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ByInvitation

Taking stock of US-Asean ties on eve of Sunnylands Summit



Tommy Koh
For The Straits Times

Sunnylands is the name of a 200 acre (about 81ha) home built in the 1960s by one of America's wealthiest couples, Walter and Leonore Annenberg, in Rancho Mirage, California. Their intention was to offer the estate to the US president for his use as the Camp David of the West.

Camp David is the name of the presidential retreat in the hills of Maryland, a state on the east coast.

Eight US presidents, from Mr Eisenhower to Mr Obama, have used Sunnylands to host foreign dignitaries. In 2013, President Barack Obama held a two-day summit at Sunnylands, with President Xi Jinping of China.

Early next week, on Monday and Tuesday, President Obama will welcome the ten leaders of Asean to a special summit in Sunnylands.

By choosing Sunnylands as the venue, the US President is sending the message that he attaches as much importance to Asean as he does to China.

I would like to take stock of the current state of Asean-United States relations and to anticipate what the leaders will likely focus on.

ASEAN-US RELATIONSHIP

The Asean-US relationship is comprehensive, substantive, mutually beneficial and trouble-free. The relationship is supported by very substantial economic ties, extensive cooperation in many sectors and common values and objectives.

SUBSTANTIAL ECONOMIC TIES

The US is Asean's largest foreign investor, with cumulative investments of over US$225 billion (S$313 billion). The US is Asean's fourth largest trading partner.

The conclusion of the Asean Economic Community will create many new opportunities for US business. The good news is that Asean is growing and integrating. It is the world's seventh largest economy and is projected to be the fourth largest in the near future. It is a larger recipient of foreign direct investment than China.

The other good news is that the US has transcended the 2008 financial and economic crisis. The US economy is now in the same position as in 2007. It is the most competitive economy in the world. When the recently concluded Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) comes into force, this will create many new opportunities for both Asean and US businesses.

I therefore foresee significant increases in trade and investment between the US and Asean in the coming years.

EXTENSIVE COOPERATION

The US is an old development partner of Asean. Over the past five decades, the US has educated many of Asean's leaders.

American foundations, universities and non-governmental organisations have helped the Asean countries to eliminate illiteracy and to educate and train their people.

American initiatives have helped to empower our girls and women.

Other notable initiatives have sought to strengthen the rule of law and democratic institutions in Asean.

Asean and the US have also been cooperating in non-traditional security areas, including counter-terrorism, cybercrime, human trafficking, the smuggling of drugs, emergency preparedness, et cetera.

Both sides are also exploring new areas of cooperation, such as climate change and information and communications technology.

POLITICAL AND SECURITY COOPERATION

Asean and the US are also political and security partners. This partnership is founded on their common objective to promote peace and stability in the region.

They want to uphold the current rules-based regional and international order. They believe that when disputes arise, they should be settled peacefully and in accordance with international law.

The positive track record of the US, in contributing to the region's stability and prosperity, has made it a trusted partner for many Asean states.

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

When Asean and US leaders met in Kuala Lumpur last November, they decided to elevate their relationship to a strategic level. They recognised that the Asean-US partnership has played a key role in contributing to the stability and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region.

