Integrity and Moral Values in Malaysia’s Foreign Policy

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OVERVIEW

More often than not, public debates on issues such as integrity, transparency and good governance tend to focus on the domestic policies of the government of the day, forgetting that such issues also apply in the conduct of our international affairs. No discussion has so far emerged on whether these elements are embedded in our foreign policy. Moral issues are important and morality governs the conduct of our daily lives. But if integrity, transparency and good governance are part of our domestic agenda, how are they translated in our foreign policy, given that foreign policy should rightly be a mirror of domestic conduct?

This paper addresses the question of integrity and moral values in the management of our international affairs. Since we tend to put so much emphasis on this subject domestically, do integrity and morality even have a place in our foreign policy? Have they ever been an element of consideration in Malaysia’s foreign policy?

Throughout this paper, integrity is being applied to mean the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles. Although there is a fine line of difference between integrity and morality, both are used here interchangeably. Extended to the international context, integrity is confined to upholding of moral, normative values in the arena of “low politics” of humanitarian assistance, development and economic well-being. This paper will not discuss integrity in the context of “high politics” of military intervention, of just or unjust wars or aggression since such conduct has never been a part of Malaysia’s foreign policy.

The essay will begin with a philosophical debate on the reality of decision-making in foreign policy and commence with an examination of the place of morality in international relations. It will review Malaysia’s foreign policy conducted over the past 49 years to examine if integrity and morality has ever been part and parcel of that foreign policy and will attempt to offer answers to the questions on moral judgments
and moral principles. The author is guided by a literature review on the subject of International Ethics, International Justice, Foreign Policy, National Interest and numerous essays on Moral issues in International Affairs.

A PHILOSOPHICAL DEBATE
National interest has always been the basis for which a government conducts its foreign policy. The survival of a government is a great deal dependent on how well it is able to gain the support of its citizens to keep it in power, often based on its promises of sufficient food, employment, health care and education. Logically, when a country engages with the outside world, the promotion of the collective national interest of its citizens takes first priority. In the interest of the public back home, governments engage with other governments with the hope of finding new markets for their goods, getting more revenue through investments and learning new technologies to enable their citizens to gain a competitive edge. The more sophisticated its citizens, the more is expected from the government, and issues like individual rights, freedom of expression and questions of morality become equally central to their needs.

But the equation becomes quite different when a government deals with another outside its political boundary. Once outside the national boundary, it is a different game altogether. Has morality a place in international relations? When we talk about international relations, we are talking about states. Even though states are made up of people, the state itself is not a living, breathing entity. It has no compassion, nor memory, nothing except the fulfillment of its own selfish purposes.

Events in history have shown that international relations is about the protection of a country's national interest in which selfishness, deceit, hypocrisy, exploitation, intervention and sometimes aggression, and genocide are common practices. Why do countries spy on one another, plunder the resources of the weak, or form like-minded alliances against another? Such practices, immoral as they sound, appear to be expected, if not outright accepted in international affairs because countries need to survive and governments need to remain in power. These actions are likened to the Darwinian definition of self determination as survival of the fittest (Darwin, 1859), even if fittest means most adept in the use of force. Domestic politics will always be the key determinants of a country's foreign policy.

The proponents of realism, the principal being Machiavelli (1975), argue that international relations must be viewed under the category of power and that the conduct of nations should be guided and judged exclusively by the amoral requirements of national interests. Realists claim that morality is irrelevant in the
conduct of international affairs. According to them, the most notable being Hans Morgenthau in his classic work, *Politics Among Nations*, international politics is best understood as an autonomous realm of power in which the actions of nations are neither motivated by ethical considerations nor subject to ethical judgment. According to Morgenthau (1959), he is not unaware of the existence and relevance of standards other than the political one but as a political realist, he cannot but subordinate these other standards to the political one. In the Hobbesian view (Aron, 1968), agreed upon by most realists, we need to abandon the use of moral language altogether when we speak in the international state of nature and confine ourselves to speaking the language of national interest. Only in that way can we more likely achieve sensible accommodations.

To a large extent, all governments are guilty of propagating a realist foreign policy. Otherwise, how could they remain in power? The events that followed September 11, 2001 provide a clear example of realism at its height. The United States’ war against terrorism in Afghanistan in October 2001 and the attack on Iraq in 2003 on the premise that the latter had weapons of mass destruction and was therefore capable of attacking the United States was a realist response. Even in the realm of international economics, the long and tedious negotiations at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to ensure that countries are not short-changed by another are realist in response. While the WTO is meant to liberalise trade, it has been used to impose conditions linking trade to human rights records, sustainable development and fair labour practices.

