In the 1980s and 1990s, Malaysia expanded its diplomacy – as well as political, economic, sociocultural and defence engagement – to many parts of the globe, putting itself on the world map. It established connections with Africa, Central Asia and Latin America and reinforced relations with China, Japan, the Middle East and Europe. While relations with other countries generated much interest among the public and in scholarly circles, Europe attracted less. It is not that relations between Malaysia and Europe degenerated or became unimportant. On the contrary, statistics showed that activities involving the two entities flourished, albeit quietly. This lack of excitement about Malaysia–Europe relations both stems from and reflects both internal and external developments affecting Malaysia and Europe.

The destructive World War II and the decolonisation that followed weakened Europe’s position in world affairs and its linkages to former colonies, especially in Southeast Asia. The advent of the Cold War almost eclipsed any European presence as a result of the overwhelming influence and interests of the United States in the region. Throughout the Cold War period, the main focus of international relations in Southeast Asia was on the United States and China. Among the European powers, only Britain managed to retain its influence, owing both to its close and special relations with the United States and to the manner in which Britain managed the decolonisation of its colonies in the region. Thus, despite the long history of European countries such as France, Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands in Southeast Asia, the period was one of quiet diplomacy for Europe in the region.

In Malaysia specifically, relations with Europe during the Cold War era focused mainly on developing and consolidating political and economic relations with countries considered as traditional friends. The post-Cold War era, on the other hand, saw efforts to strengthen and expand the relationship in all domains. When he came to power in 1981, Malaysia’s fourth prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, re-prioritised Malaysia’s foreign policy, with positive impacts for relations with Europe. Although many saw this re-ordering of priorities as a ‘downgrading of relations’ with the West, it did not necessarily lead to reduction or neglect of already close political and economic ties with Europe. Rather, it entailed refocusing on areas considered to be most beneficial to Malaysia in its relations with Europe, mainly in the area of economics. At the same time, this recalibration created the potential for forging closer social and cultural ties.
Contemporary Malaysia–Europe relations

Connecting with the past

Malaysia and Europe are no strangers to each other. Contacts between the two regions for centuries have encompassed political, economic, social and cultural aspects. In the past, the Portuguese, Dutch, French and British ventured into Malaysia. The first Europeans to establish a foothold in the country were the Portuguese, who conquered the Malay kingdom of Malacca in 1511 and retained control until being ousted by the Dutch in 1641. In the fifteenth century, Malacca rose to become, in the words of Portuguese apothecary-turned-ambassador Tomé Pires, ‘of such importance and profit that it seems to me it has no equal in the world’ (Andaya and Andaya 1982: 38). Its importance as a trading post attracted European powers, who jostled for control of Malacca.

The Dutch arrived in Malacca in 1641, making the city the chief outpost of the Dutch East India Company, from which information-gathering missions were dispatched to the various Malay kingdoms. The Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 transferred Malacca to the British, marking the beginning of the division of the Malay–Indonesian archipelago into two distinct areas of influence, one under Dutch and the other under British control. The rest of Southeast Asia, too, became divided among European powers. The French took control of Indochina, the Spanish controlled the Philippines, and Portugal retained control over East Timor until 1975.

Continuing close relations with Britain

When Malaya achieved independence from Britain in 1957, the political and security environment in Southeast Asia was dominated by the Cold War and East–West conflict. Considerations of both external and internal politics and security at that time forced Malaysia under its first prime minister to opt for a pro-West and an anti-communist foreign policy. As Europe was divided into East and West, so were Malaysia’s options. Besides Britain, Malaysia also established close relations with other Western European countries, such as France, Germany, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries. Ideologically and politically, Malaysia saw itself as a part of the ‘free world’, allied with the West against the communist world. Besides this close political and ideological association with Western Europe, the Malaysian economy depended to a large extent on trade with these countries.

