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## MALAYSIAN IMAGE IN THE GLOBAL POLITICAL CONTEXT

As a practising diplomat, I do not wish to proffer any theoretical or conceptual explanation to my approach in tabling my paper today. I will not be using terms familiar to you like *realism*, *pluralism* or *structuralism*, nor will I attempt to get involved in the inter-paradigm debate, or of conflicting and competing models and approaches to explain Malaysia's role in international relations. The reason for my avoiding such approaches is simple. First, I am not a theorist but a practitioner and I have been fortunate to be involved in the formulation and practice of Malaysia's foreign policy and foreign relations for some 35 years. Second, I feel that international relations are so unsettled and difficult to reduce to an intellectual order because of their changing character. Some may claim foreign policy to be predictive, yet it is not, nor is it scientific or deductive. I therefore prefer to leave it to the intellectuals to provide the theoretical explanations to the course of Malaysia's foreign relations.

Given that assumption, I will proceed to discuss my paper in the context of the challenges facing Malaysia's foreign relations as we move towards the new millennium. In doing so, I plan to touch on a number of aspects that are as much empirical as they are normative. Given the advance in technology, one need only to switch to the CNN channel to know what is going on in other parts of the world. The Internet equally provides abundant information about the happenings around the world today. But international politics are more than just all that, for diplomatic reporting, to a certain extent, is a mixture of unclassified facts on the one hand, and classified comments and interpretations, on the other.

My paper will concentrate on certain pertinent points which pose as challenges to our foreign policy. These include the questions of national interest, social justice, equity, globalisation, global governance, the advent of information technology, the influence of the media in international relations, the role of Islam, political and security interests and that of identity.

Before delving any further, let me as an introduction, explain the objectives of Malaysia's foreign policy. Like any sovereign state, Malaysia's policy is based on the need to protect, defend and promote its national interests. As Machiavelli said, to understand foreign policy is to think in terms of public interest. Malaysia has been fortunate that since its independence its policy makers have been persistent in ensuring that communitarian and normative values form part of that public interest. It is for this reason that we have been a strong proponent of issues which have communitarian appeals. This is a natural course of action because we are a small and developing country and are not in a position to subscribe to the cosmopolitan logic inherent among great powers. Being communitarian means being sensitive to the moral obligations expected of the members of the international community. As I speak to you today, people are dying in many parts of the world from lack of food, shelter and medical care. Over 24 million people have become refugees and displaced persons as a result of civil wars or natural disasters and over 1.3 billion people are living in a state of poverty. A few months ago, Malaysia faced a natural calamity where over 200 people in Sabah lost their lives following a tropical storm. Hundreds of letters of condolences from all over the world were received, some from heads of state and government, some from ordinary people. Many contributed both in cash and in kind to offer relief to the victims. What are the moral implications of a situation like this? Quite simply, most Malaysians will agree with me that if it is within our power to prevent something bad from happening, we ought morally to do it. And we do this on the principle of impartiality

and universality - which means that we do not discriminate against someone merely because they are far away from us, or we from them.

For this reason, Malaysia is concerned about poverty and the inequality in the distribution of wealth throughout the world. It is a known fact that natural resources are distributed unevenly over the earth's surface. Some regions particularly in the North are rich in resources and their people are fortunate to benefit from them. But other regions do not fare as well and despite the best efforts of their community, they attain only a meagre level of well-being due to resource scarcities. Morally, those who are less advantaged for reasons beyond their control, cannot be asked to suffer the pains of inequality.

There are other areas which involve moral values of which Malaysia has been an active proponent. This concerns the issue of human rights. Malaysia takes a holistic view of human rights. Our perception of human rights is moulded by its national values, customs, traditions as well as its social and economic systems. We believe that these values are indivisible and interdependent. We will continue to stress that the right to development is a fundamental and inalienable human right. Looking back at the success of the New Economic Policy, we can understand that the NEP is what human rights is all about - giving people the opportunity to better their livelihood. Another conceptual lacuna is the emphasis on individual rights at the expense of the rights of the community. While Western human rights concept give greater emphasis on the rights of the individual, Malaysia emphasises the importance of community rights over the individual. Excessive individual freedom leads to a decay in moral values and weakens the whole fabric of nations. In the name of individual rights and freedom, racial prejudices and animosities are resurfacing to the extent that we are witnessing the rise of new forms of racism and xenophobia, increasingly manifested in violence.

