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## 2005 foreign policy imperatives

By Munir Majid

QUIET diplomacy has many advantages: it does not generate the excitement which can cause international relations to get out of hand and make serious dispute out of disagreement.

It also achieves many unsung successes, things which are taken for granted such as undisturbed movement of people, goods and services among states, even a common stand in the international political system.

However, in today's world, with fast moving dangers and issues and consequences, where the ability to mould international opinion is an important construct of diplomacy, in situations especially of relative weakness, an active and media savvy component to foreign policy practice is also a necessity.

Malaysia has not always been reticent or quiet in its diplomacy. Relatively recently, former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's sharp remarks against American unidimensional policy to fight international terrorism, is an example of Malaysian willingness to speak out. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has not exactly been holding back in foreign policy, even if his style of delivery is somewhat different, but his predisposition has been to look for constructed solutions, as in bilateral relations with Singapore.

There is nevertheless the need for Malaysian foreign policy practitioners to craft an active multilateral plan to find solutions and to forge engagements in a world of international terror, in a world that is becoming increasingly anti-Muslim, in a world that could also come to harm Malaysia, a Muslim-majority country. Such a plan, in other words, would serve the national interest.

There seems to be optimism that peace would break out in 2005. This mood is largely the outcome of an assessment that President George Bush would be more conciliatory in his second term. With elections due in Palestine and Iraq next month, there is an expectation, perhaps more a hope, that progress towards a peaceful Middle East will be made, with the state of Palestine established well within the next four years.

Without wanting to be a stick in the mud, we all have seen enough of the twists and turns in the Middle East not to be too sanguine about the future. Nevertheless, whether it is peace or war and terror that breaks out, we should be prepared for it.

It is here that Malaysia, as chairman of the OIC, should engage the Americans, starting from the foreign policy establishment in Washington, to show how democracy and economic progress work among 250 million Muslims in Southeast Asia - larger than the population in the Middle East where the Americans see most of the trouble in the world coming from and which the Americans see as defining Islam.

Here, in our part of the world, is the Islam that is real and tested, the Islam that works for the people. Sometimes, we describe it as moderate or progressive Islam, but I find it a qualification to Islam which is unnecessary, even gratuitous. What we should say is: Here it is. Islam true and real. It works. It builds and does not destroy. It is no mere rhetoric - Islam does not support terror.

We should bring a consciousness of what is positively happening in Southeast Asia to Washington, and bring Washington again to Southeast Asia to see that reality.

There is also a domestic political dimension to the job of diplomatic

work that must be done. If Abdullah does not take the lead part, as OIC chairman, someone else might try to fill it, even without the OIC appurtenance, say only with a university sinecure in Washington.

The Malaysian foreign policy establishment must be smart and sharp to establish the diplomatic beachhead and spread out from there. That positioning could also become critical should the Thai Prime Minister try to fob off his cack-handed management of his problems in the south as a case of Islamic terrorism.

We should anticipate this by wringing that chicken in the neck, by showing that our forte is progress and development, and by showing that it is the failure to achieve this in the south of Thailand that is causing all the problems there. Indeed, by showing our absolute willingness to engage in that forgotten growth triangle.

The next big ticket item our foreign policy practitioners should be working on next year is on the development of the East Asian Economic Community.

The first summit will be held in Kuala Lumpur. This is a Malaysian initiative which is at last going to take off. We have to think through the path of developing the economic co-operation and integration, in tandem with Asean.

The path in the development of the European Union is an obvious model, although of course there are many political, economic, cultural and social differences.

Nevertheless, there are many aspects of functional integration which are worthy of close study, especially in trade, investment and a common market. The Malaysian foreign establishment should open up, and invite the participation of outsiders, from inside and outside the country, to contribute to the thought and block-building process.

This it has done - one brainstorming session with respect to the Prime Minister's notion of setting up a Centre for Conflict Resolution in Malaysia - but there will have to be more of such sessions and outside participation.

The centre is an important project, but it should not consume all effort so much so that wider foreign policy imperatives are neglected. Perhaps Wisma Putra could outsource the intellectual process to a body like ISIS which, in turn, could be instructed to engage local and foreign experts.

Foreign policy has become too important to be left to the dictates of quiet diplomacy alone.

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