

Newspaper	New Straits Times
Date	22/3/2013

Policy shift helped win more friends globally

NST- 22/3/2013

EARNEST EFFORT: An equidistant foreign policy shored up Malaysia's credentials as a non-aligned state

HOW does one explain Malaysia's distinct shift from one of being avowedly pro-Western and staunchly anti-Communist, that smacked of non-neutrality in the East-West Cold War conflict, to one of being Non-Aligned and equidistant? The significant shift is also somewhat intriguing in the way it emerged.

This landmark development in Malaysia's diplomacy and international relations was an outcome of the rather uncanny impact Indonesian Konfrontasi had on the thinking and attitude of its leaders, in particular that of Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman.

The psyche of Malaysia leaders especially in respect to their overriding goal of safeguarding national sovereignty and in ensuring political self-preservation was shaken to its very core when Indonesia, the enamoured brotherly neighbour, launched its Konfrontasi to destroy Malaysia.

A parallel to this profound trauma is to be found in the horrifying experience Indian leaders underwent when their "Hindi Chini Bai Bai" foreign policy mantra was utterly shattered by China's military attack in 1962.

When Konfrontasi was first unleashed, the government found itself compelled to rely almost wholly on the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement to ensure the country's security and territorial integrity.

The heightened security concerns resulting from Indonesian military actions also initially prodded a reinforcement of the country's pro-Western world view and a hardening of its anti-Communist stance on international issues.

This seemed thoroughly justified given the firm belief that Konfrontasi was a grand communist design hatched by Parti Kommunist Indonesia that was acting in concert with a larger Peking-Pyongyang-Hanoi Axis, to ensure a fierce and sweeping geo-political communist domination in the region.



Datuk Dr Ananda Kumaraseri was a career ambassador

But as the traumatic challenge of Konfrontasi progressed, Malaysia found it necessary to go beyond addressing its immediate defence and military concerns to counter the stiff diplomatic hurdles in the international arena to secure its territorial integrity and sovereignty.

The government found itself hard put to match Indonesia's diplomatic clout among the international community of nations that the latter had built over the years.

Numerous Malaysian delegations to international conferences found themselves disadvantaged to press the country's case because of its entrenched pro-Western anti-Communist profile.

To the utter disappointment and frustration of the government, Malaysian representatives were shunned and even shut out in important international forums at



Tunku Abdul Rahman acknowledged the need to change foreign policy in line with world realities

practically every turn. A pertinent case in point was Malaysia's failure to secure admission into the Conference of Non-Aligned Nations in Cairo in 1964.

The bitter experiences underlined the reality to re-orientate the country's profile if it was to succeed in winning friends globally.

An earnest effort was called for to shed Malaysia's pro-Western anti-Communist image in favour of an equidistant foreign policy in order to shore up its credentials as a non-aligned state.

The Tunku himself acknowledged the need for the shift on grounds of the realities of the contemporary international situation.

So by 1966, the new direction of the country's foreign policy and conduct of its diplomacy and international relations was well on course to win as many friends, particularly among Afro-Asian and Latin American states.

Initial efforts to give substance to the foreign policy shift that focused

on establishing Malaysia's credentials as a non-aligned state was soon widened to include the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and Eastern European socialist states.

This policy shift witnessed a spate of historic exchange of visits and negotiations at senior-officials levels with the communist states.

The first Malaysian delegation to visit Moscow that eventually paved the way for the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union at ambassadorial level included a senior Foreign Ministry officer in the person of Yeo Beng Poh.

The follow-up visits by the Soviet Delegation led to wide ranging discussions with senior officers from the Prime Minister's Economic Planning Unit, the Ministry of Trade and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that included, Mohammad Ghazali Shafie, Raja Mohar Raja Badiozaman, Tong Yaw Hong, Robless and G.K. Rama Iyer. The focus of the negotiations was on exploring new avenues to enhance trade and economic collaboration.

But it was all too clear that these initiatives were an integral part of the Tunku's policy shift aimed at giving real substance and meaning to Malaysia's credentials as a member of the Organisation of Non-Aligned Nations by shedding its entrenched anti-communist pro-Western foreign policy profile.

Moreover, the government felt it prudent to expand its trade and economic interests globally by exploring new avenues of collaboration with the Soviet Union and Eastern European states.

Among other policy changes, these developments meant the relaxation and subsequent removal of the ban on Malaysians visiting the Soviet Union and Eastern European socialist states.