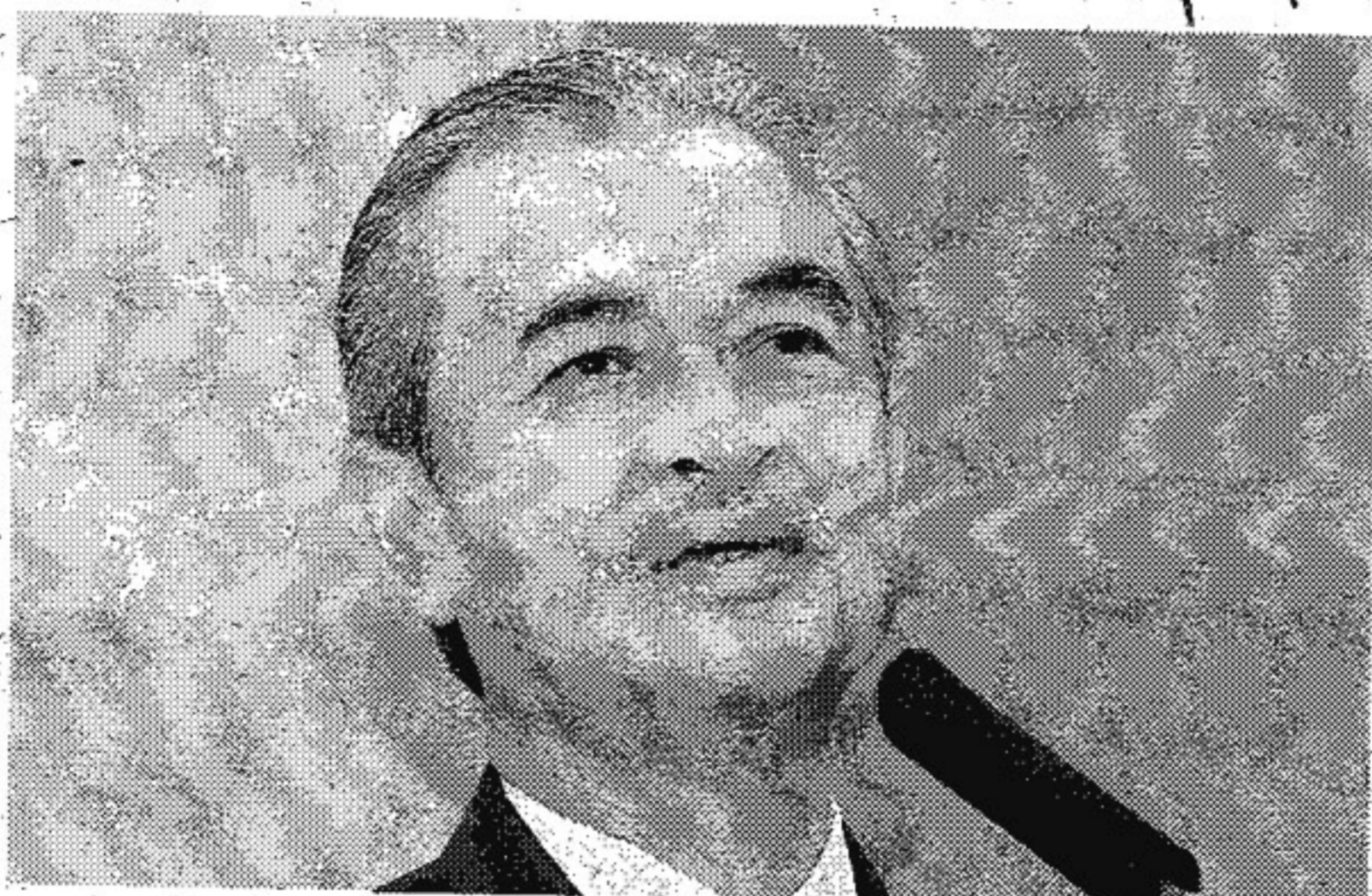


It's a question of how you play the game

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has brought about a noticeable change in style and emphasis on promoting Malaysia's interests at home and abroad, writes K.S. NATHAN.

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WHEN Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi assumed power on Nov 1, 2003 he began to initiate and develop his own agenda in domestic as well as foreign policy. As much as there is continuity in the principles of Malaysian foreign policy, there is also a noticeable change in style and emphasis on promoting the country's interests at home and abroad.



Abdullah tends to produce a measured response to events.

All five prime ministers the country has had so far had, without doubt, a global vision regarding how best to pursue a foreign policy strategy that maximises gains and minimises losses.