Progress in the field of human rights must be pursued within the context of democratisation in international relations. At the international front it is important that democracy is practiced within the United Nations. All states, big or small, rich or poor, must be given the opportunity to participate in the work of the United Nations Organisation to enhance co-operation in promoting human rights as well as in other areas of international co-operation.

Environment is another issue, communitarian in nature. Malaysia's involvement in the environment debate is well-known. Arising from our active participation in the UNCED process which culminated with the Rio Earth Summit, a number of literature has emerged which talks about Malaysia's active role. Some have labelled Malaysia as 'sovereign sensitive,' 'defensive,' 'a typical defender of national sovereignty,' 'troublesome' and 'a new fanatic of pollution.' But on the constructive side, many western writers commended on the comparative speed with which Malaysia not only ratified the Montreal Protocol but also swiftly implemented the CFC replacements. The Brazilian negotiators concluded that Malaysia was willing to play the 'villain' in the negotiations as Brazil had done at Stockholm twenty years earlier. Malaysia was said to have taken a particularly aggressive line in the negotiations on Forests and Climate Change, one outcome being reflected in its refusal to sign the Climate Change Convention at Rio on the grounds that it failed to restrain Northern emissions. On Institutions, where Malaysia chaired the working group, one writer noted that the Malaysian negotiators showed an uncommon willingness to work with Northern NGOs and to support the participation of NGOs within the post UNCED institutional framework. Malaysia's reputation highlights the importance of a publicly aggressive role in maintaining a position of leadership and preserving the cohesion of the Southern camp.

This year the United Nations will review Agenda 21, the programme of action that was agreed upon at Rio. UNCED

might well have ended at Rio had it not been for the Commission on Sustainable Development which was set up to monitor and review the implementation of Agenda 21. With its creation, it is difficult to imagine environmental concerns disappearing completely from the agenda as governments are now tied into a continuing and institutionalised process where regular meetings will keep the UNCED issue alive. Sadly, it cannot be denied that the commitments that were made at Rio remain at risk primarily for the lack of the means of implementation. There has been a declining interest not only among governments but also among the NGOs in the issues covered by the Commission. Even the media has not shown anymore interest in an event which was once memorable. Environment may be destined to stay in the periphery of international relations giving way to other issues of 'high politics' like Bosnia Herzegovina. These are the challenges that Malaysia will have to face.

Let me now touch on the economic aspects of Malaysia's foreign policy. Foreign policies of every sovereign government will inevitably have an economic dimension. For some, economics may even provide the thrust of a government's foreign policy. This has gained significance in the present international economic context where nations are persistently seeking entry into foreign markets. Of late there has been much talk about globalisation. Our Prime Minister has alluded to it giving a rather dreary outlook about what it holds for small, developing countries. Globalisation, as interpreted by the North, means a borderless world where every country big or small, rich or poor would have unrestricted access to each others' markets. It means competing on equal footing in a world which is already unequal. The effects of economic globalisation would lead to the submergence of small companies in the developing countries as large international corporations based in the North take over. The manufacturing, trading and telecommunication companies and banks will grow and merge, controlled and run by the huge core companies of the North. The little players from the small countries would be absorbed and would

disappear. It would leave weak economies exposed and unable to protect themselves as a globalised world would belong to the powerful dominant countries.

In addition, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) which was meant to liberalise trade has been used by the North to impose conditions on developing countries, linking trade to human rights record, labour practices and the environment. Once a country signs the Uruguay Round Agreement and enters the WTO, that country is obliged to follow WTO rules. Non-compliance can bring about high penalties and punishment, including retaliation through measures affecting trade and other activities. It would be difficult, if not impossible, for a developing country to change the WTO rules, or to escape from compliance of obligations as the disciplines are legally binding on present and future governments. Thus, signing into WTO is a serious business, unlike signing onto a UN Declaration which becomes only a moral commitment. An alternative would of course be to opt out of the multilateral system, but few governments have the strength or courage to think along these lines.

Indeed, globalisation is a process that cannot be reversed. In order to meet the challenges facing us, we will be expected to be resilient in the wake of the new economic challenges. In this respect, Malaysia's foreign policy serves both to protect and promote Malaysia's national economic interests.

Promoting Malaysia's economic interests involves pursuing actively the major goals of South-South co-operation through the G15 and G77 initiatives. It makes good sense to focus the country's attention on the immediate high growth areas of Southeast and East Asia, not only from the economic standpoint but from the strategic advantages it would entail. Regionalism and regional economic co-operation offer Malaysia a platform for tackling some of the major issues facing developing countries. Through ASEAN, Malaysia has now established a link with yet another major economic region,

namely the European Union through ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting), the North American economies through APEC (East Asia Economic Co-operation) and the Indian ocean region through IORI (the Indian Ocean Rim Initiative). At the same time, Malaysia has also opened up to a number of smaller countries of the South and some Central Asian countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan through Malaysia's Technical Co-operation Programme (MTCP).

