

POST-SEPTEMBER 11: U.S.-MALAYSIA RELATIONS

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Abstract

This article examines U.S.-Malaysia security relations post-September 11. It argues that, in the past, military–security relation between the U.S. and Malaysia has not been affected by the divergence of interests in the political fronts of both countries. It follows that, post–September 11 has forged even closer security cooperation between both countries despite Malaysia’s apprehension on the overall execution of Global War On Terrorism (GWOT) policy by the U.S. The strong foundation of the U.S.-Malaysia security relations, forged in the past is explained by the convergence of anti-communist stand by both countries, albeit some variance at the perception of its threats. Post-September 11 saw the convergence of anti-terrorism stand by both countries. The threat of terrorism, which is non-traditional and emanates from non-state actors, has not only brought about a heightened military cooperation through the established bilateral defence-military networking but also new form of non-military cooperation. The American-led GWOT is, however, perceived by Muslim countries as linking Islam with terrorism. In this regard, it is argued that Malaysia is playing a balancing act of supporting the GWOT effort and the domestic imperative of expressing co-religionist solidarity. That would explain Malaysia’s ostensibly anti-American and anti-Semitic rhetoric being expressed from time to time. The reality is, common interests in security issues in the past and at present have been the foundation of continued good bilateral U.S.-Malaysia security relations¹.

Introduction

The relations between Malaysia and the United States (U.S.) towards the end of Clinton administration seemed to be at its lowest ebb. This was due to the comments made by the Clinton administration as well as the Congress on the arrest of the Malaysian ex-deputy prime minister, Dato’ Seri Anwar Ibrahim and his subsequent conviction on corruption charges. Malaysian government viewed it as interference by the U.S. in its internal affairs. When George W. Bush administration came into office, there was no sign of improvement in the relationship.

In the immediate aftermath of the 11th September 2001 attacks, the then Prime Minister Dato’ Seri Dr. Mahathir (now Tun Dr. Mahathir) was

¹ This is an abridged version of the author’s project paper in partial fulfillment for the degree of Masters of Arts in Policy and Security Analysis, UKM under the title “U.S-Malaysia Relations: Rhetoric and Reality”.

amongst the many world leaders who openly condemned the terrorist acts. The 11th September incidents have been seen as a watershed in the U.S. foreign policy where Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) has become a priority in its relations with other countries. Washington has set the world agenda in making “terrorism” an international issue. Malaysia was seen as a country that could be relied upon as an ally in the Bush doctrine of “either you are with us or you are with the enemy”². There was a marked improvement in the Malaysia-U.S. relationship.

However, the U.S. attack on Afghanistan in 2001, followed by the unilateral attack on Iraq in March 2003 had alienated many Muslims in Malaysia due to the perception that the GWOT campaigns were linking terrorism with Muslim countries. The Malaysian Government has been vocal in condemning the U.S. actions and policies and demanded the world community clarify the concept of “terrorism” and associated the root cause of current trend of terrorism to the plights of the Palestinians and U.S. policy in the Middle East. The alleged remarks against the Jews made by the then Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohammed during the closing ceremony of the 10th Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in October 2003 and the subsequent report of “rebuke” by U.S. President George W. Bush seemed to have kicked up another a diplomatic row between Malaysia and the United States³. Despite the political rhetoric, it appears that bilateral security relations have not been affected by the discords.

This article examines the U.S.-Malaysia security relations in post-September 11. The major argument of this article is that, in the past, military-security relation between Malaysia and the U.S. has not been affected by the divergence of interests in the political fronts of both countries. It follows that, post-September 11 has forged even closer security cooperation between both countries, despite Malaysia’s apprehensions on the overall execution of GWOT policy by U.S.

In understanding US-Malaysia security relations this article looks at the concept of “security” and “alliance” to explain convergence of security interests in the past, viewed from the traditional strategic studies perspective. “Securitization” of terrorism post-September 11, however, challenges the very concept of strategic security. It also offers new dimensions in looking at U.S.-Malaysia relations. This article therefore seeks to explore the closer security cooperation between Malaysia and the United States in the context of non- military cooperation amongst law enforcement agencies, in addition to the established traditional military-defence relations.