Malaysia’s option to ally itself with the West and to maintain an anti-communist foreign policy can also be explained through an important domestic factor. Since the end of World War II, Malaysia had been engaged in fighting a communist insurgency; the conflict lasted until 1989, when a peace treaty was signed between the government of Malaysia and the Communist Party of Malaya. The communist threat was an important factor shaping Malaysia’s foreign policy before 1970. Its anti-communist stance, explained Malaysia’s first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, was ‘simply to protect our independence’ (Abdullah 1985: 26). Malaysia relied on Britain to help deal with these security threats. Malaysia and Britain were members of the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement (AMDA), expanded in 1970 to the Five Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA), including also Australia, New Zealand and Singapore. Not only long-standing historical relations, but also the security and economic imperatives of this period made Malaysia ‘conspicuously pro–Britain and pro–Commonwealth’ (Abdullah 1985: 28). The British stronghold in Malaysia left little chance for other European countries to penetrate the country, nor did Malaysia have a need to push, or interest in pushing, for stronger ties with other European countries, especially given the presence in the region of the United States, a close friend and ally of Britain.
In 1970, Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman stepped down and was succeeded by Tun Abdul Razak Hussein. The second prime minister reoriented Malaysia’s foreign policy towards non-alignment. Several reasons accounted for this change. One was Indonesian Konfrontasi from 1963 to 1966, contesting the joining of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak in the Federation of Malaysia. Indonesia’s President Sukarno also went on a political offensive against Malaysia among the non-aligned countries, declaring that Malaysia was a creation of British and American imperialism. Given Indonesia’s stature and influence among the Third World countries at that time, it was able to sway these countries to its side. By 1970, too, Malaysia found it necessary to reduce its political tutelage and security dependency on Britain. Britain had announced its intention to withdraw ‘from the East of Suez’ by the 1970s. A foreign policy of non-alignment would enable Malaysia to broaden its external relations, maintain friendly relations with as many countries as possible, and acquire the support and confidence of others. One of the most significant steps in this direction was Malaysia’s recognition of the People’s Republic of China in 1974 and consolidation of relations with Eastern Europe. This foreign policy shift under Tun Razak became a lasting foundation for the balanced foreign policy followed by his successors (Ruhanas 2011: 33).

Yet, other factors help explain the strong attachment that Malaysia still has in its relations with Britain. One of the most significant is the peaceful manner in which Malaysia gained independence from Britain, which precluded the phenomenon of elite resentment towards the colonial master found in many Third World countries. Both British and Malaysian elites found it expedient to accommodate each other, which helped to avoid violent conflicts. Moreover, the particular character of Malayan foreign policy arguably reflects an elite ideology already predisposed towards certain values and norms. These values and norms were embedded in a conservatively biased elite, marked by a strong predilection for Western democratic practices, as well as for pragmatism, as nurtured in multicultural discourses and practices (Saravanamuttu 2010: 71). Britain also became intimately involved in Malaysia’s difficult political experiences with its neighbours, such as during the Malaysia–Singapore split. Malaysia’s then prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, confided to the British that he could no longer tolerate the ‘cat and dog’ relationship between Malaya and Singapore and thought that it would be better for Singapore to leave the Federation (Ruhanas 2011: 33).

Britain may have left the country, but its economic, social and cultural influences remain, giving it a privileged position in its bilateral relations with Malaysia (Ruhanas 2011). Although the British hold on the Malaysian economy is no longer what it used to be, Britain remains an important trading partner of Malaysia, adding value to a close relationship forged out of a long connection. Malaysia’s fourth prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, made efforts to address what he saw as an unfair bias, to the advantage of the UK, in economic links between the two countries (Jeshurun 2007: 184). Observers suggested Mahathir was ‘not very well disposed toward Britain’ since ‘he had no fond memories of having studied there, and he was opposed to Britain as a colonial power’ (Milne and Mauzy 1999: 139). Yet despite British resentment over the take-over of British plantation enterprise, Guthrie Malaysia, by Malaysia’s Permodalan Nasional Berhad (National Equity Cooperation), the ‘Buy British Last’ policy, and a sharp exchange of words between Mahathir and the British press (Milne and Mauzy 1999: 139), economic relations between the two countries continued to grow. British companies, some with a long history in Malaysia, such as HSBC, Standard Chartered, Shell and many others, are major players in the local market. According to the Malaysian External Trade Development Corporation, in 2009, the UK was the third most important export market for Malaysia in the European Union. According to Britain’s high commissioner in Malaysia, the state of trade between Malaysia and the UK is ‘pretty healthy’ and there are no
specific trade issues that could derail the good relations between the two countries (Ruhanas 2011: 38).