Only through such efforts can Malaysia meet the challenges of increasing globalisation. Malaysia's foreign policy must therefore be dynamic and sufficiently flexible to cope with a rapidly changing global situation. The new emphasis on economics in our external activities is also very much in consonance with the overall objectives of Vision 2020 in as much as the nation's resources are to be employed in fruitful and innovative ways so as to realize the goals of an industrialized and stable future for the rest of the developing world and for the common good of Malaysia and its partners.

Another aspect which poses a challenge to the conduct of Malaysia's foreign policy is the question of global governance. Who, in actual fact, rules the world today? The concept of 'governance' has served to blur the distinction between what is governmental and what is not. The Commission on Global Governance defines 'governance' as 'the sum of the many ways individual institutions, public and private, manage their common affairs.' It follows that 'a wide range of actors may be involved in any one area of governance,' including that of international affairs. New approaches to the study of international relations have tended to challenge the central position of the state in the international scene. One school of thought views the state as far too complex a structure to be seen as an international actor, while another considers that the state is no longer in the international stage. The second view advocates that transnational organisations such as the multinational corporations, political movements, NGOs and inter-governmental agencies such as the

World Bank have assumed an increasingly predominant role in the international arena, suggesting that the state is losing its control over events and that power politics have been replaced by issue politics. Even the United Nations did not escape the criticism of being manipulated by actors outside the state. Powerful multinationals and NGOs were known to have influenced the agenda of international meetings. In April 1992 for example, pressure from certain quarters forced the Secretary-General of the United Nations to dissolve quietly the activities of the Commission of Transnational Corporations.

It is true that NGOs cannot dictate terms to anyone. They cannot tax or legislate and cannot formulate foreign assistance policies. Their single-issue focus and their non-compliance position limit their legitimacy as compared to the nation-state which can accommodate a wide range of international issues. But NGOs can, however, have influence.

Another recent development is the growth of the powerful world media which is able to relay messages across frontiers. We live in the Information Age. There has been and there will continue to be an unending explosion in the field of information technology. The media, like the individual or groups of individuals, is an actor within the world community. At the Earth Summit, not less than 9,000 members of the press were present at Rio. The media played a critical role in interpreting data, educating the public, influencing opinion and changing the attitudes of governments. In many countries it has become a powerful force in society, so powerful that it can make and break governments. It can also undermine relations between governments as evident in the case of the Pergau Dam affair.

I am not advocating that we subscribe to the Realist's view that the state should continue to be in charge because these non-state actors have also an important role to play in the international community. Instead, I believe it is within our interest to be aware of the prevailing forces around us and that



Malaysia's diplomatic and political agenda has expanded significantly over the years. Today's diplomats have to deal with a multitude of issues, inter alia, conflict prevention, the fight against international terrorism, trafficking of illicit drugs, population, women issues and refugees. They find themselves negotiating about the effectiveness of the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, as well as, the danger of land mines. They are also engaging themselves in various international forum, like the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS). The latter involves drawing up a National Space Policy which would outline a comprehensive programme to promote research and commercialization of space sciences. Malaysian diplomats are constantly engaged in negotiations in search of attaining a general and complete disarmament in the world. Malaysia believes that disarmament would contribute not only to international peace and security, but also to further economic development, where resources, freed from military expenditure and defense needs, should be better utilized to advance economic development. In this respect, Malaysia supports the establishment of Zones of Peace and Nuclear Weapon Free Zones in various parts of the world to help create conditions conducive to peace and stability as well as to promote regional confidence-building. In our own region, the recent establishment of the Asean Regional Forum (ARF) is also an important initiative towards regional confidence-building.

Malaysia is involved in peace-keeping efforts in many troubled parts of the world. Its strong commitment towards the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter saw its involvement in the UN Peacekeeping operations in the Congo, Kuwait, Western Sahara, Mozambique, Angola, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Somalia and Liberia. Such commitment is in tandem with Malaysia's position on ensuring the manifestation of the principles of universal justice through the good office of the UN.

while we interact with these forces, the protection of our national interest should always be at the back of our minds.