Conceptual Framework/Literature Review

² It was announced by President Bush on 20 September 2001, nine days after the September 11 attacks.

³ An U.S. official quoted the President Bush as telling Dr. Mahathir that his remarks were “wrong and divisive and stands squarely against what I believe in”. However, Dr. Mahathir denied it and instead said that Bush had expressed regret for having had to use strong words against him. See, No Bush rebuke, *The Star*, 22 October 2003.

“Security” and the threats to it are elusive concepts. There are many literature differences on the definition of security. Its scope may expand from military to political, economic, cultural, and other non-political threats. Barry Buzan, in his study, *People, States and Fear*, argues that security includes political, economic, societal, and environmental as well as military aspects. In broader international terms, it is about the pursuit of freedom from threat: the ability of states and societies to maintain their independent identity and their functional integrity⁴. Buzan et. al (1998) argue that the dynamics of security is determined by securitizing actors and referent objects⁵. Securitizing actors refer to ‘political leaders, bureaucracies, governments, lobbyists, and pressure groups’⁶ Referent objects are ‘things that are seen to be existentially threatened and that have a legitimate claim to survival’⁷. Thus a political concern becomes a security matter through a process of securitization. The securitizing actors’ interpretation of “security” is thus a self-referential practice, because it is in this practice that the issue becomes a security issue – not necessarily because a real existential threat exists but because the issue is presented as such a threat.⁸

In the Cold-War era, the U.S. perception of security threat was mainly emanating from external forces, influenced by communist ideology under the aegis of the Soviet Union. Communism was a threat to the American way of life. When France lost the war at Dien Bien Phu in April 1954, the U.S. fresh from the memory of the “loss” of China to communism in 1949 and subsequently the Korean War in 1950, perceived an imminent communist threat at the Asian front. President Eisenhower saw the communist threat as monolithic and that the fall of Indochina would trigger the fall of countries in Southeast Asia in the form of dominoes. The Domino Theory, first enunciated by President Eisenhower and later upheld by both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations led to the escalation of the conflict in South Vietnam, drawing in U.S. and the allied forces in the defence of the Saigon government to resist the communist onslaughts⁹. It marked the beginning of the policy of “containment” in Southeast Asia.

US-Malaysia relations during the Cold War have been forged on the concept of “alliance”. In international relations, especially during the Cold-War period (when big powers rivalry was based on ideological alignment), weak countries chose either to isolate themselves, to stay neutral or to join alliances in order to balance power. Those countries which aligned with each other were having mutual expectation of support in time of disputes or wars with other states. The concept of alignment was founded on perceived

⁴ Buzan, B., *People, states and fear: the national security problem in international relations*, Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1983, pp 214-42.

⁵ Buzan, B., Waever, O., Wilde, J.d., *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998

⁶ Ibid, p.40

⁷ Ibid, p.36

⁸ Ibid, p.24

⁹ Jacob, Z.C., *Politico-security dimension of United States policy and its influence on Malaysia’s foreign policy direction (1957-1992)*, Masters thesis, UKM, 1993, p.329

common interests and common adversary¹⁰. Formal alliances give a legal formality of such alignment and demands formative obligations on the part of member countries. It generally 'strengthens alignments by introducing elements of precision, obligation and reciprocity'¹¹. Although there was no formal, direct military alliance between Malaysia and the U.S., there was an indirect link through the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO)¹². Great Britain was a key member of SEATO. Malaya (a colony of the Great Britain) was therefore protected through SEATO, a military alliance formed with the U.S. leading the ideological pole of "free" countries against the other pole of "communist" countries¹³. When Malaya was granted independence in 1957, a formal defence agreement under the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement (AMDA) was formally signed giving Malaya the security umbrella of Britain in the SEATO membership. Although there was a variance in the perception of the communist's threat by the US and Malaysia – the former being the Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union; the later, CPM insurgency – the common adversary, Communism has forged a consonance in the U.S.-Malaysia security alignment and cooperation.

