

The Evolution of Malaysia's Multilateral Activities under Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed

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I. Malaysia's foreign policy during Mahathir's first term of office (1981-1986)

1. "Look East" Policy

Observers of Malaysian foreign policy generally agree that Prime Minister Mahathir, when taking office at the end of 1981, initiated a new phase of Malaysian foreign policy.¹ He thus followed the kind of "tradition" established by his predecessors Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Abdul Razak who both left their marks on Malaysian foreign policy.

The "Look East" Policy which framed Japan as the model to follow for Malaysia's economic development was one of the major features of Mahathir's first term of office (1981-1986). Mahathir, the first Malaysian Prime Minister who had not been educated in Britain, was proud of showing national consciousness by reducing the ties to Britain in order to cut down what he considered colonial dependence. An enhanced commitment to the philosophy of Non-Alignment, as well as an involvement in the world of Islam underlined the distance from traditional powers and the closer links to Third World countries.

2. Few multilateral activities

Although the Non-Aligned Movement had been a priority in Mahathir's foreign policy and therefore could have been a basis for multilateralism, multilateral activities did not play a major role during Mahathir's first term of office.

Malaysia took part in multilateral events, but did not display a high profile. If it was host of international meetings - such as the ASEAN Foreign ministers' meeting in July 1985 - it is because it was Malaysia's turn, not because it was a special initiative. Furthermore these meetings were mainly of regional, not of a worldwide nature. One might argue, that a more active role could be discerned in the field of commodities, but this is quite a limited area as far as the substance and the states involved are concerned.

The Antarctica initiative within the UN can be considered as a first step in direction of multilateral activities. It challenged the Antarctic regime as agreed by the parties to the Antarctic treaty and pleaded for the interests of Third World countries who had not been involved in negotiating it. Compared to the area of commodities, the Antarctica issue is not an issue of immediate concern to Malaysia's interests, but shows a more comprehensive concern for Third World countries. It has served to give Malaysia greater international visibility.² Important as this initiative was, as a step on the way to an active multilateral policy, it remained (when launched) a single initiative, not yet part of a broader concept.

During Mahathir's second term of office, multilateral activities of worldwide scope were enhanced and became one of the striking features of his foreign policy.

The following analysis is illustrative of the considerable increase of Malaysian activities in the multilateral field which began with Mahathir's successful candidature for the post of Chairman to the International Conference on Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking in 1987. Other successful candidatures for key posts in international organisations and conferences were to follow such as the UN Security Council, the Presidency of the UNESCO General Assembly and the General Conference of the Atomic Energy Agency. Hosting major international conferences in Malaysia such as the Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference in October 1989 and the South-South-Summit in June 1990 has equally been part of the concept. Malaysia launched different initiatives to enhance the economic cooperation in East Asia, both within ASEAN and by the proposal of an East Asian Economic Grouping.

Constraints of Malaysian home policy, i. e. the challenge by Mahathir's rival, Razaleigh, contributed to the formation of this proactive multilateral policy especially in the beginning, but became less important later on, when multilateral policy was pursued for foreign policy reasons as well.

Malaysia did not content itself with the glory of being elected to key posts of international meetings or with creating a congenial atmosphere at conferences it was hosting, but was concerned with the substance as well. Its moderating influence which was quite often instrumental for reaching consensus earned Malaysia a lot of recognition. It is primarily Mahathir himself who shaped this proactive Malaysian policy in the multilateral field.³

In order to show the policy's evolution the following analysis is developed in a chronological order beginning with the International Conference on Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking organised under the auspices of the UN, and then examining together all other Malaysian activities within the UN family. Initiatives related to ASEAN are therefore dealt with rather at the end, although ASEAN is one of the priorities of Malaysian foreign policy.

II. The evolution of Malaysia's multilateral activities

1. Chairmanship of the International Conference on Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking (ICDAIT) in June 1987

The International Conference on Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking which took place under the auspices of the United Nations in June 1987 in Vienna was the first multilateral event of worldwide scope where Malaysia played a prominent role through its Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir, who was elected President of the conference. The presidency was originally contested by Bolivia and major lobbying efforts had to be made, but finally it was successful. Mahathir handled the presidency in an businesslike matter and his performance earned him a lot of recognition.

The presidency was important to Mahathir mainly for reasons of domestic policy. At this time Mahathir faced stiff challenge to his leadership by the former minister of economics, Razaleigh. In this situation Mahathir's election to the presidency was a personal triumph for him which was proof of his international popularity.⁴ After this multilateral experience Mahathir became more interested in developing more actively the multilateral field. In September 1987 he was pleading for more multilateralism:

"We must return to multilateralism. Admittedly the United Nations is cumbersome and some members can be unreasonable. But it is the only true representative body of the countries in the world. It can be improved, but it must not be bypassed"⁵

The Malaysian Foreign Ministry was asked to examine the possibilities for a more active multilateral role and in January 1988 Foreign Minister Abu Hassan announced the forthcoming candidature to the UN Security Council.⁶

2. Election to the Security Council in October 1988

This candidature to the steering committee of the world organisation turned out to be difficult. Due to a competitive candidature of Bangladesh, Malaysia did not manage to get the support of the whole Asian group for an agreed slate. Both were competing for the votes of the G-77 of which both were members. As Bangladesh had beaten Japan in its candidature in 1979/80, it was confident it would be successful again. It was counting on the support of less developed countries for whose cause it was considered a better fighter than affluent Malaysia. Consequently Malaysia took up a very careful and thorough lobbying which involved talking to each of the more than 150 delegations individually.