Besides close economic links, Malaysia and Britain enjoy strong cultural, educational and social ties. Traditionally, Malaysians look to Britain as a source of overseas education. Over the years, thousands of Malaysians have graduated from British universities, bringing back with them not only degrees, but also memories of and fondness for Britain. This affinity is evidenced, for example, in the widespread use of the English language, which remains the de facto language of economics, social standing and political power. Recent estimates count more than 11,500 Malaysian students in the UK, making them Britain’s fourth-largest group among non-EU students (Ruhanas 2011). Many British educational institutions operate in Malaysia, too, including Nottingham University and the Newcastle Medical School of Malaysia. Others are expected to announce branch campuses in the country in the next few years. Reflecting close Malaysia–Britain social relations, too, are frequent official and private visits of leaders to Britain, as well as rising numbers of British tourists to Malaysia.

The legacy of colonial ties, national security needs and familiarity with each other are some of the most important factors shaping and influencing Malaysia’s strong relations with the UK. The lack of cultural barriers and continued expectation of mutual economic and political benefits will likely continue to strengthen the relationship (Ruhanas 2011). Still, as former Prime Minister Mahathir demonstrated, a policy of diversification in Malaysia’s foreign relations serves to safeguard national independence and interests. It is in this direction that Mahathir moved, in building stronger relations with other European countries that can respond to Malaysia’s evolving national interests.

Europe: more than Britain

Malaysia’s relations with the rest of Europe are necessarily less complex than with Britain. Malaysia established relations with major Western European countries soon after gaining independence in 1957. In general, political relations with these countries have been consistently good, without many issues to mar them. Since 1970, Malaysia has made efforts to establish and consolidate relations with the countries of Eastern Europe, too, even though they were still under communist rule at that date. By the 1980s, and in line with a new foreign policy direction under Mahathir, Malaysia–Europe relations saw an expansion of scope and political will to venture beyond traditional partners (Ruhanas 2011: 38).

Opportunities and challenges in Malaysia–France relations

France presents a key example of a European power on par with Britain in terms of global political influence and cultural prestige, yet with no historical baggage attached to Malaysia. During his tenure as prime minister, Mahathir made efforts to develop strong relations with France in economic, political and socio-cultural domains. Besides having particular potential to counterbalance the overwhelming British influence that so disturbed Mahathir, given centuries of British–French rivalry in world affairs, cultivating close relations with France also provided Malaysia with an opportunity to expand and diversify its economic partnerships and cultivate a more independent foreign policy stance.

Malaysia established diplomatic relations with France upon independence in 1957, although its first ambassador arrived in Paris only in 1959. Few issues have disrupted the Malaysia–France relationship since (Ruhanas 2011: 34). One of these issues was French nuclear testing.
in the Pacific in 1995: Malaysia and some twenty-one other countries sponsored a draft resolution at the UN condemning the nuclear testing. This action resulted in a cool period in their relations. In general, though, Malaysia–France relations initially lacked visibility. Apart from the fact that Malaysia tended toward the Anglo-American sphere of influence, France’s presence in Southeast Asia diminished after it left Indochina in 1954. Developments in Europe during this period also forced France to focus its attention on that region, where it was a major actor. Owing to different domestic and foreign policy priorities, prior to the 1990s, Malaysia and France did not represent high-value allies for each other strategically, politically, economically or culturally. As such, there seemed no urgency to push for a stronger relationship. As the French appropriately summed it up, Franco–Malaysian relations suffered from a reciprocal lack of knowledge about each other (Ruhanas 2011: 34).

