The Social Sciences 8 (6): 560-564, 2013
ISSN: 1818-5800
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Malaysian Foreign Policy During Mahathir's Administration

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Abstract: Malaysia saw an unprecedented economic achievement during Mahathir's administration and started taking center stage in the international relations arena during the 1990's. Malaysia's profound profile in global and regional relations was largely credited to the robust economic reformation and strengthen inter-governmental relations by Mahathir's administration, especially with its ties with the ASEAN countries and US/Europe cooperation. This study explains Mahathir's foreign policy experiences which spans from economic and trade ties to the reinforcement with ASEAN and OIC countries.

Key words: Mahathir, ASEAN, regional relations, foreign policy, trade, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Mahathir's foreign policy: Tun Mahathir Mohamad (previously Dato' Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad) took the office, as the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia on the 16th of July, 1981 as being anticipated by many observers. This was due to the fact that all previous Deputy Prime Ministers have been elevated to the highest office without being challenged neither internally nor by someone outside the UMNO party (Von der Mehden, 1982). Malaysia's domestic concern shifted to the issue of who will become his deputy rather than the post of PM. There were two main contenders for the post. On one side, Tengku Razaleigh Ismail, a Kelantanese Prince which has been the finance minister for some time. His vast experience and ground support has put him as the front runner. The second was Dato' Musa Hitam, a younger Johor UMNO leader who was as vocal as Mahathir and spent in the political wilderness with Mahathir during Tunku's era. Both were UMNO's deputy vice president at that moment. Tun Hussein Onn was not at his best health after having a heart attack a few months before and has been receiving medical treatment from abroad. Tun Hussein Onn was ill during his visit to London in December, 1980. He went back to London in February, 1981 and had a coronary bypass operation when prompted him to make the decision to resign a few months after. This is the first time that Malaysia will be headed by a man from a humble background and who received local education. Mahathir, not like his predecessors was locally educated at the Malaya University. He is a medical doctor by profession. Tunku, Razak and Hussein were all foreign educated and from either royal or the Autocratic families. Mahathir however comes from a middle class family, his father, Master Iskandar was a headmaster of a school where Tunku once gone as a student.

Mahathir chose Dato' Musa Hitam as his deputy and both were young Turks in terms of aggressiveness and the desire to serve the nation and have challenged even the leader of the Malaysian independence movement, the Tunku (Hamzah, 1990). Both men were ultra Malay nationalist and come from the rank and file of the UMNO hierarchy (Means, 1991; Milne and Mauzy, 1999; Morais, 1982) (the term ultras was given by Lee Kuan Yew, the former Singapore Prime Minister in light of fierce criticism by Malay leaders towards Singapore and its predominantly Chinese leadership). The Malay leadership in return labeled Singapore leaders as Chinese chauvinist, due to its strong root in defending the Chinese community and having traditional ties with the PRC. However, Musa was not the only deputy that Mahathir had. In the course of his 22 years rule, Mahathir has had four deputies which were Dato' Musa Hitam (1981-1986), Tun Ghafar Baba (1986-1993), Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim (1993-1998) and Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (1998-2003), the current Prime Minister of Malaysia. Out of the four deputies, Anwar Ibrahim was the only one who publicly defied him and was unceremoniously sacked in 1998.

Mahathir's fierce, frank and open criticism has been his style of leadership even before he holds any government post. To him, being frank and open is not to be equated to extremism. If a person does not be frank and critical of something which is not right, he will be taken for granted (Morais, 1982). This style of leadership of his was clearly witnessed during his tenure as the Prime Minister of Malaysia.

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MY WAY

Tun Mahathir is a fan of Frank Sinatra song, my way that so much so one can observe that his political life has been nothing but the realization of Sinatra's song. He will say whatever needed to say and do whatever needed to do even if what he says or does would upset some other people (this act of Mahathir is so famous that some has termed it as Vintage Mahathir. Mahathir was very good in handling the journalist and would give ample time for them to indulge in Q&A sessions. He has never scolded anybody, however he resorts to being sarcastic and cynical in giving his answers. He likes to give analogies as the answer to trivial question). He will cunningly maneuver a meeting in such a way, the attendees will confirm to his liking or at least does not reject his ideas. Although, this may sound a bit authoritarian but most importantly Mahathir always gets his job done (Hamzah, 1990).