Finally it managed to get 104 votes out of the 106 required for the two-thirds majority, Bangladesh got only 55 votes. Due to this poor result, Bangladesh withdrew its candidature. That Bangladesh had expected to get herself the two-thirds majority shows the difficulty Malaysia had been facing and the great diplomatic achievement the outcome of the voting represents. Their careful tactics had impressed quite a few observers.⁷

It now paid off, that Mahathir had made a serious and successful effort to consolidate relations with countries with whom relations had not yet been much developed. He had focussed on the Pacific states⁸ who particularly welcomed this attitude. African states honoured Malaysia's unequivocal stand against Apartheid and also the technical assistance Malaysia had granted to quite a few of them.

What a difference from the time of "Confrontatie", when Malaysia had to realise that it had neglected to lobby for support! The "Confrontatie", the confrontation with Indonesia on the question of Sabah, had its negative impact on Malaysia's first candidature for the Security Council in 1965 as a certain number of countries led by Indonesia were not ready to give Malaysia the support it needed for the necessary two-thirds majority. As the other candidate, Czechoslovakia, could not get the two-thirds majority either, a gentlemen's agreement was struck which allowed Czechoslovakia to serve the first year and Malaysia the second.⁹ From this experience Malaysia had learnt the lesson about the importance of cultivating friends in the international arena.¹⁰

3. Malaysia's role on the Security Council

a. First phase: January 1989 - July 1990

What role was Malaysia playing as member of the the Security Council? Its Permanent Representative, Razali Ismail, told Malaysian journalists in an interview in April 1989 that the economies of the developing nations would be a focus

for Malaysia's activities in the Security Council. He drew a line to the special session of the UN to reevaluate world economic development of spring 1990 and the fourth UN decade, beginning in 1990, to formulate the International Development Strategy (IDS). Being an economically advanced nation, Malaysia could contribute its experiences to formulating a concept for development to other developing countries.¹¹ But these topics were dealt with in the General Assembly and in the Second Committee rather than in the Security Council.¹²

The Chair of the G-77 which Malaysia had during 1989 seemed to be more important. Malaysia made a considerable number of interventions on behalf of the G-77; it had a moderating influence and was often instrumental in developing a consensus.

Malaysia continued to cooperate with its ASEAN partners to find a solution for Cambodia, but was not a major player.

Palestine, Apartheid, were the areas, where Malaysia focussed interventions in its own name. They are also topics where Third World countries are mostly in agreement.

Overall one might summarize that during the first 20 months of its membership to the Security Council from January 1989 to July 1990 Malaysia took active part in the deliberations of the Security Council, but no specific initiatives were developed. Razali's assessment¹³ that Malaysia had moved from the "outer orbit to the inner circle... we are consulted on almost everything" probably describes best what the membership to the Security Council meant for Malaysia. One has to take into account, however, that there were no extraordinary topics on the agenda of the Security Council, where there would have been an occasion for a major demonstration of leadership. This changed with the Gulf crisis in August 1990.

b. Second Phase: August 1990 to December 1990 (Gulf crisis)

Malaysia's role became more important during the gulf crisis from August 1990 to the end of its term of membership in December 1990.¹⁴ It belonged to the four Non-Aligned countries (Malaysia, Colombia, Yemen and Cuba) who considered it important to have their own stand in the deliberations of the Security Council (the Non-Aligned members from Africa Ethiopia, Cote d'Ivoire and Zaire felt very strongly about Iraq's invasion and therefore went along with the views of the USA and the other permanent members of the Security Council).

Malaysia did not commit itself on the vote for resolution 678 (1990) of Nov 29, 1990 until the last moment. The fact that both the Soviet Union and China did not object was probably a major reason for its positive vote.

In this group of four Non-Aligned, where the permanent members of the Security Council had to make a particular effort to get their support, it was Malaysia which showed the highest profile. Whereas it was obvious that no common ground could be found between the USA, Cuba and Yemen, this common ground was sought with Malaysia. Its arguments were taken seriously, its views were discussed. Very often Malaysia was instrumental in bringing about consensus. Its influence stemmed to a large extent from its membership in the Non-Aligned movement and the Organisation of Islamic Countries, less from caucusing with the Commonwealth countries.

But the wise professional behaviour of its Permanent Representative Razali Ismail contributed as well. It is mainly due to his moderate and circumspect actions that Malaysia earned a lot of recognition in the Security Council. He knew how to command attention, and how to utter criticisms without overdoing it. He did not bore the other members of the Security Council by being too long or by giving the impression of being keen on a high profile. His interventions showed intellectual depth. One can easily assume that he had largely contributed to the moderate and balanced statement which Foreign Minister Abu Hassan delivered in the crucial meeting of the Security Council on November 29, 1990.

Abu Hassan explained that horrified at the prospects of war the natural tendency of Malaysia would have been to abstain.

"However, we are convinced that such a step would not amount to effectively discharging our responsibilities in the Council. ... It is Malaysia's duty to support and uphold the unity and resolve of the Council to reverse aggression and to restore peace."¹⁵

Foreign Minister Abu Hassan made clear that the authorisation of force could only be taken under the terms of the Charter of the United Nations and regretted that the resolution was not clear in this respect. As a member of the Organisation of Islamic Countries he called on the Security Council to address properly the question of the Palestinians in the occupied territories. He appealed to Iraq to comply with the resolutions of the Security Council and ended his speech: "The onus for the avoidance of the use of force is clearly on Iraq."¹⁶

Abu Hassan's speech showed statemanship and responsibility. It was received with respect and recognition by other delegations. It contributed to the vote being considered an independent decision rather than a function of Malaysia's relations to the USA especially in the economic field.

