

Malaysian tiger set to roar again

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by hasmy agam



Winning a non-permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council reflects members' respect for and confidence in Malaysia, but now high expectations and tremendous responsibility lie ahead for our delegates.

MY heartiest congratulations to the Government for winning a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. Also, warm commendations to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Wisma Putra) for its lobbying efforts that went into overdrive in the last several months, involving not only senior officials but also the Foreign Affairs Minister and often the Prime Minister himself.

The bid for a seat on the security council (*see pic*) is always vigorously contested, but fortunately on this as well as the last occasion, Malaysia was the sole candidate for the Asian seat, again reflecting the country's standing and respectability among the Asian countries.

Our fourth win for a security council seat after an absence of 15 years demonstrates the continued confidence and trust that the UN membership has in Malaysia.

When we ran for a security council seat for the 1999-2000 slot, a day before the voting, I was approached by the Permanent Representative of a country with which we had problematic relations.

He told me that while the relationship between our two countries was a difficult one on account of a particular issue that divided us, nevertheless, he had been instructed by his Government to vote for Malaysia because of "your country's principled and consistent positions on international issues."

That was a high compliment from an unexpected quarter on the way we conducted our foreign policy

and diplomacy.

This latest victory on our part is a clear reflection of the continued respect for and confidence in Malaysia and, equally important, the expectations that Malaysia would be able to once again play its constructive role during its upcoming membership in the council.

Attention should now be focused on our role and responsibility as a member of the security council in the next two years ending Dec 31 2016, and what Malaysia intends to do or to initiate during its membership.

The challenges are high and there is much work waiting for our team, with a heavy, complex and sensitive bundle of issues to deal with.

It is not simply a matter of taking our seat in the security council but being equally mindful of the high expectations, as well as the tremendous responsibility, that lies ahead for our delegates.

To meet these high expectations, it is important that both the team in New York and the support team at headquarters work together as the issues that are being dealt by the security council are now much more numerous and complex.

In the past, the team in New York was left much to themselves, being the experts on the ground, but I would hope that this time around there would be greater coordination and sharing of ideas in terms of the issues that we should take a lead on, or initiatives that we would like to promote in the security council.

The issues that are dealt with by the security council relating to international peace and security are numerous, some of which have been on its agenda for years, if not decades. Quite a number of them are intractable issues that defy solution, and new ones keep coming before the security council.

As a responsible security council member, Malaysia will have to deal with the issues in an objective and even-handed manner, and help ensure that the council remains united so as to be able to carry out its core function of maintaining international peace and security.

Issues of concern to the security council in the last few years include the increasingly complex and tumultuous political/security situation in West Asia or the Middle East.

As a security council member, Malaysia should have a clear and unambiguous position on each of these issues, based on a set of clear principles tempered, perhaps, by a certain amount of pragmatism based on national interests.

In the past, we had been able to follow a much-appreciated balanced approach. This has always been and will remain a big challenge to members of the security council, especially those who are concerned about their integrity and credibility.

I strongly endorse the suggestion made by Professor Gareth Evans, former Foreign Minister of Australia and currently Chancellor of the Australian University, that Malaysia "should initiate efforts in the security council to push for nuclear disarmament."

Evans made this suggestion in response to a question by Bernama, at the end of a recent Forum on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament held at the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

Other equally important initiatives that could be taken up include those relating to regional peace and security, international terrorism, the situation in Palestine and the very pertinent issue of safety of civil aviation in the light of the recent tragedies that had befallen us.

It would be good if the ministry would provide opportunities for others outside of the diplomatic profession to contribute ideas in terms of the issues to be taken up, as well as strategies and

approaches to be adopted.

A lot of work needs to be done in initiating anything new in the security council so as to ensure the all-important consensus, without which it would not be possible to initiate anything, given the differing national and regional interests and positions of members of the council, aside from the vested interests of the veto-wielding permanent members.

My former colleagues in the ministry, who dealt mostly with bilateral issues, used to argue very strongly that bilateral relations were the bread-and-butter of diplomacy.

But in the globalised world we live in today, and as foreign policy is an extension of domestic policy, multilateral diplomacy and bilateral diplomacy are becoming intrinsically linked.

Multilateralism has evolved and has taken centre stage on many issues. Indeed, many issues that are handled at the multilateral level have become increasingly important elements of bilateral diplomacy.

There should be a good balance between the two, one reinforcing the other in the pursuit of our overall national interests.

Hence the importance of developing specialised skills among our officers so that we would be in a position to play an increasingly active, even leadership role, on certain important issues at the multilateral level so that from time to time, and on issues of vital interest to the nation, the Malaysian tiger could roar out again as in the past, even as we pursue a path of moderation in the international arena.

> Tan Sri Hasmy Agam is a former diplomat who served as a member of the Malaysian Delegation to the United Nations Security Council in 1989-90 and 1999-2000. The views expressed here are entirely his own.