

Reading too Much into Things

It would seem that not-so-subtle attempts are still being made to drive a wedge between our present Prime Minister and his predecessor; the former's recent 'look west' call as opposed to the latter's 'Look East Policy' being a case in point. But in truth, they couldn't be more complementary.

THE *New Straits Times* and its Bahasa Malaysia sister paper, *Berita Harian*, on Dec 21 headlined the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, as urging Malaysians to 'look west'.

They quoted Abdullah, who was on an official visit to India, as saying that Malaysian businessmen should look west towards India and the Middle East for opportunities, saying that the regions offered exciting possibilities.

Conspiracy-minded readers immediately saw in the headlines another veiled attempt by some sections of the media to drive a wedge between Abdullah and his predecessor Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad who, in 1981, introduced the 'Look East Policy'.

The media, in particular the print section, spun quite a controversy for themselves over the recently ended tussle for the

control of a DRB-Hicom stake between Tan Sri Syed Mokhtar Al-Bukhary and Tan Sri S M Nasimuddin.

With that episode still fresh in the minds of many people, it is not surprising that the 'look west' and 'go west' headlines by the two newspapers evoked the image of yet another broadside against the former Prime Minister.

It is widely perceived that Syed Mokhtar received the short end of the stick from some newspapers because he is seen as a 'Mahathir's boy' – a fact that is debatable since he met Dr Mahathir only in 1998 when he was already a well-established corporate titan.

Alas, this is not the case. Abdullah was merely stating the obvious. India, said the Prime Minister, is growing at a phenomenal rate. Even the Middle East, despite its turmoil, has an oasis of economic growth and political stability.

It has to be noted that even when the Look East Policy was in high gear, Malaysia neither ignored nor downgraded the importance of India and the Middle East.

The policy was not about politics or trade. It was about learning and applying the positive aspects of eastern values found in countries like Japan and South Korea.

In fact, Malaysia's South-South Cooperation Policy was incidental to the Look East Policy as the government sought to expand economic and trade ties with non-European economies around the globe.

It was under Dr Mahathir that Malaysian companies and businessmen started to venture into India, the Middle East, Central

Asia, Africa and South America. For his role, Dr Mahathir remains a celebrated personality on the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East. He makes regular visits to the regions to speak to officials and businessmen. In the past months, he has covered such destinations as Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates and, most recently, Bangladesh.

Abdullah's strong endorsement of the importance of India and the Middle East will ensure that our presence in these regions – diplomatically and economically – remains at a high level.

IRAQ: JUST ANOTHER AMERICAN PUPPET

WITH the Middle East in turmoil, thanks largely to the United States policy towards Israel and its occupation of Iraq, it would be easy to dismiss the region as a goner. Yet, it is here that diplomacy is at its most critical. Left to the Americans, the Middle East will be no different in future than it had been for decades under European influence.

Osama bin Laden (minus his extremism and militancy) has a point when he argued that too many Middle Eastern governments are too distant from their people and too beholden to the US.

Until the Sept 11, 2001 attacks on the New York World Trade Center and the Pentagon in Washington DC, successive US administrations saw nothing wrong with the Kings, Sheikhs and Emirs of the Middle East for as long as they left Israel alone and submitted to US hegemony.

America had problems with some Arab

presidents and prime ministers because they supported Russia during the Cold War and their rhetoric about Israel.

Even Saddam Hussein, purportedly the purveyor of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), was once an American ally. Washington supplied him with guns and rockets to destroy the Ayatollah's Iran.

And Osama would not have been as formidable as he is today had it not been for the support of the CIA and its Pakistani ally, the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence), during the Russian occupation of Afghanistan.

But somebody had to pay for Washington's intelligence failure that led to Sept 11. Americans had to be assured that it was safe for them to eat, drink and be merry once again. So, who better to beat to a pulp than Osama and Saddam?

Unfortunately, for the young American soldiers who are dying daily in Iraq, neither the senior nor the junior Bush has been very good at understanding the world beyond Texas. Getting rid of Osama and Saddam isn't as simple as mounting a cattle drive.

Today, both Osama and Saddam are heroes to many Muslims. They may not be wearing T-shirts with the likeness of Osama and Saddam, but they see the two men as being no more or less evil than the neo-conservative war mongers in Washington DC.

Even the White House is singing Osama's signature tune – regime change. That is what Osama has been fighting for for decades before the US got into the act to literally install Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan and promote Iyad Allawi in Iraq.

Susan Watkins, writing in the July/August issue of the American magazine *New Left Review* notes: 'Little secret is made of the fact that, like his counterpart Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan, he (Iyad Allawi) has been a paid CIA agent for many years.'

Unless the United Nations and other multilateral organisations like the Organisation of Islamic Conference and the Arab League get more actively involved in shaping the future course of the Middle East, more CIA transplants will end up as

presidents, prime ministers, Emirs and Wazirs.