The intense cooperation of the permanent members of the Security Council which evolved from the Gulf crisis raised concern among the a. m. group of four Non-Aligned as to the role of the nonpermanent members. When the annual report of the Security Council was on the agenda of the General Assembly Non-Aligned countries parted from the normal practice which consists in adopting the report without discussion. Instead they denounced the closed shop attitude of the permanent members. Ambassador Razali stated

"it has become common ...practice...for the permanent five to carry on intensive discussions among themselves and then to present a broadly acceptable text to the others."¹⁷

He warned

"it would be intolerable, and probably dangerous, if exclusivity were accompanied by preponderance of influence...by one permanent member of the Council."¹⁸

Ambassador Razali called for a broader dialogue between the Security Council and the General Assembly. He considered important a system of accountability for implementation of UN resolutions.

"We do not wish to see a situation in which the Council is involved only in the formulation of a resolution, after which implementation is left only to certain members, and therefore is outside the accountability of the United Nations machinery."¹⁹

Malaysia showed much concern about the future of the Non-Aligned movement, realising that there are hardly any common interests left to tie its members together. It was afraid that distance or opposition to America could be the only common cause for the members of the Non-Aligned movement, but that there was no common goal. In its statement on the annual report of the Security Council Malaysia launched a firm appeal to the Non-Aligned countries

"to unite and constitute a check and balance so that the Council can act as an impartial peacemaker without having to succumb to the selective standards and dictates of certain countries."²⁰

In the preparations for the resolution on Palestine 681 (90) Malaysia played a very active role. Together with Finland and the US, Malaysia belonged to the negotiation team for this resolution. This reflects the high standing Malaysia enjoyed and the importance attached to its views. By the same token Malaysia was considered very suitable for bringing about consensus in this matter. In the discussions Malaysia intensely called on the US to use its influence towards Israel in order to settle the question. The US alone would be in a position to do so.

Overall Malaysia took a very independent view during the discussion of the Gulf crisis at the Security Council and was not a very easy counterpart for the US. But a large number of the UN members, even outside the Non-Aligned, considered the points and concerns raised as not being without a certain foundation. Malaysia's arguments therefore were taken seriously and initiated new discussions. They will have an impact on considerations about restructuring the Security Council.

4. Chairman of G-77

In January 1989 Malaysia was elected Chairman of the G-77 for 1989.²¹ This position which is mainly exercised in UN meetings contributed a lot to enhancing Malaysia's standing within the UN.

The election to this position was not the result of a diplomatic initiative launched by Malaysia, but rather due to a compromise. This compromise was sought by Pakistan who could not impose its own interest against India who stood for election as well. To overcome the deadlock of India's and Pakistan's candidatures Pakistan proposed Malaysia.²² After this compromise support could be found from the Asian group whose turn it was to nominate a candidate.

Overall, this election by consensus was much easier than the campaign for the Security Council. Lobbying for the Security Council and Malaysia's plea that it was a good representative for the Non-Aligned had probably paved the way for its election to the Chair of the G-77. Foreign Minister Abu Hassan attributed the election mainly to Malaysia's "untiring efforts to forge South-South economic cooperation"²³.

Overall Malaysia got a lot of credit for its Chairmanship of the G-77. It was particularly admired for its handling of it simultaneously with its membership on the Security Council. Both are time consuming tasks which are challenging to a Foreign Service with limited personnel. Coping with it is a major achievement.

5. UN peace keeping

Participation in UN peacekeeping operations is another area of Malaysia's multi-lateral activities. Malaysia sent officers and soldiers to take part in the 24 nation UN observer group to monitor the ceasefire between Iran and Iraq²⁴ and it was one of the three countries contributing with a bataillon to UNTAG (UN Transition Assistance Group) for Namibia.

6. Chairman of the General Conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency, September 1988

At the same period when Malaysia was campaigning for its seat in the Security Council it had the opportunity for another success in the multilateral area: On Sept 19th, 1988 the Malaysian Permanent Representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was elected Chairman of the 32nd General Conference.²⁵

It was the turn of the South-East Asian and Pacific (SEAP) group and this time no problems arose in nominating the Malaysian representative as the only candidate of the group. The diplomatic achievement lies in getting the approval for its candidature from within the SEAP group. (Reference could have been made to Malaysia's candidature for the Security Council as an argument against the candidature for the General Conference of the IAEA).

No major problems arose during this conference and Ambassador Abdul Halim achieved his task in a business-like manner.

7. Chairman of the General Conference of UNESCO (1989-1991)

UNESCO was another worldwide forum where Malaysia managed to get the most important post at the General Conference 1989. As with the Security Council, it was the turn of the Asian and Pacific group, the group to which Malaysia belonged, to nominate the President. But again the candidature was not easy; the Asian and Pacific group could not agree on a candidate. The Malaysian candidate, education Minister Anwar Ibrahim, whose candidature was thought by some to be a means of getting support for his political career in Malaysia through international recognition, was opposed by former Prime Minister Whitlam of Australia. The Asian controversy led to the suggestion of having a Presi-

dent from Africa or even Europe. Malaysia saw no reason to withdraw, but rather drew the conclusion that the campaign at the Security Council had convinced many delegations of its moderate and compromising attitude and that these arguments would help for the campaign at UNESCO as well.

Finally Anwar Ibrahim was successful. Of course, the support of third world countries helped the candidate from Malaysia, but his personality and his subtle campaign had contributed to the positive result as well.

Chairing the 25th General Conference was rather challenging as quite different views persisted about the main agenda items such as reorganisation of UNESCO and de-ideologisation. But Anwar Ibrahim was able to apply firmness as well as flexibility so as to arrive at a sometimes difficult consensus. He gained a lot of recognition for his Chairmanship from other delegations.

