

Najib charms Washington?
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There was once a popular perception that a less nationalistic leader in Malaysia would best suit the interests of the United States. After more than two decades of anti-west bashing by Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's ascension to the prime ministership was very much welcomed. Too bad that his friendly foreign policy was undermined by his lack of efficacies.

Some foreign diplomats might therefore quietly await the day when Anwar Ibrahim - highly articulate and a renaissance man - could make it to the top job. Be that as it may, Najib Abdul Razak managed to temporarily stall such an eventuality, and now appears to be a darling to the west - Washington in particular - with his charm offensive and diplomatic overtures.

Last April, Parliament passed the Strategic Trade Bill 2010, which now gives authorities the power to act against individuals involved in the design, development and production of weapons of mass destruction.

Visiting Malaysia late last year, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (right) hailed it as a major achievement that would deny nuclear proliferators the opportunity to use Malaysian territory to expand their aims, and the country now has powerful tool for preventing proliferation by making it easier to stop shipments of nuclear fuel, weapon parts and other equipment especially to states that are not fulfilling their international obligations such as Iran and North Korea.

That Clinton did not meet with Anwar can be seen as a moral victory for the BN government, which has been working profusely to salvage its international image severely damaged by Mahathir's incessant controversial remarks in the past.

Deviation from Mahathir's stance

Mahathir must be livid that both Abdullah and Najib have deviated considerably from his stance, but would likely feel consoled that the close ties between the US and Malaysia's opposition alliance have begun to loosen.

Furthermore, concrete steps have been taken between Washington and Putrajaya to enhance maritime security in the strategically important Malacca Straits. In October 2010, USS Abraham Lincoln and USS Shoup docked at Port Klang, bringing 5000 American sailors to experience Malaysia's rich culture and history

Rear Admiral Mark Guadagnini, a US commander, lauded the visit as a symbol of the long-standing maritime cooperation between the two countries, stating further that trust and cooperation are fundamental to the promotion of peace and are essential for prompt, positive response in times of crisis.

But what clearly raises the eyebrows of China, Russia and India - the three regional powers - is the regular passing exercise involving the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70) and the Royal Malaysian Navy corvette KD Kelantan (FFL 175) and frigate KD Lekir (FF 26). The latest event was held last month, when Carl Vinson was under way on a

deployment to the US 7th Fleet area of responsibility.

But it is Indonesia that plays the most vital role in the Malacca Straits. Just recently, Indonesian military commander Admiral Agus Suhartono reassured US Pacific Fleet commander Admiral Patrick Walsh that Jakarta would always guarantee security in its territorial waters, while emphasising that this would be done in collaboration with the US and China via the Asean + 3 framework.

Still, there are latent fears by China and others in the region that the main US focus on partnership with Asean is military more than anything else, with a view to containing Beijing's geo-strategic influence among the member states and in the wider Asia-Pacific region.

To exert its rightful role in global politics, China must resume its rightful place in its sphere of influence, which had traditionally been East and South-East Asia until the dying years of the Qing Dynasty.

The Straits of Malacca is the busiest sea-lane in the world that represents a lifeline of trade for many nations. With large amounts of global petrochemical products being transported through the waterway annually, its strategic significance can never be overemphasised.

This aside, roughly 60% of China's crude oil imports originate in the Middle East - and the figure will increase dramatically over the next decade as the Chinese become more affluent - the straits will only become all the more important.

Dialogue and cooperation

Little wonder that the Chinese leadership from time to time reminds the world the best way to mitigate the strategic vulnerability in the region is through dialogue and cooperation, not a hidden agenda by "certain major powers" to "dominate the straits".

Yet no headway will be made so long as Beijing faces hurdles in reaching out to the South China Seas countries, what more with the 7th Fleet - Washington's permanent forward projection force based in Japan and its units positioned near South Korea.

That Najib has been able to placate the Chinese with favourable economic deals and to gain "respectability" of the Americans in an obliging manner is truly remarkable. Should this approach of getting the best of both worlds continue to be effective, its emulation by other regional governments is a sure thing.

A concerted effort by Asean will no doubt help contain the simmering tensions between the two powers. So far, Najib has been able to score notable points by virtue of being in power, and there are indeed tough tasks ahead for Anwar to prove that he, too, would make a redoubtable leader.