



Rapturous welcome for US President Barack Obama from his young audience at the town hall meeting in Universiti Malaya. Also present is Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

The promise of youth in Malaysia-US ties

YOUTH LEADERS: Their role should go above and beyond the typecast, they should be actively engaged and mentored in policymaking

LONG lines of youth in the head of government. The first sitting United States of America president to visit Malaysia in nearly half a century, this was also the leader who electrified the world in 2008 with his election as the first black man to the White House and who had spent his formative years halfway across the world from the US. His political star may have flickered domestically and abroad since, but he is still the American president with a swag.



Elina Noor is ISIS Malaysia assistant director, foreign policy and security studies

It was, rather, President Barack Obama's town hall with young Southeast Asian leaders in Kuala Lumpur last week. But this was not a regular meeting and Obama is no ordinary suited politicians from Washington DC

to Putrajaya now try to keep up with fist bumps and selfies.

It is unclear whether these generational trends are part of the Comprehensive Partnership between Malaysia and the United States, announced during Obama's stop here. Or if they distinguish from the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership we share with another country.

What is clear for the future of the Malaysia-US partnership, however, are the following:

FIRST, Malaysia-US ties have substantially been the way of a partnership — particularly in defence and security cooperation — long before a label needed to be affixed. What the formalisation of a partnership now implies, however, is a qualitative enrichment in traditional areas of collaboration and an evening out of that relationship in other areas on a more equal footing. Implicit in that is the recognition of a maturing relationship

→ *Continued next page*

between both countries that will likely continue to be guided by political leadership but that should equally and autonomously be led by other functional institutions of the partnership — business, civil society, and, increasingly, the youth.

SECOND, just as the youth are key to the political vote in Malaysia and the United States, they are also integral to the endurance and dynamism of bilateral relations between the two countries. As the dynamo of growth, there is tremendous scope for youths in both countries to nurture personal, lasting and meaningful connections with each other through education and sociocultural initiatives. The Fulbright English Teaching Assistant programme is a good example that could spin off creative and contemporary language exchanges like spoken word in both English and Bahasa Malaysia; an introduction to the Malaysian traditional dances on both sides of the South China Sea for American dance students; and artisan training or internships in traditional crafts like batik-printing, songket-weaving, or wood-carving. After all, if Malaysians can't sufficiently appreciate and preserve our heritage, maybe we can encourage others to do so instead.

THIRD, the role of the youth in diplomatic relations should go above and beyond the typecast of sociocultural programming. Young leaders in Malaysia and the United States should be actively engaged and mentored in the policymaking processes of defence, security, trade, and investment — the anchors of the relationship — so that they stay informed of developments in these areas and are able to contribute to key decisions in an informed manner when they assume influential positions. Next generation leaders in government or other policymaking circles should be identified in their respective countries and introduced to their counterparts with the aim of sustaining contact through regular meetings, online and offline.

The Young Leaders Programme at Pacific Forum CSIS (Centre for Strategic and International Studies) is an outstanding model that might be replicated at the bilateral level for a more focused and intense engagement.

Finally, it is the youth of today who will play a crucial role in safeguarding and promoting the multicultural strength shared by both countries. This will require, among Malaysians, consciousness and acceptance of "the other" domestically as well as an awareness of America's social intricacies beyond media stereotypes. This will no doubt be laborious work in progress, and perhaps the audacity of hope in both countries.