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## The promise of space

IT is a testament to the pace of technological change that what might have seemed literally outlandish a few short years ago now not only makes excellent sense but is, in fact, already manifest reality. The impending formation of Malaysia's National Space Agency this July will come seven years after Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad first declared that aerospace development would be a priority for Malaysia. Since that 1995 overture, Malaysian satellites sent into orbit include Binariang's Measat communications birds and the TiungSat-1 meteorological and Earth-imaging package, with the new NSA looking to send up another remote-sensing satellite with Russian technology.

Associated with these innovations have been rapid advances in the level of local aerospace expertise and the size of the industry in both manpower and value. Aerospace development is also a prime crucible of co-operation between the Government and the private sector, and among Malaysia and the nations assisting us in these endeavours. Bilateral relations with Russia, in particular, are soaring to new heights on Malaysia's desire to advance our expertise in extreme science, technology, engineering and medicine, be it in outer space or in Antarctica. As such, these initiatives are also playing an important role in helping restructure international relationships to fit the 21st Century.

Even if the sky is no longer the limit, however, flying off "to infinity and beyond" is a very down-to-earth matter of developing the necessary skills and expertise. At this stage of human exploration, the true challenge of space is still in the effort to get there. Yet, as technological advance remains the single most potent indicator of socio-economic development, Malaysia's initiatives in space are a holding brief on behalf of all developing nations against being left even further behind as the developed world climbs exponentially to escape velocity.

Far from indulging in science-fiction fantasies, this is about ensuring that the benefits of leading-edge science and technology become a fact of life down here on Earth. For all we know, or will know with our new remote-sensing meteorological technology, somewhere in low earth orbit might even be found the solution to the filthy water slopping out of our taps.

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