8. Withdrawing the invitation for ESCAP because of Israel's observer status

Malaysia had offered to host the annual session of ESCAP (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific) in March 1990, but later withdrew this offer because of problems arising from the participation of Israel who is an observer at ESCAP. The main issue in this connection arose about the question of nameplates. Malaysia was not ready to accept a delegation with a nameplate "Israel", whereas ESCAP pointed out that observer nameplates had been used at all previous sessions and the Kuala Lumpur meeting would have to do the same. Malaysia refused to comply and decided not to host the meeting, which took place in Bangkok instead.²⁶

The same problem obviously arose in connection with the invitation for the 1990 meeting of the Interparliamentarian Union. Malaysia had made known unofficially its readiness to host the meeting, but withdrew before issuing the official invitation, the most likely reason being again the participation of Israeli parliamentarians. Domestic policy is the main reason for this strong Malaysian attitude. Especially before the Malaysian elections, Mahathir took very seriously the challenge of his opponent Razaleigh and did not want to bring up an unnecessary issue of controversy. Razaleigh would have used the presence of an official Israeli delegation in Malaysia for strong criticism and questioning of Mahathir's loyalty to muslim politics.

This puts limits to Malaysia's possibilities of hosting major international meetings, especially of worldwide scope. It practically excludes all UN meetings, like the General Conferences of UNESCO, UNCTAD or the UN Conference on Environment and Development to which Malaysia is giving active support.

9. Indochinese Refugees

In March 1989, Malaysia was hosting the preparatory conference for the refugee conference in Geneva. Participating were not only ASEAN first asylum countries but also states from outside the region, namely Western European countries as well as US, Canada, Australia and Soviet Union. Due to its subject of Indochinese refugees, the Conference was however more regional in character than international. Malaysia became host country mainly by its own initiative. As it

became more and more difficult to find resettlement countries for Vietnamese refugees to whom Malaysia had granted first asylum, Malaysia had an interest in discussing this problem in an international forum. It consulted with the UNHCR, then sent out invitations, and assumed the cost of the conference.

Malaysia's role as host of the Preparatory Conference paid off at the main conference, the International Conference on Indochinese Refugees (ICIR) which took place in Geneva in June 1989 upon the invitation of the Secretary General of the UN. Malaysia's hosting of the preparatory conference can be considered a major factor for the participating states to elect the Malaysian Foreign Minister Abu Hassan its Chairman. In the international press reports his role was, however, not reflected, whereas the keyrole of Britain was intensely reported.²⁷

10. Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference in October 1989 (CHOGM)

a. Political part of the Conference

This conference, at which 46 delegations took part, with 38 heads of state or government was a major milestone in Malaysia's international recognition. Never before had Malaysia hosted such a high ranking conference of worldwide scope. Protocol and security questions arising from the huge number of heads of government would have been a major challenge for any industrialised country, more so for a developing country. CHOGM proved a successful, troublefree exercise for Mahathir.²⁸ Malaysia managed it with ease and charm and was complimented for its excellent organisation.

From a political view point hosting the conference and taking an active part in it meant a total change from Mahathir's first term of office where he had not taken part in CHOGM of 1981 and 1983, but had sent his foreign minister instead. Mahathir had even been seriously considering leaving the Commonwealth, which he considered a club dominated by Britain. But two studies he had requested had advised against doing so, seeing more advantage in bringing Malaysia's influence to bear in the club rather than staying out.

Mahathir's presence at the Nassau CHOGM in October 1985 was a precursor of the shift, but the Kuala Lumpur conference made it even clearer. The new approach considered CHOGM a forum which gave Third World countries the opportunity of shaping it themselves. But as Mahathir explained at CHOGM in Nassau, the firm stand of the Commonwealth against Apartheid in South Africa was the major reason for revising the position.²⁹ After the reserve against the Commonwealth it is quite remarkable that Malaysia was successful in its candidature to host CHOGM, although the cost involved in hosting reduced the competition.

The discussion of South Africa which was dominated by the protagonists of tightening sanctions and of developing financial pressure showed again as at former CHOGM meetings, that the Third World countries had much more influence than Britain. Britain managed to get some of its views reflected in the Commonwealth statement "Southern Africa: The Way Ahead", but not so much as to make it totally acceptable to Britain. She felt it unwise to bloc consensus and therefore signed the declaration but felt it necessary to publish an explanatory document, which was very much resented by the other Commonwealth leaders.³⁰

b. Langkawi Declaration

Malaysia had taken the initiative for the Langkawi Declaration on Environment adopted at CHOGM³¹ by inviting the Intergovernmental Follow-up Committee of the Group of 77 to Kuala Lumpur in August 1989. Malaysia introduced the draft on environmental matters worked out by this group into CHOGM. Malaysia was proud of this declaration adopted at CHOGM because it was the first international declaration on environment in which both industrial and developing nations took part.

The interest of developing countries was taken care of by a paragraph on the balanced perspective necessary when protecting the environment, i. e. "due emphasis should be accorded to promoting economic growth and sustainable development".³² The other interest of developing countries in this connection that "environmental concerns should not be used to introduce a new form of conditionality in aid and development financing" is equally clearly stated. In order to enable developing countries to respond to the environmental protection needs, the programme of action of the Langkawi Declaration calls for the development of international funding mechanisms. The responsibility of the industrialised countries in the current threat to the environment is mentioned right in the beginning: "it stems from past neglect in managing the natural environment and resources. The environment has been degraded by decades of industrial and other forms of pollution..."

One might say it is the first international declaration which is not only talking about measures to protect environment, but also leaves no doubt, that the developing countries need growth in order to have a chance to catch up and that they are not ready to renounce of their income from selling timber in order to make up for the mistakes of the industrialised countries.

