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Vital to strengthen US ties

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I BELIEVE, in spite of what I hear, that President George W. Bush is a grudge-holder. He is also a "capable realist" when dealing with those who opposed the Iraqi invasion. However, Mexico, Chile, even Canada have learnt just how low their standings have sunk after they failed to give the US their support over Iraq.

Bush cancelled the Mexican and Hispanic Cinco De Mayo celebrations at the White House and Chile, another Security Council member that withheld support, had to watch with as much grace as it could muster as Washington accelerated, then signed, a free-trade agreement - that Santiago had waited for months to initial - with Singapore, an enthusiastic ally.

Bush cancelled a visit to Canada, a traditional friend-turned-miscreant. It seemed he never forgave James Baker, secretary of state under his father, who he thought did not work hard enough during the senior Bush's bid for re-election in 1992. But when he needed someone of stature to get him out of the mire of the Florida recount in the 2000 election, he deftly turned to Baker.

We will see what happens when Bush meets President Jacques Chirac, President Vladimir Putin and Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder on French soil at next week's G8 summit in Evian.

Perhaps it is too much to expect - but diplomacy is the art of the possible - Bush to exchange handshakes (and a few significant words) with Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who, along with the leaders of China, India and several other nations, has been invited by France to attend the alpine meeting that will focus on the world economy, aid to poor nations and fighting terrorism.

In any event, there was a time when Malaysia could safely be ignored by the United States. It was more or less in the right camp during the height of the Cold War. Later on, Malaysian neutrality and non-alignment kept it off the economic, military and ideological chessboard in the great game against the Soviet bloc.

America was focused on the arms race, on frontline states and proxy wars, on subterfuge and cloak-and-dagger work wherever communism of any shade threatened to rear its head, via democratic means or otherwise.

Americanism has always been exported, but to us in the farther reaches of the geostrategic map, it was usually benign. This benignity was not without mutual reward - a wellspring of goodwill was created and continues to flow to this day.

After the Cold War, the US - now the world's hyperpower - moved to exert itself where it was careful to tread lightly before. Non-aligned, small (and previously peripheral) nations, such as ours, fell into the ambit of its activist foreign policy. This is where the trouble began.

Last Friday, I took part in a panel discussion on US-Malaysia ties organised by ASLI. US Ambassador Marie T. Huhtala spoke forthrightly of the need to repair relations after the severe erosion caused by the war on Iraq. The gist of my comments and hers follow:

This time last year, US-Malaysia relations were on the mend. After Sept 11, Washington at last saw Malaysia's geo-political measure as a principled, rather than an opportunistic, ally in the international war on terror.

The friendship of our two countries had seemed poised to assume a level of value and recognition that could transcend the diminishing issue of the

jailing of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. Sept 11 seemed a turning point: Malaysia's consistent position that internal security argued forcefully for stringent measures, including the temporary suspension or abridgement of some civil liberties, looked to be tilting over the US's one-size-fits-all stand on human rights.

President George W. Bush's lengthily extended hand to Dr Mahathir in May last year gladdened our hearts. Washington appeared to respect not just our zero tolerance of terrorism but our point of view on it, our freedom and autonomy in the way we ran our country, our rigour in protecting our people and our sovereignty.

Anwar was too small an issue to snag the larger purpose of concerted action against international terrorism, which, though global in reach, is really a subject of domestic policy and prosecution.

Terrorism is a complex crime, requiring complex solutions. It was not simply a matter of disabling the terror networks and putting militants behind bars. Root causes had to be addressed; the terrorists had to be starved of their objectives and ends as well as their resources and means.

Everyone agrees that the war on terror, directed at a tiny minority of dispersed fanatics and their supporters, must not be enlarged into blunderbuss police action against the entire communities that are thought to harbour them.

The US and its allies must not behave like Israel on a global scale. The war on terror, which must essentially be fought by independent governments within their own territories, must not be unwittingly expanded into a clash of civilisations.