Initiatives towards closer Malaysia–France relations developed during Mahathir’s tenure as prime minister. The close political and economic relations that ensued were the result partly of the good personal relations between Mahathir and the French President Jacques Chirac, and partly of a convergence of views on international issues. As a major power, France has been known to strive to safeguard its independence and sense of mission in world affairs. It has sought to balance the overwhelming influence of the United States in European and world affairs and, at the same time, to project an image as a protector to Third World countries. Malaysia under Mahathir had a similar vision of its role in international relations. Mahathir assumed the voice of the Third World, championing the rights of the weaker nations. Points of convergence in the Malaysian and French positions on international issues can be seen in their attitudes towards the crisis in Iraq and the Palestinian question and in their uneasiness – sometimes even defiance – towards American behaviour in world affairs. Mahathir’s close personal relationship with Chirac is apparent in the close contact they maintained. Not only was Mahathir present at symbolically important Bastille Day celebrations in Paris in 1997, but between September 2002 and July 2003, for example, the pair met five times, although sometimes briefly (Ruhanas 2011: 35).

The two countries also developed closer relations in the area of defence. The French have shown a great deal of interest in defence cooperation, especially with the Royal Malaysian Navy and the Royal Malaysian Air Force. France has also participated regularly in the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace (LIMA) Exhibition since the mid-1990s. Since 2000, there has been a sharp increase in the quality of military relations between the two countries, especially in the exchange of officers and experts, cooperation in training and more frequent calls by vessels of the French navy to Malaysia. French industry has responded well, establishing cooperation with Malaysian partners in the military industry. For example, the French naval shipbuilding company DNC, which designs, tests and maintains various kinds of warship, has been active in Malaysia. Perhaps the height of these burgeoning defence relations was Malaysia’s purchase of two Scorpene submarines from France (which generated much public interest because of the sensationalist controversy surrounding the purchase). Defence purchases have contributed substantially to bilateral trade between Malaysia and France. According to French Embassy sources in Kuala Lumpur, in 2012, the bilateral balance of trade was in favour of France due to the large number of aircraft purchases from France by the Malaysian armed forces. Indeed, the area of defence cooperation and business has become a major highlight of Malaysia–France relations in recent years, amplified by high-level visits from France to Malaysia – for instance, French Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault’s July 2013 visit included discussions with the Malaysian government regarding future defence procurements – and active consultations through a Malaysia–France bilateral defence working committee.
The increase in trade and economic interactions between the two countries has not been confined to defence purchases, however. In a statement released recently, the French Ambassador in Malaysia, Martine Dorance, said that trade between Malaysia and France is expected to increase further, with more French companies expected to set up business in Malaysia, including in the Iskandar Malaysia Economic Region in the Malaysian state of Johor. There have also been encouraging developments in cooperation in the fields of education and culture. Although educational cooperation is not new in Malaysia–France relations – the French government has provided grants and scholarships to Malaysian students to study in France since the 1960s – the 1990s saw an uptick, especially in the science and technical fields. It is estimated that as of 2013, one thousand Malaysian students were studying in French institutes of higher learning, in various fields.

Awareness of these mutual interests, and of opportunities to cooperate further, remains limited, however. Moreover, relations in areas other than defence and military procurements have not flourished as hoped and expected, for several reasons. First and foremost, defence relations are limited in scope, as they involve only a select group of people and do not favour people-to-people diplomacy. Strong defence relations must thus be complemented with connections in other areas for the alliance to thrive.

