrator may be.

Be it Western subversion, as alleged by some, or al-Qaeda aggression, as claimed by others, the signal is unequivocal - the country's defence must be strengthened substantially and instantly.

An atmosphere of impending militaristic threat from either terrorism or imperialism, or even both, calls for unusual levels of dedication to national interest in all respects.

That national interest is paramount goes without saying, making the negotiations for military hardware procurement extremely important because in every sale and purchase exercise the intention of the vendor is to maximise profit, while the buyer must optimise value-for-money.

The two objectives are not always compatible.

Evaluation is then indispensable and is accomplished by testing the product and studying its promised potential and past performance.

The last is indeed a very dependable guide for machines and, more so, man.

This is the rationale behind resumes, curriculum vitae and biodata.

And, a most enviable resume must surely belong to the Prime Minister.

He delivered before and, all things being equal, he should also deliver in the future.

Hence, the very high regard held for him by many, including his critics.

Two decades of his premiership have brought unprecedented growth to most parts of the country governed by Barisan Nasional.

Even an unexpected financial meltdown and the ensuing economic slowdown

have done nothing but enhanced his reputation.

Internationally, he is a force to be reckoned with.

Is it any wonder, then, that there is an ongoing appeal for the Prime Minister to stay on, if not in office then, in Parliament at least, despite his stated desire to step down.

It is, therefore, confusing when a few in powerful positions rebuke some for voicing what is not an uncommon desire among the public.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad looks to be in good health.

He is, too, in complete control of his faculties as evidenced by an unimpaired lucidity.

He remains a highly respected international leader.

Why should the nation not choose to show its continued confidence in the Prime Minister's leadership?

After all, is not the choice to be or not to be his, ultimately?

Why then the absurd rush to denounce what is a reasonable appeal?

Because, it is argued, there ought to be respect for the decision made by Dr Mahathir.

Yet, is it disrespectful to remonstrate with him in the name of national interest?

To beseech him for a little more of his time and tutelage.

Is it not the biggest honour for him if the people were to say, "Please stay if you can because we still need you but, if you must go we will understand and respect your decision?"

Instead, we are expected to say, "Thank you and Godspeed."

Granted, that the quicker the change the earlier will Dr Mahathir's successful tutelage manifest itself.

He is on record, several times over, as having voiced confidence in his anointed successor's ability.

In a time of serious global flux, however, circumspection is not a bad thing, no matter how unflattering it is to any particular individual.

Rather, national interest requires that every citizen live beyond the limited confines of selfinterest, Dr Mahathir included.

Regardless of whether they are friend or foe, therefore, he must weigh the consequences of ignoring those voices.

Yes, missiles and warships, fighter jets and bombs, battle tanks and electronic warfare can be bought to strengthen our national defence.

The more the better, and more of the most advanced would be best.

No matter what is said of defence expenditure, it must surely be obvious that an overtly pacifist perspective can leave the country in the lurch at the most awkward moments.

A cautious balance among social, economic and military development should then be the road pursued.

Nevertheless, at the end of the day it is leaders who must make decisions and come up with the right balance of diplomacy, alliances and military preparedness.

Because proof of the pudding is in the eating, there can be no doubting Dr Mahathir's ability, either at the helm or as a very senior voice of reason. As such, if he can stay, then he should.