

EAST ASIAN PEOPLE TO PEOPLE EXCHANGE: MALAYSIA

I. Historical Background – Malaysia’s Look East Policy

In 1982, six months after Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad, Malaysia’s fourth Prime Minister took office, the Look East Policy was initiated. The purpose of the policy was to gain knowledge of best practises from East Asian countries namely Japan, Korea and Taiwan.

This nation-building exercise sought to decode the secrets of success in East Asian countries and translate it into Malaysia’s development plans. The belief in East Asian labour ethics, management capability, foresight, technological skills, drive and high morale contributed to the formulation of the Look East Policy. Malaysia was not going to just blindly emulate the East Asian example taking into consideration the different cultural and historical societal backgrounds of East Asian countries compared with Malaysia. The purpose was to take the good values, learn from the mistakes and apply it to the Malaysian context.

A substantial emphasis was also placed on co-operative projects to ensure a transfer of technology and knowledge that would be beneficial to all partners. Malaysia was fully committed to the policy and thus a formal initiative of people-to-people exchange with East Asia was formed. Malaysia has since enjoyed close economic, social, cultural, security and political ties with East Asian countries. East Asia remains an important geopolitical region, second to that of South East Asia. Bilateral relations between this region and Malaysia have steadily expanded with the establishment of diplomatic relations with setting up of Embassies and placement of representatives some spanning over 50 years.

II. Closer Regional Integration

1. Diplomatic Ties

The Look East Policy was the foundation behind Malaysia's long, stable bilateral relationship with the East Asian region. This relationship is the Republic of Korea's third longest relationship with a South East Asian country. Malaysia and ROK commemorated its 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations in February 23, 2010. Similarly, Malaysia- Japan bilateral relations began August 31, 1957 and celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2007. In commemoration, Japan-Malaysia Friendship year was celebrated.

Malaysia-China relations began in 1974 flourished on the principle that Taiwan is part of a one China. The 35th anniversary of friendly relations was celebrated in 2009. Taiwan's 'Look South' policy which sought to expand economic relations with Southeast Asian nations enhanced Taiwan-Malaysia relations significantly in the early 1990's. Part of the initiative included the formation of the Malaysian Investment Fund.

Not only have there been frequent exchange of visits among military personnel and private sector players, high level exchanges among leaders have been customary. Since the establishment of diplomatic ties, every ROK President has visited Malaysia (except for the first who's term ended just as diplomatic ties began) and Malaysian Prime Ministers and Kings (Agong) have reciprocated in kind the most recent being Dato' Seri Najib Razak's June 2009 visit and President Lee Myunk-bak's visit in December 2010. Japanese and Malaysian government officials have also continued multiple exchange of visits. In addition the Emperor and Empress of Japan visited Malaysia in 2006 shortly after the then Agong visited Japan in 2005.

2. Trade

Cooperation between East Asian countries in areas of trade and investment have done well. Korea is Malaysia's 8th largest trade partner, while Malaysia is Korea's 6th largest trade partner and among ASEAN nations, Korea's 3rd largest trade partner. Trade expended from USD\$656 million in 1980 to USD\$15.7 billion in 2008. This massive expansion was concentrated predominantly in the electrical and electronics sector. Malaysia exports electronics, petroleum and liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) to Korea, while Korea is Malaysia's 7th largest source of Foreign Direct Investment at USD\$329 in 2008.

Japan was Malaysia's largest investor in 2009 pouring in RM7billion into the economy followed by Hong Kong (RM5.3 billion) and the US at RM2.3 billion. Japan imports natural gas, LPG, electronic equipment, wood and wood products while Malaysia imports vehicles, electronics, machineries, iron and steel products.

In 2008, bilateral trade between China and Malaysia increased by 10.3 percent from the year before reaching 39.05 billion. These figures continued to increase reading USD\$74.2 billion in 2010 making Malaysia the largest trading partner of China among all ASEAN countries.

Trade organisations such as the Japanese External Trade Organisation (JETRO) Kuala Lumpur a Japanese Government initiative which acts to promote Japanese investors to Malaysia have enhanced trade ties. JETRO monitors the progress of Japanese companies in the Malaysian economy and also provide consultation and have senior advisors at hand to provide assistance.

