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Subtle shift in foreign policy, sans bombast

By Brendan Pereira

THE pomp and headlines that followed Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's recent tour of the Western powers obscured this reality: a subtle shift in approach in Malaysia's foreign policy.

No where was this more evident than in the White House where Abdullah met US President George W. Bush for about 60 minutes. A laundry list of issues were discussed, from the contentious move by Israel to build a wall to keep out Palestinians to the ice-breaking fact that more than 7,000 Malaysians are in universities across America.

Consensus was reached at times, like when both leaders agreed that despite all the sideshows, Palestinians deserved a place to call home.

Disagreement was clear on occasions like when Abdullah put forward the view of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference and Non-Aligned Movement that the US appeared to be Israel's corner man in the fight with Palestine. Bush disagreed.

But there was no rancour or strident language. Both leaders agreed to disagree on several other issues. Midway through, Bush said that the US hoped to be accorded a minimum respect by other countries.

Abdullah replied that Malaysia understood the important role the US played in many areas around the globe and was prepared to give it "more than a minimum" amount of respect.

Still, this position did not mean rolling over and saying yes when the Bush administration suggested that Malaysia send troops as part of a peacekeeping force to Iraq.

It was the same in London where some painful home truths was delivered in a palatable way during a meeting between Abdullah and Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Underlying this change in style is the belief that Western powers will be less antagonistic to constructive suggestions by Malaysia if it is delivered sans the bombast.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar summed it up neatly: "No matter how legitimate and laudable our concerns were, some people were concerned that we were unable to make our case because of our relationship with the powers that be.

"This does not mean that we are going to soft-pedal or sell out on certain issues. But there will be a new style. One of the Prime Minister's strengths is that he is able to raise difficult matters in a manner which is not threatening."

Dr Dzul kifli Ahmad, head of Parti Islam SeMalaysia's research centre, said that there was value in changing the style.

"The world seems to be at a stage when people are tired of confrontation. If this style provides the PM with leverage to bring forward issues that are important to the Muslim world, then it should be supported."

He believed that the substance of Malaysia's foreign policy and its independent position on various issues would remain.

But he expected the administration to play more of a leadership role for the developing world because it was also representing the OIC and NAM.

"To me, the decision to send a medical team to Iraq can be interpreted as an attempt to help fellow Muslims who are in trouble."

He is not wrong.

During closed-door sessions, Abdullah reminded Bush, President Jacques

Chirac and Blair on the importance of making sure that the turmoil in Iraq settled down and that Iraqis could go to the polls in January to vote for the leaders of their choice.

Sending a medical team and galvanising Iraq's neighbours to contribute peacekeeping troops is part of that process of helping stabilise the situation on the ground.

Dr Chandra Muzaffar, a social and political commentator, noted while it was good to engage the world powers, any expectations of what could be achieved from having good relations with the US should be tempered with some realism.

He noted that while Malaysia and the majority of the United Nations General Assembly condemned the building of the wall by Israel, the US was one of six countries who opposed the resolution.

"Realpolitik comes into play. They may like you and find you an affable person but in the end, policy is dictated by their own narrow interests," he added.

Still, he felt that Abdullah had to develop his own distinctive style from his predecessor, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The former prime minister earned his spurs with a straight-talking style and fashioned himself as the voice of the South.

"He spoke with a certain degree of moral standing. And that was mainly because the country he represented had been fairly successful.

"In some ways, the position of the country rather than the background of the leader or the style is important," noted Chandra.

From day one, Abdullah has been clear on several issues.

Firstly, that he was not out to fill Dr Mahathir's shoes as far as foreign policy was concerned.

Also, contrary to popular perception that he was only interested in a domestic agenda, he believed that his administration should also focus on the international front.

That was why just after taking over from Dr Mahathir on Oct 31 last year, he turned to Syed Hamid and said that he saw it as destiny that at the time he was taking over the top job in the country, Malaysia was leading the OIC and NAM.

He wanted to be a worthy leader of both organisations, he said. The soft and nuanced approach may be his way of making sure that the world powers give some consideration to views being raised outside their borders.

Is there a guarantee that this softer style will yield some results and bring about a change in US policies?

Absolutely none. But realpolitik dictates that the West be engaged on all major issues.

Recent history has shown that raising the decibel level and ante all the time in foreign relations may result in the important message being drowned out.

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