Mahathir declared he was satisfied that there was a balance between the views of developed and developing countries in the Langkawi Declaration although he conceded that the Langkawi Declaration was "watered down" when compared with his opening statement.³³ The interests of the developing countries were taken care of due to their high representation and to the intense discussions on South Africa which diverted the attention of the industrialised countries from other topics.

Shortly after CHOGM, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted a resolution on environmental questions (44/228), which reflected the same tendencies. Its preparation paralleled the preparation for the Langkawi declaration, so that the Langkawi declaration has to be seen in the context of these international discussions as well. But it is to Malaysia's credit to have coordinated the views of the Third World countries and to have them reflected in the Langkawi declaration, which was to serve as reference point in other international discussions on the environment.

Malaysia, when taking up the initiative, took the opportunity to show its environmental concern. Rather than avoiding the discussion for fear of being denounced of damaging the rain forests, it presented itself as protecting the environment. It assessed properly the political importance of environmental questions and used them to improve its international profile.

In foreign reporting on CHOGM, the Langkawi Declaration was rather neglected. This is due to the focus having been largely with South-Africa. Con-

sidering that environment issues are becoming more and more important in the relations between industrialised and developing countries, the Langkawi Declaration should not be underestimated. It has become an important reference for the role and responsibility of the industrialised as well as developing states for the existing environmental problems.

11. ASEAN

a. Basic policy

When Mahathir came back from attending CHOGM in 1985, Foreign Minister Riddaudeen made clear that this did not mean a change of Malaysia's foreign policy priorities. ASEAN would continue to take the first place, followed by the Organisation of Islamic Countries and the Non-Aligned Movement. Or as Foreign Minister Abu Hassan put it in a keynote address on "Malaysian Foreign Policy in the nineties" on May 3, 1990: "ASEAN will continue to be the cornerstone of Malaysia's foreign policy."³⁴

One of the major reasons for the important role ASEAN is playing in Malaysia's foreign policy is the assessment that a country of Malaysia's size would only be recognized within a regional grouping.

Together with Indonesia it has defended Non-Aligned views against the hard liners, but it has not had a high profile in political matters. In ASEAN's major political question, Cambodia, it has not come out with an initiative of its own.

Hosting the EC ASEAN Foreign ministers meeting in February 1990 was seen as a good chance to get more attention on the international stage. Malaysia eagerly took up the opportunity of inviting the EC Foreign ministers together with their ASEAN partners when a host was sought for this meeting.

The venue was not Kuala Lumpur, but tiny Kuching in Sarawak. The idea behind choosing this place was that the European politicians concerned about the rain forest should go to one and see it for themselves.³⁵ From a view point of domestic policy, Mahathir's calculation was that a major international conference in Sarawak could add to the support which his party strongly needed there.

Malaysia was complimented again for its excellent organisation in receiving 17 foreign Ministers and their delegations at a place which had even less infrastructure than the capital.

The meeting focussed on the European single market and the developments in Eastern Europe,³⁶ but Malaysia used this meeting with the representatives of twelve major European countries to promote its views on environment questions, thus representing, as well, other developing countries.

In his opening address, Mahathir denounced firmly what he called the campaign of some European groups on the issue of the tropical rainforests.³⁷ In his view they were often driven by vote catching considerations rather than correct assessment. Opposing the demands of environmentalist groups to reduce logging, Mahathir underlined the importance of the timber industry for the Malaysian economy and called for a more constructive discussion. In the final declaration,³⁸ reference was made to the Langkawi Declaration and the Europeans accepted the developing countries view on the necessity of a balanced perspective in which due emphasis should be accorded to economic growth and sustainable develop-

ment. Malaysia under Mahathir's guidance had not limited itself to hosting the conference, but had been rather successful in directing the environmental discussion according to its own interests.

b. APEC

The importance Malaysia attaches to ASEAN is well reflected in its stand towards APEC, Asia Pacific Cooperation. Malaysia was the only country being represented only by its foreign minister and not its economic minister at the first ministerial meeting in Canberra in November 1989. At this stage, it wanted to focus on the structure of the new forum and leave it open whether its economic minister would take part at all.

Although Malaysia is aware of the possible economic advantages this cooperation could have, it is more concerned about negative implications for ASEAN. It is afraid that ASEAN would be deprived of its substance, that there would be no room for discussion among ASEAN ministers, if the topics of interest were discussed in the new forum. Furthermore it sees the danger that the industrialised countries like the US, Australia, Canada and Japan would dominate the dialogue and that ASEAN's role would be minimalised.³⁹

Malaysia, together with Indonesia, was a strong protagonist of having ASEAN at the core of Asian Pacific cooperation. The cooperation with the other partners should have evolved from enhancing the already existing dialogue process between ASEAN and major industrialised states. But the ASEAN countries were not very successful in this approach, but only managed to arrange for the participation of the Secretary general of ASEAN to have ASEAN involved in the process.⁴⁰

c. Trying to revive ASEAN

After the APEC Conference of Canberra at which the new forum was generally agreed, Malaysia examined which measures could help to preserve ASEAN. The prevailing feeling was that ASEAN was at its crossroads and that its future could be at stake if no appropriate initiatives were taken. Through the Director of the Malaysian think tank ISIS, Noordin Sopiee, an important foreign policy adviser to Mahathir, it aired the proposal of strengthening the ASEAN secretariat which until now was mainly a kind of postman. Its future role should be to "initiate plans and programmes of ASEAN regional cooperation..."⁴¹

At a roundtable in Singapore on March 29, 1990 Finance Minister Daim presented a new initiative of enhanced economic cooperation of the ASEAN countries. This was another step to save ASEAN from fading away. Malaysia had always been among the protagonists of increased economic cooperation within ASEAN realising that this could help overcome the restrictions from its rather limited market. However the disparate levels of economic development had prevented ASEAN from going into closer economic cooperation.