In post-Cold War period, the absence of U.S.-Soviet rivalry in the Southeast Asia region has brought about the fear of a security vacuum in the region. The emergence of China, the main claimant to the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, is perceived to have the potential to destabilize the Southeast Asian region and the threat is long term. An analysis of the Malaysia-U.S. relationship is therefore premised upon continued U.S. strategic interest in the region. The general consensus view of ASEAN partners is that the U.S. continued military presence in the region is vital to maintain a degree of stability. It must be stressed that the U.S. views its security relation with Malaysia from within the ASEAN framework and would prefer a collective defence arrangement. However, despite the indirect alliance of Malaysia with the U.S. in the anti-communist front in the past, any open security alliance (military link) with western powers, particularly with the U.S., would tend to alienate local constituents. The paradoxical relationship can be explained by its politico-military connection.

Jacob (1993) looked into the politico-security dimension of the U.S. policy and its influence on Malaysia's foreign policy for the period between 1957 and 1992, and concluded that communist insurgency and the American's "containment" policy have reinforced Malaysia's anti-

¹⁰ Snyder, G.H., Alliance theory: a neorealist first cut in *The evolution of theory in International Relations. Essays in honor of William T.R. Fax*, Rothstein, R.L. (ed.), Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1991, p.85. However, there were many instances of alignment not based on common adversary but calculated national or political interest. For example, Pakistan's membership in SEATO.

¹¹ Ibid, p.89

¹² For a comprehensive study of SEATO and its alliances, see Busyzinski, L., *SEATO: the failure of an alliance strategy*, Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1983

¹³ SEATO may be considered as the only formal alliance formed for the above stated purpose in Southeast Asia. The other formal alliance is Five-Powers Defence Agreement (FPDA) that was formed only in 1971 comprising Malaysia, Singapore, Britain, Australia and New Zealand, which provided for consultation and support by the latter three nations in the event of an attack on Malaysia or Singapore. For North Vietnam, she was aligned first towards China and later towards Moscow. There was no formal declared alliance.

Communists and pro-West stand in the early part of Malaysia's foreign policy¹⁴. Towards the dawn of the post-Cold War, however, Malaysia was seen to pursue a more independent line, mainly due to a host of bilateral political differences and trade issues that had strained the relationship. He nevertheless, suggested that security cooperation remained stable. The security cooperation alluded were mainly military centric. Sohdy (1991) contended that "the U.S.-Malaysia relationship is cordial but not intimate: Malaysia receives relatively little U.S. aids, has no American base, no Agency for International Development (AID) programme, and no large-scale military assistance agreement"¹⁵. She attributed this state of relationship to two main reasons. Firstly, the dominant influence of Britain over the country for a lengthy period of time, thus preventing the U.S. from establishing a foothold in Malaysia and secondly, because of Malaysia's past experiences with colonial masters –under the Portuguese, Dutch, British and Japanese. Furthermore, the experience of some of its neighbours with other colonial powers, including the U.S., has made Malaysia afraid of another colonial experience or of becoming a client state. This article will however, seek to explain another dimension, which contributes to this state of relationship, namely the domestic imperative of expressing solitary with Pan-Islamist ideals.

Following the terrorist attacks in the U.S. on 11 September 2001, the U.S. has securitized terrorism, hitherto considered only as trans-border crime¹⁶. Current U.S. policy against terrorism is referred to as "war" on terrorism. The securitization rather than criminalization of terrorism has allowed the U.S. to use more traditional security responses (eg military force) against al-Qaeda and its associates. Muslim extremism in Malaysia has long been securitized as a threat to national security. The discovery of the Jemaah Islamiah (JI) cell in Malaysia and its link with al-Qaeda has again forged a convergence in the perception of threat and common adversary. Again, it can be viewed in the "alliance" perspective, albeit a slightly different variance in that it involves non-state actors and mostly non-military cooperation. In understanding post-September 11 politico-security relations between Malaysia and U.S. in relation to GWOT, the argument of Nair (1997) on Malaysia's co-religionist connection with Islamic countries and Malaysian administrations tendency to employ an Islamic "element" in foreign policy, towards effecting a domestic function is relevant¹⁷. This is especially so when GWOT efforts are increasingly being interpreted as linking "terrorism" with Muslims whilst the plights of the Palestinians continue to be sidelined due to U.S.'s close relationship with Israel.

