Malaysia is going to celebrate its 50th anniversary of independence on August 31 this year. After gaining its independence from Britain in 1957, Malaysia has changed rapidly from a well-known major producer of tin, rubber and palm oil – these three commodities, along with other raw materials, helped Malaysia’s economic development in the mid-20th century – to a 21st-century high-technology manufacturing country. Today, 82% of Malaysia’s exports, which total almost $100 billion, are made up of manufactured goods.

In the 1970s, Malaysia began to emulate the Asian Tigers and committed itself to transforming itself from a country reliant on mining and agriculture to an economy that depends more on manufacturing. With Japanese investment, heavy industries flourished, and in a matter of years, Malaysian manufactured exports became the country’s primary growth engine. Malaysia consistently achieved more than 7% GDP growth along with low inflation in the 1980s and 1990s.

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Malaysia-Japan Relations after 25 Years of “Look East Policy”

By Saiful Bahari Ahmad

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theory or principle or formula. If one did so, one would become unable to look at the reality objectively, unable to modify or change or discard one’s approach to the problem even if it did not work. One must be pragmatic. What is important is result. One should not be like such medical doctors who proudly claim that the operation was successful, but the patient had died.” It is clear from this that the Malaysian success in overcoming the Asian financial crisis was because the leaders were completely open-minded about the new situation and demonstrated their abilities to work out their policies on the basis of reality, not on the basis of the precedents in the past – policy-making according to the reality and policy execution also based on the reality.

This seems to be something many sections of the Japanese government sector have forgotten. When it comes to the question of the government’s roles in the national economy and society, Japan has a lot to learn from Malaysia instead of the other way around.

Over a 25-year period, the number of Malaysian students who had come to Japan to study has passed 2,200. Japanese companies employed more than 85 % of the graduates. The result shows that they seem to have succeeded in developing such qualities as discipline and diligence, and they came to understand the advantages of the Japanese management system, which concentrates on long-term achievement. They also succeeded in developing a human network that is useful for entrepreneurs.

Malaysia’s current Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has pledged to continue the Look East Policy under his new government without any change, showing Malaysia’s deepening trust toward Japan even after a quarter century!

Japanese Society: A Model

Meanwhile for Japan, the economic miracle that Japan once accomplished prior to the 1980s has virtually faded. But it is important to note that for all its economic woes Japan still accounts for 60% of Asia’s economy and remains the second largest in the world. Beyond economic analyses and statistics, Japan still has a lot to offer not only to Malaysia but also to the world.

Social harmony in Japan is still strong and virtually unmatched anywhere else in the world. The crime rate is still one of the lowest on earth; Japan is an incredibly safe country. Public transport is efficient, convenient and modern. Public hygiene is impeccable; public toilets are always well maintained and clean. Public accountability is high; trust is still regarded as sacred. Japanese technology is among the most advanced in the world.

Japanese society is also a highly organized society at every level. Community cooperation is still solid. Education and scholarship are still highly revered. The educational needs of every layer of society are addressed by the community and the government. The number of universities, colleges and research institutes in Japan is also very large. The number of people with tertiary qualifications in practically every technological, scientific and academic field exceeds 700,000. Japan is the only country in Asia which has more than 10 Nobel Prize winners in fields from science to literature and peace.

And this was the “model” that Mahathir had in mind when the Look East Policy was introduced 25 years ago. This model remains valid today as it has been legitimate for the past quarter century binding the two countries – Malaysia and Japan – and the world. Even entering the 50th year in celebrating its independence there are still lots of things to learn from Japan through this policy with a new approach of globalization and smart partnership.

Look East Policy: Catalyst for Regional Cooperation

In his video message during the East Asia Senior Leaders’ Forum on March 31 in Fukuoka, Mahathir said that with the emergence of India, China, Japan and South Korea, “we feel that East Asia will become very powerful economically and together with Southeast Asia, of course we will become a very powerful force. And this force should not be interpreted militarily – it should be interpreted as a counterbalance to the European and US powers.” In his message, he emphasized the importance of regional cooperation following the Eastern basic mentality to respect other culture.

As he said, the Look East Policy should also serve as a catalyst for comprehensive regional cooperation in East Asia. Globalization and growing interdependence present East Asia with new challenges and opportunities for regional collaboration. Cooperation programs will enable East Asian nations to cope with the challenges the region faces today.

The fact that the policy is still being implemented after a quarter of a century testifies to its success and continuing relevance. It is a model of international cooperation at its best, generating greater understanding and fostering friendship between Malaysia and Japan.

This policy not only has strengthened the diplomatic relations but also linked a bridge of trust, knowledge, culture and a people-to-people relationship between Malaysia and Japan.

In conclusion I would like to say that this policy remains valid today as it has been legitimate for the last 25 years. The question before us is therefore not whether the “model” is relevant or not today because it is really a non-issue but rather how best we could review our approach so as to benefit as much as possible from the policy. The Look East Policy is actually as much about learning from Japan as about reorganizing Malaysian priorities themselves.

Saiful Bahari Ahmad is a visiting associate professor of Malaysian studies, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies.