

# S'pore can help countries navigate US-China ties: Japan's ex-lawmaker

Republic grasps both Western and Eastern cultures, says former aide to Shinzo Abe

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Singapore, with its unique place in the world in its understanding of both Western and Eastern cultures, can play a key role in helping countries navigate tensions between the US and China, a former Japanese politician has said.

This will be important as the world traverses the geopolitical and economic minefield of expanding Chinese influence amid doubts over whether US foreign policy will shift course under the next president, Mr Kotaro Tamura told *The Straits Times* recently.

Mr Tamura, 57, is a former lawmaker with the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and had served as fiscal and economic adviser to then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe from 2006 to 2007.

He observed that many countries are trying to strike a difficult balance between geopolitics and business, noting the reliance of major democracies on China's surging economic might, even as the US remains inward-looking on trade with its faltering domestic growth.

"Singapore can be a good gateway for countries to do business with China," he said in a Zoom interview, noting how global firms can gain from Singapore's knowledge of "more than just the mindset, but the way of thinking and customs of mainland Chinese".

Above that, Singapore is also a good entry point into South-east Asia, where ageing economies like



Former Japanese politician Kotaro Tamura, 57, is now an adjunct professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

Mr Tamura teaching at the National University of Singapore before Covid-19. He runs courses for Japanese business leaders on regional politics, economics and culture. PHOTOS: COURTESY OF KOTARO TAMURA

Japan's can tap into a youthful population, he added.

Mr Tamura is now an adjunct professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at National University of Singapore, where he runs courses for Japanese business leaders and policymakers on regional politics, economics and culture.

More than 450 participants have taken part, including civil servants from Japan's foreign, finance and economy ministries, as well as major businesses. The US-China conflict, as well as bilateral opportunities between Singapore and Japan as the two countries mark their 55th year of diplomatic ties, will be key themes in the 18th run of the

course this August, to be held fully online due to Covid-19.

Mr Tamura noted that while Japan seems to have taken a more hawkish line towards China of late, the LDP itself is split on its approach towards China. Many in the LDP favour a pro-China or a moderate approach, he said, including the faction led by party secretary-general Toshihiro Nikai, which was Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's main backer in his election as LDP president last year.

But Mr Tamura added that the largest faction is now the Hosoda faction, which counts Mr Abe among its members, and "the mainstream thinking now in the LDP is

to see China as a competitor".

Mr Abe is a founding member of a new political group set up to study semiconductors – and by extension the security of the Taiwan Strait, with Taiwan being a dominant global supplier of chips. The group does not include anyone from Mr Nikai's faction.

This, Mr Tamura suggested, presents a tug of war for Mr Suga to manage intra-party factional interests – and that of the wider business community – as he tries to win cross-faction support in a pivotal election year.

Mr Suga is expected to dissolve the Lower House for a general election in September, in the hope of

winning a strong public mandate before he faces an internal vote for the LDP presidential vote in the same month.

Despite Mr Suga's dwindling public support, Mr Tamura believes that he has a good chance to win – "unless something catastrophic happens during or after the Olympics" – due to the fragmented opposition. Mr Tamura added that Japan can work closely with Singapore to take on their common challenge of an ageing population and low fertility rate.

Japan's strengths lie in developing technology and medical treatment for the elderly, he said, citing the drug for Alzheimer's disease de-

veloped by pharmaceutical firm Eisai with US partner Biogen that was approved by the US Food and Drug Administration this month.

But Singapore can offer lessons on accepting diversity, given its ethnic composition and open immigration policies, as well as flexibility in how it has developed upgrading programmes like SkillsFuture to give careers a second wind.

"Covid-19 has accelerated a lot of transformation in Japan. But to properly mobilise this change, it must better connect with other parts of the world," Mr Tamura added.

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