

Najib's 'PR' diplomacy gambit in Borodai deal
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MP SPEAKS Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak's successful negotiation with the Ukraine separatist rebel leader Alexander Borodai to retrieve the black boxes of the tragic flight MH17 was hailed as his brand of "quiet diplomacy".

While I do not wish to take credit away from what the prime minister has done, it is of course necessary and important to understand the event from the overall perspective of Malaysia's foreign policy.

Malaysia's deliberate positioning as a neutral country has proven useful especially since the days of the Cold War.

It was our diplomat par excellence Dr Ismail Ali who envisioned that "our position in the world today is...unique in that we are fairly content with what we already possess...(hence) the greatest need of my country today is peace and the goodwill of all countries with which it is our desire to live in friendship and mutual understanding.

We venture to suggest that our unique position permits us to play an impartial role in the affairs of the world".

In the arena of international politics, Malaysia being a small developing country, has always taken the pragmatist, non-aligned, non-interference approach - a wait-and-see strategy and refusing to take sides especially in conflicts between major power blocs.

Although our beloved founding prime minister, the late Tunku Abdul Rahman (right) was decidedly pro-western and anti-communist, Malaysia's international stance began to shift by the time second prime minister, Najib's father, Abdul Razak took to office.

Malaysia became the first country in southeast Asia to have formal diplomatic ties with China, a marked reversal from Tunku's foreign policy.

Such a move, however, did not mean that Malaysia had discarded its pro-western stance, rather, it was a shift towards non-alignment in the international stage, be it the US or USSR or China.

Malaysia has always preferred economic co-existence rather than militaristic aggression.

By the time Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the fourth and most influential prime minister came to power in 1981, Malaysia began to be vocal against western powers and sought to forge closer alliance with our regional neighbours, Islamic countries in the middle east, as well as

the far eastern economies, notably Japan.

Nonetheless, our position with the world remained one of economic cooperation rather than a militaristic one.

Mahathir's vocal criticism against the west, in particular the UK - one of Mahathir's first act as prime minister was to initiate a boycott of UK goods through his "Buy British last" campaign in 1981 sparked by several confrontational events between the two governments - and the USA soured our relations to say the least.

In the more than two decades he was in power as the longest serving prime minister, the Mahathir regime introduced concepts such as "yellow culture" to denote the degenerate western influence, neo-imperialism, neo-colonialism, and Look East, into the Malaysian psyche against western powers.

Mahathir (left) projected Malaysia as a leader among Islamic countries and championed such Muslim cause as the Palestinian issue.

We can trace very strong anti-Semitism prevalent in Malaysia today to the Mahathir period.

Even the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis was blamed mainly on Jewish speculators, notably George Soros.

Mending relations

However, when Najib took power, being western-educated like the first three prime ministers including his late father, and unlike Mahathir or even Abdullah Badawi, the fifth prime minister, Najib was quick to mend relations with the west especially America.

At home, Najib's ruling party, the United Malays National Organisation (Umno), thrives on anti-America, anti-western sentiments to rally the support of the majority Malay population against the Opposition.

Yet tax money was spent on public relations to secure the attention of the American elites through positive media portrayals and even a personal audience with President Barack Obama in DC, leading to Obama's historic visit to Malaysia this year, making him the first US President to do so in almost half a decade.

Yet in all these, Malaysia essentially remained very much non-aligned. Najib inherited this tradition which he continues to uphold.

For example, friendship with America does not jeopardise friendship with China, the two contending superpowers today.

Again, while practising McCarthyism at home, this year, Najib even commemorated the 40th anniversary of bilateral relations between Malaysia and Communist China in the

Beijing Great Hall of the People, tracing what he called his father's "journey of goodwill".

These diplomatic moves are not quite the "quiet diplomacy" as heralded by some quarters, but rather, a diplomacy of public relations (PR), which hinges on Najib's ability, through the use of massive public resources no less, to secure his own popularity among world leaders.

This in turn scores him political brownie points at home, both among the moderates and reformers in the Malay community, and among the Chinese community who are largely antagonised by Umno's ultra-nationalist and communalist policy.

In the US-China situation, we can clearly see both Najib's personal style PR diplomacy and Malaysia's traditional "non-aligned" diplomacy at work.

As to the latter, it is clear, Malaysia is playing to both the tunes of America's 'Pivot to Asia' and China's 'Work hard, and accomplish' taking a pragmatist, neutral, wait-and-see approach towards both power blocs.

The objective of course is to maximise the advantage for a small country like Malaysia in the competition between two powerful nations.

