

Book review

**LETTA, CORRADO G.M. (2008). *MALAYSIA-EUROPE: STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP FOR THE PACIFIC CENTURY*.
PUTRAJAYA: MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS.**

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Abstract

Revisiting Corrado Letta's book on Europe and Malaysia (2008) is meant to re-introduce a unique 'classic' to a young audience in the area of education. Malaysia's international role has grown in profile, since the book was first published and the international role and responsibility of the European Union have been exposed to big challenges. The recent integration of European Studies within language and communication programs at The Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, at The University of Malaya, and The Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, at The Universiti Putra Malaysia, illustrates a heightened institutional interest in this field.

Key words

Europe-Malaysia relations, EU, ASEAN

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Anniversaries abound in ante- and post-publications of books whose numbers often make it hard for reviewers to catch up and appreciate individual titles appropriately. Corrado G.M. Letta's two-volume book on *Malaysia-Europe*, which was launched

in 2008, is such a case in point as stated by *books.google.com*, when they write that they “haven’t found any reviews in the usual places” on Letta’s book.

While the 18 diplomatic missions of European countries in Malaysia, and the EU Mission with their first Ambassador Dr. Rommel (2003-2008), celebrated the historic event in their own particular style and contribution, it was the initiative of the Asia-Europe-Institute (AEI) to focus on Malaysia’s cooperation with these European countries and The EU. Instigator and author was the AEI Senior Fellow (2005-2007) Dr. Corrado Letta. He had convinced the Hon. Dato’Seri Utama Dr Rais Yatim, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, that such a “book was in Malaysia’s interest” (Letta, p.VII).

Revisiting his book is therefore an attempt at introducing it to a wider audience in the area of education. Malaysia’s international role has grown in profile. However, the international role and responsibility of the European Union has been intensely queried during the years between 2008 and 2015. The ongoing integration of European Studies within the study programmes at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, at The University of Malaya, and the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, at The University Putra Malaysia, signifies institutional interest in this field.

Letta’s book comprises 722 pages parceled into “two volumes ... four parts ... (and) thirty one chapters” (p.2). Such weighty content (2.5kg) needs more than quantitative support. The author explains in the “Introduction” that his objective

is threefold, firstly, it aims to study the ... relations linking Malaysia to the 18 European countries which have embassies in Kuala Lumpur, and secondly... to investigate the notion can/should these ties be enhanced/ upgraded to ... an all-round strategic partnership? Thirdly, it is essential, for the sake of these relations, to close the ... gap between what European stakeholders know about Malaysia and ... what Malaysia does know about these European countries (p.2).

Foreign Minister Dr Rais Yatim combines synoptic remarks in his “Foreword” (p.V) with personal appreciation of the book, when he writes that this is “a work that could well be in years to come a major reference on Malaysia-Europe relations” whose “first part... develops a presentation of the main stakeholders – Malaysia and the European Union” and “proceeds to analyse the regional relationship between the EU and ASEAN” and that the “in-depth analysis of 18 European countries... is most rewarding”. He focuses on Letta’s key questions about the role Malaysia should play in the geopolitical theatre of nations and how European countries

should improve their “relations ... in order to dynamically activate their partnership with Malaysia” (pp.5-6).

The terminology and concept of “Strategic Partnership for the Pacific Century” in the subtitle of the book is left to be explained in the last “Chapter XXXI” under “Future Dynamics” (p. 650) as an “implicit assumption underlying the usage of the term that the 21st century will be dominated...by the Pacific rim states...in particular China, Japan, India and the United States. This idea can be compared with the historical Eurocentric viewpoint” (p. 698). There is no bibliographical or index reference for terminological or conceptual assistance.

Justification for such lack of common research practice is given by the author himself at the end of his “Introduction”, which will be quoted here at length because it exposes a conceptual strategy which preempts discussions of this book on a scientific level:

Experience suggests that since reading a text with many footnotes ... undoubtedly adds to the scholarly credibility of the research, it does, however, detract from getting and keeping the general reader’s vital attention which alone justifies, in the end, the research effort made. Therefore, it was decided ... not to include footnotes and bibliography, and to write a text using language as simple ... as possible. This objective had to be achieved while maintaining the vigour and rigour of a scholarly enquiry... Thus, the objective here was to use direct language because the great ambition was to target people across the board ... and not to remain within the confines of the learned practitioner’s or academic’s world. Hence the language and presentations of the arguments had to be void ... of professional jargon. (p.3)

Once scientific expectations have been reduced to topical talks on the basis of personal, official and public sources, the objective of this publication remains still the same: it is a compilation of facts and figures on Malaysia, its bilateral relation with 18 European countries, and with The EU and ASEAN, and it can still show Malaysia’s role in these regional networks. All written texts and oral discourse transcripts were appropriately structured on the basis of discerning reflection, they were analyzed, interpreted, evaluated and commented upon with ethical effort so to improve relations between all the countries involved.

