

Dr M: Look East Policy still relevant to Malaysia

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KUALA LUMPUR: The Look East Policy, adopted by the government in 1982 under Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's first stint as prime minister, is still relevant to Malaysia and its people.

Dr Mahathir yesterday said the policy had been one of the cornerstones of Malaysia-Japan ties.

"Throughout the years, Japan has assisted Malaysia tremendously in its economic development.

"Japan helped Malaysia build many of its world-class infrastructure, transferred technical knowledge, and extended a helping hand during the 1997 financial crisis and the pandemic."

He said after he stepped down in 2003, subsequent administrations continued to support the policy, though the emphasis was not as strong.

It was during his second stint as prime minister in 2018 that he focused on revitalising it, he said.

"The late (Japanese) prime minister Shinzo Abe and I had then agreed that the policy must incorporate new trends in bilateral cooperation to remain relevant."

He said this at the *40 Years of The Look East Policy* book launch and the Malaysia-Japan Forum here yesterday.

He said the Japanese work ethic, discipline, pride and sense of shame when failing were values that he wanted Malaysians to embrace.

He said he believed that if Malaysians had the same attitude, ethic and work culture, together with a sense of pride in their work and sense of shame when failing, the country would be as successful as the Japanese.

"It was, however, not an easy task as Malaysia, like former European colonies, tended to be more accustomed to treating the Western culture as superior.

"Though it was not easy to supplant the culture of the former colonialists, we have managed — to some degree — to promote the policy.

"Our students and workforce sent to Japan, upon their return, were testimony to this success.

"Of course the policy would not have been successful without the support of the Japanese government."

He added that global developments, including the rise of China as an economic and military power in particular, as well as the United States' hostile reaction to this, had impacted Malaysia's foreign policies and international relations.

Asean, he said, faced a threat to its centrality and subsequently its relevance to external and internal forces.

"Malaysia and Japan perceive the threats from these new realities differently. China's rise caused greater concern in Japan, leading it to align itself closer with the US.

"Meanwhile, China's growing prominence in the southeast region threatens to overshadow Japan's presence."

He said this then caused divisions, with countries in the region pushed to choose sides rather than integration and cooperation.

"It is important for Malaysia and Japan not to lose sight of its longstanding good relations.

"Albeit these new challenges, I hope that the people-to-people interaction between Malaysians and Japanese would blossom into a strong and enduring bond.

"I hope the policy will continue for many more years and act as a balance against other cultures, particularly those from the West."

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