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Doing a rebalancing act at the expense of multilateral relations

K.C. Boey

HOWARD: Feeling smug JOHN Howard who came into office seven years ago was looked upon as a foreign policy novice. This past week he has been strutting the international stage crowing vindication of his "rebalancing" of Australia's external relations.

The Prime Minister came home from the leaders' summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum well satisfied with his achievements in Bangkok at multilateral regional and bilateral levels.

To crown the week, "the world comes to Canberra", as one commentator put it, as Canberra played host to US President George W. Bush and Chinese President Hu Jintao.

In not so many words, Howard would have cause to be smug about what he had insisted from the start: that Australian policy ought never to be one of having to choose between the West (now principally US) and the East (Australia's immediate neighbourhood).

Or as Howard has oft said, that policy ought ever to have to come down to a "choice between history and geography".

In the overlapping State visits of Bush and Hu, Howard could present Australia as inherent broker of fraternal Sino-US relations, in all its symbolism if not in substance, in the absence of a tripartite gettogether.

More broadly, Howard could symbolically offer Australia as a meeting ground of East-West links.

Bangkok affirmed Howard's faith in the value of Apec to Australia - in multilateral atmospherics and bilateral outcomes.

The signing of the bilateral free trade agreement (FTA) with Thailand boosted claims that present policies gave the lie to assertions that the weight of relations with the US was hurting friendships in the region.

It follows a similar agreement with Singapore, and work towards FTAs with Japan and China, given ongoing frustrations with World Trade Organisation processes.

Meetings on the sidelines with other Apec leaders added weight to the regional balancing goal.

As much as Bangkok was notable for what Howard managed to achieve, it could be noted for what he declined to be drawn into getting involved in. Which is to be goaded into a confrontation with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The Opposition Labor Party had challenged Howard to confront Dr Mahathir over what has been represented as his anti-Semitic remarks at the leaders' summit of the Organisation of Islamic Conference in Putrajaya.

Howard, pressed by listeners on talkback radio before he left for Bangkok, had progressively turned up the volume on his initial riposte to let Dr Mahathir's remarks "through to the (wicket) keeper", while making light of Bush's elevation of Australia's status from deputy sheriff to sheriff.

Howard took the same stance in Bangkok. "It's better that I let him (Dr Mahathir) recede gently into retirement," he told journalists.

Pressed about his views on Dr Mahathir's career, all he would say was "I don't intend to give any kind of political valedictory about him. I don't intend to talk about him. Full stop."

In Australian eyes, relations between Australia and Malaysia have sunk to new lows. Public opinion is overwhelmingly critical of Dr Mahathir's "inflammatory" remarks in a time of terrorinduced fear and insecurity.

Yet there are those who wonder if the thrust of Dr Mahathir's address might have been misrepresented.

"I don't think I have ever seen more compelling and damning proof of bias than the widespread misrepresentation of Dr Mahathir's speech... which was done by extracting a few words out of context," one reader wrote in a letter to the editor.

"What he actually did was point to Jews' achievements in the world, then call on Muslims to abandon violence and emulate them - and that was called anti-Semitism."

Wrote another: "Instead of branding Dr Mahathir a racist, the media might ask him: 'Why?'"

He might be mad, or racist, or both, but he has first-hand knowledge of the attempt by world financiers, Jewish or not, to completely destroy the Malaysian economy.

"The full story did not get a run at the time, and Dr Mahathir is just making sure that it does before he quits."

Yet a third: "Dr Mahathir, many Australians would readily agree with you; this is not anti-Semitism - it's simply a political fact."

Among the politicians and media commentators, "good riddance" is the popular sentiment, with most harbouring the hope that Dr Mahathir's successor would be more temperate, in rhetoric at least, if not in substance. That Malaysia would chair the OIC over the next three years appears to have been missed in all that furore.

In Canberra, the Bush and Hu double act ranged from tragi-comedy and farce to solid substance. If Bush had noted Howard wincing over his elevation of Australia to sheriff status, he didn't appear to take much notice.

In his address to a rare joint sitting of Parliament, he urged Australia to take a leadership role in the AsiaPacific region and accept a responsibility to maintain the peace.

In a speech almost wholly devoted to security, he thanked Australians for Australia's military commitment in the war in Iraq. Not all Australians wanted to hear that.

Some Labor MPs wore peace doves on their lapels and refused to give Bush the obligatory standing ovation.

Greens senators heckled Bush during his address, protesting against the incarceration without charge of two Australian citizens alleged to have been involved with al-Qaeda in the war in Afghanistan.

In the public gallery were the wife and son of one of the two detained Australians, in Parliament as guests of the senators. Tragicomedy descended to farce as Bush started to leave. As one lighthearted commentary put it, "the day might have started as a high-security event staged with US military precision, but nothing could stop it in the end from degenerating into a classic Aussie wingding".

As pictures on the front pages showed, Howard "was eventually forced to throw himself, like a human shield, between his honoured visitor... and marauding Greens senators as they tried to accost the US President".

"Certain manoeuvres were per-formed that owed more to World Cup rugby (now taking place in Australia) than House of Representatives practice."

Hu followed Bush the next day, the first non-American to address a joint sitting of the Australian Parliament. He was spared the theatrics, with the Greens senators barred from being present after their protest of the previous day.

The senators had pledged to make themselves heard on human rights in China, and China's treatment of Tibetan nationals.

Pleasantries apart, Howard, Hu and fellow ministers signed a series of trade and economic agreements. These included a A\$30 billion (RM75

billion) agreement to sell liquefied natural gas to China - the biggest single export deal in Australian history.

The centrepiece was an overarching trade and economic framework that Trade Minister Mark Vaile compared with Australia's contribution from the 1950s to supply the resources Japan needed to become the economic power that it has grown to be.

While Howard may lay claim to having "rebalanced" Australia's international relationships, there are those who take issue with that.

Former chief diplomat Richard Woolcott is one who feels the Howard Government has "overcorrected" its foreign policy stance, pursuing close ties with the US at the expense of multilateral relations with the Asia-Pacific region.

Woolcott is a former secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Speaking at the National Institute for Asia and the Pacific in Canberra, he said that while the Bush and Hu visits were significant, they did not mean the Government had found the right balance.