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KL's chairmanship of NAM, OIC being observed

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A FEW months ago I was in the resort city of Los Cabos within the Baja California Sur region of Mexico. I have forgotten the sun, sea and the fun-loving Mexicans but what remains in mind was what Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar told us, a group of journalists.

Syed Hamid spoke of a meeting he had with the US Secretary of State General Colin Powell not long before.

The White House, Syed Hamid told us, would be monitoring Malaysia's chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and would also be keenly awaiting its leadership later this year of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) countries.

While Syed Hamid spoke of the meeting, American President George W. Bush

was somewhere in a hotel 10km down the coastal road. The Texan was in Mexico along with other leaders of Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation countries.

The Foreign Minister related to us that Powell had in jest told him that

should Malaysia lead both organisations into adopting too strong an anti-American stance, the White House would probably give Syed Hamid "a call".

The Foreign Minister, however, was quick to soften that by saying that Powell was probably joking. Maybe he was. Powell is after all a rather jovial person, at least on the outside. But I don't think he was joking when he told Syed Hamid that America would be watching Malaysia's chairmanship in both organisations closely.

I was reminded of this when reading the report by the UK's Observer saying it had obtained reliable information about foreign missions in the

US being spied upon by American organisations to gauge global responses should the US commander-in-chief orders his military machine to Iraq.

Like you, I don't know too whether to believe the report laid out in the

Observer. But I do know that much of the work at the United Nations (UN),

now caught in the issue, is not done in the meeting halls.

Ask our men and women there, and they'll tell you of the secret deals, haggling, lobbying and sometimes even threatenings done along the corridors.

Maybe this is what diplomats do. But when you have the bargaining power

in the form of the world's most powerful economy and military might, winning the deals is a foregone conclusion. We have been chastised many times at the UN for our position on the Palestinian issue for example, although our Permanent Representative to the UN often used the term "scolded" when he spoke of this to me. Scolded by the US of course.

But wasn't there somebody before who said we have a "recalcitrant" leader? Maybe the former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating was

right.

But given a choice between being a recalcitrant and being spineless, I would choose the former anytime.

We have been a recalcitrant somewhat at the UN, especially in voicing our strong criticisms towards the unfair treatment by the world superpowers of the plight of the Palestinians. But our criticisms have not

been without basis, nor have they been confrontational in nature. I think

all the while what we wanted was only for the world to once and for all sit down and solve the Palestinian issue fairly.

Now of course there is Iraq and you and I are quite sure where we stand

on this issue - the very far opposite end of where the likes of the US, the UK and Australia are.

And you can bet that Washington is watching our stance on this subject as well. Otherwise the call by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for Muslim countries to consider using oil as a bargaining chip for a better position in the global society would not have been despatched

that soon to Washington.

Personally, I think the Muslim world that produces oil should look at the option although I doubt that they will. The Prime Minister himself later acknowledged that such a move may backfire and that he was merely suggesting fellow members of the NAM to look at the benefits and hazards of adopting such a tactic.

At any rate, Saudi Arabia, the largest producer of oil has guaranteed that it will pump more to make up for the shortfall in world supply should

Iraq be bombed to smithereens.

Nevertheless, the folks in Washington have one more item in their file,

or could it be files, on Malaysia. Malaysia's three-year chairmanship of the NAM would be closely observed, I'm sure.

And come October, some of the leaders of oil-producing nations will once

again converge in Kuala Lumpur for the OIC summit. That one too will be closely monitored.

I will not be surprised if the journey to the OIC summit in October this

year will not be an easy one. Like I said, in international politics haggling, lobbying and even threatening is a daily affair.

So I may not want to discount the Observer report entirely. Instead I would look out my window more often at night. Maybe there'd be a strange star that wasn't there the night before. Maybe it would not be a star after all, but an American spy satellite listening to our conversations.

Who knows.