

Japan-Malaysia Relations focusing on the 30th
Anniversary of the Look East Policy
-Reflections of a former Japanese Ambassador-

AEI Occasional Paper 10

Datuk Issei Nomura P.J.N.

**Japan-Malaysia Relations focusing on the
30th Anniversary of the Look East Policy
-Reflections of a former Japanese
Ambassador-**

AEI Occasional Paper 10

Datuk Issei Nomura P.J.N.

AEI Occasional Paper 10

Japan-Malaysia Relations focusing on the 30th Anniversary of the Look East Policy -Reflections of a former Japanese Ambassador-

Published by:

Asia-Europe Institute,
University of Malaya,
50603 Kuala Lumpur,
Malaysia.

Tel : +603-7967 4645 / 7967 6921
Fax : +603-7954 0799 / 7967 6908
Email : pengarah_aei@um.edu.my
Website : <http://aei.um.edu.my>

© Asia-Europe Institute, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Editors: Md Nasrudin Md Akhir, Siti Rohaini Kassim, Azmi Mat Akhir, Dato' Mat Amir Jaffar

AEI would also like to acknowledge the assistance of Salbiah Sirajudin, Siti Nurhanim Ayob, Noor Yusrina Hashim, Mona Ahmad, Nurul Huda Abdul Mutalib and Aurangzaib Alamgir for the arrangement and production of this publication.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the Asia-Europe Institute, University of Malaya.

First Published 2012

Japan-Malaysia Relations focusing on the 30th Anniversary of the Look East Policy -Reflections of a former Japanese Ambassador-

Datuk Issei Nomura P.J.N.

Thank you for the kind introduction.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

Before I begin my speech, please allow me to express our deep appreciation to the people and the government of Malaysia for their assistance, kind words of sympathy, and for showing their solidarity with the people and the government of Japan, especially during the Great East Japan Earthquake which took place in March last year.

First of all, I have to explain why I am standing here. When I was working in Malaysia as Ambassador in the late 1990s, there happened to be a few Japanese businessmen working here as heads of Japanese companies who were born in the same year with me, 1940, which is the year of “dragon”. We formed a group called “dragon-kai” and regularly met and played golf. This year is the year of “dragon”, and this group decided to get together in Kuala Lumpur on the occasion of the 6th round of the year of the dragon. Incidentally, I had had a long-standing promise with Professor Nasrudin of the University of Malaya, which was to deliver a speech or a lecture should I ever have the chance to visit Kuala Lumpur. This commitment materialized because I had a special connection with him and with the University of Malaya. From 1996 to 1971 I was appointed to be a Visiting Professor at the University of Malaya and delivered lectures on the subject of “Japan’s Foreign Policy after the end of the War in the Pacific”, with Professor Nasrudin giving me valuable guidance with regard to the duties of a Visiting Professor.

Upon my appointment as Visiting Professor, the University gave me the opportunity to deliver a public lecture. In October 1996, I gave a speech titled “Japan and Malaysia towards the 21st Century: Projecting our Partnership into the Future”. Retrospectively, I realise that I had made some rather bold remarks about the relations between Japan and Malaysia. I had said that our bilateral relations should not be pursued in the narrow context of bilateral relations, but should be widened and deepened so that our two countries could cooperate with and contribute to the benefit of other countries around the world. I even

said that we have a lot to do in the areas of politics, the environment and human resource development.

After leaving Malaysia in 1999, I served as an Ambassador in Okinawa, Germany and Russia. I retired from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2006 and worked for Their Imperial Highnesses the Crown Prince and Princess of Japan until last summer. As with any Ambassador who had served in several countries, the country of the first Ambassadorship is the country with the strongest personal attachment. My personal attachment with Malaysia became unshakeable when I had the honour of being decorated as a Datuk P.J.N. (Panglima Jasa Negara) by the Malaysian Government in February 2006. I have always maintained an interest in the issue concerning Malaysia and this region. Professor Nasrudin has been kind enough to keep in close contact with me, and I in turn have encouraged him to strengthen the Japanese study unit at the University of Malaya.

Well, this time, in order to prepare for today's speech, I had to go through many documents and seek advice and opinions from my colleagues and friends, including Professor Nasrudin. In doing so, I was delighted to find that Malaysia has been steadily and successfully developing to fulfill its goal of Vision 2020, and the relations between Japan and Malaysia have developed and deepened far more than I could have ever expected back in 1996. Look at per capita national income, for example. It was around US\$3,500 in the second half of the 1990s when I was Ambassador, and in 2010 it was US\$ 8,423. This is not a figure that is expected of a developing country at all.

