

Malaysia at the United Nations: A Study of Foreign Policy Priorities, 1957–1987. Second Edition. By Rajmah Hussain. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 2010. Softcover: 294pp.

This well-researched book is a valuable addition to the growing corpus of studies on Malaysia's foreign policy. Hussain's focus is on Malaysia's involvement, policy positions and actions at the United Nations (UN) from 1957–87. This is a work which was originally submitted to the London School of Economics (LSE) as a Ph.D. thesis. The author went on to serve as Malaysia's Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the UN and related organizations in Geneva (2001–05) and in Vienna (2005–06). The book still bears the mark of her 1988 LSE thesis in that bibliographical references do not go beyond the year 1987. In one additional, concluding chapter the author pens further reflections on the subject but here again no new literature is cited.

After a competent summary of the first three decades of Malaysia's foreign policy, Hussain provides narratives on Malaysia's entry into the UN, its struggles during Indonesia's *Konfrontasi* and on Malaysia's decision-making process at the UN. While the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or Wisma Putra, is said to be at the centre of this process, the author notes that other agencies and the Prime Minister were often consulted for important decisions. The role of the public, and public interest groups, was minimal or non-existent but, overall, policy-making seems to have been an open and pluralistic process.

The author's main thesis lies in the significance and role of "group diplomacy" in Malaysia's pursuit and implementation of foreign policy objectives at the world body. Malaysia aligned itself with various Third World blocs, whose clout grew over time. Despite the absence of a detailed study of voting patterns, Hussain nonetheless provides us with a sharp overview of Malaysia's UN politics, policy orientations and policies in Chapter Seven. The groupings with which Malaysia was firmly associated were: the Commonwealth countries, Afro-Asian and non-aligned groupings, the Non-Aligned Movement (after 1970), the Group of 77, Islamic countries, ASEAN, "the Asian group" (author's phrase), and various bilateral alignments. However, the ranking of these groups in terms of Malaysia's priorities was as follows: ASEAN, Islamic countries, non-aligned countries and Commonwealth countries. The author concludes that "group diplomacy strengthens Malaysia's bargaining position *vis-à-vis* other countries in the organization" (p. 140).

In the next section of the book, Hussain examines in detail Malaysia's initiatives in six case studies, namely: (1) the Cambodian conflict; (2) the Palestine question; (3) primary commodities; (4) law of the sea; (5) Antarctica; and (6) illegal narcotics. Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia from 1978 to 1989 was a preoccupation of Malaysia and it toed the ASEAN line on this issue. In the author's view: "Malaysia had at times to subjugate the national position to the group position" (p. 172). In particular, Hussain cites the example of the Cambodian crisis on which Malaysia and Indonesia differed with the other ASEAN countries, prompting Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta to issue the Kuantan Declaration of 1980 articulating a policy of equidistance *vis-à-vis* Moscow and Beijing. On Palestine, the author admits that Malaysia had little real influence on decisions even at the UN, yet the issue provided it with ample opportunities to enhance its Muslim profile and to derive "diplomatic, religious and economic advantages" (p. 190).

Insofar as primary commodities are concerned, Malaysia was a putative leader. Its role in the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and in the tin and rubber agreements gets a thorough treatment, with the author concluding that Malaysia had to eventually move beyond the UN on these matters as the world body could not guarantee the success or effectiveness of commodity agreements. Malaysia's tin caper of 1981 — when the government intervened in the tin market in the guise of a "mystery buyer" — is cited as an example of such an action although that incident actually diminished Malaysia's erstwhile "unassailable reputation" (p. 210). If truth be told, the tin misadventure was a major financial disaster costing the country billions of ringgit, a point which the author could also have noted.

Malaysia's stances at the United Nations Conference the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) — which was concluded in 1982 — were decidedly "developing world" but it did not rely at all on its traditional groupings for negotiations. For example, ASEAN was split on the archipelagic issue. Hussain has documented well all of the issues concerning UNLCOS in Chapter Eleven. Despite its adherence to UNCLOS principles, Malaysia issued a map in 1979 on which it now bases all its claims to surrounding seas and features, which the author submits "remained to be resolved through diplomatic channels" (p. 228). In point of fact, some of these claims — Ligitan, Sipadan and Pulau Batu Puteh/Pedra Branca — have already been adjudicated at the International Court of Justice which the author does not discuss.

In Chapter Twelve, Hussain deals with Malaysia's 1982 Antarctica policy. Seen as a personal project of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, ASEAN gave only tepid support for Malaysia's call for the largest uninhabited continent to be "mankind's common heritage". Malaysia instead won the backing of the non-aligned group of countries. The author considers this to be a "diplomatic success". However, opening the debate on Antarctica at the UN in 1984 and 1985 led to no substantial change of policy. Another example of Malaysia's astute, if disingenuous, UN politicking is found on pages 254–55, where the author narrates how Mahathir was elected President of the International Conference of Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking (ICDAIT). Mahathir faced a challenge from the Bolivian candidate (supported by the Latin American states) but a compromise was worked out, along with the suggestion that US "arm-twisting" helped the Malaysian cause.

Rajmah Hussain's book on Malaysia's involvement, actions and policies at the UN is surely a necessary read for regional foreign policy practitioners. However, this reviewer is disappointed that the author has not adopted a more self-consciously critical approach to dissecting Malaysia's effectiveness at the world body. As opposed to largely providing the reader with a view that only shows *how* Malaysia pursued its interests at the UN, one would have liked to know *how well* Malaysia succeeded in actually achieving its own goals and those of the larger global community.