

Clearly, Malaysia is no lackey of the US

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The Asia-Pacific Intelligence Chiefs Conference, which held its first meeting in Kuala Lumpur early this month, should not be seen as a staging ground for any new ideological crusade or an instrument to be used by any major power to expand its influence or to carve out a new sphere of influence in any part of the world, writes **MOHD SALLEH ISMAIL**

THE First Asia-Pacific Intelligence Chiefs Conference (Sept 4-7) attracted considerable interest from many quarters. From the professional standpoint, the conference was a success. The overwhelming response to the conference was a telling testimony to the consensus among participants that intelligence is crucial to security management. Most of the feedback on the conference has been comforting and encouraging.

But there have also been some negative comments which have somewhat distorted the perspective of the conference and sought to read into it disturbing political and strategic implications. We anticipated that, because however well-intended an international forum may be, it is bound to invite adverse observations.

Some linked the 1st APICC to US interests, contending that through APICC, Malaysia had helped the US to find a new vehicle for spreading its influence in this part of the world. This observation has ominous implications. It implies that Malaysia, to use a Cold War slogan, has become "a lackey of US imperialism".

The 1st APICC assembled professional intelligence officers in the Asia-Pacific region in Kuala Lumpur to share their views on how their expertise and resources can be effectively mobilised to promote regional security. This is relevant to the Malaysian armed forces' current transition to meet the complex changes in our security and strategic environment and to support our deepening involvement in regional and international affairs.

To play our role effectively, we need to expand our engagement with other countries, especially the major powers, and develop capabilities in electronic and cyber warfare, to address maritime security and to provide early warning to both national and regional security agencies on impending threats. We are in the process of expanding the functions and



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organisation of the Defence Intelligence Staff Division (DISD) in anticipation of the impending new challenges.

Second, the proceedings of the APICC are highly democratic. The conference is a platform which allows all participants to explain their respective countries' security concerns and their strategies of addressing them. Understandings reached at the conference reflect more the collective view of all participants than that of the US. In fact, Asean already has entered into co-operation with the US on the main non-traditional security issues discussed at the conference.

Although the US commands resources to support its leading role in regional security matters, its policies and strategies have also taken sufficient note of the regional states' preferences and positions and have as far as possible seen to it that regional intelligence co-operation does not encroach on the sovereignties of collaborating states.

Third, we must recognise that the US has immense economic and strategic interests in East and Southeast Asia. To the US, maritime security is vital to its economic interests, and comprehensive regional power balance to its strategic interests. This explains the present active and extensive US involvement in the west Pacific and its forward deployment

strategy in the region.

Even Russia, China and India have to a large extent recognised the legitimacy of a US physical presence in the region and conceded that the US' leading role in regional affairs is more constructive than disruptive.

Fourth, interaction among nations is bound to generate influence which often proves mutually beneficial. APICC provides a platform for Malaysia and other regional states to make known to the US and other major powers their security concerns and priorities and explain the policies and strategies they have adopted to promote their security interests.

At the recent APICC, the US was treated as a partner, not a dominant player. Here, it may also be pointed out that among the regional states, US political and strategic influence in Malaysia is least pronounced.

Fifth, one notable development in our regional strategic environment in the post-Cold War era has been the changing nature of Asean-US relations. This is mainly reflected in Asean's ability to modify the basic premise of US Asia-Pacific strategy. Asean subscribes to multilateralism as the basis for regulating regional affairs. The foundation of US strategy is bilateral alliance relations mainly in the form of joint defence treaties concluded, for instance, with Japan, South Korea and Australia. But because of Asean's expanding economic clout and growing collective bargaining power, the US has in some way accommodated the multilateral trends.

It is true that the US still considers its present security role in the region as the dominant player. But on the other hand, Washington has increasingly come to realise that Asean has only assigned to the US a partnership role in the management of regional security, and that it can ensure the stability of its strategic and political relations with Asean only when it is willing to accept the principle of equality.

In short, we may say that the preponderant US security role in the Asia-Pacific should not be seen in any absolute terms. The US needs the support and co-operation of other nations in defence of its interests in the region. Such support and co-operation will be forthcoming only when Washington is willing to observe the principles of reciprocity and mutual respect in its dealings with the region.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, in his keynote speech to the conference, highlighted the "organic link between intelligence and security and that security management cannot be divorced from intelligence". He singled out maritime and cyber terrorism as among the more pressing security issues on which the intelligence community should focus more attention and effort.

The theme of APICC was in remarkable congruence with the tenor of the deputy prime minister's keynote address. The mission of APICC is clear but daunting. It is to enhance the capacities of regional states to meet the security challenges in the 21st century.

There is a powerful desire among the regional states to enhance transparency and mutual trust in security co-operation. In this regard, APICC is not to be seen as a staging ground for any new ideological crusade nor an instrument to be used by any major power to expand its influence or to carve out a new sphere of influence in any part of the world.

Finally, APICC provides all regional intelligence chiefs a platform for confidence-building and a channel of direct communication. Through APICC, all foreign participants have an opportunity to witness for themselves current developments in Malaysia. This will enable them to have a better perspective of the country.

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