

Three wishes for the New Year

*** Singapore to mature * Asean to stay neutral * Asia to be at peace**

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The Straits Times, 3 January 2015

It is customary to make three wishes for the New Year. Since 2015 is now upon us, I will use this column to share with readers my three wishes for the New Year.

First Wish

I WISH Singapore a very happy golden anniversary. I wish that Singapore will continue to enjoy peace and stability, prosperity with equity, unity with tolerance, safety with vibrancy and freedom with responsibility.

I wish that Singaporeans will continue to believe in and practise our core values of hard work, integrity, meritocracy, compassion, racial and religious harmony, gender equality, freedom from corruption and open economy and open minds.

At a recent forum, a friend from India described Singapore as a case where a government and a people have succeeded in creating something out of nothing. It is not exactly "nothing" because we do have three assets: a strategic location, a natural harbour and an intelligent and hard-working people. However, our success story is like a miracle.

Our per capita income is one of the highest in the world. Our people enjoy full employment as well as access to good housing, health care, schools, transport and a healthy environment. Our city grows more beautiful with each passing year.

Singapore is, however, not perfect. There are areas in which we can and should do better. I am disturbed by the inequality in Singapore. We have one of the highest Gini coefficients in the world. I am unhappy that many of our children are growing up in poverty. About a third of our students go to school with no pocket money to buy lunch.

As a trustee of two education trusts, I am reminded each year of the large number of needy students in our schools and tertiary institutions. I was shocked when the president of one of our universities told us recently that 60 per cent of his students need financial assistance.

At the other end of the spectrum, I am worried about the growing number of the elderly poor. Many of them are in poor health and have inadequate savings. Many of them live in loneliness, having no family or been abandoned by family and relatives.

I would like to see Singapore grow in cultural and political maturity. A culturally mature people accept diversity and welcome different points of view. A politically mature society is one in which the vanquished are gracious in their defeat and the victors are magnanimous in their victory.

I hope that Singaporeans would be less obsessed with money and less materialistic.

My mentor, Mr S. Rajaratnam, once said that Singaporeans were in danger of becoming a people who knew the price of everything and the value of nothing.

We did not heed his warning. As a result, I fear that Singapore is in very grave danger of becoming a market society.

Second Wish

ASEAN will be 48 years old this year. Asean has transformed South-east Asia from a cauldron of conflict into a region of peace and prosperity. It is by far the most successful regional organisation in the developing world. I wish Asean great success in the new year.

Asean is the sixth-largest economy in the world. Its ambition is to integrate the 10 economies into a single economy by the end of 2015. The consensus is that the project is 80 per cent complete. Under Malaysia's chairmanship, Asean will attempt to summon the necessary political will to overcome the vested interests and get the job done. Much will depend on the attitude of Indonesia. I hope that President Joko Widodo will back the Asean Economic Community.

All the great powers have a stake in South-east Asia. Instead of trying to keep them out, Asean has wisely invited all of them to join us in building a peaceful and prosperous region. The competition for influence between the United States and China has grown stronger. Relations between China and Japan are tense and burdened by history and nationalism. The 1962 border conflict between China and India continues to cast a shadow over their bilateral relations. There is a huge deficit of trust between and among the great powers.

In this context, Asean has been able to play a positive role. It is the convener and facilitator of the region's forums and institutions, such as, the Asean Regional Forum, Asean Plus Three and the East Asia Summit. This is Asean's indispensable contribution to regional peace. There is no other country or group of countries which can play this role.

What about the future? The future is uncertain because some Asean countries appear to be taking sides in the rivalry between the great powers. Asean is only useful to the region if it remains united, independent and neutral. Only such an Asean can continue to play the central role in regional institutions. I hope that the fiasco in Phnom Penh, in 2012, when the Asean foreign ministers failed to adopt a joint communique will never happen again. In 2015, under Malaysia's chairmanship, I am confident that Asean will remain united, independent and neutral.

Third Wish

MY THIRD wish is for peace in Asia and the Asia-Pacific. What are the threats to peace in our region?

One potential threat to peace is the disagreement between China and Japan over Diaoyu/Senkaku. There are two competing narratives about who has sovereignty over these islands.

Since the former Democratic Party of Japan government nationalised these islands, bilateral relations between Beijing and Tokyo have been on a downward spiral. Until the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit in Beijing, in November, the leaders of the two countries had not met for more than two years. Following the meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the region can heave a sigh of relief. Let us hope that wisdom will prevail and the two neighbours will focus on cooperation rather than conflict. We should see a gradual improvement in the relations between them in 2015.

Another potential threat to peace is the rivalry between China and the United States. Although the two countries engage each other in regular dialogue, at various levels, there is an enormous deficit of trust between them. For this reason, and because of their historical and cultural differences, they do not understand each other and misread each other's intentions.

For example, the Chinese interpret US President Barack Obama's pivot to Asia or rebalancing to Asia as a disguised form of containment. The Chinese attribute their problems with their neighbours to US machinations. The US, on the other hand, suspects that the Chinese agenda is to reduce US influence and leadership in the short term, and to oust them from the region in the long term. The Americans perceive China's activities as an attempt to create a Chinese sphere of influence and to impose Pax Sinica on her neighbours.

Asean's vision is that the region should be open to all but dominated by none. Asean wants our regional architecture to be open and inclusive. Asean refuses to take sides and wants to be friends with all the major powers. Through its forums and free trade initiatives, Asean wants to create a region which is at peace, economically prosperous and socially just.

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