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## Reviving Malaysia-US ties

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IT SEEMS rather appropriate that I should review Malaysian-American relations from the perspective of a sometime diplomat.

In the soon-to-be 45 years since the relationship began on August 31 1957, there have been only two important factors which have made a considerable impact on Malaysian attitudes towards Americans.

First, their support prior to the Indonesian Confrontation and during and after the unfortunate event, which hastened the demise of Sukarno's presidency, earned the Americans our gratitude.

Secondly, Vice-President Al Gore's rude remarks at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) dinner held by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on November 16 1998.

The incident dismayed us and resulted in the cooling of relations with the Clinton Administration.

I wrote 17 years ago in my book Tunku Abdul Rahman and Malaysia's Foreign Policy, 1963-1970 that the relations between Malaysia and the US were always amicable, adding that "the relations became cordial and warm, especially during the Johnson presidency (1963-1969)".

"President Lyndon Baines Johnson visited Malaysia in 1967, and became the first American President ever to visit the country." Hitherto, he remains the only one.

Richard Nixon visited us when he was out of office. Later this year, Bill Clinton will come here.

Johnson told me he wanted to honour Malaysians by visiting us - for having successfully battled militant communism, which was winning the war against the US' military might in Vietnam.

The relationship has been wholly marked by the preponderance of goodwill and cordiality until Al Gore's blunder as a result of bad advice by the American Embassy. All this is behind us. We must move forward.

Dr Mahathir's official working visit to Washington next week marks a new milestone in bilateral relations, a clear shift in their priorities prompted by realpolitik. Dr Mahathir, freed of politicking in his 15-party coalition and by a weakened Opposition, wants to strengthen ties with Malaysia's largest trading partner.

The Bush Administration wants to enlarge its friendship with the moderate Muslim world amid mounting criticism of American policy in the Arab world, which is losing allies, friends and potential partners in the Islamic world. I'm quite sure American policymakers know the distinction between allies and potential friends or partners, who will be very critical for Washington's coalition against terrorism.

The Prime Minister's journey takes place at a time when his popularity at home is soaring, and his domination of Umno and the Barisan Nasional is undisputed.

On the international level, his various positions and the release of Suu Kyi (brokered by the PM's special adviser and also UN Special Envoy to Myanmar, Tan Sri Razali Ismail) have further boosted Dr Mahathir's standing.

Razali paid tribute to the PM for his contribution to the happy event, for Dr M was much involved in the matter as everyone in KL knows. Dr Mahathir is a happy man indeed.

The US in 1941 needed a Grand Alliance against the Fascism of Germany, Italy and Japan, just as the September 11 attacks on the World Trade

Center and the Pentagon created the global coalition against terror. Can Washington sustain this?

A new "concert of powers" - big and small - will be necessary to maintain peace and keep the terrorists at bay.

If I were advising the Americans, I should tell them not to wrangle too much over details. Give and take: Win some and lose some.

In the early years of Independence, the relationship with Great Britain was the central tradition of Malaysian diplomacy. It was embarrassingly unambiguous. We made a grievous mistake, for we shouldn't have become dependent or expected favours from it. We ought to have become more self-reliant. Tun Razak and Dr Mahathir reoriented Malaysian foreign policy.

We put greater emphasis on our relationship with Washington, Beijing and the then Soviet Union. At the best of times - in the Eighties and early-Nineties - there were about 40,000 Malaysian students in the US.

Though we now may have only about 8,000 (only 778 are government-sponsored), education remains one of the strong pillars (besides security and defence cooperation, and trade) of the Malaysian-American relationship.

Dr Mahathir's politically correct response to the September 11 attacks and his arrest of Islamic militants (long before the September 11 incidents) have bolstered his political standing among the non-Muslims and the moderate Malays. He appears to have regained middle-Malaysia. All this has not gone unnoticed by Washington's power-elite and the European Union, and our neighbours. For sure, at least for now, Dr Mahathir has excoriated Pas' Islamic extremism.

Malaysia has, I believe, come out of recession. At present, our bilateral trade is healthy - could be better, of course - worth a total of US\$29.6 billion (RM112.48 billion), with exports valued at US\$17.8 billion and imports US\$11.8 billion - US\$6 billion in KL's favour.

The March trade surplus rose due largely to recovery in orders from the US. Malaysia is the US' 11th largest trading partner, and its 17th largest export market. The US exports more to us than it does to Russia, India, and Indonesia combined!

The Americans continue to be our biggest source of foreign direct investment (FDI) - US\$2.9 billion until October 1 last year.

I expect Dr Mahathir's visit will spur positive business sentiment for mutual benefit.

I shall not talk about what Dr Mahathir and Bush will raise during their second face-to-face meeting. I shall give my views and assessment after their meeting.

One thing I know for certain - the two and a half hours or more of meetings between Dr Mahathir and Bush, Vice-President Dick Cheney and National Security Adviser Condoleeza Rice, all at the White House, will usher in a new phase of political and economic realism in Malaysia-US relations.

The US can count on Malaysia for more than just fighting terrorism in return for a better understanding of our domestic and foreign policies and more importantly the recognition of who we are in the Islamic world and among the developing countries.

Dr Mahathir will be chairman of NAM (Non-Aligned Movement) and OIC (Organisation of Islamic Conference) beginning next year. As chairman, Dr Mahathir will be the interlocutor for both organisations. Washington cannot ignore the spokesman of these movements, nor would it want to.

His international position notwithstanding, Dr Mahathir will lead the ruling coalition in the next general election.

For the next five years, whatever Washington thinks (and this is getting progressively positive) of Dr Mahathir, he is the epitome of a successful

moderate Muslim leader who, for nearly 21 years, has been managing a multi-religious, multi-lingual and multi-cultural Malaysia which is incredibly prosperous and stable.

It is even more striking because Malaysians have attained what they have today through regular elections.

Washington should not have any lingering doubts about us - we shall be friends of all and enemy of none except those who want to destroy us. Dr Mahathir is one Muslim leader who does not wink or nod at Islamic extremism. Umno has fought and won thus far a long war against Pas' highly conservative brand of Islam.

Malaysian-American relations are at a buoyant level as Dr Mahathir and Bush prepare for their meeting. They must focus on what unites rather than what divides us.

If one looks hard enough, one will find that whether the enemy was Hitler, Communism, or Islamic extremism, a successful working relationship depends on mutual esteem and non-interference in each other's domestic affairs, and not on one nation being far more powerful than the other.

Ancient wisdom says even the mighty must sometimes tread carefully lest it undermines multi-lateral support for the wider and crucial battle against the terrorist menace.

Let's go back to the goodwill days of the Johnson-Tunku-Tun Razak partnership.

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