I will now touch on a very important aspect of Malaysia's foreign policy. It concerns the conduct of political diplomacy. Political work in my view must still be the fundamental role of Wisma Putra. Without political stability there cannot be economic prosperity. A glaring example is the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina. It takes a lot of confidence-building effort to bring the business people back into the country. At the end of the day, what people want is a stable and secure environment for relations to flourish among nations. By political diplomacy, I also mean handling social, cultural, economic, trade and environmental matters politically. Many of these 'low politics' issues have been highly politicized by governments and transformed into a North-South debate. Handling these issues constitute a major portion of our political work.

Malaysia's foreign policy is structured upon a framework of multilateralism and bilateralism whereby its outreach can be likened to a pattern of concentric circles. At the core lies the commitment to ASEAN as Malaysia's top priority, consistent with the primary focus on regional relations. Malaysia's close link with the countries of the Islamic world through the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) forms the second circle. The third circle would be the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) with which Malaysia has had a long and historic relationship due to its appreciation of the common interests and mutual aspirations of the countries of the developing world. Malaysia's support for NAM has been unwavering and it looks forward to a reassertion by the Movement of its intrinsic virtues in the post-Cold War era. Similarly, there are historically sound reasons for Malaysia's continued involvement in the Commonwealth of Nations and our Prime Minister has, in many ways, provided inspiration for the organisation to take on a more purposeful role in the future.

In the area of 'high politics' Malaysia is actively involved in supporting political stability and the process of peace in many conflict areas. Malaysia has expressed concern over the continuing armed hostilities which have caused severe destruction in Afghanistan. Malaysia supports the collective efforts undertaken by the UN, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and individuals in trying to restore constitutional government and processes in Burundi. We are following very closely the unsettled rift between the coalition partners in Cambodia which, if not controlled, would undermine the efforts of the government in maintaining peace in the country. Malaysia recognizes the Republic of Cyprus and supports its independence and territorial integrity. We are also sympathetic to the plight of the Turkish Cypriots and would like to see that they enjoy equal and political rights to ensure the preservation of their culture and religious entity.

We are also following the political events in Cuba, in Haiti, in Zaire, in Iraq, the Korean Peninsula, in Tibet and in Jammu and Kashmir which continues to remain a contentious issue between India and Pakistan. Malaysia believes that the international community should urge Israel to work towards a peace solution to address the legitimate security concerns of Israel as well as the legitimate claim to sovereignty of countries in the region in order to achieve a comprehensive and lasting peace in West Asia. Malaysia maintains its neutrality over the UN sanctions against Libya at the same time expressing our sympathy over the problems faced by its people. On Myanmar, Malaysia is aware that certain sections of the international community have serious concerns about the denial of democracy in the country. But there are several other countries that do not practice democracy. Yet, these countries enjoy good relations with the same group of countries that are finding fault with Myanmar. We believe that ASEAN should continue to pursue its 'constructive engagement' policy with regard to the

present ruling government. ASEAN looks forward to Myanmar joining the organisation, in line with its overall objective of embracing all the countries of Southeast Asia in this regional grouping, turning our region into a cohesive family of 10, and into one of prosperity and of plenty.

In line with Malaysia's aspiration to see complete disarmament throughout the world, Wisma Putra is monitoring closely the developments currently taking place in Europe. The expansion of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) to include the former Warsaw Pact countries has been seen by certain quarters as an attempt on the part of the United States to flex its muscle in a unipolar world. The U.S. initiative to gradually integrate the countries of Eastern and Central Europe and the Baltic states with the European Union through the Southeastern European Initiative (SECI) has created feelings of uneasiness on the part of Russia. Russia sees such a move as an attempt on the part of the West to isolate it or worse to contain it. There is no guarantee that Russia will just lay back and allow such developments to take place and it is possible that it would reassert itself to prevent this slide backwards.

We also see similar developments happening nearer to our region. There have been pockets of bilateral or trilateral defense agreements being put into effect that seemed to lead to something. ANZUS (Australia-New Zealand-United States Pact), the bilateral defense arrangement between the United States and Japan and the recent arrangement between Australia and Indonesia prompted us to ask: is there a nearby threat that we should be concerned about?

It is foolhardy to assume that one can predict and manage the future of its international relations. The best we can do is to evaluate and manage events that affect our national well-being. As a small, developing country, Malaysia was never isolated from the external forces influencing its political, socio-economic and cultural configuration. While some may say that

Malaysia is vulnerable to these forces which can influence its national make-up and daily existence, I like to think that Malaysia's strength lies in its ability to adopt, adapt and adjust to the external elements coursing itself into the national fabric and having significant impact on the nation.