**MORAL CONSIDERATIONS IN FOREIGN POLICY**

A study of foreign policy particularly since the 1960s suggests a shift in foreign policy behaviour of states. Because newly independent countries were at that time just beginning to stand on their own feet, their relations with other countries did not involve issues of great substance as much as non-material factors like pride, honour and dignity. International incidents during those years such as the Vietnam War, famine, poverty and economic injustice brought moral issues into the forefront of the international agenda. The creation of UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development), the call for a New International Economic Order (United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution 3201, 1974) and the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement all centred on the argument that poor and marginalised countries needed to band together in order to be heard.

During the 1970s, fresh debates on moral issues such as human rights, refugees, the plight of the Palestinians, the rights of the child, and the role of women in development took centre stage in international discourses. International organisations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United
Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNCHR), International Labour Organisation (ILO), International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and hundreds of other agencies bloomed in response to the needs of the newly independent countries. In addition, when a government turned savagely against its own people, the international community justified humanitarian intervention as a moral response. Human rights violations have been accepted as justification for intervention and interference in the internal affairs of states. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has justified such interventions in the case of Cambodia during the regime of Pol Pot, in Bosnia, East Timor and recently in Darfur in West Sudan.

In fact, proponents of international justice like John Rawls (1972) take a step further to include within the scope of human rights the right to an adequate standard of living. In view of the increasing global distributive inequalities, many world society theorists question if citizens of relatively affluent countries have obligations founded on justice to share their wealth with the least fortunate countries. Charles Beitz (2004), in discussing the ethics of assistance contends that human rights are not just desirable goals but are morally necessary ones and international efforts to aid or promote reform are legitimate and may be morally required. In this aspect, human rights intervention may take the form of deploying funds and technology to the deprived states.

Peter Singer in his essay “Famine, Affluence and Morality” produced one of the strongest cases for cutting through the complexities of international relations theory in favour of a direct appeal for action. The strength of his argument is in its simplicity. Given an emerging famine in Bengal that could lead to suffering and the death of millions, Singer asked if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, are we morally obligated to act? Following that principle, Singer (1990) contends that we should not discriminate against someone merely because they are far away from us or we are far away from them.

Singer’s principle brings us closer to an event at home in the early morning after Christmas in 1996 when the interior Division of Keningau in the state of Sabah was hit by a strong cyclone that eroded the shores and swept away over a thousand riverine houses and left 400 people dead.1 Following the tragedy, which was beyond expectation for Malaysia as the state was supposed to be the “land below the wind,”

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1 See, Speech by The Honourable Datuk Raymond Tan, Minister of Community Development and Consumer Affairs, Sabah on the occasion of the handing over of disaster relief equipments from Japan, August 26, 1999.
Malaysians were overwhelmed that hundreds of heads of government and individuals from all over the world whom we did not know, conveyed their condolences and offered assistance to help the victims, without discriminating on political or geographical grounds and without attaching strings. Similarly, the United States did not close an eye to children who suffered from starvation in North Korea despite their strong ideological and political differences.

The adherence of moral values is reflected further in the text of the UN Millennium Declaration when Heads of State and Government gathered at the UN in New York in September (6–8), 2000. The meeting, held at the dawn of a new millennium reaffirmed states’ commitments and undertaking of responsibilities on various noble tasks including the following:

- To free fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanising conditions of extreme poverty, to which more than a billion of them are currently subjected;
- To address the special needs of the least developed countries, small island and land-locked developing countries and adopt a policy of duty-and quota-free access for essentially all their exports, improve market access, enhance Official Development Assistance (ODA) and increase flow of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) as well as transfers of technology;
- To implement the enhanced programme of debt relief for the heavily indebted poor countries and to grant more development assistance to reduce poverty;
- To reduce the proportion of people who suffer from hunger and who are unable to reach or to afford safe drinking water;
- To ensure that children have access to all levels of education;
- To promote gender equality and the empowerment of women;
- To reduce maternal mortality, reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS, the scourge of malaria and other major diseases and to improve the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers; and
- To ensure that children and all civilian populations who suffer disproportionately the consequences of natural disasters, genocide, armed conflicts and other humanitarian emergencies are given every assistance and protection, to enable them to resume normal life as soon as possible.