FOMENTING THE SHIITE-SUNNI DICHOTOMY

ONE unintended outcome of the US policy in the Middle East is the replacement of American and European expatriates by Asian and other non-European nationals.

With an increasing number of American and European expatriates leaving, governments and companies in the region are becoming more dependent on Asians, Africans and other non-Caucasians.

Similarly, an increasing number of Arab investors and tourists who once placed complete faith in America and Europe are beginning to look east towards Asia.

So, looking west for business opportunities as suggested by the Prime

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Minister is a natural course of action. It has always been a policy of the government, since Dr Mahathir expanded our horizon, to encourage Malaysians to do business with South countries.

Of course, trade and cultural links between Malaysia and the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East are as old as civilisation itself. So are the links with China and other eastern empires.

This part of the world had co-existed peacefully for centuries until European colonisation in the 16th Century tore the region apart.

As a colonial power, America, while colonising the Philippines only briefly, left the most unsettling effect on the region.

Thus, we are not short of lessons to guide us in our understanding of the post-Cold War US hegemony. They tell us of the perils of blindly believing and following the US.

America has been wrong on many occasions. And had we believed US propaganda, we would have stayed away from China. The US spook-masters had not only described China as a plague but had also warned countries around the world of the dangers of the yellow tide.

But the late Tun Abdul Razak Hussein not only defied conventional wisdom of the day but also braved domestic reservation to forge diplomatic relations with China in 1974, when US intervention in Vietnam was tethering on the brink of collapse. America hightailed from Vietnam the following year.

Today, America is pandering to China not only because the middle kingdom is the fastest-growing economy in the world but also because it holds a massive amount of US government debts.

Having miscalculated the resolve of the Vietnamese people and lost a 10-year war against the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army, America put in a last ditch effort to frighten the rest of Southeast Asia to stick to its side by promoting the domino theory. Southeast Asian countries were told that when South Vietnam fell, they too would fall one by one to the communists.

Neither the Chinese plague nor the domino theory materialised.

Having spent billions of dollars and sacrificed the lives of more than 50,000 servicemen and women (and killing millions more Vietnamese), the US hightailed from Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), leaving behind thousands of collaborators – many of whom are still suffering the backlash to this day.

The images coming out of Iraq are hauntingly identical – US invasion, the installation of a US-backed government, the killing of civilians, the guerilla warfare and the body bags. Except for the place and time, there is little else to separate Iraq from Vietnam.

So, Bush is desperate for an exit plan. The

bravado aside, neither Bush nor his collaborator British Prime Minister Tony Blair can be totally convinced that the so-called democratic election will put the lid back on the Pandora's box.

By attacking and occupying Iraq, Bush and Blair have either deliberately or unintentionally released the genie. By unleashing the *Shiite-Sunni* animosity as a tool of occupation, Bush and Blair have effectively made Iraq less governable.

The net result is while the US may have gotten rid of Saddam, with or without WMD ever being found, it may have to contend with another clerical-led Islamic government in the Middle East. That, of course, will give the US further excuse to continue to harass and subjugate the Middle East. Having promoted Arab-Israel animosity, Washington is now fomenting the *Shiite-Sunni* dichotomy.

JUST HOW MANY SENIOR OFFICIALS DOES IT TAKE TO RUN KL?

BACK home in Malaysia – in Kuala

Lumpur to be specific – hopes are high that the new Mayor Datuk Ruslin Hasan will do something good for the Vision City.

Never mind that he was appointed just hours before his predecessor's term was about to expire. Hopefully, within that few short hours, a proper transfer of power and responsibility had been affected.

Fortunately, in this case, the successor is an internal candidate. Ruslin was the City Hall Director-General. Still, it would have been nicer and more Malaysian in practice if the old *Datuk Bandar* had been told ahead that his term was not being extended, and the new man asked to get ready. We can do without last-minute appointments and surprises, more so when we are promising a kinder, more people-friendly government.


For the new Mayor, the task ahead is unenviable. Many aspects of city management and services have visibly deteriorated. He should immediately get on with the job of revitalising the city. Being an insider, he would have been equally responsible for its deterioration. He would

know what is broken and should immediately proceed to fix it.

Another nagging question is: What really constitutes the post of Mayor? Is it an administrator's post? Or is it a protocol job that is intended to give the city an air of pomp and pageantry?

That notwithstanding, with a minister, a secretary-general, a *Datuk Bandar* and a director-general, Kuala Lumpur is clearly over-staffed and over-administrated. A lot of taxpayers' money is needed to keep them in their jobs while their roles and responsibilities continue to remain guesswork for many people.

No wonder we hear of taxes, charges and fees being continuously raised in Kuala Lumpur and other cities, albeit with little effect on the welfare of the ordinary people.

Do we need so many high-ranking officials to run one city? 

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