A challenge and question that now confronts us in the formulation and conduct of our foreign policy is: as a state whose official religion is Islam, how do we incorporate the central tenets of Islam into it? The principles and values of Islam, that is social justice, communal peace and individual dignity is certainly universal and have parallels in every religion and civil laws of the world. In the Sixties, in calling for the expulsion of South Africa from the Commonwealth because of its policy of apartheid, Malaysia, whether it knew it then, was applying one of the most universal of the Islamic principle: that is, all men are equal before God. Our stand also gained wide support for its moral and ethical grounds.

I would very much like to dispute those who perceive that Islam was never central in the formulation of Malaysia's foreign policy. Without invoking paragraphs from the Holy Qur'an and the Hadith, Malaysia's moral and ethical approaches have been based on the universal precepts of Islam, from the concept of Ummah, rule by the consent of the people, decision-making by consensus, to the right of retribution. There seems to be a notion among some quarters that Islam appears to affect Malaysia's foreign policy only to the degree that it does not run counter to Malaysia's interpretation of national interest. I urge you to rethink and question this. In my opinion, Malaysia's interpretation of Islam is closer to the spirit and intent of this venerable religion of ours. Our interpretation of Islamic tenets is devoid of short-term consideration and self-serving interests.

There are cynics who maintained that Malaysia's particular concern and involvement in Bosnia-Herzegovina is primarily driven by our rage and anxiety of witnessing an ethnic

Muslim group being exterminated in the heart of Europe, while the European seems to deliberately look the other way, and to Malaysia's perception, are collaborators in the genocide of the Bosnians. If that be the case, then how do we justify our active participation, internationally, in finding durable solutions to the internal non-Islamic conflicts in the Congo, Angola, Cambodia, and the Great Lakes region of Africa? The increasingly borderless world makes it impossible for any nation to be mono-ethnic. This reality calls for realistic solutions. Malaysia should continually urge Muslim and other ethnic minorities in other countries to live peacefully in their country as good, law-abiding and productive citizens. We should not let any Muslim or other ethnic minorities be under the illusion that we encourage their quest for self-determination in legitimate states. Their quest for statehood or autonomy may lead them to backwardness at best, and extermination at worst. As a successful pluralistic state, Malaysia proved that it is possible for various ethnic groups to coexist peacefully through tolerance, accommodation and compromise.

The perceptive student of Malaysia's foreign policy would detect an interesting and seemingly contradictory approach in the articulation and practice of Malaysia's foreign policy. At the bilateral level, we have unfailingly emphasized on strengthening and expanding our relations with almost all countries in the world in every area, regardless of their political and economic systems. At the multilateral level, it is not uncommon for Malaysia to be adversarial with countries it professes and in fact has close bilateral relations with, on issues of particular concern to it. Multilateralism is after all about forging alliances for strategy and strength in negotiations on issues and interests with like-minded countries. These issue-driven alliances may end when the issue was resolved. In gist, if I may be so bold in saying so, promoting bilateral relations extensively and intensively is of primary concern to Malaysia. This is reflective of the high level exchanges of visits taking place between Malaysia and other countries, the number of trade, investment

guarantee, air services, avoidance of double taxation, visa abolition, scientific, economic and cultural agreements signed bilaterally. We need to continually forge strong and symbiotic bilateral relations which are capable of withstanding the shifting alliances in addressing multilateral issues. Allies on one common concern today may be adversaries on another issue tomorrow.

I would now like to conclude my talk by touching on a very salient aspect of our foreign policy. It concerns the subject of national image and integrity. Increasing awareness of ethnic or communal characteristics has become a feature of our age. It reflects a quest for identity. This notion is important because without a sense of identity there is likely to be no notion of self or self-respect. But a sense of identity can only come from a meaningful relationship with others. Mutual dependencies create a much valued sense of identity as well as a sense of security.

..... Malaysia, in its 40th year of independence, has attained a new level of sophistication in regarding the world and its place and role in it. As we become more comfortable economically, we became more assured in promoting our national developmental experience as a possible model for other developing countries to emulate. We want the world to see us as a pluralistic society that comes together, one that has transcended our differences, and succeeded in nation-building. We have proved to the world that it is possible to forge a nation without depriving our peoples of their varied traditions. We want the world to see that it is possible to be a modern Islamic state and progressive society by incorporating and applying Islamic principles and values in our developmental thrust. I am confident that as we move towards the new century, we have a fairly good chance of finding a place that is respectable and deserving in the eyes of the international community.

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