Daim was pleading very vividly for the need of closer economic cooperation which can be interpreted as a sign of the strong political interest behind the initiative. The trend of establishing regional trading blocs was the new argument for more intense economic cooperation:

"there is a wide gap in the strength and ability of the ASEAN members to influence the course of future events against the likes of the EC, Japan or the United States. Simply put, if ASEAN is to have any credible economic clout it must act in greater concert and greater harmony."

Daim was proposing a larger regional market as well as promoting the group as an investment centre rather than having each ASEAN state competing for foreign investment by competitive fiscal and financial incentives.

His plea was impressive and if he could have managed to convince the other ASEAN partners to take concrete steps, this could have meant considerable progress. However as in the 23 years before, ASEAN countries continue to be too much afraid of economic competition among themselves to agree to create even a customs union.

d. East Asian Economic grouping

But Malaysia has not given up. As its limited market makes Malaysia particularly sensitive to the challenges of economic cooperation of other regions, Mahathir has launched a new proposal of economic cooperation in January 1991.⁴² As trading bloc sounded offensive to some of the prospective East Asian partners, the word "grouping" is used.

The underlying idea is again to react to the establishment of regional trading blocs by becoming a leading exporting force and an investment haven. The East Asian countries can get economic clout only by acting in concert with likeminded countries of the region. As more economic cooperation could not be brought about within ASEAN, a new grouping would be sought instead.

In addition to the members of ASEAN, the East Asian trading grouping should include Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, as well as Vietnam and Myanmar. It thus aims at integrating these two countries into the market economies of East Asia. It excludes non-Asian countries like Australia and New Zealand. It is less culturally heterogenous than the suggested APEC and there is only one dominant country, Japan, rather than the USA, Canada and Australia. Japan plus the four tigers are probably meant to be the locomotives of the grouping. Yet the envisaged membership of Vietnam and Myanmar makes the economic gap between the countries even greater than within ASEAN.

As was the Malaysian appeal to strengthen ASEAN, this new initiative constitutes a counterproposal to APEC as well. This is precisely the reason why the major partner of the concept, Japan, is hesitant.⁴³ It feels the concept would not be in the interest of its relations with the US, who are not part of it. So the chances of this initiative remain doubtful.

12. South-South-Summit in June 1990

In June 1990 Kuala Lumpur was the venue of the South-South-Summit or G-15 Summit because of the fifteen participating states from all regions of the southern hemisphere. This was another occasion for Malaysia to play an important role at an international conference at heads of government level. Nine countries were even represented by heads of state.⁴⁴

South-South cooperation had been an area where Malaysia had been active since the mid-eighties. A preparatory meeting was organised by the Malaysian Institute of Strategic and International Studies in Kuala Lumpur in 1986. Mahathir then went personally to see Nyerere in Dares-Salaam in order to ask him to take over the chairmanship and it was Mahathir who announced to the Non-Aligned Movement Summit Meeting in Harare in 1986 the intention to establish the South-Commission.⁴⁵ Malaysia felt that due to its relative advanced economy it had to play an active role in economic matters among the Non-Aligned countries.

The origin for the Summit was an initiative for South-South-Consultation and Cooperation launched at the Non-Aligned Summit in Belgrade in 1989.⁴⁶ Apart from Malaysia the following countries took part: Algeria, Argentina, Brazil, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Jamaica, Mexico, Nigeria, Peru, Senegal, Venezuela, Yugoslavia, Zimbabwe.⁴⁷

The choice of the participating countries came about rather at random. It left irritations with other members of the Non-Aligned movement left out such as Pakistan. The 15 participating states of the G-15 therefore underlined that this new forum was not part of the Non-Aligned movement.⁴⁸ The rationale given for the choice of the participants was to have all regions represented by a country of influence in the region. But the 15 did not manage to get a rich OPEC country into their grouping.

Despite its involvement in the South cooperation it was not easy to get agreement for Malaysia as the venue of the Summit. Indonesia was interested as well and Malaysia's successful lobbying for Kuala Lumpur left some irritation on the Indonesian side.

The underlying principle of the G-15 cooperation is that a core group of countries should initiate cooperation through viable projects which would be open for participation by all developing countries. The projects are rather down to earth⁴⁹ and do not hint at the general structure of North-South relations. They deal mainly with a concern of the promoter, but are not always of general importance. None of the participants were from the LDCs, all participating countries have reached some level of development. Only a country that can contribute can be a member of the club. The problems of the LDCs were not addressed. As a kind of disclaimer, the final communique⁵⁰ stressed that the actions of the G-15 should not prejudice basic interests of developing countries which are not yet ready to participate. This however is not enough for the LDCs who need positive action. As none of the wealthy OPEC countries could be convinced to participate, the project of a South Bank, which was aired in the weeks before the summit, could not be adopted.

The urgency of the debt problem for some of the participating states, especially from Latin America, meant that this problem could not be left out of the agenda, although no common approach could be found. A group of personal representatives of the heads of states was therefore created to discuss the problem. Only three of the 15-odd projects on the agenda were adopted for immediate implementation⁵¹ whereas the others were deferred for further examination. Two of the three projects adopted for immediate implementation were initiated by Malaysia, i.e. a South Investment, Trade and Technology Data Exchange

Centre and the proposal about payments and "trade information"-related matters between pairs of developing countries. This bears out Malaysia's high profile in matters of South cooperation and its ability to assess the needs of the participating countries and the possibilities for consensus. The relatively small number of projects adopted is indicative of the fact that cooperation of 15 countries scattered all over the world is hardly possible because they are too heterogeneous. It is rather regional cooperation that is called for.