If all governments adhere to the call for duty and charity, to which their leaders have committed them, the world would be spared many of the societal ills related to hunger and poverty of the unfortunate and deprived millions. Unfortunately, there appears to be an erosion of generosity and self-sacrifice and the heightening of self-centredness
on the part of those who traditionally exhibited generosity. Today, only a handful of OECD donor countries (i.e., Denmark, Norway, Sweden and The Netherlands) have honoured the 1970 UN call to meet the quota of 0.7 per cent of their GNP for overseas aid (ODA). The average contribution from other OECD countries is 0.26 per cent of their GNP. Further (Global Futures Bulletin, 1999), corrupt regimes and human rights criteria are applied unevenly to serve the political and economic interests of some donor countries. Critiques of development assistance suggest that foreign aid has failed as a development policy because it destroys the incentives of the market place and extends the power of the ruling elites.

A deeper study of these financial flows to the needy countries might also reveal some disturbing facts. ODA that are in the form of grants, loans or technical support are more often than not, given with conditions. In most instances, aid is tied to the recipient countries having to engage consultants and contractors of the donors’ choice. This is understandable given their taxpayer’s expectations but it negates any pretense of selflessness on the part of the donor countries.

If this is not enough, many poor countries are at the mercy of the developed world when it comes to determining what kind of healthcare they can get. Official UN statistics show that an alarming number of people in Africa (25.3 million in Sub Sahara alone) suffer from HIV/AIDS. How far these figures are true is not certain, since it is a fact that very few people in Africa have been tested for HIV/AIDS. A sinister interpretation is that the panic and terror intentionally generated by the hype publicity campaign is a plot by the multinational pharmaceutical and petrochemical industry to sell expensive drugs at the expense of the poor governments in Africa. To a fast growing number of professional observers, it is increasingly obvious that AIDS is not caused by any virus, that it is not sexually transmitted and that it is not even contagious. Instead, AIDS is said to be a multi-factored syndrome caused by poisonous chemicals and drugs (Jerndal, 2002), particularly insecticides, pesticides, recreational drugs, viral and bacterial infections, malnutrition and prescription drugs of many kinds most particularly the extremely toxic chemotherapy routinely prescribed for AIDS and HIV infection.

Similarly, governments all over the world whether rich or poor have been bullied by non-state actors in the form of powerful drug companies, into purchasing numerous kinds of vaccines. Many new findings have shown that vaccines for whooping cough (pertussis) polio, measles, flu and tuberculosis are in fact the cause of many deaths and cause infants to suffer irreversible brain damage, paralysis and serious complications (Sinclair, 1993). While rich governments are quick to realise the dangers of these
vaccines—and in the case of the pertussis vaccine have made efforts to remove the mercury content that is causing brain damage to children, poor countries continue to take them, out of ignorance or because of irreversible decisions.

MORALITY IN THE CONDUCT OF MALAYSIA’S FOREIGN RELATIONS
Let us now turn to Malaysia and examine the extent to which we adhere to the principles of morality as we conduct the business of diplomacy with the international community. Many of our leaders have reinforced the view that Malaysia’s foreign policy is based on the need to protect, promote and defend our national interests. Although taken at face value this appears to sound Machiavellian, in practice Malaysia’s foreign policy is more Grotian in nature\(^2\) in that we subscribe to moderation, sympathy for others, common sense and charity. A review of our foreign policy since 1957 will reveal that our policy makers have been persistent in ensuring that communitarian interest and normative values form part of our national raison d’etre. At the international level, Malaysia has been a strong proponent of issues that have communitarian appeals. We have been concerned about poverty and the inequality in the distribution of wealth throughout the world and we believe that those who are less advantaged for reasons beyond their control morally cannot be asked to suffer the pains of inequality.

One important area in which Malaysia is an active proponent of moral values is the issue of human rights. Malaysia takes a holistic view of human rights. Our perception of human rights is molded by our own national values, customs and traditions as well as by our social fabric and economic system. We believe that these values are indivisible and independent. While the western human rights concept gives greater emphasis to the rights of the individual, Malaysia emphasises the importance of community rights over the individual. Thus, Malaysia contends that individual rights are best served when the community as a whole prospers. In addition, we will continue to stress that the right to development is a fundamental and inalienable human right.

