

Newspaper	THE STAR
Date	11/09/2017

A delicate act of balancing

The US government is appreciative of Malaysia being a moderate country and its stance on the fight against terror. However, there is still that cautious optimism in the air due to Trump's unpredictability.

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WHEN the White House announced that President Donald Trump had invited Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak to Washington on Sept 12, it caught many people off-guard.

Some were surprised that the invitation to the Prime Minister came so soon, as this is only Trump's first year of presidency and he is already an unpopular one, according to various polls.

Others were quick to question the motive behind the White House invitation and whether the Prime Minister can handle someone like Trump, who can be unpredictable.

The truth is senior officials in Putrajaya and the US State Department have been working on the visit for several months.

"We have been working on the visit for some time.

"Yes, there is talk on how the invitation came about - we are not using lobbyists to get this done, it is the officials who have been doing the legwork.

"The White House notified us through the official channel to sync the announcement. It was agreed that the White House will announce it first and Malaysia will follow up with a statement," a senior Malaysian official said.

"This is the first time that the Prime Minister has been invited to meet President Trump at the White House. This is an honour because for an invitation to be extended, it reflects the importance of the bilateral relationship," said the official.

Naturally, this meeting has generated a lot of interest back home and abroad. Some already decided to spin the visit, although Najib has yet to step foot in the Oval Office.



Meeting of minds: Najib and Trump will hold a four-eyed meeting at the Oval Office, followed by a delegation meeting with Trump's Cabinet members and senior advisers.

First of all, this is the 60th year of bilateral relationship between Malaysia and the United States, during which ties have gone deep and multi-faceted in many areas.

In 2014, under President Barack Obama, the relationship was elevated to a comprehensive partnership with robust ties in trade, investment, education and culture.

According to International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Mustapa Mohamed, during the last 30 years, American companies have invested about RM70bil in the manufacturing sector, making the United States the largest investor in the manufacturing sector after Japan.

The United States is Malaysia's third largest trading partner with total trade amounting to RM136bil in 2016.

"We value our economic ties with the United States and will continue to engage members of the American administration and business community," he said.

Malaysia is also a valuable partner of the

US government in the fight against terror.

There are genuine concerns on the possible spillover effects from the foreign terror fighters facing defeat in the Middle East and that South-East Asia would be a hotspot.

"The fact that Marawi (in southern Philippines) could not be easily contained manifests the level of training and sophistication.

"It is a worrying prospect and development," said an official.

There is a sense of urgency that this needs to be dealt with and the US government is appreciative of Malaysia being a moderate country and its stance on the fight against terror.

However, there is still that cautious optimism in the air due to issues facing the Prime Minister personally and Trump's unpredictability.

It is a very delicate balance for the Prime Minister because this visit can go either way, depending on how Trump, as the host, is going to manage the visit.

Malaysian officials are looking at things positively as their counterparts have been quite open whenever they meet, described by one official as a signpost of the importance they place on Malaysia.

Even when US State Secretary Rex Tillerson visited the region, including Malaysia, recently, he engaged Asean ambassadors based in Washington to have a feeling of what to expect from the countries he was visiting.

As for Trump, he finds that relations with America's traditional ally in the region like the Philippines is quite strained with President Rodrigo Duterte being critical of the US government.

So which country does he turn to? It didn't take long for Trump to "court"

Najib, as Malaysia has a track record of being a reliable partner, although as one critic said, Malaysia's foreign policy is seen as more pragmatic than consistent.

Another advantage is Najib's years of exposure to foreign diplomacy, and having met and played golf with Trump may just be the right ingredients to move issues on the table forward.

"If Trump shows the visit is very important and that Malaysia is a small country that plays an important role, it will send the signal to others that Trump is making efforts to engage the rest of the region, too," said an observer.

Another nagging issue is Malaysia - or rather Najib's cosy relationship with China and its leaders - and how the United States views this relationship.

Malaysian ambassador to the United States Tan Sri Dr Zulhasnan Rafique said he did not detect any sign that the Americans are worried with the close ties.

"We have good relations with both. Commercially, it is good to do business with any country that will invest with us," he said.

The two leaders will hold a four-eyed meeting at the Oval Office, followed by a delegation meeting with Trump's Cabinet members and senior advisers.

A joint statement by the two leaders will be issued to the media on the outcome of the discussions.

For sure, Malaysian officials will be following closely Trump's tweets after the meeting, as the president is known for his penchant to express his opinions via his Twitter account.

Good outcome or otherwise, this meeting will be followed in earnest by all back home.

The Star - 11/9/2017 Pg. 2