Another new dimension in looking at U.S.-Malaysia security cooperation is the view of Ann-Marie Slaughter, the Dean of the Woodrow

¹⁴ Zacharia C. Jacob, 1993, Op. Cit.

¹⁵ Sohdy, P., *The U.S.-Malaysian nexus. Themes in superpower-small state relation*, Malaysia: Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) ,1991

¹⁶ The United Nations defines transnational crimes as 'offences whose inception, prevention and /or direct or indirect effects involved more than one country' Eighteen different categories of transnational crime have been identified amongst which are terrorism, aircraft hijacking, sea piracy and money laundering.

¹⁷ Nair, S., *Islam in Malaysian foreign policy*, London: Routledge,1997, p.81

Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, who argued that a new world order is not a collection of nation-states that communicate through presidents, prime ministers, foreign ministers, the United Nations or NGOs but governance through a complex global web of networks. She said that these networks of government officials: police, investigators, financial regulators and even judges and legislators; exchange information and coordinate activities across national borders to tackle crime, terrorism, and routine international interactions. She cited as an example in year 2003 when relations between the United States and France was at its lowest ebb and there was a degree of crisis between Bush and Chirac, and in Germany between Bush and Schroeder, yet relation between the French Justice Ministry and Otto Schily of the German Justice Ministry and John Ashcroft (U.S. Attorney-General) were incredibly tight. They had to be tight because they were on the frontline trying to track down terrorists. The collaboration was not affected by the political turbulence at the leadership level. Slaughter also concurred with the view of Dana Priest in her book *The Mission*, which argues that “the military side also operates through networks” where the U.S. military operation against terrorism is primarily through networks with its counterparts abroad¹⁸. This argument may explain the enduring U.S.-Malaysia military-security cooperation, not affected by the political discords of both countries.

Post-September 11 Security Relations

In the aftermath of September 11 incidents, Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir and President Bush met at a private session at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Beijing in October 2001. This was followed by a visit to the Pentagon by the Malaysian Defence Minister, Dato' Seri Najib Tun Razak in April 2002 which paved the way for an official visit by the Prime Minister of Malaysia to the White House in May 2002. During the Prime Minister's visit to the White House, U.S and Malaysia signed a joint declaration to fight terrorism in Southeast Asia, making Malaysia's efforts part of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). The said declaration agreed to mutual cooperation in counter-terrorism in defence, banking, intelligence sharing, border control, transportation and law enforcement¹⁹. Consequently, the existing defence cooperation has not only been enhanced but also opened another avenue in the form of non-military, anti-terrorism related cooperation such as intelligence exchange, financial control on terrorist funding, training etc.

A glimpse of the close U.S.-Malaysia security relations which was described as a “well kept secret” can be found in a speech by Malaysian Defence Minister, Dato Seri Najib Tun Razak on 3rd May 2002 in the Heritage Lecture series held in the U.S. where he revealed that Malaysia had granted all U.S. requests for flightovers during Operation Enduring

¹⁸ Fernandez, J., New world order of networks, *Sunday Star*, 28 March 2004, p. 34

¹⁹ “Declaration of Cooperation Between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of Malaysia on Cooperation to Combat International Terrorism” signed on 14 May 2002 in Washington, D.C.

Freedom in Afghanistan²⁰. In addition, he also stated that Malaysia had assisted the U.S. in arresting and handing over suspected terrorists wanted by the U.S.. Malaysia has also provided military protection to U.S. merchant ships crossing the Straits of Malacca²¹.

A bilateral training agreement between the U.S and Malaysia signed in 1984 allows for training exercises involving all branches of the U.S and Malaysian armed forces on a regular basis. Some of the U.S. Special Forces had undergone training at the Malaysian army jungle-warfare training school²². The agreement also allows the conduct of the annual Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercise between Malaysian Navy and the U.S. Marines and Coast Guard personnel. Post-September 11, saw the CARAT exercise being held in earnest from 26 June to 1 July, 2002, involving 1,100 Malaysian soldiers and sailors and 1,400 U.S. Marines and Coast Guard personnel²³.

