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Our foreign policy not cast in stone

By Hardev Kaur

The substance of Malaysia's foreign policy, including its relationship with Singapore, remains the same despite a difference in style between Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Both leaders have gone the extra mile in championing the cause of the developing world while engaging the developed world in discussion. This has taken Malaysia to international prominence with the spotlight on its chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar has had it good at Wisma Putra for almost seven years - six under Dr Mahathir's inimitable leadership and the past eight months working with the more subtle Abdullah. There is, of course, the bonus for him in Abdullah's 8 1/2 years experience in international affairs as Foreign Minister.

The veteran minister, also an astute politician, talks to HARDEV KAUR about how Malaysia is responding to the dictates of the times.

Q: Has there been a change in Malaysia's foreign policy under Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi?

A: There is a lot of talk of a change in foreign policy under Pak Lah, forgetting the fact that foreign policy, using Pak Lah's words, is not cast in stone. It is fluid, it has to be current and must respond to current occurrences.

It was the same when Dr Mahathir took over as Prime Minister. The foundation is there but you have to make new approaches to suit the changing world environment. We have a very strong foreign policy stance. Our position is well known on regional and international issues, on matters that affect justice and humanity. And all these remain unchanged.

The way he responds to the situation would definitely depend on his approach and style.

But if he (Abdullah) answers questions differently from Dr Mahathir, that is to be expected because each individual has his own way.

I have worked under both - under Dr Mahathir for about six years as Foreign Minister and now under Abdullah. I do not have to make adjustments in terms of our foreign policy stance.

This is because foreign policy is actually the Prime Minister's policy. We are just the interpreters and implementers of that policy. I do not find that I have to make departures and adjustments. We just go on looking at issues and problems. It is not difficult because the man who is now the Prime Minister has been responsible for the Foreign Ministry for eight and half years - one of the longest for a Foreign Minister.

Q: Has the approach to dealing with Singapore changed?

A: Both accept the fact that Singapore is a close neighbour and our historical, economic and political ties are sometimes intertwined. Both countries are interested in resolving issues that stand between us because we have a bigger picture in terms of economic, trade and investments. I think all this while, Dr Mahathir as Prime Minister had tried to work on the relationship. But the style now is different. Pak Lah cannot just say he will continue. He has to find new approaches and try new ways to see whether they are possible. But that does not mean that he has changed the policy regarding the national or strategic interest of Malaysia.

Dr Mahathir cannot be Pak Lah and Pak Lah cannot be Dr Mahathir - and this is according to Pak Lah himself.

If the issue was contentious when it was dealt with by Dr Mahathir and if Pak Lah were to take a different position, then people would view it as a weakening in our position. But there is no weakening of our position on core issues. Pak Lah is friendly, but friendly does not mean he is weak. Once he makes a decision, it is very difficult to move (him).

Q: Does being the chair of both OIC and NAM, two organisations that account for a large proportion of UN membership, impact on the foreign policy approach?

A: When I wanted the chairmanship of OIC for Malaysia, Dr Mahathir asked why? My response was that we have been saying a lot of things, we have been criticising and we have a lot of views. Don't you think we should be at the helm in order to do some of the things that we have been saying are lacking?

As for the chairmanship of OIC, it was not our turn, it was Africa's turn. But we got the support of some of the Arab countries, Saudi Arabia and Qatar and we were able to win and Dr Mahathir commented that "you are a fantastic marketeer".

After OIC, I was thinking of NAM and everyone in the ministry objected arguing that we did not have the time, we did not have the people but ultimately the decision was mine. I went to Dr Mahathir who in turn wanted to know whether I was crazy. I argued that it would be good for Malaysia. We talk of South-South co-operation, of Third World co-operation. Some of the talking has to be seen in the context of how we do things. It was agreed upon and we did well.

When Pak Lah took over, he was landed with leading two important organisations and he said that maybe it is "takdirkan oleh Tuhan" (fated). We accepted and we must continue to provide the leadership.

Q: Have we, as Chairman of both OIC and NAM, managed to bring the two organisations forward and enhance their capabilities and impact?

A: We have to be judged by others. The membership seems to be appreciative and feels that we are doing what is expected of us. For example in the OIC, to call for a meeting of the whole body is difficult. We call for focus groups - the OIC Committee meeting on Palestine, an immediate meeting to discuss the situation in Iraq and developments in the Middle East. When we decided to meet the Quartet, the comment of the membership was that Malaysia was fantastic. Immediately after the decision of the KL meeting, we carried out the function tasked to us. People see that we are serious.

We told the Quartet that we want to have a relationship that is not one-off but that there should be follow-ups and that we need input from an organisation that represents the Islamic nations.

