

07/01/2003

`Forward defence' gives room for manoeuvre

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THE term "forward defence" used by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in his New Year message has been widely discussed in the media as well as in the coffee shops. What does the term mean?

Literally, it means putting up a defence forward of one's position. During the Cold War, it was a Nato strategy for the defence of Western Europe against the Warsaw pact countries. It entailed the protection of West Germany as far forward as possible - almost up to the Inner Germany Border. The use of tactical nuclear weapons was considered to offset the disparity in weaponry between the two sides.

The strategy has been adopted by Israel to cripple the military might of its Arab neighbours at the outbreak of hostilities. A small country requires such a strategy when fighting in its own territory as there is little room for manoeuvre.

Pre-emptive strikes either by air, land or sea on military targets are a must, as surprise is crucial. Once the opposing side's combat power is temporarily incapacitated, a combined force of armour, mechanised infantry and artillery with adequate air cover must speedily follow up to capture and hold ground. Subsequent fighting will be confined to the area captured.

The British had similar plans for the defence of Malaya at the onset of the Second World War. Operation Matador was intended to seize Songkhla in southern Thailand and hold it against any Japanese seaborne invasion but indecisiveness on the part of the colonial government prevented the 11th Indian Division from doing so.

I am certain our defence planners have already in place effective counter measures to give any invading force a "bloody nose".

Vital targets like command, control and communication centres must be protected against destruction in the opening moments. Our army, naval and air assets need to be dispersed and concealed so they do not become sitting ducks in the event of a strike. Mobility, therefore, is essential.

Once a chunk of our territory is captured, plans must be afoot to regain it in the shortest possible time. A protracted war is definitely not to our advantage. The best option is to strike before the opposing side takes