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Southeast Asia can look out for itself

THERE are two kinds of people in this world. Those who mind their own lives and those who poke their noses into other people's business. The nations of Southeast Asia mind their own business and resent those who pry into their affairs, never mind their intentions. National sovereignty is paramount and busybodies are not welcome. Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi stressed that we can take care of ourselves and unless invited, Australia or any other outside power has no special security role in the region. Peace and security in Southeast Asia have been Asean's raison d'etre since its founding more than three decades ago. John Howard cannot arrogate to himself the role of peacekeeper in this region just because his penghulu or village chief in Washington says so.

The US keeps reminding the world of its democratic ideals. But in arbitrarily appointing Australia as regional sheriff without consultation, it betrays authoritarian behaviour. America's haughty attitude is reflected in the reaction to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's comments about the Jews. Dr Mahathir has strongly denied that he had been rebuked by President George W. Bush. Perhaps Bush had no choice but to lie because of the Jewish lobby's influence on his chances for reelection. If domestic politics was all it was, then the playing-up of the alleged rebuke was of "minor importance".

Australia's adoption of Bush's doctrine of preemption, however, is another matter. If Canberra allows itself the freedom to attack its Southeast Asian neighbours in the interests of its own security, it deserves to be treated like a potential aggressor. Asean countries have been co-operating closely on maintaining security and stability in the region. They have a wealth of experience dealing with all kinds of threats, including terrorism and subversion, extending well before the Sept 11 attacks. The region is countering terrorism based on lessons learnt in the past, which require not only concerted police action but also winning hearts and minds. The people of Southeast Asia are mature enough to look out for themselves. They will ask for help if they need to but won't brook unsolicited intervention from an antipodean power even if supported by the might of the US.