

By Invitation; Three miracles from 2015

These very positive developments stand out from the bad news of conflicts, disasters and tragedies last year

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We are inundated with bad news. Every day seems to bring news of a new conflict, disaster or tragedy. And since good news is not news, we seldom hear of happy developments. When I look back on the year which has just passed, I am struck by a number of very positive developments which I will call "The Miracles of 2015".

MIRACLE NO. 1: The Paris Agreement on Climate Change

Since the advent of the Industrial Revolution, human activities have progressively warmed the earth. For some years, the world's leading climatologists have warned that unless we curb the increase in the release of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, the world's average temperature would continue to rise and would have many negative consequences for humankind. For example, the sea level will rise and low-lying cities and countries will be threatened.

At the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit), which I had the pleasure of chairing, we adopted the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The UNFCCC has 195 parties. This was followed by the Kyoto Protocol. The Protocol was adopted in 1997 and entered into force in 2005. The Protocol was ineffective for several reasons, one of which was that the United States refused to join it.

It became increasingly apparent that without universal participation by all countries, big and small, global efforts on climate change would not be meaningful. The 195 parties to the UNFCCC thus began negotiating the successor agreement to govern climate change cooperation after 2020 when the Kyoto Protocol ends.

The negotiating journey has been arduous and dramatic. It began on an optimistic note in Bali, Indonesia, in 2007. It stumbled badly in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 2009. The process was put back on track in Cancun, Mexico; in Durban, South Africa; Warsaw, Poland, and in Lima, Peru. Approaching Paris, disagreements were still so protracted that the negotiators were uncertain whether there would be an agreement and, if so, whether it would be a good agreement.

Miraculously, on Dec 12, 2015, the dynamic and skilful Foreign Minister of France, Mr Laurent Fabius, was able to announce that the Paris Agreement on Climate Change had been adopted by consensus. The agreement is universal and legally binding. It will attempt to limit the rise of global temperature to 1.5 deg C.

I am glad to say that Singapore's Foreign Minister, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, and its chief negotiator, Ambassador Kwok Fook Seng, played constructive leadership roles in the negotiations.

MIRACLE NO. 2: Myanmar's transition to democracy

Myanmar, previously known as Burma, is an important country and a member of Asean. It is strategically located between China and India, is generously endowed with natural resources and has enormous economic potential. From 1962 to 2010, it was ruled by the military.

The West used to treat Myanmar as a pariah state. The West used to urge Asean to expel Myanmar, to isolate her and to impose sanctions against her. Asean preferred to keep Myanmar in the family and to encourage her to undertake reform. Myanmar was treated with respect and dignity. However, when the military opened fire on unarmed Buddhist monks and civilians in September 2007, the Asean family did not hesitate to condemn this outrage.

Beginning in 2010, Myanmar began a careful transition to democracy under a "Seven Step Road Map" drawn up by the military regime. A general election was held in November 2010. The flawed elections produced a Parliament dominated by the military. Former prime minister Thein Sein was elected by the Parliament as the president in 2011.

He surprised everyone by instituting serious political and economic reforms. He released many political prisoners, including the democracy icon, Ms Aung San Suu Kyi. He welcomed her and her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), into Parliament in 2012 through by-elections won by the NLD. Myanmar engaged the international community through its chairmanship of Asean in 2014.

The big question was whether the general election in November last year would be free and fair. Would the NLD and Ms Suu Kyi be allowed to contest the elections? And, if the NLD were to win the elections, would President Thein Sein, the military and the former head of state, Senior General Than Shwe, who led the previous government, accept the outcome?

The international community has judged that the elections held on Nov 8, 2015 were free and fair. Supported by the people countrywide seeking peaceful change via the ballot box, the NLD won a sweeping victory, taking 59 per cent of the seats in Parliament: 255 in the Lower House and 135 in the Upper House. Under the Constitution, the military has 25 per cent of the seats in Parliament.

The NLD commands more than the 50 per cent majority needed to elect the president and one of the two vice-presidents in the Presidential Electoral College next month. Ms Suu Kyi, however, is barred by the Constitution from the presidency. If the requisite constitutional amendment is supported by the military MPs and other parties in Parliament, this hurdle will be removed and she can become president.

The results of the historic elections have been accepted by President Thein Sein, the military's commander-in-chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, and even by retired Senior General Than Shwe. A new civilian government will take office in April this year after over 50 years of military rule.

Compared with the Middle East, where the Arab Spring has turned into a nightmare, the peaceful and remarkable development in Myanmar appears to be a miracle in its transition to

democracy.

MIRACLE NO. 3: The Xi-Ma summit in Singapore

On Nov 7, 2015, China's President Xi Jinping and Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou met at the Shangri-La Hotel in Singapore. The 81-second-long handshake was history-making. It was the first time that the leaders of the two sides of the Taiwan Strait have met since the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949.

Why do I celebrate the Xi-Ma summit as a miracle of 2015?

I do so for the following reason. Peace is not a given in cross-strait relations. We have seen the rise of tensions across the strait on several occasions. Any armed conflict between the mainland and Taiwan will have serious repercussions on the region.

The ruling party of China, the Chinese Communist Party, and the ruling party of Taiwan, the Kuomintang, both hold the view that there is only one China. The two sides agreed tacitly in 1992 in Hong Kong and again, in 1993, at their meeting in Singapore, that each side will interpret the "one China" policy in its own way. This understanding paved the way for a series of constructive meetings and agreements. The Xi-Ma meeting cast this understanding, known as the "1992 Consensus", in stone, bringing cross-strait relations firmly into the orbit of peace.

We should welcome good relations between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. The summit meeting between Mr Xi and Mr Ma will help each side to have a better understanding of the other through direct talks. It will help to increase mutual trust and reduce suspicion and misunderstanding.

It took 66 years for the leader of the mainland and the leader of Taiwan to shake hands and talk to each other directly.

We should therefore welcome the summit in Singapore between Mr Xi and Mr Ma as another miracle of 2015.

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