In 2009, the establishment of the Korean Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KOCHAM) was reciprocated with the setting up of the Malaysian Industrial Development Authority (MIDA) by the Small and Medium Business Corporation of Korea (SBC) in 2010.

3. Economic Cooperation

Courting East Asian knowhow, expertise and investment saw the culmination of major projects built in Malaysia by East Asian companies. To name a few:

- (i) One of the Petronas Twin Towers (the worlds tallest towers until 2000) was built by Samsung Engineering and Construction and Kukdong Engineering and Construction
- (ii) The RM400 million Dayabumi complex was build by Japanese company
- (iii) The 13.5km Penang Bridge, one of the longest bridges in the world of which 8.4km is over water was constructed by Hyundai Engineering and Construction Company Ltd.
- (iv) Berjaya a Malaysian company is investing USD\$100 million in a resort complex in Jeju Island where the Korea-Asean summit was held in 2009.
- (v) The partnership between Heavy Industries Corporation of Malaysia (HICOM) and Japan's Mitsubishi was the foundation of Malaysia's national car industry and the birth of the national car company - Perusahaan Otomobil Nasional Sendirian Berhad (PROTON) which was formed in 1983.
- (vi) Malaysia's very own *Sogo Shosha*, Sime Darby Pernas Trading Corporation was formed in 1983 to emulate Japanese corporations that venture in international trade and are in a wide range of commodities.

4. Socio-Cultural Cooperation

(i) Tourism

- In 2008, 267,000 Korean's visited Malaysia and a year later 66,148 Malaysians visited Korea.
- Malaysia is said to be the #1 tourist destination for Japanese with 30,663 Japanese tourists visiting in 2009.
- 94,322 tourist from China (including Hong Kong and Macao) visited Malaysia in 2009
- Air Asia has sparked the East Asian low cost airline revolution making air travel cheaper opening up new destinations within the region.

(ii) Education

- Malaysians make up the 5th largest student group in Japan after Chinese, Koreans, Taiwanese and Vietnamese.
- There are 960 Koreans in formal education in Malaysia and 10,000 studying languages around the country.
- 8 Korean schools in Malaysia
- Programmes such as the Japan Study Support program and Dispatch of Lecturers program has allowed for Japanese experts to be sent to Malaysia.
- At 2009, 2,395 Malaysian students were studying in Japan.

(iii) Training Programmes

- Malaysians undergo training in various technical courses including industrial technology and min-level manager training in Korea.
- As part of the national car partnership agreement, Malaysian workers were sent to Japan for a maximum of 6 months to be trained through intensive training programmes.

- Military training as well as biennial visits between the Korean Naval War College and its Malaysian counterpart continue to forge closer people-to-people exchange.

(iv) Expatriates

- At 2009, there were 14,580 Korean Nationals in residing in Malaysia.
- Malaysia My Second Home (MM2H) Programme, Koreans are ranked in the top ten of applicants.
- At 2009, 9,152 Japanese reside in Malaysia while 8,291 Malaysians reside in Japan at 2008.

(v) Hallyu

- Food
 - In Kuala Lumpur is peppered with Korean, Japanese, Hong and Chinese restaurants serving scrumptious food from the East Asian region.
- K-Pop
 - Korean artists such as Rain and girl band Wonder Girls have a huge following in Malaysia. Earlier this year, a telco company tapped into the K-Pop craze and organised a K-Pop concert.
 - A local Malaysian Radio Station is in the midst of running a K-Pop HITZ talent show and the winner will get an all-expense trip to Seoul, Korea.
 - Paid music TV stations both local and regional (MTV Asia) have dedicated Japanese, Korean and Canto Music hour and programmes.
 - R16 Korea an annual international B-boy tournament and urban arts festival is organised in KL.

