

Asian troika usher in period of stability

James Crabtree

For The Straits Times

With all his theatrics, it is hardly surprising that so much attention has been lavished on United States President Donald Trump, and whether his administration will usher in a new era of instability in Asia. But behind those headlines, a quieter though potentially no less significant change is brewing: The start of a period of unusual stability in the leadership of Asia itself.

Over the past month, the region's three most important politicians – China's Xi Jinping, Japan's Shinzo Abe and India's Narendra Modi – have all but ensured they will serve a further term in office. This matters, because leaders tend to achieve more the longer they serve, becoming more radical as their tenure extends, and their authority increases.

The most obvious is Mr Modi, who won a crushing victory this month in elections in Uttar Pradesh, India's largest and most politically significant state. Only a gutsy gambler would now bet against him returning to power with a similarly healthy victory in national elections in 2019.

Talk of a forceful second term for Mr Xi hummed in the background of this month's "two meetings", the annual political gatherings in Beijing. There was even gossip that Mr Xi might eventually want to rip up the Communist Party's rules, and serve a third.

Finally, Mr Abe, a few weeks back, secured a rule change in his Liberal Democratic Party's Constitution, allowing him to serve a third consecutive term, and thus his fourth overall. This gives him a fair shot at governing until 2021, in the process becoming Japan's longest-serving prime minister.

All three now have a chance to push forward their existing domestic economic reform agendas which, even on a charitable reading, have up until now proven more than a little disappointing.

Mr Xi unveiled bold plans back in 2013, notably to shake up China's bloated state enterprises, but thus far has delivered little. For all his electoral successes, Mr Modi has also proved a surprisingly timid reformer. And while Mr Abe has at least coined a term for his "Abenomics" agenda, his progress in actually restarting Japan's long-deflated economy has been similarly mixed.

There are good reasons to believe all three will now quicken their pace. First-term leaders spend their early periods in office fretting about retaining power, courting popularity and ducking hard decisions. Winning internal struggles is also a frequent focus, as has most obviously been the case with Mr Xi.

But as time passes, and in particular when a second term is in the bag, a mixture of greater experience, growing impatience and the inevitability of eventual exit should all act to increase resolve.

The coming period of stable Asian leadership is unusual too. Without troublesome elections to bother him, Mr Xi could have reasonably been expected to serve two terms, although, given the internecine uncertainties of Chinese politics, even that was never a sure thing. But the recent history of both Japan and India is littered with weak leaders and disappointed voters. That both countries are now enjoying extended periods of firm, relatively calm leadership is remarkable.

Here, the contrast with the West could hardly be clearer. Asia's troika are the strongest heads of their respective countries in a generation. No major Western country could say the same. Mr Trump has shaken up all manner of assumptions about America, but his domestic achievements are few, and his position remains precarious and unpopular. The heads of Britain, France and Germany, meanwhile, are preoccupied with internal convulsions, and weaker as a result.

None of this is a sure thing, of course. Time in office is no panacea, and it is always possible that leaders who are timid at first will remain so. But there are plenty of examples suggesting that office-holders become more forceful over time, not less.

Former US president Barack Obama achieved many of his most consequential string of reforms not long before leaving office, including his deals over Iran and Cuba. In Britain, both Mrs Margaret Thatcher and Mr Tony Blair grew far more radical in their second terms as prime minister.

There is a final similarity too, namely that the longer heads of large nations stay in office, the more they tend to focus on foreign affairs. This also could be significant in Asia, especially as Mr Xi pushes China to shoulder more of the burden of global leadership, and Mr Modi helps India gingerly retake its place among the world's great powers.

It is often remarked that Asia's Big Three leaders share a common set of beliefs, backing a muscular form of right-wing popular nationalism. But in the end, it is likely to be their longevity, rather than their ideology, that truly leaves its mark.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• The writer is a visiting senior research fellow at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. He is on sabbatical from *The Financial Times*, where he was until recently its Mumbai bureau chief.