Our bilateral relations today are clearly and convincingly expressed in the Japan-Malaysia Joint Leaders' Statement, "Enhanced Partnership for a New Frontier", which was issued at the time of the Malaysian Prime Minister Dato' Sri Mohd Najib's visit to Japan in April 2010. According to this document, we will further strengthen our cooperation based on four main pillars: cooperation for peace and security, cooperation for strengthening competitiveness and sustainable growth, cooperation for contributing in the area of the environment and energy, and cooperation for human resource development and promotion of people-to-people exchanges. As a former diplomat who served here as the Japanese Ambassador 15 years ago, I am deeply impressed by the efforts of widening and deepening of our bilateral relations.

Now, I should like to highlight two areas in which I was most impressed.

The first area in which I was most impressed was the area of politics and the environment. Economic and business relations have been the main pillar of our bilateral relations for

many years. Therefore, developments in this area such as the conclusion of the Economic Partnership Agreement and the strengthening of regional cooperation, while being remarkable achievements indeed, were, for me at least, more or less anticipated. Because of our strong economic relations we expected a similarly strong development in the area of politics, which I must admit, was previously a rather weak and modestly-developed area. But now I am pleased to learn that Japan has been cooperating with Malaysia in training United Nations peace keepers at Port Dickson. I hope that we expand further cooperation in this area.

Our cooperation in the Mindanao Peace Process has also been quite remarkable. Our cooperation in the fight against terrorism and piracy is also quite impressive. I also like the way the “Japan-Malaysia Cooperation Initiative for Environment and Energy” was announced. It explicitly states the concrete measures which must be taken by both sides. I hope that these measures will be implemented soon. I am also glad to learn that Japanese companies are cooperating in the low-carbon city and smart community projects in Putrajaya and Cyberjaya.

The second area in which I was most impressed is human resources development, especially with regard to the smooth and successful evolution of the Look East Policy. At the time, I strongly felt that taking six years to graduate from a Japanese university (with two years for preparatory education and four years in a Japanese university proper) was an excessive burden to the Look East students. I remember that I proposed that the period be cut short by one year by making the preparatory education in Malaysia cover the syllabus that would have taken place during the first year in the Japanese university. It seems that this idea was adopted in the Malaysia Higher Education Loan Fund Project (HELP).

With the establishment of twinning programmes with Japanese universities (at the moment, as many as 15 Japanese universities are involved in this arrangement), Malaysian students can graduate from a Japanese university in five years (three years in Malaysia plus two years in Japan). In my view this is a remarkable evolution of the Look East Policy. I should like to express my commendation of every person who worked in this Project.

I also admired the opening of the Malaysia-Japan International Institute of Technology (MJIT). This idea was proposed by the initiator of the Look East Policy, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, in 2001. The idea can be understood as the ultimate goal of the Look East Policy, because it aims to obtain a level of education equal to that of Japan without

sending students to Japanese universities. Taking into account the differences in the educational systems of both countries, it must have been quite difficult to reach an agreement between the parties concerned. I express the greatest respect to all those engaged in the establishment of MJIT.

MJIT is an institute within Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). It is a brand-new establishment which opened in September last year. I understand that in the first year, the number of students was 65 undergraduates and 34 postgraduates. There are 37 teaching staff, four of which are Japanese. MJIT aims to become the leading institute in this region. Within seven years it hopes to have as many as 2,700 students, including students from neighbouring ASEAN nations as well as other countries.

The Look East Policy covers not only the area of higher education, but also vocational education and training. With regard to this, I greatly admire the success story of the Japan-Malaysia Technical Institute (JMTI). JMTI was established in 1998 in Penang to cope with the needs of the industry, which needed experts who could manipulate hi-tech instruments. I hear that JMTI has a very high reputation and that the number of applicants exceeds the capacity of the institute. I remember attending the stone-laying and ground breaking ceremony of JMTI at Bukit Minyak, Penang in July 1998 as Ambassador.

This year is the 30th anniversary of the Look East Policy, and I was asked by several persons to refer to it and to comment on it in my speech. While I am more than happy to do so, at the same time I know I must be careful. I will confine myself only to my reflections and observations as a former Japanese Ambassador to Malaysia.

First of all, I have the highest respect for the Malaysian government for continuously attaching importance to human resource development. Indeed, nation-building cannot take place without human resource development. I have a strong feeling that the evolution process of the Look East Policy is on the right track, and I sincerely hope that there will be further success to come. I must admit that I used to have an uneasy feeling with regards to the phrase “Look East”, even when I was Ambassador here. Perhaps in the first ten years or so of the Policy the words “Look East” would have sounded natural. But after the successful implementation of the Policy and the remarkable development in nation-building in Malaysia, I thought that we should look both ways.

In another words, Japan should also look to Malaysia. I had already made this point clear in my public lecture at the University of Malaya in 1996. Now I feel much more

strongly about it after learning of the twinning programmes between Japanese and Malaysian universities. There are tremendous merits to spending their second or third year of university in a Malaysian university for Japanese students who take advantage of this arrangement. Malaysia is the success model of a multiracial and multi-religious society. I hope that Japanese youth will be able to experience this success model.