Economic priorities

Emphasising economics as the ‘bread and butter’ of Malaysia’s diplomacy, Prime Minister Mahathir took advantage of growing economic relations between Malaysia and several European countries to further strengthen their relations. Malaysia’s ties with Germany exemplify this thrust. The two countries have developed active economic, trade and educational linkages, not least because of Germany’s reputation as a European and global economic powerhouse. Malaysia and Germany have a long history of close economic ties. Malaysia (along with Singapore) has for many years been one of Germany’s leading suppliers and the second-largest market for German goods. Trade in the year 2004, for instance, amounted to €6.9 billion, an increase of 1.5 percent from the previous year. Another visible area of economic relations is German investment in Malaysia. With more than 300 German companies with offices in Malaysia, and over seventy operating production plants, German investment has created more than 30,000 jobs. For a period of five years, between 2000 and 2005, Germany ranked as the second-largest foreign investor in Malaysia. The main focus of Malaysia–Germany economic relations has been in the area of electro-technical products, office and other machinery, motor vehicles and hardware. Besides direct economic exchanges, Malaysia has also benefited from German vocational and technical cooperation programmes. One such example is the contribution of GTZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit), which provided assistance in reorganising vocational and technical education in Malaysia along the lines of the German system. The flagship project in this area is the German–Malaysian Institute (GMI) in Kuala Lumpur, which began as a GTZ project in 1992 (Ruhanas 2011).

Despite efforts of NGOs from both countries since the 1990s to develop stronger socio-cultural ties between Malaysia and Germany, the results have not been encouraging, in terms of creating greater public awareness about each other. German foundations such as the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation have been active in organising seminars and workshops on socio-cultural and political issues in Malaysia, working closely with local institutions. Their activities seem to have declined, however, despite hopes that the visit of then Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder to Malaysia in May 2003, the first ever by a
German chancellor, could inject new momentum toward fostering stronger cultural and social relations between Malaysia and Germany. Still, the countries maintain good political and beneficial economic relations.

**Strengthening relations through regional cooperation**

In Southeast Asia, the end of the Cold War helped speed up the process of regionalism, as seen in ASEAN’s expansion from six countries to ten. Vietnam joined the Association in 1995, followed by Laos and Myanmar in 1997 and Cambodia in 1998. By the end of the 1990s, ASEAN was able to unite all the countries of Southeast Asia, as envisaged by its founding fathers in 1967. An expanded and consolidated ASEAN provided greater opportunities to enhance relations between the region and Europe, especially in economic areas. Europe was accepted as an ASEAN dialogue partner through the ASEAN–Europe Meeting (ASEM) created in 1995. Previously, Europe and ASEAN had engaged via the Special Coordination Committee of ASEAN when the first European Economic Community (EEC)–ASEAN ministerial meetings were held in Brussels in 1978. The second EEC–ASEAN ministerial meeting, held in Kuala Lumpur in March 1980, established a framework for closer economic and trade relations between the two regional groupings. It focused on the promotion of trade, investment and business, including small and medium enterprises. Both parties have since held regular meetings, with the aim of expanding ASEAN–EU dialogue.

Despite the Asian financial crisis of 1998, European business and economic interests remained in the region. The EU remained one of Malaysia’s top trading partners, behind China and the United States. Within ASEAN, Malaysia is the EU’s second-largest trading partner, after Singapore. Economic relations between Malaysia and the EU continued to improve with the establishment of the EU–Malaysian Chamber of Commerce in early 2003 and further negotiations. In the view of the EU, however, opportunities remain, especially in trade in services, as Malaysia has increasingly liberalised its economy and trade.

Besides facilitating economic relations, regionalism has also brought ASEAN and EU leaders into regular political interaction. During ASEM meetings, ASEAN and EU leaders take the opportunity to hold bilateral talks and discussions on the sidelines, a tradition born out of these formal gatherings. Examples include the bilateral talks between Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, held during the ASEM Summit in Hanoi, in September 2004. Abdullah and Merkel held another such meeting in Helsinki in September 2006, during the ASEM Summit. The EU has been present on the ground in Malaysia, too, with the establishment of its office in Kuala Lumpur. Although its main interest is developing and facilitating economic interactions between its members and Malaysia, the EU office has extended its activities to include connecting with the public through engagements with civil society groups, professionals and academic circles via cultural and socio-political discussions, to generate better mutual understanding.