The commander-in chief of the U.S. forces in the Pacific (CINCPAC), Adm. Blair visited Sabah, Malaysia sometime in early February 2002 in conjunction with U.S.-Philippines joint exercise in the southern Philippines. The visit was significant because it was linked to the U.S. joint exercise with the Philippines in the GWOT effort against the Abu-Sayyaf rebels operating in the Southern Philippines who were allegedly involved in hostage-ransom kidnapping in the Malaysian island of Sipadan in late 2001, and its alleged link to Al-Qaeda networks.

U.S. interests in the Straits of Malacca, a vital sea lane for maritime trade and oil supply route from the Middle East, saw increasing security cooperation in the plying of the ships from the U.S. Seventh Fleet in Malaysian Waters. After September 11, more emphasis has been placed in protecting the Straits of Malacca from possible terrorist attacks. Recent local news report quoting Admiral Thomas Fargo, the U.S. military commander in the Asia-Pacific region, as telling U.S. legislature of the plan to deploy U.S. forces along the Malacca Straits as part Washington's new counter-terrorism initiative, has however put Malaysia on the defensive due to the sensitivity of the issue²⁴. Malaysia and Indonesia has since rejected direct US presence in the Straits of Malacca claiming it was the rights and sovereignty of the littoral states to ensure maritime peace and security²⁵.

²⁰ Malaysia has since the termination of U.S. bases in the Philippines in 1992 provided air and port facilities to the U.S. military. The agreement allows the U.S. airforce to mount surveillance flights and to use its air bases in the event of a crisis. See, Sodhy, P., 1991, p.380-381

²¹ Najib Razak , U.S- Malaysia defence cooperation : a solid success story, Heritage Lecture # 742, 3 May 2002, <http://www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/HL742.cfm>, retrieved on 12 September 2003.

²² Revealed by Dato' Seri Najib bin. Abdul Razak during a joint media conference with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld on 2 May, 2002 at the Pentagon. See, *US Information Service*, <http://usinfo.state.gov>.

²³ *Comparative Connection*, http://www.csis.org/pacfor/cc/0202Qus_asean.html.,retrieved on 12th January 2004.

²⁴ "Najib: No need for U.S. to patrol straits". *The Star*. 5th April 2004. p. 2

²⁵ "Stay out of straits, US told". *The Star*. 8th May 2004. p 21

Non-Military Cooperation

GWOT has brought a renewed cooperation in the exchange of security intelligence on terrorist activities. In the past, there have been regular security intelligence exchanges between the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Malaysian Special Branch (SB) on matters of common interests. The Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) also maintains close intelligence exchange on drugs trafficking activities with its Malaysian counter-part, namely the Narcotic Department of the Royal Malaysia Police. In 1996, the Malaysian police helped to capture a Kuwaiti, Wali Khan Amin for his involvement in the World Trade Centre bombing in 1993²⁶. It was also reported that in January 2000, upon CIA's request, Malaysian SB monitored a meeting of Al-Qaeda operatives in Kuala Lumpur which was attended by a suspect involved in the USS Cole attack in Yemen in October 2000 and the two hijackers who were involved in the 11th September 2001 attack on Pentagon. Malaysia was thus able to supply the U.S. with valuable information, including names and photographs of the terrorists, reportedly to have been highlighted in the U.S. Joint Congressional Committee Report on the September 11 attacks²⁷.

Following the September 11 attacks, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) chief, Robert Mueller visited Malaysia in March 2002 and held discussions with several key security people in Malaysia, including the then Inspector-General of Police, Tan Sri Norian Mai. It is believed that amongst the subjects discussed was the arrest of one Yazid Sufaat, a former Malaysian army captain, whose condominium was allegedly the venue of the planning meeting in Malaysia for the September 11 attacks by Al-Qaeda operatives²⁸. Yazid, who has been arrested by the Malaysian police, is still in detention under the Malaysian Internal Security Act (ISA). Following the meeting, intelligence extracted from Yazid from the Malaysian Special Branch have been transmitted to the FBI and in addition, a FBI team had been allowed access to interview the said detainee in connection with the prosecution of a Al-Qaeda member, Zacarias Moussaoui in the U.S.²⁹.