The G-15 is interested in a dialogue with the G-7,⁵² possibly in a North-South Summit, but some of the G-7 have not reacted positively to its soundings. At the press conference after the G-15 meetings Mahathir announced that the G-15 would pursue this goal, possibly through some members of the G-7 ready to support it.

The outcome of the summit might be limited if one looks at the projects, and the scope for worldwide South cooperation might be restricted, but one can assess positively that the participating states are examining what steps they can take themselves in order to promote development rather than looking to the developed countries for assistance. Mahathir was commended for the positive role he played at the summit. It has enhanced his standing among the Third World countries.

III. Multilateral activities - the striking new feature of Malaysia's foreign policy during Mahathir's second term of office

During Mahathir's second term of office, especially since his election as President of the International Conference on Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking in 1987, Malaysia's multilateral activities increased considerably. In fact, they became the striking feature of this period. Mahathir himself, who as almost all of his predecessors takes a keen interest in the foreign policy of his country, is the driving force behind the assertive policy in this field.

It would be underestimating the substance of Malaysia's multilateral activities and its impact especially among Third World countries if one considers its multilateral activities only a function of Malaysian domestic policy. The serious challenge by Mahathir's opponent Razaleigh was an important factor in following this new avenue, but multilateralism has become an independent goal of Malaysian foreign policy.

ASEAN continues to be at the forefront among the multilateral bodies in which Malaysia participates. Possibilities of closer economic cooperation among South-East Asian and East Asian states both within ASEAN or in a new regional grouping have become a major area of activity in Malaysia's multilateral policy. But apart from ASEAN many other multilateral activities are developed as well, especially with the UN.

Malaysia got a lot of recognition for the way it acted when chairing international conferences. This is particularly true for its role in the Security Council during the Gulf crisis and for Mahathir's role at the South-South-Summit. Malaysia's moderate role, its membership in the Non-Aligned movement as well as in the Organisation of Islamic States were often instrumental for consensus.

It is quite impressive to see how Malaysia has managed to get elected to key posts in worldwide bodies at very short intervals. Normally deals are made, which

means that the successful candidature for one post involves giving up another. Malaysia has shown particular skill in its candidatures. Lobbying for the UN Security Council made it known to many countries especially from the G-77 and the Non-Aligned that Malaysia was as a moderate country suitable for representing the interests of many of them. One might argue that by having "advertised" these features during the lobbying campaign for the Security Council, it facilitated further candidatures rather than making them more difficult. The election to key posts has been more difficult than hosting the conferences. Malaysia's comparatively good economic situation enables it to provide for generous arrangements when hosting conferences. It thus becomes a very popular host. One may assume that the profile Malaysia acquires through the hosting of conferences helps in making participating countries ready to support Malaysian candidatures at international conferences or organisations.

When hosting a conference Malaysia did not limit itself to creating a pleasant atmosphere, but made major contributions to the substance as well. In this connection, environment became a new field of activity where Malaysia is voicing the interests of Third World countries.

These conferences are not just of regional scope, but they are mainly related to its Non-Aligned activities. The EC-ASEAN foreign ministers meeting is the only conference with major participation of industrialised countries, whereas CHOGM is mainly an event of Third World countries. Malaysia's decision not to host the annual session of ESCAP due to its policy towards Israel makes it unlikely that Kuala Lumpur will become the venue of UN conferences.

Reports on Malaysia's activities in the international press, i.e. the established international press of America and Europe, are rather scarce. This can be taken as another confirmation that the international press is not paying enough attention to the interests of the Third World countries. Another explanation may be that Malaysia is not as well trained in carrying out an active press policy as the US or other industrialised countries. This is an impression one gets from the reporting of the UN refugees conference in Geneva. Apart from the Vietnamese foreign minister, it was only the statements of ministers of the industrialised states that were reported.

As long as Malaysia does not host genuine worldwide conferences, especially UN conferences, the interest of the international press will be unlikely to shift to Malaysia. One might argue, however, that Malaysia is not looking for attention on a worldwide scale, but is satisfied with being in good standing within the Non-Aligned countries. Here it has a role to play and gets recognition, whereas it is rather difficult to compete for recognition on a worldwide scale with the industrialised countries.

Coverage in the international press is not Malaysia's top priority. However, it is generally suffering from not being well known on a worldwide basis and in this regard it has a certain interest in worldwide coverage.

Due to the scant attention the international press gives to Malaysia, one might conclude that its role is not comparable to other active Non-Aligned countries like Yugoslavia, India or Indonesia. Indonesia continues to be the key player among the ASEAN nations on the Cambodia question. India's size and its political role since its independence give it special weight among the Non-Aligned

countries. Malaysia's commitment to a market economy and its economic success which is approaching the status of a newly industrialising economy set limits on a leading role among Third World countries. If one considers these limitations, the support Malaysia has got from Asian nations as well as other Third World countries for key posts in international fora is the more remarkable. Malaysia's membership in the G-77, the Organisation of Islamic States and to a lesser extent the Commonwealth plays an important part in getting the wide support. But Malaysia's moderate and mediating views, as well as its professional handling of multi-lateral matters are a more important reason for its success in the multilateral arena.