One year later, the situation in US-Malaysia relations appears to have reversed itself. I think they are at their lowest ebb in years, even lower than in 1999, the year of Anwar's detention. The reason for it is Iraq.

For me, Iraq has upstaged the war on terror and distracted us from the causes and effects of terrorism. For the US, it has seemed more important for its allies to support it in the invasion of Iraq than for it to support its allies in their domestic campaigns against terror.

Malaysia opposed the invasion on a number of grounds, top of which is the principle that war must be avoided at all costs and must only be fought as a last resort. Because the Iraq war was one of choice rather than necessity, fears of American unilateralism, hegemony and neo-imperialism - hitherto more a matter of theory than practice - are becoming concretised. This has made it harder for moderate Muslims, already on the back foot, to win the argument for a peaceful redress of Muslim grievances against the extremists.

I have said this many times before: I am not viscerally anti-American, and neither are a majority of Malaysians. The US-Malaysia relationship is like an ice-berg - only the 10 per cent above the water-line appears in the newspaper and TV headlines. The rest - trade, investment, education, among others - remains deep and extensive.

We remain committed to enhancing this multifaceted relationship and are careful to distinguish our American friends from the cruder aspects of their Government's foreign and security policy. I still believe America can act as a force for good in the world. It can and must do so in the Middle East by once and for all finding a permanent solution to the root cause of the region's conflict - the fate and future of Palestine.

There were many points of convergence between my viewpoints and Huhtala's, as indeed there are in the broad spectrum of relations between the two countries. Here is an excerpt of her remarks:

The US-Malaysia bilateral relationship is a hot issue at the moment. The past few months have seen a very public airing of differences between the two countries over the issue of Iraq. Many are asking the question, can

the relationship be restored to the warm ties we enjoyed just a year ago, when Prime Minister Mahathir was invited to the Oval Office by President Bush?

It would appear this is something both sides want. At the same time, it is impossible to deny that our bilateral relationship has been strained recently. Malaysia's opposition to the coalition action against Iraq is well known, and was not in itself a problem from Washington's point of view. Many countries around the world disagreed with us on Iraq.

But some of the public statements by senior Malaysian officials have castigated the US in antagonistic, occasionally offensive terms. American officials at the most senior levels in Washington were especially taken aback to hear the victims of the Sept 11 terrorist attacks dismissed as mere 'collateral damage', and irritated by allegations that the US was pursuing a war against Islam, a policy based on racism and an effort to dominate the world.

These are not helpful statements by any standard, and I'm here to tell you that Washington does take note of them. They are bound to have a harmful effect on the relationship. But we also realise that actions speak louder than words, and we recognise the important co-operation between Malaysia and the US on key issues that have remained strong throughout this period of rhetorical hostility.

The list of issues which unite our two countries is much larger than the list of our differences. I hope that both sides will take a deep breath, come to that vital realisation, and dedicate themselves to resolving our differences and moving forward on areas where we have common interests.

It is not surprising that we have had differences with Malaysia - in fact we have differences from time to time with even our closest allies. The important thing is to foster an open dialogue, as befits a mature relationship, and treat each other seriously, as the friends we are.

I have left out many of the substantive elements in her speech for reasons of space. Apart from the note of admonition at the beginning, she touched on areas in which the US could work with a successful, moderate Islamic country like Malaysia, such as support (and participation via Petronas, in policing, etc) for the reconstruction of Iraq under international auspices and for the road map to a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

I am sure Putrajaya would be more than receptive to both. If the disagreements between the US and Malaysia are confined to the rhetorical, then substantive co-operation between the two countries would indeed turn the spat over the last 12 months into water under the bridge.

US-Malaysia relations, I maintain, are stronger than the differences over Iraq. Let's venture to expunge any misunderstanding and suspicion and ensure that Iraq does not diminish the more important co-operation in traditional spheres and in the war against terror.

Both Malaysians and Americans have a stake in a burgeoning relationship. We have become a model and provide proof that a moderate Islamic state can succeed in the battle against extremism and obscurantism in the Muslim world.