Malaysian authority in April 2002 arrested 63 persons linked to Kumpulan Militan Malaysia (KMM), a group that allegedly has links with Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) that had six different plans to attack U.S. and other

²⁶ Wong C.W., Step up efforts to thwart militant groups, *The Star*, 14 August 2001.

²⁷ Sodhy, P., U.S.-Malaysia relations during the Bush administration: the political, economic, and security aspects in *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.25, No. 3, December, 2003, p. 377. See also, declassified report on testimony of the Director of CIA, George Tenet at the joint congressional committee dated December 2002, report on the 107th Congress, 2nd Session, <http://news.findlaw.com/hdocs/docs/911rpt/>, pp.151-152

²⁸ Ibid, p.152

²⁹ Huhtala, M.T., Terrorism – a treat to world peace?, remarks by U.S. Ambassador to Malaysia to the Rotary International dinner forum, Kuala Lumpur, 22 February 2003, <http://www.usembassymalaysia.org.my/amsp0222.html>, retrieved on 20 October 2003

assets in Singapore³⁰. In this connection, a U.S. State Department spokesman in his daily briefing on 14th February 2002 applauded the Malaysian government's arrest of more than 20 suspects under the ISA in connection with an alleged plot to target U.S. facilities³¹.

Malaysia has also been praised as a leader in curbing terrorist financing, having passed a strong money laundering legislation long before the events of September 11³². On 6 May 2002, the Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Treasury, Kenneth Dam visited Malaysia and told the press that Washington was very pleased with the cooperation from Malaysia to curb terrorist funding³³. He was in Kuala Lumpur to solicit the possibility of Malaysia acting beyond the U.N listing that requires all member states to block the assets of terrorist entities³⁴. In this connection, Malaysia through its 2003 amendment to the Anti-Money Laundering Act (AMLA) 2001 has extended the money laundering reporting mechanism of banks to include the reporting of suspected terrorism financing. The amended Act provides for measures to be taken for the detection and prevention of terrorism financing as well as for the freezing, seizure and forfeiture of terrorist properties. These actions are seen to complement the U.S. GWOT effort in controlling terrorist financing.

The setting up of the South East Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT) on 1st July 2003 in Kuala Lumpur marks another chapter in U.S.-Malaysia anti-terrorism efforts in the regional context. President Bush first announced the setting up of SEARCCT at the October 2002 APEC meeting in Mexico³⁵. However, sensitivity towards direct U.S. military involvement in the region has prompted Malaysia's clarification that the center would not involve military training³⁶. Subsequent U.S. unilateral attack on Iraq in March 2003 deemed it too sensitive for Southeast Asian countries to officially include U.S. as a partner³⁷. Nevertheless, U.S. will continue to play a pivotal role in providing funding and training resources for the operation of SEARCCT³⁸.

³⁰ 63 with links to KMM arrested, *New Straits Times*, 28 September 2002, p.4; The Jemaah Islamiyah. Arrests and the threat of terrorism, White paper, Republic of Singapore: Ministry of Home Affairs, 2003, p.26

³¹ U.S. Information Service, 14 February 2002, <http://usinfo.state.gov>

³² Ibid, 14 February 2002.

³³ Kenneth Dam, Deputy Secretary of the Treasury. Ibid., 7th May 2002

³⁴ Jemaah Islamiah (JI) at that time was not yet listed as a terrorist organization in the UN listing. However, the U.S together with Australia and some Southeast Asian countries had on 23rd October 2002 formally requested the placing of Jemaah Islamiah (JI) to the consolidated list of terrorist-related entities, there is no more question of Malaysia acting beyond the UN list See, "O'Neill Says Joint Terrorist Designation Sign of Commitment (Views action as a first step in anti-terrorism fight in Asia)". News extract. Ibid. 23rd October 2002.