- **Movie and TV serials**
 - Paid TV has a dedicated anime channel while local tv stations air Korean drama serials.
 - Korean movies are aired on paid TV regularly.
 - Korean actors visit Malaysia for a signing session to promote their art

(vi) **People to People Exchange**

- Initiatives such as the Japan-East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youth Program and the Ship for Southeast Asian Youth program have been successful in promoting Japanese culture.
- The Korean Plaza in Malaysia houses the Korean Tourism Board and runs regular free classes – *hanbuk* trial, beauty, cooking, language, tourism, culture. It also promotes Korean heritage sites, culture and food.

III. Immersion and Embracing East Asian Culture – A General Observation

The East Asian Cultural wave has been embraced by multi ethnic Malaysia in a big way. Culturally diverse, it is interesting to note that many Malaysians enjoy a variety of East Asian cuisine in urban Kuala Lumpur and East Asian food has been adopted into urbanite cravings. Hotel buffets serve a variety of local and western cuisine and East Asian food is becoming a staple on menus. Certain five-star hotels in the city also boast of fine-dining Japanese restaurants.

To add to the East Asian Wave, the number of East Asian singers and performers headed to our shores has increased and so has their following.

Watching snippets of the K-Pop talent show was an discover (on my part) of a different youth cultural pocket being embraced by the different ethnicities in Malaysia. Not only are the contestants singing in Korean, most of them do not speak Korean but have emulated Korean culture, pop-attire and dance form.

It is not only the young who have been bitten by this East Asian cultural wave. Large chunks of society are avid fans of popular East Asian drama serials and movies such as Winter Sonata, Oshin, Fireflies in the Garden and Jewel in the Crown, to name a few, not including anomie – noting that not all have been dubbed or have subtitles.

East Asian writings and books are readily available in local bookshops and well-stocked Kinokuniya housed in the shopping mall in the Kuala Lumpur Twin Towers. Famous authors such as Haruki Murakami and Kazuo Ishiguro have also become very popular here.

These are basic observations equating to clear examples of how well Malaysians have embraced East Asian culture.

IV. Opportunities for Future Cooperation

Malaysia has strong, stable relations with the East Asian Region. Further suggestions to enhance this relationship through:

1. Providing avenues for cultural and intellectual dialogue
 - Allow for scholars, diplomats and other prominent personalities to examine, discuss and churn out ideas as to the direction on which future cooperation could take.

2. Social exchange among politicians

- Aside from discussing political and economic issues, a focus on socialising among parliamentarians can be encouraged.
- Prefectural should also be included in this exercise.
- Re-visit the Look East Policy and increase the number of high-level engagements and summits.

3. Peacekeeping Operations (PKO)

- (i) Hold joint training exercises as Malaysia has had a long history in PKO and ROK has participated in 12 active missions globally.
- (ii) Share best practises – Malaysian Peacekeeping Training Centre

4. Sports Exchange

- (i) East Asian countries can promote relations through friendly tournaments, test matches, promotional tours, training programmes and demonstrations for popular regional and traditional sports such as football, badminton, karate, kendo, wushu and other sport.

5. Management of Global Commons

- (i) Cooperation in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean
- (ii) Management of pandemics and other health emergencies
- (iii) Cyber-security and defence industry cooperation
- (iv) Further explore avenues for better cooperation and management of Marine security
- (v) Nuclear Power Plants – as ASEAN countries look towards going nuclear, East Asian countries who have been in the

business are ideal experts who can exchange, consult and share knowledge on this important issue.

(v) Illegal people trafficking – engage in ideas and policy options.

6. Education

- (i) Shift from technical training into exchanges at university and advance graduate levels.
- (ii) East Asian Education Exhibitions – a high number of Malaysian students are being sent to the West for tertiary education, the rising cost of fees and exchange rates could sway students to look east.
- (iii) Education institutions could also capitalise on a mutual Asian heritage – to lessen culture shock and enable students to adapt better into a new phase and new country.
- (iv) Proximity – closer to home, cheaper flights, less time difference constraints
- (v) Explore avenues for greater sharing of information and expertise in areas of high value and high technology.

7. Financial Cooperation

- (i) Islamic Finance as a viable alternative and one that complements the existing financial system.

