

***Malaysian Foreign Policy in the Mahathir Era 1981–2003: Dilemmas of Development.* By Karminder Singh Dhillon. Singapore: NUS Press, 2009. Softcover: 300pp.**

This first full-length work on Malaysian foreign policy during Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's tenure is a welcome addition to the literature. Although there have been several shorter studies or articles addressing Mahathir's foreign policy by academics such as David Camroux, Joseph Liow and myself, the subject certainly deserves the sustained and in-depth analysis given by Dhillon which shows Mahathir's indisputable impact on the country's foreign relations in the twenty-two years he was at the helm.

Self-consciously theoretical, the book, which is derived from a doctoral thesis submitted to Boston University, takes a stab at the foreign policy literature and highlights "the idiosyncratic factor" as the main element underpinning Mahathir's foreign policy. Foreign policy is examined across seven major outputs and sixteen component policy initiatives, the seven outputs being: Buy British Last, Anti-Commonwealth, Look East, Third World Spokesmanship, Regional Engagement, Islamic Posturing and Commercial and Developmental Diplomacy. Adopting social science parlance, the author identifies the seven outputs and sixteen components as the dependent variables of the study. Chapters Two, Three and Four are then structured according to the three major independent variables, the idiosyncratic factor, the domestic factors and the external factors, while Chapters Five and Six discuss the foreign policy outputs mentioned above. Chapter Seven, which concludes the book, summarizes the author's overall theoretical findings.

It is refreshing that while being theoretical, Dhillon employs a minimum of jargon, writing in a fluent and engaging style, brimming with rich narratives supported by copious footnotes. It is obvious that the author has read practically all the literature on Mahathir along with scores of his speeches, the most important ones being cited in the bibliography.

Emphasizing the idiosyncratic factor, Dhillon tries to show how the premier's personality impacted on foreign policy under his watch. Mahathir's "plebian" background (being raised in the poor state of Kedah), his mixed ethnic roots (paternal grandfather hailing from Kerala), distinct ideological disposition and feisty leadership style are all presumed to have influenced his policies. Beyond this, by employing a comparative foreign policy approach, Dhillon also

gives the reader an analysis of how domestic contingencies and global developments combined with the premier's personality traits produced major shifts in terms of "direction, nature, substance, style and rhetoric" (p. 266) in Malaysian foreign policy, when compared with previous regimes. More interestingly, Dhillon is upfront with his critique of Mahathir's foreign policy, suggesting that the premier took "huge risks with his policies and relentlessly pushed initiatives that were not fully understood by the MFA [Ministry of Foreign Affairs]" (p. 272). Moreover, he avers, Mahathir's idiosyncratic foreign policy often did not quite square with national capacities and domestic realities. Worse, regime maintenance (or Mahathir's own political imperatives) often trumped the goals of national development. Dhillon suggests that this was particularly true of Mahathir's Islamic posturing, the Look East and Buy British Last policies, and even globalization policies, but less so with respect to commercial and developmental diplomacy.

One must commend the author for a well-documented critique of Mahathir's foreign policy which is usually absent in other foreign policy studies. Let me briefly take up the point about Islamic posturing to illustrate Dhillon's analysis. The Prime Minister was undoubtedly riding the tide of Islamic resurgence in the late 1970s, and deliberately introduced a host of Islamization policies from the 1980s aimed at disarming the United Malays National Organization's (UMNO) Islamist political opponent, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS). Islamic posturing often took the shape of strong words and actions *vis-à-vis* Islam's purported enemies: Israel, the Jews and sometimes the US and Europe. Palestine, the First Gulf War and Bosnia were particularly prominent concerns of Mahathir. But a more facile example of Islamic posturing was the 1994 ban on the film *Schindler's List* because it was alleged to be "Jewish propaganda". As related by Dhillon, earlier, in 1986, Mahathir banned the *Asian Wall Street Journal* for three months and expelled two of its journalists on the grounds that the paper was controlled by the "Jewish lobby" (p. 243). Yet, as Dhillon says, "the spark that ignited Mahathir's ire was the newspaper's reports alleging cronyism of Mahathir's ally and Finance Minister Daim" (p. 243). Mahathir's disingenuousness was exposed when PAS disclosed that UMNO had hired Saatchi and Saatchi, a company it alleged was owned by "Zionists", to handle UMNO's election campaign in 1986. Following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, when Islamism became sullied, Mahathir was quick to realign Malaysia's interest with the United States and allow for a disgraced lobbyist, Jack Abramoff, to press for an urgent

meeting with President George W. Bush. Dhillon suggests that while Islamic posturing served Mahathir's purpose of undercutting PAS and gaining acclaim as the global Islamic statesman, it was a policy that was not without risks since it allowed PAS to consistently call Mahathir's bluff.

At the end of the day, all of this goes to show that one can make too much of Mahathir's idiosyncrasy as a factor in foreign policy. When the chips are down, the dictates of power politics or domestic imperatives tend to determine a leader's actions. Dhillon's own analysis hints of this even though he has been more inclined to give greater play to the idiosyncratic factor as the major driver behind Mahathir's foreign policy. One could say, for example, that the need for regime maintenance and the national imperative of development may have determined how Mahathir had really fashioned his foreign policy in spite of his own proclivities. Furthermore, globalization and regionalism may have greatly influenced Malaysia's foreign policy in spite of Mahathir's own predilection for counter-hegemonic and anti-Western stances.

Malaysia's adherence to the "ASEAN Way" and other conservative foreign policy stances also stood in stark contrast to Mahathir's foreign policy activism. Yet Mahathir was not able to move ASEAN in the direction of his own preferences for East Asian integration, i.e. the East Asia Economic Caucus. Furthermore, Mahathir's iconoclasm faltered because of a hubris which did not accord with a domestic Malaysian reality or the aspirations of its civil society. My critique should by no means discourage anyone from turning away from this excellent work which, to my mind, is compulsory reading for those who wish to understand the political subtleties of Malaysia's foreign policy formulation during the Mahathir era.

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