³⁵ Sodhy, P., 2003, p.370

³⁶ *New Straits Times*, 28 October 2002, p.1-2; American suggestion for anti-terrorism centre must be well studied, *Berita Harian*, 3 September 2002

³⁷ Sodhy, P., 2003, p.377

³⁸ For Financial Year 2003, under the NADR-ATA program, Malaysia was allotted US \$ 1.27 million in part for training programs for SEARCCT. See, US State Department, Congressional budget justification for foreign operations, www.state.gov/document/organization/28976.pdf, retrieved on 20 April 2004.

The International Military Education Training Program (IMET) program has also been given greater emphasis with higher yearly allocations³⁹. In its justification for budget allocation, the U.S. State Department stressed the importance of the program in that it had “contributed significantly to regional stability by strengthening our military-to-military ties, and familiarizing the Malaysian military with U.S. doctrine, equipment, and management techniques”⁴⁰. In addition, fostering of good working relations with top Malaysian military officers seems to be the underlying objective as can be seen in the Financial Year (FY) 2002 request for allocation, in which it was mentioned that Malaysia’s Chief of Army was a 1986 graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College in Fort Leavenworth under the IMET program⁴¹. For FY 2003, the actual allocation was U.S. \$ 831,000.00 (RM 3.16 million), the estimate for FY 2004 is U.S. \$ 1.2 million (RM 4.56 million) and for FY 2005, a U.S. \$ 1.1 million (RM 4.18 million) budget has been requested⁴².

In addition, post-September 11 has also seen a new addition in U.S. military assistance to Malaysia under the Non-proliferation, Anti-terrorism, Demining and Related Programs (NADR). For FY 2002 the state department requested U.S. \$ 250,000.00 (RM 950,000.00) for a cooperative program to help Malaysia establish effective export controls for the prevention of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, related technologies and other weapons. Under the same program, Malaysia was allocated U.S. \$ 1.2 million in FY2003 for “the effective controls on transfer of sensitive materials and technologies as well as funding for such training opportunities for the Malaysia Counter Terrorist Centre”⁴³.

Post-September 11: Divergence of Political Interests

Malaysia in the past has been very critical of U.S.’s seemingly frequent use of veto powers in the United Nations Security Council in support of Israel in the Israel-Palestine conflict. The divergence of political views on the said issue on its own did not cause much diplomatic tensions. However, it was the then Prime Minister Mahathir’s strong words against Zionism and his alleged critical remarks of Jews that have been construed as anti-Semitic and have caused much bilateral tension. Notably, in 1986 his allegation of a Jewish agenda to undermine the economy of Malaysia, purportedly due to its support of Palestinian rights in the Israeli-Palestinians conflicts. Again, in 1997 his alleged remarks of a same Jewish agenda that blamed George Soros for the Asian Financial Crisis, had been met with some strong

³⁹ The IMET program is an instrument of U.S. national security and foreign policy. IMET courses “offer opportunities to present democratic alternatives to key foreign military and civilian leaders, and further regional stability through mutually beneficial military-to-military relations”. See, Ibid, www.state.gov/document/organization/17783.pdf, retrieved on 20 April 2004.

⁴⁰ Ibid, www.state.gov/document/organization/3966.pdf., retrieved on 20 April 2004.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid, www.state.gov/document/organization/28976.pdf, retrieved on 20 April 2004.

⁴³ Ibid. The center referred to is the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter –Terrorism (SEARCCT).

reactions from some influential quarters within the U.S. administration. Finally, the alleged anti-Jewish remarks made during the closing ceremony of the 10th Organization of Islamic Conference in Kuala Lumpur in Oct 2003 had again kicked up a diplomatic ruffle between both countries and some adverse reactions from Jewish lobby groups in America.