For the Tunku, it was strategic alignment with the West in the face of communism and the Indonesian Confrontation (1963-65); for Tun Razak, it was coming to terms with the communist powers (China, Vietnam and the Soviet Union) in a post-conflict scenario after the British pullout "east of Suez" and American military withdrawal from Indochina after the Vietnam War.

For Tun Hussein Onn (1976-1981), the Kuantan Principle (1980) represented his desire to restrain external powers from getting militarily involved again in the Cambodian hostilities and scuppering initiatives to resolve the conflict in the spirit of Asean.

For Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, while Asean regionalism was an important commitment, the stage was not broad enough to give adequate expression to his foreign policy priorities, which were always addressed in global terms. Yet, Dr Mahathir recognised the role of power in international relations — a *realpolitik* approach to foreign policy which was marked by practical co-operation in security matters with the United States, and regional co-operation with neighbours in the war on terror.

The collective empowerment of the South nations to more effectively deal with the advanced, industrialised and rich North remains a key principle of Malaysian foreign policy. It is this ideological perspective that has informed the country's strong support for

the 116-member Non-Aligned Movement, and even the isolated Myanmar regime's admission to Asean in 1997.

Over the past two years, foreign policy under Abdullah has evidenced a similar vision and commitment, although the manner of execution has been quite different compared to his predecessor. His civil service background informs him of the value of standard operating procedures, the significance of formulating policies that are credible, and the need to consider the pros and cons of a particular decision when applied to international relations.

His inclination to be circumspect on major domestic as well as international issues tends to produce a measured response to events. This approach and style of foreign policy management might not conduce towards innovation and bold initiatives *ala* Dr Mahathir. However, it also frees itself from the sometimes unwelcome rhetoric and grandiose statements that could harm Malaysia's efforts to win friends and influence people.

While attacking the West and the North might be popular in certain quarters, Abdullah is equally aware that actions speak louder than words. People and nations would only listen to Malaysia if the country is well managed, has a leadership that can respect religious and cultural diversity — and profit from it rather than crush it in favour of some xenophobic dream.

Indeed, Abdullah's congenial nature arguably strengthens the element of certainty in domestic and foreign policy-making and avoids the pitfalls of unpredictability associ-

ated with the promotion of ambitious but less achievable enterprises.

Malaysia's hosting of the First East Asia Summit (EAS) in December last year could well turn out to be Abdullah's more positive contribution linking principle to policy: the capability to strengthen Asean integration which itself has challenged regional leaders for the past four decades.

Abdullah has supported the entry of Australia and New Zealand (besides India) into the EAS in recognition of the changing balance of power dynamics in the Asia-Pacific region marked by a rising China and India. In the circumstances, the economic opportunities arising from the new strategic scenario must be seized at the right moment to more effectively promote Malaysia's economic and strategic interests.

Pursuing a strategy of excluding the Australasian states in the present geopolitical context could well be outdated even if, as Dr Mahathir has continued to insist, these two countries are Western outposts doing the bidding of the US. In Abdullah's view, these emerging trends of broader regionalism and Asian empowerment must be recognised and not rejected.

More recent initiatives to sign free trade agreements with external powers, including the US, bear testimony to the altered perspective of Malaysia's foreign economic policy. Undoubtedly, Abdullah's regionalism and globalism in foreign policy are soundly informed by the dictates of realism.

This apparently pragmatic vision of a new Asia and the prospects for Malaysian

foreign policy have entered into the strategic calculations of the country's fifth premier in the first decade of the 21st century. Relations with Singapore have improved considerably and the prospects for a final settlement on outstanding issues, including the completion of a new bridge to replace the Causeway, look bright.

Delicate relations with Thailand over Muslim refugees in the south fleeing into Malaysia are being handled with caution and moderation, while territorial disputes with Indonesia in the Sulawesi Sea are being managed with due regard for international law as well as the transitional challenges affecting the process of internal democratisation and stability in its bigger Asean neighbour.

With respect to Myanmar, there is growing discomfort and concern over the lack of progress towards political reform and accommodation, yet Malaysia feels that undue external pressure on Yangon could make matters worse rather than better for Myanmar and the region. In this regard, Malaysia, like the rest of Asean, is hamstrung by its commitment to the non-interference principle, and is wary of eroding the Asean consensus by the application of "flexible intervention" to achieve progress.

Ideologically, Abdullah's "Islam Hadhari" project extends from the domestic to the international sphere — in the sense that a country's best interests are promoted by mutual understanding, tolerance and coexistence, by strategic compromises with regional and external powers that ultimately produce a win-win situation, by the exercise of restraint when the use of force rather than reason might appear compelling, and by the wisdom to recognise both the limits as well as the prospects for Malaysia as a regional and global actor in a changing era.

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