In shaping Malaysian foreign policy, Mahathir always give the diplomatic services clear instructions and directions, not like the PMs before him. Zainal Abidin Sulong, a former diplomat and civil servant in the diplomatic services recounts that Mahathir always know what he wants and give directions on what to do not like the PMs before him (an interview with Zainal Abidin Sulong. Ambassador Sulong was a career diplomat and involved directly with the formation of Malaysian foreign affairs during three prime ministers of Malaysia included Mahathir Mohamad. He started his career as a Malaysian diplomat in 1957. He had served as the Malaysian Ambassador to Indonesia (1972-1977), the USSR (1977-1980) and as the Malaysian permanent representative to the United Nations, New York (1980-1984 March) before being appointed Secretary-General of the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in April, 1984). Mahathir shifted Malaysia's traditional foreign policy of pro-British and the West to his new strategy of look East policy (Mahathir was always fascinated with the work ethics of the Japanese, South Koreans and Taiwanese work force. One of the first steps, imitating their work ethics was the introduction of punch-in clock machines in all government buildings and the wearing of name tags. This directives not only targets the improvement of government services, such as corruption and breach of trust). He even launched the buy British last policy as a retaliation to the unfavorable treatment of Malaysian students in Britain and problems encountered by Malaysia's flagship National Airline, the Malaysia Airline (MAS), over landing rights in London (Means, 1991).

Despite Mahathir's scathing remarks about the West and the monopoly Jews, America remained as the biggest trading partner and biggest export market for the past 20 years. Trade with the United States went up steadily and consistently over the years despite Mahathir's periodical pot-shot on the West. Malaysia's huge semi-conductor and electrical goods productions needs the huge American and European markets beside the Japanese as well (Table 1).

Table 1: Trade of Malaysia in 1990 and 2002 with countries

Trade	1990 (RM billion)	2002 (RM billion)	Increase (%)
Trade with US			
Exports	13.5	71.5	429.6
Imports	13.3	49.7	273.7
Trade with EU			
Exports	11.9	43.9	268.9
Imports	11.6	34.4	286.6
Trade with Japan			
Exports	12.6	39.8	215.9
Imports	19.1	53.9	182.2

MITI (2002); http://www.miti.gov.my/

Malaysia experienced a phenomenal economic growth of about 6% annually from 1990-1996. However, when Malaysia was thrown into deep recession in 1997/1998, Mahathir pointed his finger to the irresponsible Western speculator, namely George Soros, as the reason of the economic downturn (Mohamad, 2000).

MAHATHIR AND ASEAN

I am a Malaysian nationalist. For this i offer no apologies. I am also an ASEANist. I am deeply committed to ASEAN which has played such a critical role in turning what was an area of turmoil, antagonism, conflict into a zone of cooperative peace and prosperity (Dr. Mahathir Mohamad at the Asia Society Conference on Asia and the Changing world, Tokyo, Japan, 1993).

Mahathir has been one of the ASEAN leaders who categorically dedicated his appreciation to ASEAN as the organization behind the driving force and source of stability in the region. To Mahathir, ASEAN has been playing the stabilizing influence and as a catalyst in developing national economic resilience in the Southeast Asia region. For that matter, ASEAN remains in the fore-front of Malaysia's foreign policy priorities (Mahathir, 2004).

Mahathir sees that the economic development and the harmony and safety enjoyed by ASEAN countries for the past 40 years or so has been as a result of successfully maintaining a peaceful, secured and business friendly environment in the region. ASEAN has made it possible for these countries to enjoy such an environment by abiding to the principles of ASEAN neighborliness, policy of non-aggression, non-interference into internal affairs and the successful avoidance of escalated conflict. It was obvious that

Mahathir was indebted to the organization from all of his speeches given over the years. In his final and departing speech at his last ASEAN Summit in 2003, he urged that the remaining ASEAN leaders must upheld the principle of non-interference, the consensus-based decision making, national and regional resilience, respect for national sovereignty, the renunciation of the threat and the use of force in the settlement of dispute. These are the ASEAN norms and the ASEAN way that have served ASEAN countries well. He reiterated again Malaysia's total commitment to the association having been one of the founding members of the organization.

Mahathir had always reminded ASEAN leaders of the need to implement all the planned projects and programs rather than making rhetorical announcement for the benefit of the press. In his speech addressed to the 29th ASEAN economic ministers meeting in Petaling Jaya, he urged all the delegates to remain focused in pursuing ASEAN objectives in economic and trade and start addressing issues that confront them (a speech delivered at the 29th ASEAN economic ministers meeting in Petaling Jaya, on October 16, 1997).