Concerns about the environment, transboundary crimes such as trafficking of persons, drug trafficking and money laundering are also communitarian and normative in nature and Malaysia has been an active advocate at the regional and international levels. Malaysia has never failed to provide support to those who suffer from the consequences of natural disasters, armed conflict or other humanitarian emergencies.

\(^2\) Hugo Grotius, 1583–1645. The Dutch jurist set the foundation for modern international law with his famous work, *The Law of War and Peace.*
Over the years since independence, we have contributed in millions of ringgit to relief funds, notably the humanitarian assistance for the Bosnia Herzegovina reconstruction effort, Palestine, Afghanistan and the latest being Iraq.

Malaysia is involved in peace-keeping efforts in many troubled parts of the world. Its strong commitment towards the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter saw its involvement in the UN peacekeeping operations in Congo, Kuwait, Western Sahara, Mozambique, Angola, Bosnia Herzegovina, Somalia and Liberia. Such commitment is in tandem with Malaysia’s position on ensuring the manifestation of the principles of universal justice through the office of the United Nations.

Belief in international cooperation means having to accept multiple memberships in international groupings which may reflect separate strands in one’s foreign policy. The Non Aligned Movement (NAM) is important to many relatively weak countries because it has been a way to devalue power. But NAM has changed considerably over the years and has cut across new debates of the 1960s and 1970s. Until today it has become a good way to link internal and external needs of the member countries. Similarly, the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) is relevant to many Muslim countries as a way to bring the ‘Ummah’ together. As a country with a majority Muslim population, policy makers have been sensitive that the principles and values of Islam such as social justice, communal peace and individual dignity—which are in fact universal values—are also incorporated in our foreign policy considerations. It is for these internal and external factors that Malaysia advocates activism and leadership in these two organisations. Of importance is Malaysia’s leadership role in ASEAN. Prime Minister Dato’ Seri Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi has called (2004) for a universal acceptance that for ASEAN to make an impact in the world, community interests should prevail over national interests on issues affecting the overall community.\(^3\) Equally, at the bilateral level, we have unfailingly emphasised the strengthening and expansion of our relations with almost all countries in the world, in every area, regardless of their political and economic systems.

From being a donor-recipient country of the 1970s, Malaysia was transformed into becoming a progressive trading nation. This has enabled it to assist other developing countries since the early 1980s. Through its Malaysia Technical Cooperation Programme (MTCP), Malaysia has assisted over 10,000 participants from 135

\(^3\) Dato’ Seri Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi, Keynote Address by the Prime Minister at the National Colloquium of ASEAN, Shah Alam, 7 August, 2004.
developing countries, sharing development experience with them with a view to nurturing collective self-reliance; promoting multicultural understanding and international teamwork. While some may argue that Malaysia's South-South policy is aimed at exploiting the untapped potential of the South which could in turn offer vast opportunities for trade and investment and bring increased revenue to Malaysia, its advocates argue that South-South cooperation creates a win-win situation in which by sharing a portfolio of knowledge through capacity-building, these developing countries would be in a position to engage with dignity and on an equal footing with the rest of the world.

Do we need a moral code in the conduct of our foreign relations? History will judge us for the manner in which we conduct ourselves externally. Professor Jomo K. S. (2002) in his book *Ugly Malaysians* mentions cases of investment abuses by some of our logging companies and corporate investors abroad. However, these are exceptions rather than the rule and some manufacturing investors and state-owned enterprises—notably Petronas, have actually been welcomed and appreciated as an attractive, even superior alternative to other options in the world's oil and gas industry. Compared to many oil producing countries—particularly members of OPEC, Petronas' record of sharing the returns of its revenue to the citizens of its country through economic development, education and scholarships schemes, outreach programmes in areas of health, environment, arts and culture and sports development are outstanding and exemplary.

National geocentricism will continue to be powerful drives in inter states relations. Malaysia, like any other state will undoubtedly have to make choices about when to put pure self interest above all others. It is not the case of one or the other all the time and in some situations there is no choice and the way is obvious. But so far Malaysia is fortunate that it places so much importance in advocating a foreign policy that centres on propagating a good national image and integrity in the conduct of its international affairs. The concept of integrity is crucial because without it there would be no notion of self or self-respect. It is because of these elements we find so central in our foreign policy that we believe Malaysia will stand a good chance of finding a deserving place in the international community.
REFERENCES


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