

NZ primed for closer Asian ties

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NEW ZEALAND is in a better position to forge closer ties with growing Asian economies because it is less aligned with the United States and Europe, Malaysia's former prime minister says.

Mahathir bin Mohamad, who was in Wellington to deliver a speech on criminalising war, said yesterday that New Zealand was more prepared to identify itself with Asia.

"Australia seems to identify itself with Europe and America. New Zealand has a completely different world view and it's also not

so willing to identify itself with Europe and America," he said.

Attempts by Australian Prime Minister John Howard to represent US interests in the region had not helped, 81-year-old Dr Mahathir said.

"When people talk about becoming [the US'] deputy sheriff that's not very welcome in our region."

On Monday, Dr Mahathir, a critic of the US during his 22 years as Malaysia's leader till 2003, told a packed Wellington audience of 400 that war must be made a punishable crime. His provocative speech was delivered at Victoria

University's annual Saad Lecture and included comparing the actions of US President George Bush to that of former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.

If Hussein had won the US-led war on Iraq, and Mr Bush was in court then, "obviously they are going to pass the death penalty on Mr Bush for killing so many Iraqis". More than 600,000 Iraqis had been killed, he said.

"Today's war is a war against unequal powers."

Dr Mahathir told the audience that 7000 years of war had led only to mass death and an escalating arms race as countries

spent millions trying to protect themselves. "War is not an option because our capacity to kill is so huge now that we can blow up the world." Disputes should be resolved by criminalising war and taking perpetrators to court.

"Warmongers" could be defeated only by electing pacifists as leaders, he said.

Malaysia was taking a leading role in spreading the vision — which some would call an "impossible dream" — through a conference next month illustrating the effects of war. "The idea that war is a crime must be spread from now."