

# Taking a leaf from Hang Tuah's book

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MALAYSIA is a showcase of how a relatively small country has successfully conducted diplomacy and managed its foreign affairs.

The point to note is that at the time of Independence, Malaysia was not new on the international scene or in a desperate search of an identity.

Since its beginnings, the country seemed to have been assigned a regional and global role. It had vast historical experience in foreign contacts that provided a sound grounding in international relations. This found expression in Malaysia's positive outlook on foreign relations and its foreign policy initiatives.

Malaysians have been blessed with almost five decades of peace and progress.

These are the fruits of enlightened leadership and unwavering commitment to safeguarding the country's territorial integrity and promoting its national interests.

Unfortunately, today, the younger generation especially, tend to take the peace and prosperity for granted. They fail to appreciate that the first line of defence of the country's sovereignty and independence is diplomacy.

For, when diplomacy fails, armed conflict results, as demonstrated throughout history. Although intangible in its benefits, the significance of skillfully conducting international relations and diplomacy can hardly be exaggerated. It is therefore appropriate for us to be mindful of this fact.

Malaysia's remarkable success in conducting its diplomacy and managing its foreign affairs is rooted in its elaborate historic mosaic.

The country's past helps us to understand the thinking, attitude, aspirations and policies of present-day Malaysia.

We need to appreciate, first, the strategic location, and its global setting stemming from its being a confluence of many of the finest cultural traditions of the world.

Secondly, its background of international commerce and early orientation to foreign relations and ties

## COMMENT

By G.K. Ananda Kumarasiri

provided Malaysia a rich diplomatic heritage.

These attributes have contributed to Malaysia's high profile in international relations and diplomacy. Other key factors include the dynamic and visionary role of its founding fathers.

The world view and enlightened leadership of Tunku Abdul Rahman and his successor, the social engineer and technocratic administrator Tun Abdul Razak Hussein are of cardinal importance in laying the strong foundations in international affairs.

The pluralistic character of Malaysia inherited is reflected in its ethnic, religious and cultural mix.

Particularly noteworthy, are the concepts of *musyawara* — the hallowed tradition of consultation and free-and-open discussion for collective agreement; and *muafakat* or consensual agreement.

These intrinsically Malay cultural traits form a cornerstone of Malay society as personified by the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

These entrenched Malay values are displayed in his leadership style in Umno, his preference for consensual agreement in formulating national policies and projects, government and administration and the non-confrontational approach to international relations.

The Malacca Sultanate, the "Golden Age" of Malaysian history, bequeathed a highly-developed court culture with respect to foreign relations. Its elaborate ceremonies, palace protocol and court procedures which may be referred to as "palace diplomacy" is representative of the diplomatic grooming of the early Malay States.

The Sultanate produced personalities such as Hang Tuah, who is regarded by most Malaysians as a leg-



Tunku Abdul Rahman, at the Selangor Club Padang, Kuala Lumpur for the countdown to independence in 1957, managed the country's foreign policy and diplomacy with patriarchal authority and supreme confidence.

endary warrior and an icon of martial skills and bravery.

In fact, he is also the first, and indeed, one of the most distinguished ambassadors in Malaysia's recorded history.

His diplomatic prowess is an index of Malaysia's diplomatic heritage. Hang Tuah spoke several languages and was despatched to a number of countries as special envoy of the sultan. The diplomatic acumen and adroitness of the early Malay States were reinforced in the face of European intrusions which resulted in a new set of political, commercial, economic, social, cultural and diplomatic challenges.

This situation exposed the Malay rulers to formal dealings, elaborate negotiations and treaty-relationships.

They showed greater diplomatic vision, foresight and skills in dealing with foreign powers than most other countries which had easily succumbed to the coercion of "gunboat diplomacy".

Early exposure to and experience in conducting foreign relations enabled the Malay rulers to deal with

the European intrusions with dexterity and sophistication as attested by the courtliness, elaborate protocol and diplomatic procedures.

They did not easily capitulate or lose their sovereignty completely, even right to the very end of British rule.

An outstanding Malay blue blood who was steeped in "palace diplomacy" was the Tunku.

Diplomacy was second nature to him and enabled him to manage the country's foreign policy and diplomacy with patriarchal authority and supreme confidence mixed with a liberal display of gentility, dexterity and aplomb.

Thus when the country stepped into the international arena as a nation, the transformation from "palace diplomacy" to "international diplomacy" occurred in an orderly and healthy fashion. There was a natural adaptation for Malaysia to the new milieu of conducting foreign affairs as a sovereign and independent nation.

Malaysia's unique global setting and history of foreign relations bequeathed a rich diplomatic heritage.

It inherited a sound understanding and keen sense of the methods and means of conducting diplomacy and foreign relations.

These factors have enabled Malaysia to play a prominent role in international relations far out of proportion to its age as a sovereign entity, size and power potential.

The legacy of its past leaders' achievements and performance will continue to inspire its present and future leaders to steer through the turbulent and challenging contemporary international environment.

I had the privilege to serve under the Tunku and Abdullah in my 30-year diplomatic career. There is good reason to believe that under Pak Lah, Malaysia will maintain a high profile in the national as well as international arenas.

The country possesses an unprecedented combination of leadership in managing its international relations and diplomacy. Abdullah held the foreign minister's post for eight years and incumbent Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, to date, has occupied the hot seat for seven years.

Abdullah has brought to bear his experience in formulating and postulating Malaysia's foreign policy and conducting diplomacy.

This is evident in his chairmanship of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, the Non-Aligned Movement and his senior-statesman role in Asean. His affable personality and non-confrontational statesmanship has endeared him at home and abroad among world leaders.

Abdullah's consensual leadership style is reminiscent of the paternalistic and genuinely caring hallmark of the Tunku. It is not surprising that even his critics readily acknowledge in his genial streak a source of impregnable strength.

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