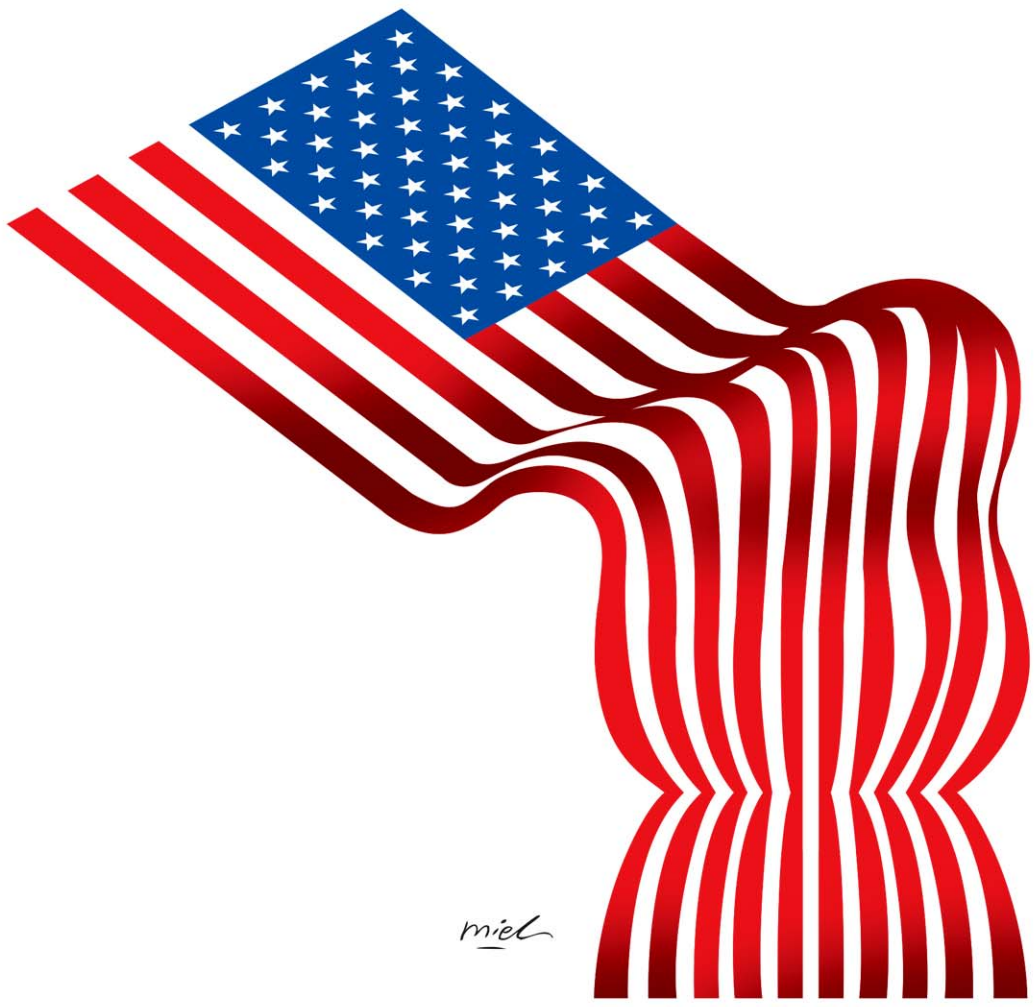
Both sides will however have to invest energy and resources to nurture and grow the relationship. The challenge is to translate the new relationship into concrete measures which will benefit the peoples of both sides. Otherwise, strategic partnership will remain an empty slogan.

ASEAN'S REGIONAL ROLE

Asean enjoys very good relations with the US. At the same time, Asean also enjoys very good relations with China, Japan, India, the European Union and other powers. Asean's policy is to be close to all the major powers but to be allied to none.

Asean does not wish to take sides in the disputes between the major powers or in their competition for influence. By being neutral and independent, Asean is trusted by all the major powers. This has enabled Asean to play the role of the region's convenor and facilitator. This is the reason for the central role which Asean plays in the region's institutions.

The US understands and supports Asean centrality.



I hope the summit in Sunnylands will offer an opportunity for the American and Asean leaders to go beyond their scripted remarks and have a heart-to-heart talk on the pressing issues of our region and of the world. I hope they will also focus their minds on the future direction of Asean-US relations.

OBAMA'S LEGACY

Asean has never had a better friend in the White House than Mr Obama. Because the President spent part of his childhood in Jakarta and is able to speak Bahasa Indonesia, he has a feel for our region and understands its culture. He has made a paradigm shift in US policy towards Asean.

First, he overcame the reluctance of previous administrations and acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in South-east Asia.

Second, President Obama made the unprecedented move of institutionalising an annual Asean-US Summit, committing the US President to meeting all ten Asean leaders every year.

Third, the US was the first non-Asean country to appoint a Permanent Representative to Asean.

Fourth, the US has joined the East Asia Summit and has played a positive role in it.

Fifth, President Obama visited Myanmar and met all the stakeholders to encourage them to make a successful transition to democracy.

Sixth, during the past seven years, the US has never failed to send high-level representatives to the annual East Asia Summit, the Asean Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit Ministerial Meetings.

Seventh, President Obama has promoted people-to-people ties, as can be seen through his personal involvement in the Young South-east Asian Leaders Initiative.

THE FOCUS IN SUNNYLANDS

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Finally, I hope that the summit will succeed in consolidating the achievements of the past seven years and institutionalise them in a way which will endure no matter who is elected as the next president of the United States in November.

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