8. Infrastructure Development

- (i) The estimated infrastructural demand of having a young population is USD\$8 trillion over the next ten years. East Asian countries and Malaysia could cooperate in this area.
- (ii) Malaysia will build an MRT system for greater KL and local expertise need to partner with East Asian companies such as Hitachi and Kawasaki.

9. Green technology

- (i) There is a strong will between countries to promote green technology – potential for both human resource development between experts and universities.

10. Cultural Exchange

- (i) Public Lectures on various cultural topics by East Asian experts and vice versa.
- (ii) Food Carnivals – celebrity chef exchange programmes
- (iii) Exhibitions – in mainstream galleries
- (iv) Film Festivals – grander introduction to the industry, and exchange of artists, directors, producers.
- (v) Cultural organisations to increase its presence

11. Expanding Exchange

- (i) Target segments of workers from different sectors – journalists, teachers, members of women organisations, civil society
- (ii) Increase youth exchange programmes, post-university work placements, cross-country internships

12. Technological Cooperation

- (i) Cooperation in areas such as renewable technology, biotechnology, nanotechnology and information and communications technology

13. East Asian News Media

- (i) With the CCTV being well accepted , perhaps starting an East Asian newspaper based in Malaysia might be an option to enhance people-to- people exchange

V. Conclusion

Malaysia's Look East Policy and the East Asian Wave have worked in tandem to enhance people-to-people exchange between Malaysia and East Asian countries. This policy remains very relevant and has not only contributed to the broadening of bilateral cooperation but has been vital in increasing regional cooperation. To take this policy further, there needs to be institutional structures that comprehensively monitor such exchange in order to develop it further. Greater understanding of cultural and social traditions contribute to better mutual understanding and play an important role in maintaining peace and stability in the wider region.

Sources

1. Alternative Airlines, Air Asia <http://www.alternativeairlines.com/air-asia>
2. Bower E.Z & Green M. J (2011) *US Japan-ASEAN Trilateral Strategic Dialogue*, Maui Hawaii Jan 5-78, 2011 Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Washington
3. China and Malaysia : A New Era of Rapport (2009) http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009malaysia/2009-06/02/content_7961842.htm
4. China – Malaysia Trade Ties, April 24, 2011 http://www.cncworld.tv/news/v_show/14372_China-Malaysia_trade_tie.shtml
5. Fumitaka, F (2007) *Malaysia-Japan Relations Under the Mahathir Administration: Case Studies of the “Look East” Policy and Japanese Investments in Malaysia*, Asian Survey, University of California <http://www.jstor.org/pss/10.1525/as.2007.47.3.505>
6. ISIS Focus: *Fifth East Asia Congress: Mapping the Second Decade of East Asian Community Building* October- December 2007
7. ISIS Focus: *24th Asia-Pacific Roundtable Part 1*, 7-9 June 2010, Japan External Trade Organisation <http://www.jetro.go.jp/malaysia/services/jpncoinmsia/>
8. Leong, S (2002) Session III “*Ways to Make Japan and ASEAN Socially and Culturally Closer*” Japan-ASEAN Dialogue by GFJ/ASEAN ISIS – Japan and ASEAN : Cooperation for Peace and Prosperity in the Asia-Pacific Region
9. Leong, S (2006) *China-Southeast Asia Relations and The Taiwan Issue. Malaysia-Taiwan Relations: Political Imperatives Prevailing*, Shanghai Institute for International Studies, China http://www.isis.org.my/attachments/377_SL_Malaysia_Taiwan_Relations.pdf
10. Lim, T.S (2009) *Renewing 35 Years of Malaysia-China Relations: Najib’s Visit to China*, EAI Background Brief no: 460 <http://www.eai.nus.edu.sg/BB460.pdf>
11. Malaysia-Republic Korea 50th Anniversary Scholars Colloquium (17-19 October 2010) ISIS Malaysia
12. Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan <http://www.mofa.go.jp>
13. *Shaping the G20 Agenda in Asia: The 2010 Seoul Summit* (2010) East West Dialogue, East West Centre
14. The Mahathir Years – Look East Policy <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/~teh20y/classweb/worldpolitics/LookEast.html>