On the other hand, perhaps the one event best described Najib's personal style PR diplomacy was the Obama-Najib selfie taken during the President's visit to Malaysia which went viral on social media.

Indeed PR diplomacy is 'selfie' diplomacy - it is social through it being inter-personal.

The Najib-Borodai deal

The Najib-Borodai deal was struck precisely through such brands of diplomacy.

First the PR diplomacy; the media – Wall Street Journal, Newsweek, even Utusan - reported that the deal was Najib's project, alluding to the fact that the involvement of the Malaysian government machinery was almost nonexistent and it was really Najib's personal style PR diplomacy driving the whole process.

In other words, Najib was conducting international affairs on a who-you-know basis. Selfie diplomacy at work.

An interesting feature of the deal is the much highlighted "personal communication" between the prime minister and Borodai through unidentified intermediaries.

Even Umno's mouthpiece, Utusan acknowledged the role of such party in the success of the deal.

Who are these intermediaries? Could it be Russia, who has since kept quiet about its role in the Najib-Borodai deal, although Russia has to date refused to be openly linked to the

separatists.

Or could it be the prime minister's family relation among the powerful elites of Kazakhstan, a country neighbouring the Ukraine.

Regardless who the party was, the deal depended very much on the strings Najib can pull; his PR diplomacy.

Secondly, Malaysia's pragmatist non-aligned, non-interference position was certainly a plus point.

We do not or rarely, if any, exert any moral or ideological view on international conflicts.

We just accept the world as it is, and we seek to protect our national interest as much as we can.

No judgement on the Ukraine civil war, no judgement on the so-called Cold War 2. Or between USA and Russia and their proxies, no judgement on the Donetsk rebels.

Only pragmatism to solve an immediate problem - to retrieve the black boxes and the bodies of the MH17 victims.

Some seems to think that Malaysia paid off the rebels to strike the deal, but I believe it is unlikely that the prime minister will resort to such measures.

In light of a crisis which fumes the entire global society, the Donetsk separatists, facing the pressure of western media against their pro-Russian anti-Kiev stance, needs legitimacy.

A humanitarian deal with a non-aligned state provided them at least a semblance of such recognition.

It was no accident that the Malaysian military envoy sent to retrieve the black box from Borodai (left) himself addressed the latter as "His Excellency", a loose recognition, but a recognition nonetheless, of Borodai's premiership of the rebel-declared Donetsk People's Republic.

New questions

Malaysia's foreign policy has kept us, a small, developing nation, out of major trouble due to international conflict for most of our post-Merdeka years until now. It served our purpose as a nation. Yet, we need to ask ourselves new questions.

The global stage today is not only an arena for nation states but also non-state actors as well, notably multinational corporations, armed groups, the international civil society and, more and more, local governments, where dynamics of interactions differ from conventional diplomatic relations.

Will we be able to “protect” ourselves in these new circumstances?

Even in old issues such as the Middle East conflict, Malaysia has never taken a neutral stance, as evidenced whenever we glance at our passports which state, “This passport is valid for all countries except Israel”.

Can we still afford to be a neutral and silent observer of a world in dispute?

My colleague, Ng Wei Aik (left), the Member of Parliament for Komtar, has pointed out the difficulty for Malaysia to pursue justice in the MH17 atrocity without our government ratifying the Rome Statute.

This is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to international conventions especially in regards to human rights, gender equality and environmental protection.

Most of the time, our government refused to ratify part or the whole of a convention under the pretext of it infringing national sovereignty.

In other words, the propositions are against our principle of non-interference and neutrality.

Yet, in some of these cases, it is clear that the government’s refusal to accept universal values was due to its own questionable human rights record at home.

In this highly globalised environment, can we appeal to universal values, such as justice for MH17 victims, if we continually refused to be subjected to them?

And then there are questions on how will our conventional foreign policy protect us from new forms of international relationships, for example, trade agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement which often are prejudiced against smaller nations.

Finally, can Malaysia depend on selfie diplomacy, especially one which will only work if the prime minister or the ruling party’s interest is at stake?

For example, although the MH17 crisis is admittedly different from MH370, yet we do not see such efficiency nor tactfulness displayed in the government’s handling of the latter as compared to the former.

Leadership must be consistent, and diplomacy must serve the interest of Malaysia as a whole, not narrow political interests.

Like the surprising revelation in the photo op of the handover of the MH17 black box - there is no black box, only an orange one! - perhaps this is the clearest example why we should not take for granted the old black box theory of international relations.

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