Tensions at political level post-September 11 therefore revolved around anti-American sentiments among Malaysians due to their “co-religionist” with Muslim countries. Malaysians view the U.S. foreign policy and its GWOT campaigns as anti-Muslims, while Americans view Malaysia as being anti-Jewish due to the alleged anti-Semitic rhetoric often expressed by Malaysian leaders. It is against this background that the U.S.-Malaysia relations are premised upon.

Conclusion

The strong foundation of the U.S.-Malaysia defence-security relations may be explained by the convergence of anti-communist stand by both countries in the past. During the Cold War period, U.S.-Malaysia relation operated under the theme of “Containment” policy. Malaysia with its alignment to the West would rely on the U.S. to provide protection and stability in the Southeast Asian region. The U.S. as a superpower, was preoccupied in its effort to “contain” the influence of communism in the wider objective of Cold War rivalry with another pole led by the Soviet Union premised upon ideological differences. Common security interests and common adversary i.e. Communism, in the past had therefore forged a consonance in U.S.-Malaysia security alignment and cooperation, unaffected by contentious issues caused by divergence in political and economic interests.

It is obvious that the U.S.-Malaysia security relation has been further enhanced post-September 11, with a multitude of cooperation in addition to the usual military-defence cooperation. This has been brought about due to Malaysia’s strong anti-terrorism stand that has forged a convergence of interests with the U.S. in its GWOT effort. Better U.S.-Malaysia security cooperation is therefore premised upon common perception of terrorism as a security threat. Securitization of terrorism has enabled the U.S. to mobilize its military /defence resources and its establishments in this GWOT effort. Terrorism, hitherto under the criminal and law enforcement domain demands more non-military-centric counter-measures.

However, U.S.-Malaysia security cooperation in this anti-terrorism effort seems to continue to operate under the military-centric structure, with established military-to-military networking forged amongst the defence establishments of both countries. Allocation of funds in anti-terrorism programs continues to come from the U.S. Defense Department’s Foreign Operations budget. It must be stressed here that essentially, terrorism and its related problems requires more non-military counter measures, rather than military force. In the Malaysian context, counter-terrorism falls mainly

under the domain of law enforcement agencies, with the Royal Malaysia Police Special Branch playing a major role. The established U.S.-Malaysia security arrangement does not seem to correspond to this changing trend in security threats. It therefore requires the establishment of new networking with different security related organizations.

Despite the occasional divergence of political interests, U.S.-Malaysia relations remain strong. U.S. continues to be Malaysia's largest trading partner with the balance of trade in Malaysia's favour⁴⁴. Malaysia continues to depend on U.S. foreign direct investment (FDI) in its electronics, oil and gas sectors. The role of U.S. as a superpower that would ensure regional stability has also made its presence and influence in Malaysia imperative. U.S. also has important economic, political and security interests in Malaysia. Malaysia is one of U.S.'s top 15 trading partners and continues to be an important market for U.S. goods and services⁴⁵. Malaysia is seen as an active member of the ASEAN and a moderate member of the OIC currently holding the Chair of that organization. Its influential voice on Islamic issues and the Middle East, and its active role in the peace negotiation for the Southern Philippines between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the government of the Philippines, have made Malaysia an important ally in U.S.'s GWOT.

However, better bilateral security cooperation in this American-led GWOT, which is seen by Muslim countries as linking Islam with terrorism, demands a balancing act of supporting the GWOT and the domestic imperative of expressing co-religionist solidarity. That would explain the ostensibly anti-American and anti-Semitic rhetoric often being expressed from time to time. The reality is, common interests in security issues in the past and also at present have been the foundation of continued good bilateral U.S.-Malaysia security relations.

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⁴⁴ Malaysia's export to U.S. for the year 2003 amounting to U.S. \$ 24,008.9 million and import U.S. \$ 10,343.6 million with U.S. \$ 14,517.4 million to Malaysia's favour. See, U.S. Census Bureau, Foreign Trade Division, Washington, D.C. 20233, <http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5570.html#2004>., retrieved on 29 April 2004

⁴⁵ As at February 2004, Malaysia stood at 10th placing in the top 15 trading partners ranking. See, Ibid, <http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/statistics/highlights/toppartners.html>, retrieved on 29 April 2004.

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