Under these auspices, this book appears to be a preparatory textbook that facilitates the provision of elementary information on Malaysia and Europe. The potential student readers will easily follow a popularly written script on the development

of intercultural and political proceedings between The EU and ASEAN. They will be involved in a process of critical thinking as the narrative evolves. The author's personal opinions, expectations and assumptions may even find corresponding reactions in the reader's immediate and subjective agreement, rejection, criticism or counter-arguments, which can give the book a truly Socratic touch of ambulatory pedagogics.

The copious assortment and descriptive analysis of bilateral relations between Malaysia and 18 European countries follows the same structural pattern that was used for the overviews on Malaysia, ASEAN and The EU. The topical arrangement reminds the reader of books on 'Culture and Civilisation,' with the usual hard facts on geography, climate, or currency, followed by the social data on politics, the economy, or the media, finishing off with particular issues that are typical for the individual case in question.

The orthodox and unoriginal way of spreading and grouping the data in these core chapters (I, II, IX-XXV) may be disappointing for the user. This should, however, not divert from the fact that such particular assembly of information has unusual origins. The material is enriched with the latest official statistics, diplomatic protocols, chamber of commerce publications, personal in-house interviews with CEOs, or selected media coverage. Moreover, it includes interviews, personal observation and comment, subjective assessment, and evaluation. All of this is difficult to find and access by means of common research. Admittedly, caution may be indicated for official quotations of textual excerpts unless the official sources are noticeably mentioned, but they are often underpinned by a separated backbone of hard "Building Blocks" with foreign office releases, agreements, or legal documents (Part II, 91-96; Chapter VII, 139; Part III, 154). Overall, the collection of data is a unique and useful toolbox for students, academics, business people, and the general public alike. Letta has certainly reached his goal of informing his "stakeholders" (p. 2) of each other's country and profile (p.3).

Letta finishes most of his chapters with evaluation and outlook, and concludes his book with a quintessential "Lessons Europe Can Learn from Malaysia" (pp.702-703) and with a "Lessons Malaysia Can Learn from Europe" (p.704). They can be summarized in such a way that Europe can learn from Malaysia's massive economic success, from its innovation (p.703), and also from its clever handling of financial matters. Alternatively, Malaysia, as one of the founders of ASEAN, is advised to use its leadership skills to help ASEAN learn from European integration (p.705), and to support Asian military dynamism to become an international supporter of "threat response" (p.706). In addition, it is suggested that Malaysia help found an Asian monetary fund, and take care of its own branding in the international market.

In conclusion: Letta has built up a private bank of data with his two-volume book on Malaysia and Europe that can be recommended for use “in years to come (as) a major reference on Malaysia-Europe relations” (p. V). As much as the book may be lacking in academic discipline and may reveal formal shortcomings (*e.g. the incongruence between the table of contents and some chapter headings), it convincingly thrives on Letta’s personal mission to eradicate prejudice through knowledge and information. It is worthy of being categorized as the first preparatory text-book reader on Europe for Malaysian students and teachers.

References

Letta, Corrado G.M. (2008). *Malaysia-Europe: Strategic Partnership for the Pacific Century*. Putrajaya: Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Additional data on the complete contents of the book:

Letta, Corrado G. M.: Malaysia-Europe: strategic partnerships for the Pacific century. Putrajaya: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2008. - Vol. 1-2, Vol. 1: Malaysia-Europe relations, 2008. Part I-II, Chapters I-VII, 20 Tables, Ill. & Fotos, pp. I-XVI, 1-153; Vol. 2: Bilateral relations, 2008. Part III-IV, Chapters VIII-XXXI, pp. I-XVI, 154-722, Ill. & Fotos, 77 Tables, Letta: Biographical & Bibliographical data. (ISBN 978-983-43196-2-5).

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