Mahathir has always upheld the concept of state sovereignty over internal affairs and the need to restraint from getting involved into another country's affairs. To him, every state should enjoy a free hand in administering its own people and address issues in their own way. That is why Malaysia has restraint itself from giving unnecessary comments on other members internal issues, thus it does not want anyone to do otherwise. But, this rule has one exception which is Singapore. Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew has been criticizing each other whenever there is the opportunity to do so as historical ties of the two nations has made it impossible to resist.

Malaysia-Singapore relations were only cordial during his premiership. There have been unresolved issues between the two siblings ranging from the water agreement between Johore and Singapore, overlapping claims on the Pulau Batu Putih and Pulau Pisang and the Tanjung Pagar CIQ relocation predicament. However, all comments from either side of the boundary do not affect the reality that both countries enjoy tremendous economic advantages from inter-state trade and commerce. Singapore remained second largest trade partner to Malaysia since early 1980's (Table 2).

Table 2: Top four Malaysian trading partners in 2007

Countries	2007 (RM billion)	Share (%)
United States of America	149.21	13.4
Singapore	146.46	13.2
Japan	120.78	10.9
People's Republic of China	117.94	10.6

http://www.matrade.gov.my/foreignbuyer/Msiatop10.htm

MAHATHIR AND EAEG

Tun Mahathir understood the way the new economic world works. He believed that in order for ASEAN commodities to gain international access and being treated fairly in international negotiations, all the countries should come together and have a common stand on certain international issues. With the emergence of the European Community (then evolved to become the European Union) and North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), ASEAN countries would have a better chance in international negotiations if they team up together with other East Economic Tigers. Therefore in 1991, Mahathir proposed the formation of a loosely economic arrangement called the East Asia Economic Group (EAEG) (a speech delivered at the meeting of ASEAN Economic Ministers (AEM) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 7th October, 1991). EAEG was then modified to become East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC).

EAEC would consist of all ASEAN countries plus Japan, South Korea and China and having Japan, as the leading negotiating countries. However, this proposal of Mahathir did not have the back up of other economic powers in the Pacific Region; namely the United States (US) and this was a setback. The US is concerned that any economic grouping that does not include them would be detriment to its economic well being. With this problem, Japan hesitantly rebuff Malaysia's proposal out of loyalty to the US. Some countries see EAEC would overlap the functions already played by Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). Furthermore when AFTA was being launched in 1992, Mahathir's EAEC proposal has been sidelined.

Few would not understand that Mahathir's EAEC proposal was mainly to keep the US, Australia and New Zealand from being in the same grouping as the other Asian countries. ASEAN's inclusion into APEC upsets Mahathir so much so that he boycotted the APEC Summit when it was held in Seattle in 1993 due to lack of prior consultation by the Australian who proposed the meeting (Milne and Mauzy, 1999). Mahathir believed that ASIAN countries should work together as they have something in common as regards to culture and attitude towards the West. But, Mahathir's EAEC concept was not well explained and therefore had not received the support it needed to see its implementation (Higgott and Stubbs, 1995).

However in a face saving exercise, Malaysia's Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar told a Malaysian backbencher in 2000 that the East Asia Economic Caucus had been created in 1995 in the form of ASEAN+3. He pointed out that ASEAN+3 meetings had been held

recently between ASEAN, Japan, China and South Korea. Meeting last November in Manila, he noted these countries had agreed to strengthen economic, social, technical and other ties in the region. This showed that the EAEC had been implemented (it was not until 1995, however that the rest of ASEAN unanimously endorsed the concept. At the ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei, members affirmed their support for the EAEC. It took another couple years before the first ASEAN+3 meeting took place during the December, 1997 ASEAN summit in Kuala Lumpur (Oorjitham, 2000).

MAHATHIR AND ISLAM

Islam assumed growing prominence under Mahathir's administration (Milne and Mauzy, 1999). Although, Islam and the Muslim agenda have been close to the hearts of previous administrations, certain international events amplified Malaysia's role in speaking for the Islamic world. Mahathir has always been pro Palestine and anti-Zionist so much so that he equates almost all bad things that happened in the world is being orchestrated by the Zionist movement. In his last speech at the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in 2003, Mahathir said Jews ruled the world and got others to fight and die for them but added that they would not be able to defeat the world's 1.3 billion Muslims (CNN, 2003; Mahathir Attack on Jews Condemmed). Earlier, he opposed bitterly the visit of Israeli President to Singapore in 1986 and labeled Singapore of being insensitive to the emotions of surrounding Muslim ASEAN countries.

