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## Challenges and uncertainty

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INTERNATIONAL and regional economic and political systems are constantly evolving. In this state of flux, diplomacy still has an important role to play, says RAZALI ISMAIL.

THE year ahead augurs well for Malaysia. The transfer of power from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has proceeded smoothly, and by any standard of evaluation, the Prime Minister has achieved much in his early days in office.

Yet, while attention has understandably been focused on the Prime Minister's domestic initiatives, his understanding of foreign affairs, gained in his time as Foreign Minister, should serve Malaysia in good stead in the years to come.

The Prime Minister has already publicly stated his willingness to put relations with Singapore on a steady footing, though genuine progress will also require movement on hitherto stubborn details. At this challenging time for the Islamic world, his experience and knowledge of Islamic affairs will be especially invaluable to Malaysia in its capacity as chairman of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and, more broadly, in its capacity as chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

Just as importantly, his appreciation of the rhythm of international relations would be invaluable to Malaysia as it attempts to find ways to come to terms with the unforeseen forces that are currently reshaping the international environment.

For most of the world's 180-odd nations, the "state" is seen as the primary actor in international affairs, while the principles of "state sovereignty" and "non-intervention" in each other's domestic affairs and "peaceful settlement of disputes" are sacrosanct.

International order and stability come from a "balance of power" between states. Small nations, meanwhile, see the United Nations - at least when it is working properly - as the most effective institution for stabilising relations between nation states.

Sticking to these fundamental principles has certainly served Malaysia well in the years since Independence. Yet, there can be no escaping the fact that the world in which Malaysians live is changing fast. The Cold War is over. Today it is being argued that the major threats to international stability are seen to come from international terrorism, and the proliferation of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, and in the worse-case scenario a link between the two.

Consequently, many observers believe that the existing principles governing international behaviour will need to be re-written, and international institutions restructured, to effectively tackle these "new" threats.

Talk of pre-emptive action to defeat these challenges wherever they may be and before they emerge is very much to the fore, and has both its supporters and dissenters.

To varying degrees, the logic of taking effective early steps can be applied to dealing with other challenges such as global warming, AIDS, SARS, international crime and drugs syndicates, migration, people smuggling, and economic globalisation.

Separately but no less importantly, Asean - an organisation that was founded on the very principle of "non-intervention" - is also evolving, albeit slowly. Thus far, most progress has been in the economic sphere.

Growing competition from China will likely speed up moves towards closer economic co-ordination.

Lately there has also been progress in areas that even a decade ago would have seemed unthinkable. Since Sept 11 various measures have also been implemented - both at the regional level and bilaterally - to tackle the challenge of terrorism. Last May, at their annual gathering in Phnom Penh, Asean Foreign Ministers broke with their tradition of not commenting on the domestic affairs of another country by taking positions on developments in Myanmar, which some said affected Asean's international credibility and were not in keeping with the evolving standards and practices of the organisation.

Of course, Asean is unlikely to become the European Union (EU). The Indonesian glue that traditionally held the organisation is still absent. And when push comes to shove, national interests tend to dominate. In the round, however, it is difficult to disagree with the recent observation of the former Indonesian Foreign Minister, Ali Alatas, that "respect for sovereignty will remain a basic principle for Asean. We realise that we have to reinvent ourselves in order to remain relevant, in order to remain effective."

So what does this mean for Malaysia? Broadly speaking, we must appreciate that the way in which the international and regional economic and political systems are evolving, combined with the emergence of new threats, means that Malaysia will have to accept some erosion of its sovereignty, and in many cases will actually benefit from doing so.

Conversely, we must accept that rigid adherence to the principle of "non-interference" elsewhere is not always in Malaysia's interests; nor should we use "non-interference" as an excuse for doing nothing.

At the same time, we must remember that while our world is changing, it is not changing as much as some journalists and pundits would like us to think. To be sure, new threats and challenges are a real and present danger.

However, the old world of international relations dominated by nation states has not been replaced. The rise of China and the steady emergence of India and their impacts on the region and the world should not be underestimated.

Internationally, the military pre-eminence of the United States, specifically expressed in the form of its new found doctrine of "preemption", can also be seen as a major ordering - or disordering - factor, depending on one's perspective.

As a small yet proactive country, it is only natural that Malaysia will feel the turbulence resulting from the confluence between the realities of both the new world and the old more than most. In order to manage this situation, we must work hard to ensure that, as they strive to improve their own security, the larger powers do not overlook the concerns of smaller nations.

In policy terms, while accepting the reality of greater intervention, we must learn from the events leading up to the second Iraq conflict and do all we can to ensure that the focus is always on finding "regional" solutions to regional problems, or on coalitions between the region and the UN, or between the region and other interested parties.

Globally, we must work to strengthen and revive the UN. The inability of the organisation to prevent the US and the United Kingdom from acting outside its authority and the subsequent polarisation of the Security Council and the General Assembly was an issue of concern to Malaysians.

To many, the solution to the problem is to give the UN more power to address "transnational" threats. This means convincing the US and the other permanent members of the Security Council that only by doing this

will the UN avoid irrelevance.

The UN also risks becoming irrelevant if reform comes at the expense of its weaker members' security, or if it allows a situation to prevail where certain member states can take "preemptive" steps against other UN members without the approval of the Security Council.

To my mind, the best way to square the circle would be to enhance legitimacy in the composition of the Security Council. After all, it stands to reason that if more intrusions on states' sovereignty are to occur, then the international mechanisms for controlling and regulating the actions should also be enhanced.

Malaysia also needs to take a close look at its relationship with the US. We should escape from the cycle of public altercations that have at times defined our relationship. Moreover, the public nature of our relationship has made it harder for cooler heads to prevail. Against this backdrop, efforts to refocus our relationship by, among other things, strengthening closer business-to-business ties should help to get relations back on a more even keel.

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