With this positive balance sheet of support in multilateral fora, Malaysia's situation has totally changed from "confrontation" where Malaysia lacked friends. It has learnt the lesson and drawn the necessary conclusions by carefully cultivating these friends. It paid off that Malaysia gave particular attention to the islands of the Pacific region. Multilateralism, purposely developed by Mahathir during his second term of office, has become an independent pillar of Malaysian foreign policy. It reflects the increased responsibility of a country which has reached quite a high economic standard and will soon be entering the group of newly industrialising economies.

Finally, the intense multilateral activities of Malaysia revealed an excellent performance of its diplomatic service. Coordinating the different groupings and ultimately bringing about consensus is a difficult and time consuming task. For a country like Malaysia with a small diplomatic service, this is especially true and will limit its ability to take on new multilateral initiatives in the future.

NOTES

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- 1) M. Pathmanathan, "The new dimensions of Malaysia's foreign policy", *Winds of change*, Kuala Lumpur 1984, p.28 and Abdullah Ahmad, *Malaysian foreign policy, a critique*, presented at the Malaysian foreign policy Seminar organised jointly by Intan and the Ministry of foreign Affairs on Oct 8th, 1987; the titles of the articles are indicative of the views of their authors.
- 2) Rajmah Hussein, *Malaysia at the United Nations: a study of foreign policy priorities, 1957-1987*, University of London, 1988 (Ph.D. dissertation), p.366.
- 3) Pathmanathan, *op. cit.*, p.41; Rajmah Hussein, *op. cit.*, p.83.
- 4) Rajmah Hussein, *op. cit.*, pp.384f.
- 5) *New Straits Times* (NST), Sept 2, 1987.
- 6) Foreign minister Abu Hassan at the annual reception for the Diplomatic Corps, NST, Jan 26, 1988.
- 7) For a detailed description of the lobbying see Zainah Anwar, "How the UN Battle was won", NST, Dec 5, 1988.
- 8) M. Pathmanathan, *op. cit.*, p.54.
- 9) *UN Yearbook*, 1963, p.711; *UN Yearbook*, 1964, p.609.
- 10) Rajmah Hussein, *op. cit.*, p.135.
- 11) NST, May 2, 1989.
- 12) The call for new initiatives to address the debt crisis was launched at the second committee, NST, Oct 5, 1989.
- 13) In above mentioned interview.
- 14) See also T. Morello, "The Gulf widens", *Far Eastern Economic Review* (FEER), Sept 6, 1990.
- 15) *Security Council*, S/PV 2963, pp.74 ff.

- 16) **Ibid.**
- 17) **Prov. records of the General Assembly, A/45/PV.63, p.42.**
- 18) **Ibid.**
- 19) **Ibid.**
- 20) **Ibid.**
- 21) **NST, Jan 13, 1989.**
- 22) **NST, Jan 16, 1989.**
- 23) **NST, Jan 13, 1989.**
- 24) **NST, Aug 14, 1988.**
- 25) **IAEA, Resolutions and Decisions of the 32nd General Conference, GC XXXII, Dec.1.**
- 26) **Star, Jan 18, 1990.**
- 27) The focussing of the reporting on the British, American, Australian and Vietnamese role at the conference might be attributed to a large extent to a more active and professional press policy of these countries, whereas Malaysia with its limited staff in Geneva was not able to do it likewise, see **New York Times (NYT)**, June 14, 1989 and **Neue Zürcher Zeitung**, June 14, 1989.
- 28) Suhaini Aznam, "Consensus in the Club", **FEER**, Nov 2, 1989, p.12.
- 29) **Siaran Akhbar, PEN 10/85/67(PM), p.2.**
- 30) **FBIS-EAS-89-203, October 23, 1989, p.6,7.**
- 31) **Mahathir in final statement on CHOGM, FBIS-EAS 89-204, October 24, 1989, p.1.**
- 32) **Main points of Langkawi Declaration in FBIS-EAS-89-203, October 23, 1989, p.2.**
- 33) **FBIS-EAS-89-204, October 24, 1989, p.1.**
- 34) **Siaran Akhbar, PEN. 5/90/3 (Haluar).**
- 35) **Südostasien aktuell (SOAa), 1990/2, p.121.**
- 36) **SOAa, 1990/2, p.121.**
- 37) **SOAa, 1990/2, p.187,188.**
- 38) **SOAa, 1990/2, p.190 ff.**
- 39) See Commentary in **Business Times**, Nov 9, 1989, which seems to reflect quite well the view of the Malaysian government; see also headline in progovernment **New Sunday Times**, Nov 12, 1990: "Malaysia wants ASEAN to remain intact".
- 40) "Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Ministerial Level Joint Statement", 6-7 November 1989, Canberra, **ASEAN Economic Bulletin**, 6 (1989) 3, pp.358-360.
- 41) **Noordin Sopiee, "Time for ASEAN to convene fourth Summit", Star, March 22, 1990.**
- 42) **FEER, January 17,1991, p.11; NYT, February 12, 1991, p.D6.**
- 43) **Anthony Rowley, "In the Bloc-hole", FEER, Jan 17, 1991, p.17.**
- 44) **Srdjan Kerim, "Group fifteen Summit", Review of International Affairs, June 20, 1990, p.6 ff.**
- 45) **Nyerere, "Chairman's preface", The Challenge to the South, the Report of the South Commission, London 1990, p.V.**
- 46) See Mahathir in his opening address at the G-15 summit, **FBIS-EAS-90-106, June 1, 1990, p.3.**
- 47) **FBIS-EAS-90-106, June 1,1990, p.2.**
- 48) **Kerim, loc.cit., p.7.**
- 49) **Kerim, loc.cit., p.6.**
- 50) **Communique published in NST, June 4, 1990.**
- 51) **Kerim, loc.cit., p.6.**
- 52) See Mahathir's opening address, **FBIS-EAS-90-106, p.3.**