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US-Malaysia relations getting even closer

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THINGS got even better after the Prime Minister met President George W. Bush at the White House yesterday. It seems right that Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is in Washington during the fullness of spring, a time of greater exuberance than any other season.

No meeting has excited Malaysians more than this.

If there is one thing that I am learning on this trip, it's this: make friends, many pals. Dr Mahathir has and is making many friends in the American capital which will surprise his detractors and the Opposition.

Confidence can build mountains. What makes this trip so different is that it comprises few people, unlike his other overseas trips.

I believe Dr Mahathir and Bush have achieved a degree of success, as far as could be perceived. Malaysia's support for a two-state solution in which both Palestine and Israel will have the right to exist and Dr Mahathir's condemnation of terrorism are viewed positively by the Bush Administration as well as the Republican and Democratic legislators on Capitol Hill.

That notwithstanding, Dr Mahathir will continue to speak his mind on evolving issues and unsettled ongoing international problems. If I may add, we do want quick progress towards ending the Palestinian-Israeli conflict - the longer it lasts, the more dangerous it is, not only to the region but to the world.

Israel's ruling Likud Party has passed an emergency resolution never to allow the establishment of a Palestinian State, making peace efforts there more difficult, a move which will enrage the Arab world and perhaps disappoint the Americans too.

We all know neither Prime Minister Ariel Sharon nor his rival, former PM Benyamin Netanyahu, has any affection for an independent Palestinian state but each was forced by Washington and the exigencies of politics and diplomacy to accept the concept.

Netanyahu clearly, when he gave weak support for the Oslo peace process, and Sharon explicitly when he said several times he would support Palestinian nationhood, albeit on very restrictive terms.

Dr Mahathir has come here with the noblest zeal to promote the best interests of Malaysia and the ummah. He has been and is expressing our views and that of the Muslims on many matters with candour and considerable skill.

If he has failed, he can say he has honestly done his best because it's never easy to influence an American president even though he knows that as long as the US maintains its bias in favour of Israel, it will be difficult for Arab countries, and even other Islamic nations such as us to move towards the middle ground.

If Osama bin Laden is alive he is gaining new recruits in the Middle East because Likud's assertions, the recent Israeli incursions and an American attack on Iraq would only further destabilise the region.

The Bush posture on foreign policy, on Israel in particular, is based on a narrower definition of American national interest and a clear ordering of priorities: fighting terror and prosecuting the Bush Doctrine - either you are with us or against us. Since US foreign policy is still in flux, listening to Dr Mahathir's world-view, reflecting moderate Muslim opinion, should help Bush as he ponders his next move in the Middle East.

The meeting should establish a new momentum for an invigorating

relationship founded on mutual understanding and respect for each other's sovereignty and esteem. It has, I believe, improved attitudes and ties in both directions.

Besides us, the Bush Administration is also showing a sudden interest in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim nation, which practises moderate Islam in general, but whose secular traditions are being threatened of late by emerging extremist groups.

A joint declaration on cooperation to combat international terrorism was initialled, which should be able to meet the challenges of terrorism, no longer encumbered, as it were, by the absence of an understanding.

Nations must prevail over, not succumb to, the growing and elusive menace. We have done the right thing (and long before the Sept 11 attacks) by condemning all forms of terrorism by militant groups as well as States on civilians, regardless of justification.

This declaration, which is salutary, must have the broad-based support of most nations to be workable since they are all vulnerable to terrorism.

Dr Mahathir has charted a new path and opened doors. Something has been bestowed upon Malaysia for having dared enough to be ourselves!

There is justifiable pride that the White House, the Pentagon, the Treasury, State Department and senators and congressmen have got a fresh view of us and we of the Americans.

The role now devolving upon Dr Mahathir is extremely important, if arduous.

His energy, in his triple capacities - as PM-cum-Minister of Finance, Chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) - shall pervade near and far. He will advocate measures and take any action which in his judgment would aid in securing the triumph of Malaysian diplomacy.

This is one precedent his successors will wish they can follow. But that moment will be a while yet. Meanwhile, Dr Mahathir will be busy as the armour-bearer of modern Islam, which he wears with the most singular unselfishness regardless of his political popularity.

The Prime Minister will enhance the struggle, his personal crusade, to integrate Islamic values with democratic ideas, defining a modern aspect of enlightened Malay-Muslim experience and the pursuit of happiness.

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