It is the same with NAM. People thought that we could not organise the NAM meeting but it was very well done. It was all business-like. In that respect it speaks well for the new man (Pak Lah) and any doubts people may have have been erased. He may not say it the way Dr Mahathir might but Pak Lah has his own mind.

Q: Malaysia had called for the restructuring of the United Nations some time ago. Will Malaysia continue to pursue this, especially in the light of current world events?

A: At one time - when Pak Lah was the Foreign Minister and we were President of the UN General Assembly - we were a voice in the wilderness on the restructuring of the UN. But now it is accepted that the UN, a creature of the Second World War, has to change to meet the new paradigm shift with globalisation, IT and new players on the global stage. What was once a voice in the wilderness has now become current. Whether we will succeed or not (is to be seen) as the UN is a multilateral body, so big and with all sorts of vested interests. It is not easy to finally come up

with something which is acceptable to everybody. That fact is recognised but the move is already there to restructure the world body.

Pak Lah speaks the same language as Dr Mahathir did on the need for UN reforms. But no one can deny the fact that we have no alternative to the UN. And for Malaysia to make the call brings greater meaning as we are leading two multilateral organisations - OIC and NAM.

Q: The Prime Minister is currently in China, a major Asian economy. The other major Asian economy is India. Will there be equal emphasis on India?

A: We have been very active in India. The new Indian Prime Minister has said that he is going to encourage investment, business-friendly and foreign-investor friendly policies. What we have done with India will continue. India is going to be another big economic powerhouse in South Asia.

Our relationship with East Asia is one aspect of our foreign policy and the relationship in South Asia is equally important to us. A change of leadership should not affect (the relations) unless there is a change of policy. But the assurance of the new Indian Government is that there would be no shift in policy.

Q: The approach to relations with Thailand and Indonesia?

A: Indonesia is important for the stability and strength of Asean. Its well-being, economic growth and stability is of great importance to Asean because it is the biggest Asean country. We must remember that our trade with Asean countries accounts for 26 per cent of our total trade and a lot of that trade is with Indonesia.

We share some land and maritime borders with both countries - Indonesia and Thailand - and we pay particular attention to ensuring our bilateral relations are strong and good. At the same time, we want to look at the overall perspective in terms of opportunities and challenges we face.

We continue to co-operate not only in the security area but in economic development as well. The policy of "prosper thy neighbour" will still continue. Look at Thailand with a population of 70 million and Indonesia with a population of 200 million. If their economies are doing well, it will benefit us a great deal.

Q: With regard to the Straits of Malacca, Singapore says it wants US patrols to prevent terrorism in the straits but Indonesia and Malaysia have a different view.

A: There is a misunderstanding about what we want and what Singapore wants. Malaysia and Indonesia are equally interested in seeing that the Straits of Malacca is secure. There is no difference here. Both our countries believe in the need for constant surveillance to ensure that it is a safe international navigation lane. But where we seem to defer is how we go about it. In this particular case no one single state, no matter how much interest they have, should invite a foreign or third party to secure and safeguard the sea lane without consultation with the littoral states. We do not want to learn of all these things from the media.

If there is a threat, we can sit down together and see what is the best way of facing it. There is a need to respect territorial sovereignty. We do not want to create a new dimension of threats which did not exist before. The fact that we invite a third party does not mean you can overcome threats. There may be new forms of threats because of the position of the third party.

People talk of the straits being narrow, the straits is busy. I wanted to see for myself. I went on a helicopter. Undeniably the straits is very busy and it is narrow. But in terms of record, there was only one incident of a pirate attack and that was also on the Sulawesi side, in the last six months.

The only thing that we question is someone else suggesting that there

should be a third party involved in the surveillance of the navigational lane. Just because you have an interest, you should not ignore the interest and sovereignty of the littoral states. That is all.

I do not like to create disagreements or disputes with Singapore. But if we continue to fight or highlight our differences in the media, then it can bring the relationship into a lot of difficulties. That is why we have to exercise a lot of restraint when reacting because we think that there must be a bigger picture. We are all concerned about a possible threat. So we should all sit down respecting the sovereignty of the littoral states before we take a carte blanche approach and say, okay a third party should come in because we cannot do it.

Q: Malaysia had reservations about Apec and then ASEM came along. How do we see the groupings of which Malaysia is now an active member?

A: We are a global player and as a trading nation we must not be overdependent on a single market. And we know that the biggest economic purchasing power in the world is Europe and this relationship is there and needs to be developed further. So the ASEM mechanism has been a useful mechanism. We pay a lot of importance to the ASEM summit, the ASEM Foreign Ministers meeting, ASEM Trade Ministers meeting and ASEM Finance Ministers meetings. ASEM therefore figures quite high on our list and in expanding our horizon. With the expansion of the EU to 25 members, it makes the relationship politically, economically and trade-wise very important.

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