

DRAWING LESSONS FROM DR MAHATHIR'S POLITICAL NOUS

Malaysia needs wise and intelligent leadership, as exemplified by the PM, to shape foreign policy and conduct

MALAYSIA-China relations have now reached new heights. This resulted from the wisdom of both countries top leadership in mitigating strategic dynamics at the global, regional and domestic levels.

One example of these strategic dynamics is the current "negativism" on Malaysian palm oil which started in France and is now affecting our exports to Europe. The other is United States President Donald Trump's trade war with China, which is perceived as an economic threat to China's weak trading partners.

On the contrary, Putrajaya's full support for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Beijing's agreement to increase its import of Malaysia's palm oil are testimony to Malaysia-China wisdom in handling the strategic dynamics.

In this context, Malaysia used its relative position in the international arena to contribute to the enhancement of China's BRI credibility. According to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, it was because BRI "is a great idea" that would benefit Malaysia.

He added that BRI could also "bring the landlocked countries of Central Asia closer to the sea", enable them to "grow in wealth", and reduce "their poverty". Ultimately, "everyone will benefit from the ease of travel and communication".

China was appreciative of this support because Malaysia "is an important country along the ancient Maritime Silk Road and in the development of the BRI". Hence, China used its material power in the global economy to increase its import of Malaysia's palm oil.



Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad had bilateral meetings with China's President Xi Jinping, Premier Li Keqiang and Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress Li Zhanshu during his four-day visit to Beijing last month.

Our country, therefore, has benefited from its support of China's BRI.

Malaysia has entered into four agreements with Chinese parties for the export of 1.62 million tonnes of palm oil worth US\$891 million (RM3.63 billion) based on current prices. This has eased up the slack from decreasing palm oil exports to Europe.

The above realities on BRI and palm oil, however, might entail other agendas on global and regional geopolitics concerning China as an economic giant and Malaysia as an advocate of Southeast Asian prosperity and security.

FIRSTLY, because Malaysia's support for BRI could also be used as an approach to deter Trump's "trade war" with China, which is counter-productive to economic progress and world peace; and,

SECONDLY, because Dr Mahathir might want intensified support of BRI by most nations to hedge against China's behaviour in the South China Sea. This is due to the fact that Malaysia is one of the claimant states in the Spratly Archipelago that has been less confrontational towards China.

Dr Mahathir might have the above intentions in mind because he is well known as a decision-maker with a strategic intellect. During his earlier admin-

istration from 1981 to 2003, he managed to transform several systemic threats to Malaysia into opportunities benefiting the country's survival, its people and economy.

In 1982, he used foreign policy strategy to handle a severe regional economic recession. In 1998, he employed an "out-of-the-box" approach to overcome the Asian financial crisis which hit Malaysia and other countries.

Interestingly, one repeated pattern in Dr Mahathir's strategy was the use of Malaysia's foreign policy behavioural shift or the modification of its focus and emphasis. He did it by altering some features of our external relations or the conduct of our international trade to resolve Malaysia's financial and economic problems.

Dr Mahathir empowered himself with the scenarios mentioned because as prime minister he was Malaysia's foreign policy chief executive who was also responsible for the country's security and its strategies.

Neoclassical realism, as a theory for foreign policy analysis, has posited that a prime minister also "possesses private information and a monopoly on intelligence about foreign countries".

Additionally, it has a supposition that "every state's external behaviour is shaped first and foremost by its power and position in the international arena

and, specifically, by its relative share of material power capabilities".

These were among the reasons why Dr Mahathir's current approach on China had shifted from the Pakatan Harapan (PH) government's earlier strategy.

In 2018, he used an almost "confrontational strategy" to correct China's alleged unfairness on BRI investments in Malaysia. He also made contradictory statements on the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) and the Bandar Malaysia projects.

Today, the ECRL project is back on track at a reduced cost. The Bandar Malaysia construction was continued after its investor agreed to mix the participation of China builders with Malaysian contractors.

Hence, Malaysia has evidently gained from Dr Mahathir's so-called "fickle-minded" bilateral relations and trade ties with China. But, do we realise this behaviour is actually in consonance with the dictum of neoclassical realism?

More importantly, this theory also emphasises that a state requires wise and intelligent leaders to exercise its relative position in the international arena. This would enable the state to appropriately shape its policy behaviour or trade conduct based on its threat outlook at all levels.

Dr Mahathir has skilfully realigned our country's current stance on BRI to guarantee our economic survival, trade interdependency, regional geopolitics and world peace.

Therefore, it is imperative that PH leaders draw lessons from how Dr Mahathir has handled such situations from a foreign policy stance. They must study how a small state should handle its asymmetrical relations with big powers to obtain mutual benefits and gain mutual respect.

This is vital if they aspire to manage a peaceful Malaysia in the post-Dr Mahathir era. This is also crucial because foreign policy begins at home!

The writer is a former member of parliament for Parit Sulong in Johor from 1990 to 2004