**Opportunities in Eastern Europe**

Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, Malaysia did not neglect communist Eastern Europe, despite the differences in their political systems and ideologies. The USSR was the first communist power to be recognised by Malaysia, with the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1968. Despite being clearly in the ‘free world’ camp, Malaysia did not want to exclude either superpower from its list of friends. Politically, this was useful in balancing the might of the West and the fear of
China that dominated the security thinking of many Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia. Diplomatic relations with Moscow also contributed to the ‘rehabilitation’ among socialist and non-aligned countries of the image of Malaysia, which had been dented as a result of the confrontation with Indonesia and Malaysia’s overall pro-West, anti-communist foreign policy under its first prime minister. Economically too, Malaysia was looking for opportunities to diversify and expand economic relations and for markets for Malaysia’s export commodities, previously monopolised by Western countries.

This move by Malaysia was considered as ‘bold’ for the time and raised concern among many of its friends, including the United States. But Tun Razak Hussein, the Malaysian prime minister who reoriented Malaysia’s foreign policy towards non-alignment and who was responsible for developing relations with communist countries of Eastern Europe and with China, was quick to reassure them that the aim was economic and not political. To further allay fears among the major powers of external involvement in Southeast Asia, Malaysia proposed a Southeast Asian Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) in 1971. Tun Razak made a visit to Moscow to explain the concept of ZOPFAN in relation to Southeast Asian security. Mahathir later emphasised this idea again, when he visited Moscow in 1987. Over time, the political relations between Malaysia and the USSR first established during the administration of Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, Malaysia’s first prime minister, were enhanced under Tun Razak and further refined during the tenure of Mahathir.

**Challenges and opportunities of enhancing ties with Eastern Europe**

Although ideologically different, Malaysia and Eastern Europe attempted to bridge the gap by exploring ways to take advantage of opportunities in other areas within the limited political confines of the Cold War era. This was especially so with the Soviet Union. The two countries agreed to promote cultural ties through the exchange of radio and television programmes, artists and museum artefacts, and in the educational field. Collaboration grew at a slow pace, however, owing not least to unfamiliarity about each other, reinforced by the geographical distance that separates the two countries and peoples. Malaysia and the USSR also differed in opinions on many international issues. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 was opposed by many countries, including Malaysia. Malaysia was also concerned about Soviet intentions in Indochina and the Indian Ocean. It was not until the end of the Cold War that Malaysia and Russia found new opportunities to expand and consolidate their relations in many aspects, including developing greater political, economic, social and defence ties.

While there is potential to strengthen relations between Malaysia and Russia, there are also numerous challenges. Russia is still a far-away country, whose society and culture seem almost alien to many in Malaysia. Because of distance, though, the two countries are spared the neighbourly disputes or disagreements traditionally associated with neighbours in close geographical proximity, which could provide for greater opportunities for unhindered development of political, socio-cultural, educational and economic ties. The countries have developed close cooperation in defence matters, particularly in defence purchases. Russian arms sales to Malaysia began in the 1990s, when it obtained a contract to supply eighteen MiG-29 aircraft to the Malaysian Armed Forces. In 2003, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Malaysia in conjunction with the latter’s purchase of Russian jets worth US$600 million. Malaysia and Russia have also pursued increasing cooperation in the field of science and technology. In 2007, they started talks regarding collaboration on the training of Malaysian astronauts. Moreover, many Malaysian students now look to Russia to study, especially in the field of medicine.
The end of the Cold War and subsequent political, economic and social developments in Europe have provided increased opportunities for Malaysia and the countries of Eastern Europe to look for common ground and interests in expanding their relations. The new environment in Europe has also provided an opportunity for Malaysia to contribute towards the region’s security and political stability, through multilateral cooperation. The conflict in the former Yugoslavia highlighted yet another dimension in Malaysia’s foreign relations: its commitment to peace.

Enhancing relations through commitment to peace and stability

Malaysia has a long history of participation in the United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKO). Its first such involvement was in the Congo in 1960. After a long lull, Malaysia became active again with the coming to power in 1981 of Mahathir Mohamad, whose active international diplomacy included contributions to the UNPKO. Since the 1980s, Malaysia has been involved in peacekeeping operations under the UN in several countries, including Angola, Cambodia, Lebanon, Somalia, Timor Leste and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Its participation in the UNPKO was motivated by its commitment to international peace and to the principle of justice enshrined in Malaysia’s foreign policy.

