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Talks to be held in an informal setting to encourage open discussion among leaders

Innovation, entrepreneurship high on agenda of upcoming US-ASEAN summit

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SINGAPORE – The Special Summit between United States President Barack Obama and South-east Asian leaders next month will be an informal but "strategic discussion", and one focus will be on how to promote innovation and entrepreneurship in the Pacific Rim, said the US' top diplomat for Asia yesterday.

"The leaders will discuss how to support integration under the new ASEAN (Association of South-east Asian Nations) Community; they will talk about trade and investment; about how we can work together to promote innovation and entrepreneurship — areas that can boost opportunity and prosperity for the millions of the people (in the Pacific Rim)," said Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel at a lecture organised by the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and the US Embassy.

Mr Russel told TODAY that the summit — the first to be hosted by the US for ASEAN leaders — will be organised in an informal setting to encourage strategic and open discussions among leaders, as opposed to usual diplomatic meetings held in sterile environments with tight agendas.

Such a setting also reflects "the strong personal relationship that President Obama has built with each of the leaders", he said, adding that the historic summit to be held at the Sunnylands estate in California from Feb 15 to 16 was a culmination of the investment Mr Obama has made in reaching out to Asia. "Bringing the leaders to California, which is the central location for innovation and entrepreneurship, and following the leaders' summit with a trade ministerial event in the Silicon Valley, will give a big push to the collective efforts to adapt to a 21st century digital economy," he added.

Mr Obama has pledged to pivot the US' foreign policy towards Asia and has visited South-east Asia almost every year since 2009. Under his leadership, the US has acceded to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and joined the ASEAN-led East Asia Summit.

During the 27th ASEAN Summit and Related Summits held in Kuala Lumpur in November, ASEAN and the US elevated their ties to a strategic partnership. Washington is keen to leverage on its comparative advantage in innovation and pursue closer economic ties with ASEAN — the world's seventh largest economy.

Mr Russel, 62, also outlined some of Mr Obama's foreign policy challenges for the remaining 12 months of his term, including relations with North Korea, combating Islamic State and tensions in the South China Sea.

He said that the US will continue to adopt a "strategy of deterrence, pressure and diplomacy" vis-a-vis North Korea, which carried out its fourth nuclear test earlier this month, sparking fears in the Korean peninsula.

Among others, Washington will strengthen security alliances with Seoul and Tokyo and enact stronger sanctions against Pyongyang, including through the United Nations.

He maintains that the US wants to negotiate with North Korea, so that an international framework can be reached, similar to the deal made with Iran last year. "The difference between Iran and North Korea is Iran made the decision to negotiate to see if there is a compromise to be had. North Korea decided not to negotiate," he said in response to a question after his lecture.

To combat Islamic State, Mr Russel said the US will work with partners to strengthen information sharing, border security and law enforcement as they respond to the threat of returning militants.

Commenting on the South China Sea, Mr Russel said China's assertive behaviour in the disputed waters will only lead to its neighbours banding together to protect themselves, thereby heightening tensions in the region.

Beijing claims most of the South China Sea, alongside the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia and Brunei. Tensions flared recently, when Chinese planes repeatedly landed on a new airstrip on islands it reclaimed in the Spratly area, triggering a backlash from countries in the region.

He said Washington will continue "shining the spotlight on China's behaviour" in the South China Sea so that Chinese leaders will become more aware of the consequence of their actions. "In China's authoritarian system, Chinese diplomats do not pass up the messages through the system that their (regional) strategy is not working," he said.

S'PORE, U.S. PLEDGE STRONGER STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP AS TOP DIPLOMATS MEET

● Singapore and the United States have affirmed their strong bilateral ties and pledged to strengthen their strategic partnership, following talks between the two countries' top foreign affairs officials yesterday.

Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs Permanent Secretary Chee Wee Kiong and US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel yesterday met in the Republic to co-chair the Fourth United States-Singapore Strategic Partnership Dialogue.

"Both sides affirmed the strong political, economic, and defence ties between Singapore and the US. They noted that the 2004 US-Singapore Free Trade Agreement laid the groundwork for the robust and mutually beneficial economic relationship both countries enjoy today," said a joint statement by both parties.

The co-chairs also recognised the strategic and economic imperatives for the 12 participating countries of the Trans-Pacific Partnership to ratify the trade pact expeditiously, which would mark a significant step towards the establishment of an open and transparent multilateral trading system in the Asia-Pacific and the active economic engagement of the US in the region, said the statement.

Mr Chee and Mr Russel also welcomed the signing of the enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) in December 2015, an update to the 2005 US-Singapore DCA and part of the bilateral Strategic Framework Agreement between both sides, as well as the renewal of the Singapore-US Third Country Training Programme last August. The co-chairs exchanged views on regional and global developments, including those related to the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN), East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the situation in the South China Sea as well as the Korean peninsula, said the joint statement.

Speaking to TODAY, Mr Russel said he had a "good and fruitful" meeting with Mr Chee. "The areas of overlaps in interests between the US and Singapore really brought home to me in the discussions," he said. "The ability of our militaries to operate together in a high level of training and also the effectiveness of Singapore's military, is also a contributor to regional stability and deterrence."

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