Mahathir's passion to the plight of Muslim minority all over the world was duly noted. When ethnic clashes took place in the Balkan, he sprung to the plight by providing Malaysian troops as a part of the UN Peacekeeping forces in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Malaysia sent about 1500 military personnel to Bosnia-Herzegovina as peacekeepers. He slammed the US and the Europeans for being late in giving reactions until the situations was way out of hand. The slaughtering of 8000 Bosnian in Srebrenica has turned around the world attention and began significant steps intervening in the Balkan wars. Malaysia has always played important role in the Southern Thailand and in Mindanao conflicts as mediators. Mahathir's last direct involvement in the international Islamic affairs was when he became the Chairman of the OIC in 2003, months before he retired from active politics.

He was been regarded as the voice of the Muslim world, the voice of the third world and evidently as the voice of ASEAN. Malaysia has emerged as a strong and insistent voice, especially under the determined direction of Tun Mahathir Mohamad (Milne and Mauzy, 1999).

CONCLUSION

Malaysia's foreign policy has been characterized by so many variables but could be summed up as follow:

- Malaysia as a developing nation
- Malaysia as a member of ASEAN and the Southeast Asia region
- Malaysia as a member of the larger Asia continent
- Malaysia as a part of the Muslim world

In spite of the differences in the approach and implementation of Malaysian foreign strategy between one Prime Minister and another, Malaysia has never been more pragmatic in formulating its foreign policy. However, Mahathir has been the most pragmatic leader of all. How else can one explain, Mahathir's unrelenting support for the Palestinian course and his international condemnation of the Jews can be coupled by a public denunciation of the suicide bombers attacks in the Palestinian conflicts. Mahathir condemned the suicide bombers and the terrorist attacks of the New York World Trade Center during his last speech at the OIC conference in Putrajaya in 2003. At the same meeting, foreign ministers of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) will not accept any attempt to label ongoing Palestinian struggles as terrorist acts and call on the United Nations to take the lead in combating terrorism. The five-page statement, titled the Kuala Lumpur Declaration was adopted by the ministers on the conclusion of the 3 days extraordinary session of the OIC Foreign Ministers on terrorism. The ministers also reiterate the principled position under international law and the charter of the United Nations of the legitimacy of resistance to foreign aggression and the struggle of peoples under colonial or alien domination and foreign occupation for national liberation and self-determination. For that statement that he has made, Mahathir had caused a lot of anger and dissatisfaction among the Arab leaders.

Mahathir's critical view of the West does not stop him of doing business with them. Nor does his strict intolerable stance towards Singapore resulted any lesser trading with the neighboring country. Mahathir is the perfect pragmatic leader that Malaysia need and his resignation in 2003 will be a big lost to Malaysia and the region as a whole.

Malaysia foreign policy towards ASEAN and regional cooperation is nothing short than the full

commitment as Malaysia realized that in order for Malaysia and other states to achieve economic and political development, the region itself must offer a conducive and favorable environment. ASEAN has succeeded in keeping bilateral conflicts at bay by not including it into any of ASEAN's meeting agenda. Malaysia's insistence in keeping the status quo as it is and remain true to the concept of non-interference and the non-use of force in settling dispute has bore fruit as ASEAN countries have successfully avoided any military conflict since its inception in 1967. This alone is a milestone achievement for ASEAN.

ASEAN countries excellent trade and economy record over the years, except during the Asian crises of 1997/1998 has been the proud achievement of the region. With peace and stability comes in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and infrastructure development. Singapore remains the bulliest economy in the region with Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia not far ahead. With the total implementation of AFTA in the near future, only good things will happen. All this has been achieved due to the well thought strategies by ASEAN leaders and in Malaysia's case, by its able and charismatic Prime Ministers. As Mahathir pointed out during his final speech delivered in Bali in 2003, as ASEAN moves forward, it must not disregard the principles that have kept them together for >4 decades. He listed all the values that the ASEAN organization stands for, for what the international community identifies as the ASEAN way.

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