Malaysia expressed its wish to join the United Nations Protection Forces (UNPROFOR) in the former republic of Yugoslavia in February 1992 and was accepted by the UN in February 1993. Malaysia’s participation in the peacekeeping operations in former Yugoslavia included the sending of three battalions under the UNPKO and two contingents under NATO, which received a mandate to protect Bosnia-Herzegovina after the Dayton Agreement of November 1995. Malaysia’s participation in these missions was the first of its kind for the Malaysian armed forces in Europe (Ruhanas 2011). The Malaysian forces involved included the Royal Malay Regiment, the Special Forces and the Royal Armour. Their tasks included building roads, schools and houses, and providing medical aid. In addition, the Malaysian battalions were given the task of mediating among groups such as the Muslim Bosnian forces and the Croatian forces.

As Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad explained in a speech at the Commonwealth Heads of States Meeting in Cyprus in October 1993, what motivated Malaysia’s involvement in the peacekeeping operations in Bosnia was its concern about the lack of attention by the international community to violations of human rights in the war-torn country. Prior to this, in May 1992, Malaysia had recognised Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia as independent, and established diplomatic relations with these nations. Consequently, Bosnia-Herzegovina established an embassy in Kuala Lumpur in March 1994. As an indication of its concern about the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Malaysia also called on the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in 1995 to step up measures to help that newly independent European country. Malaysia’s participation in the peacekeeping mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina exposed Malaysians to the complexities of the political, economic and social situation in a part of Europe relatively unknown to them before. At the same time, it succeeded in creating awareness among the countries of Central Europe about Malaysia and opened prospects for further interaction between the two areas (Ruhanas 2011).

Even if by now forgotten by many, Malaysia’s participation in peacekeeping operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina helped to develop people-to-people diplomacy between Malaysians and Bosnians. Besides facilitating the work of Malaysian NGOs such as ABIM (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement) in humanitarian assistance to Bosnians, Malaysian participation in the UNPKO helped familiarise Malaysians and Bosnians with
each other in a relatively short period of time. As a result, several educational and public institutions in Malaysia came to receive Bosnian students, especially the International Islamic University of Malaysia. Since the 1990s, too, the Malaysian Armed Forces Staff College at the Ministry of Defence in Kuala Lumpur has been accepting a Bosnian officer to be trained there each year.

These efforts aside, in general, the potential to expand relations between Malaysia and Eastern Europe in most areas is yet to be tapped. But at least the political and psychological barriers that once kept Malaysia and Eastern Europe apart have been removed, making it easier now to maximise opportunities to develop relations.

Conclusion

Malaysia’s relations with Europe have focused mainly on Western Europe, particularly with Britain. This bias was shaped by history, and political and post–World War II security developments. Malaysia’s close relationship with Britain in many domains was conditioned and shaped by British colonial rule in the country from the nineteenth century until its independence in 1957. The regional political and security environments contributed greatly to Malaysia’s maintaining this close relationship for an extended period. The end of the Cold War ushered in new priorities and opportunities for Malaysia’s foreign policy, however, which resulted in more conscious efforts to expand relations with Europe beyond the United Kingdom and to balance the overwhelming Anglo-American presence in the country. Relations with several major countries of Europe, such as France and Germany, considered as ‘traditional’ friends of Malaysia, have been strengthened. Since the 1990s, relations with France especially have been greatly enhanced, encompassing political, economic, educational and defence matters.

In recent years, however, issues of contention have arisen that could put a dent in efforts to cultivate friendship and understanding between peoples in Europe and others, especially Muslims. A trend of concern is the ‘Islamophobia’ that seemed to be on the rise after the events of 11 September 2001 in the United States. Besides that trend, other issues relating to the cultural integration of minorities in Europe have created uneasiness in Malaysia, where the majority of the population is Muslim. Nevertheless, this tension has not weakened the strong political and economic relations that have been established between Malaysia and Europe, based on mutual interests. These relations are expected to increase further, given the globalisation, accessibility and greater openness so characteristic of international relations today.

Notes

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