

# A warm welcome to Kamala Harris

Singapore highly values America's role in the region. But there are concerns that need to be aired.



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For *The Straits Times*

The Vice-President of the United States, Ms Kamala Harris, will visit Singapore from tomorrow to Tuesday. The people of Singapore warmly welcome her visit for three reasons.

The first reason is that she is the first woman elected to that office. This is very significant to Singapore because we have designated this year as the Year of Celebrating SG Women. She is an inspiration to the women of Singapore.

The second reason is that she is the first US vice-president of Indian descent. Her brilliant mother, Dr Shyamala Gopalan, was from Chennai, Tamil Nadu. She earned a PhD from the University of California at Berkeley and was an endocrinologist. She devoted her life to research on breast cancer. Many Singaporeans will feel a connection to Ms Harris, because they are Tamil-speaking and trace their roots to Tamil Nadu.

The third reason is that she represents the most powerful country in the world. Her visit conveys the message that Asean and the countries of this region are important to her country.

Her visit follows upon the recent visit of US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin to Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines, and the visit of Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman to Indonesia, Thailand and Cambodia.

The US has played a very important role in the political and economic life of this region.

Politically, the US has championed the post-World War II, rules-based international order and multilateralism. The US supports the international rule of law, international law, and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

The US supports Asean and the central role which it plays in the region's forums and economic integration. The presence of US forces in the region has helped to maintain peace and security and a balance of power.

Economically, the US supports free trade. The opening of its enormous market to exports from Asia has helped countries of the region to break out of poverty and catch up with the West. US investment, trade and official development assistance have helped the region to prosper.

One of the best things which the



Above: US Vice-President Kamala Harris' upcoming visit to Singapore conveys the message that Asean and countries of this region are important to the US, says the writer.

Left: US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin fist bumping Senior Minister Teo Chee Hean as Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen looked on, after Mr Austin spoke at the 40th International Institute for Strategic Studies Fullerton Lecture in Singapore last month. PHOTOS: REUTERS

**We highly value the constructive role played by the US in the political and economic life of the region. We wish the US well and hope that it will lead the world to a more peaceful, most just and more prosperous world.**

US has done for the region is to invite its bright young men and women to study at some of America's best universities under the Fulbright Foreign Student Programme and other programmes.

#### AREAS OF CONVERGENCE

There are many areas of convergent interest between the

US and Singapore, and the US and Asean.

The first area is in trade and investment. The US is the largest investor in Singapore and Asean. The US is Singapore's third-largest trading partner in goods, and Singapore's top trading partner in services. Singapore is the third-largest Asian investor in the US, after

Japan and the Republic of Korea.

The US and Singapore concluded a free trade agreement in 2003 and it came into force in 2004. To complement this, the two countries should negotiate a new agreement on digital economy.

Another area of convergent interest is climate change. Singapore and the US played an important and constructive role in

negotiating the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change.

The two countries share a commitment to implement that agreement faithfully. There are many opportunities for the two countries to cooperate, such as in green standard-setting, clean energy, green buildings, sustainable transport and green finance.

A third area of cooperation is strengthening the rule of law and multilateralism. For small countries such as Singapore, our very existence and prosperity depend on them.

#### AREAS OF CONCERN

I would also like to share with Vice-President Harris some of the region's concerns.

Is America reliable?

Following the recent events in Afghanistan, many have asked whether the US is reliable. Can the Vice-President assure America's friends and partners in the region that President Joe Biden was right to withdraw US forces from Afghanistan and that this has nothing to do with the reliability of US commitments to its allies and partners?

Is America pro-free trade?

The countries of Asean and Asia have prospered on free trade. Has Mr Biden rejected the protectionist policy of his predecessor? Is he supportive of free trade? Will the US return to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership? The agreement, signed by 11 countries in 2018, had evolved from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which did not come into force after the US withdrew from it in 2016.

Will the US lift its veto over the appointment of appellate judges at the World Trade Organisation (WTO)? The dispute settlement system of the WTO has been paralysed by former president Donald Trump's refusal to approve the appointment of such judges.

Will America clash with China?

Singapore and Asean would like to continue as the good friends of both the US and China. We watch with growing concern the deterioration in the relationship between the two great powers.

We would like the two countries to resolve their differences peacefully. We are concerned that the fiery rhetoric being exchanged by Washington and Beijing may lead to clashes between the two countries over, for example, Taiwan. Can the Vice-President assure us that peace will be maintained and there is no danger of war?

I shall conclude by reiterating my warm welcome to Vice-President Harris. I want to assure her that Singaporeans have a very positive view of her country.

We highly value the constructive role played by the US in the political and economic life of the region. We wish the US well and hope that it will lead the world to a more peaceful, most just and more prosperous world.

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