

2017: Three great expectations

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When I think of 2017, three events dominate my mind. First, on Jan 20, Mr Donald Trump will be inaugurated as the 45th president of the United States of America. Second, on Aug 8, Asean will commemorate its 50th anniversary. Third, the next Singapore presidential election will be held on or before Aug 26. I wish to discuss each of those three events and explain why they are important and how they will have an impact on our lives.

THE TRUMP PRESIDENCY

The US is the only superpower in the world. It has the world's largest economy, the most powerful military and very attractive soft power. There is no other country like it.

At the end of World War II, the US led the victorious allies in designing the post-war order. The vision was to create a new world order based on the sovereign equality of states, the rule of law and collective security.

On the economic side, the vision was to create an economic order based on free trade, stable currencies and cooperation to promote development. It was also part of the vision to promote democracy and human rights.

To fulfil that vision, several multilateral institutions were established. They include the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (which has evolved to become the World Trade Organisation).

Every US president since Franklin Delano Roosevelt has, to a greater or lesser extent, adhered to that vision and supported those institutions of global governance. The question is whether the 45th President of the United States, Mr Donald Trump, will do the same or depart from precedent and make a paradigm shift.

Under his leadership, will the US become isolationist?

Will the US continue to champion free trade and globalisation or will it become protectionist and pursue a mercantilist trade policy?

Will the US pursue the goal "to make America great again" with or without regard to the interests of others?

We do not know the answers to those questions. We can, however, take comfort from some of the individuals whom President-elect Trump has nominated. The Secretary of State and the Defence Secretary are two of the most important posts in the Cabinet. General James "Mad Dog" Mattis, the nominee to be the defence secretary, has a solid reputation in Washington. He earned his nickname in the Marine Corps as a charismatic and tough-minded military commander.

Mr Rex Tillerson, the nominee for the post of secretary of state, is well known to Singapore's leaders. ExxonMobil, the company which he leads, is a major investor in Singapore and a good corporate citizen. Mr Tillerson is a free trader and has written in support of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. He has also testified in the US Congress in favour of the US acceding to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. He is not an ideologue but a pragmatist. If confirmed, we are confident that he will be a successful secretary of state.



ASEAN TURNS 50

On Aug 8, Asean will mark its 50th birthday. It is an event which all of us in Singapore and in South-east Asia should celebrate.

When Asean was born in 1967, many pundits in the West predicted that it would die in its infancy. They pointed out that the region was too diverse and there were few commonalities among the founding five countries. This was a time when some commentators in the West had described South-east Asia as the Balkans of Asia.



When the Cold War ended, the detractors of Asean in the West said that Asean was doomed. They described Asean as a creature of the Cold War. The reasoning was that with the end of the Cold War, Asean had lost its reason for being and would therefore fade away.



Over the past 50 years Asean has overcome many challenges. It has grown from strength to strength. It is today one of the world's most successful regional organisations. I would highlight three of its most important achievements.

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Asean has transformed South-east Asia from a region of war and conflict to a region of peace and stability. It is not yet possible to say that war between Asean countries is unthinkable. However, when an armed conflict occurred along the Cambodian-Thai border, Asean intervened by trying to calm the situation and urging the two sides to show restraint. Indonesia offered to send observers to the border. The UN Security Council outsourced the management of the crisis to Asean.

The second achievement of Asean is economic. The rise of Asean in the world economy is one of the three biggest growth stories of human history. Asean has become an economic community. The ambition is to create a single market and production base by eliminating tariffs and other trade barriers. With 620 million consumers, Asean has a combined GDP of US\$2.3 trillion (S\$3.3 trillion), making it the seventh-largest economy in the world. The combined GDP is projected to increase by more than fourfold to US\$10 trillion by 2030. This will make Asean the fourth-largest economy in the world.

The third achievement of Asean is perhaps the most remarkable. The 10 member states of Asean have been able to unite and act as one. It has established fruitful relations with its 10 dialogue partners, which include all the major powers. It has established several forums to promote dialogue, mutual trust and cooperation, such as the Asean Regional Forum, Asean Plus Three, the East Asia Summit and the Asean Defence Ministers Plus. Asean chairs all these forums.

Does Asean have a bright future? I think Asean has a bright future but it faces several important challenges.

The first challenge is to ensure that it is securely anchored in the hearts and minds of the 620 million citizens of Asean. Asean must not be seen by the people as a project of the elite and of big business.

The second challenge is for the individual governments of the 10 countries to take good care of the people who will be adversely affected by trade liberalisation and economic integration. This must be done in order to avoid a populist backlash of the nature we have seen in Britain and the US.

The third challenge is to stay united in the face of intensified competition by the major powers, especially between the US and China. Individual Asean governments must have the wisdom to realise that Asean must remain united and neutral if it is to retain the central role it plays in the regional architecture.

ELECTING SINGAPORE'S EIGHTH PRESIDENT

The Singapore electorate will elect its eighth president on or before Aug 26. The Singapore Government has declared that the next presidential election will be reserved for Malay candidates. Singapore has not had a Malay president since Mr Yusof Ishak in 1970.

I had expected my Malay friends to welcome the decision to have a reserved election for our eighth president. Much to my surprise, several of my Malay friends told me that they did not like the idea. They explained that it would violate the principle of meritocracy. They said they would prefer a Malay president to be elected in an open competition and not in a reserved election.

What is my attitude towards the issue? I hold the view that the highest office of our Republic, the presidency, should not be the monopoly or the duopoly of one or two ethnic groups. It should be held by worthy individuals from the different ethnic groups.

I like the old system of the Parliament electing the president. Under that system, we had an excellent Malay president, Mr Yusof Ishak, and an excellent Eurasian president, Dr Benjamin Sheares.

The Government is not confident that, in an open election, we will ever elect a Malay or a Eurasian to that high office. This is the rationale behind the procedure of reserving an election for a particular ethnic group. Is it a violation of the principle of meritocracy? We have two competing principles at play: the principle of meritocracy and the principle of inclusiveness.

In most situations, the principle of meritocracy should prevail over the principle of inclusiveness. However, in this case, I would like the principle of inclusiveness to prevail over the principle of meritocracy. I therefore look forward to voting for an eminently qualified Malay candidate next year to be our eighth president.

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