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Malaysia's voice of reason

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Prime Minister **Datuk Seri Najib Razak** and US President **Barack Obama** at their first-ever bilateral talks ahead of the Nuclear Security Summit in **Washington** in 2010. Bernama pic

MODERATION: The United States has discovered in us a country that can be a mature and responsible partner

IT is easy to understand, although not universally appreciate, that Barack Obama carries about him the weight of the world's problems by virtue of the fact that he is president of the United States, still by far the strongest single country around.

Thus, while Malaysia is honoured that he has found time from his manifold responsibilities globally and at home to pay us a rare visit (the last visit by a sitting US president being, incredibly enough, nearly 50 years ago), our pride in that we have done pretty well by and for ourselves, despite benign neglect from the global superpower, should be reciprocated with a measure of gen-

uine humility and respect on the part of the US that we have not unnecessarily added to the international headaches confronting the US in an always potentially volatile corner of the globe.

Some Malaysians may still recall a previous visit by then vice-president Al Gore, deputising for president Bill Clinton, when Gore caused serious offence to his hosts with a condescending public lecture about the alleged failings of Malaysian democracy.

Malaysians should be gratified that this time around, the ruling US Democrats under Obama have learnt to be more respectful of Malaysian political sensitivities, to the extent of



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even avoiding a presidential photocall with the always-controversial and politically polarising figure that is Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Malaysian democracy may not be perfect and, like that of the US, may never be. It is, nevertheless, thriving. It will, therefore, be best for the US president to appreciate that any overt statements against the way democracy is practised and developing in Malaysia will more likely be counter-productive.

Political sensitivities aside, Malaysia will have good reason to be satisfied

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that the US has rather belatedly discovered in us a country that can be a mature and responsible partner in our joint quest to build a better world for all concerned.

That quest can best be realised by joint efforts to promote greater economic prosperity for all. In this regard, the US must have also discovered in Malaysia a useful voice representing small developing countries in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) that the US is seeking to forge among a select group of countries.

As with most bold initiatives, TPP has run into some problems with myriad domestic constituencies in each of the TPP countries, not least in the US itself. It will be short-sighted indeed if we allow such domestic obstacles to stymie what otherwise will be an economic partnership that will expand economic opportunities overall for all participating countries.

Many, including Malaysians, will be looking towards the US and, in particular, Obama, to provide the needed leadership to move TPP forward and, most especially, in a rather recalcitrant US Congress.

It may be difficult for other countries to take painful political decisions related to TPP if the US cannot bring itself to do likewise.

All told, Malaysia may prove to be the most "relaxing" leg in this four-nation trip of Obama's. Not coincidentally, perhaps, that may have much to do with the fact that Malaysia stands out as the only nation on the presidential itinerary that is not a treaty ally of the US.

The other three countries that Obama is visiting are expecting to hear from their main ally what the US will do in the face of a more assertive China. It is a very delicate dance Obama will be expected to perform in seeking to reassure his Asian allies while not needlessly antagonising China, which is now locked in an interdependent and globally vital economic relationship with the US.

In such a fraught relationship between the incumbent and rising Pacific powers, Malaysia should increasingly be playing a moderating voice of reason. We maintain excellent official relations with China, despite a recent hiccup over the tragic fate of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370. Both Malaysia and China, despite their respective domestic pressures of the moment, are unlikely to let their bilateral relations be blown off-course.

Malaysia does not profess a policy of neutrality in its foreign relations and non-alignment may have also outlived its shelf life, but an even-handed policy of extending a hand of friendship to all the major powers will remain in Malaysia's best interests, going forward.

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