The idea behind the establishment of JMTI and MJIT is to fulfil the aims of the Look East Policy without sending students to Japan. The scope of study at the JMTI is vocational and focuses on technical matters, with participation from Japanese experts from Japanese companies in Malaysia in the training and practical aspects. Because of this, I believe that the quality of vocational education at JMTI is similar to that of Japan. MJIT is has just only started so it may be some time before the teaching staff and facilities will function as planned. There may be some teething problems to solve, but as I have said before, MJIT has an excellent vision for the future in the long-term perspective. I am sure that MJIT can overcome those problems, whatever they might be. I fully expect to hear of the success of MJIT soon.

During my Ambassadorship here for three and a half years from 1995 to 1999, there was an important occasion which I would always look forward to attending. The occasion was the send-off party for students who had completed their two years of preparatory education in Malaysia, and were now bound for Japan. One scene is firmly engraved in my memory and I can vividly recall it even now. It was the glittering, hopeful eyes of the students. Looking then at their glittering eyes, I believed that they would all return from Japan after fulfilling their mission.

I have here the text of a speech I gave at one of these send-off parties. Reading it now, I realise that I was very patriotic not only with regard to Japan but also Malaysia. I spoke to them as if I was speaking to my own sons and daughters. Please allow me to quote some of my words.

“...when you go to Japanese university, study hard! When I say “study hard”, I mean that you study in the morning, in the afternoon, and if necessary in the evening and at night. In life there are some years when you are obliged to do nothing but study. Don’t say you cannot do it. If you have a specific purpose for your study, you can do it. Your purpose is to contribute to the nation-building of Malaysia. The country of Malaysia needs you, and you have to respond to the needs of your country. When I went abroad to study abroad in the early 1960’,

Japan was still a developing country, and the country needed its people to study and work hard to catch up with the Americans and the Europeans. I always had a specific purpose in mind. It was to contribute to the needs of my country. I studied really hard. Now, 30 years onwards, I believe that I did the right thing at the right time. Your hard study in Japan will result in many rewards in the future, perhaps not in the immediate future, but in your lifetime, and it will certainly remain a great asset. You are a valuable asset not only for Malaysia, but also for Japan and Japan-Malaysia relations”.

There was an especially critical moment in the continuation of the Look East Policy. It was during the Asian financial crisis of 1998. The Malaysian government had informed the Japanese government that there were no financial resources to send new Look East students for that year. I thought that it was indeed an extraordinary situation for Malaysia to be in. Doubtless, for those students who had finished their preparatory courses and were waiting to go to Japanese universities, this was a terrible disappointment.

Never before this time had I negotiated more strongly with my home government. It was such a relief to me and my Malaysian friends to hear that the Japanese government had decided to bear all the expenses necessary for the dispatch of the Malaysian students who had finished their preparatory education, provided that the Malaysian government would bear the expenses necessary for them to continue their study in Japan from the next year onward. Thanks to the Look East Policy, the number of Malaysian students who have studied in Japanese universities has increased to almost 6,000, and the number of Malaysians dispatched to Japan for training is around 8,000. They are now playing important roles in Malaysian society.

From the Japanese side, as I have said, I really hope to see more Japanese students coming to Malaysia. But in terms of our bilateral relations as a whole, I see an encouraging aspect in the fact that the overwhelming majority of those Japanese businessmen, government officials, scholars and others who have spent several years here go home as big fans of Malaysia and wish to continue a positive association with Malaysia, such as spending their post-retirement here. If we continue and expand people-to-people contact, just as we have been doing till now, there is no doubt that we can develop further and enjoy even better relations in the future.

Well, with those positive and optimistic words on our bilateral relations, I conclude my speech. Thank you for your attention.

About the author

Datuk Issei Nomura was born in Hiroshima in 1940. He studied Law at the University of Tokyo and upon graduation in 1963, he joined the Gaimusho. For 27 years up to 1990 in MFA, he had served at the Japanese Embassy in UK, Soviet Union, Denmark and USA.

In 1991, he was given a special assignment as Director, Office of the Draft Legislation on Peace-Keeping Operations in the Prime Minister's Office. Then he was promoted to Director-General, European and Oceania Affairs Bureau, MFA and in 1995 he was appointed Ambassador to Malaysia. Subsequently, he was appointed Ambassador in Charge of Okinawan Affairs, Ambassador to Fed. Rep. of Germany and then to the Russian Federation.

From 2006 to 2010, he was the Grand Master of the Household of the Crown Prince of Japan and then Special Advisor to the Imperial Household.

In 2006, he was honored by the Government of Malaysia and awarded the P.J.N. (Panglima Jasa Negara) – hence his Datukship.



Asia-Europe Institute

AEI Occasional Paper 10

Asia-Europe Institute,
University of Malaya,
50603 Kuala Lumpur,
Malaysia.

Tel : +603-7967 4645 / 7967 6921

Fax : +603- 7954 0799 / 7967 6908

Email : pengarah_aei@um.edu.my

URL : <http://aei.um.edu.my>