

# 'MALAYSIA MUST NOT QUIT'

Despite withdrawal of US, there is still much to be gained from pact, says ministry's ex-top official

VEENA BABULAL  
KUALA LUMPUR  
news@nst.com.my

**M**ALAYSIA should not drop out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) despite the withdrawal of the United States from the agreement.

Former international trade and industry ministry secretary-general Tan Sri Dr Rebecca Fatima Sta Maria said Malaysia had built "so much goodwill" with other countries in the due course of negotiations for TPP.

"Why waste the momentum? There are three other countries (who are in the negotiations) with which we don't have Free Trade Agreements - Canada, Mexico and Peru. Let's harness that.

"I think the Mexican market is very, very, very attractive. You won't want to dismiss that so easily. We should build on it as well," she said.

Sta Maria was speaking to the *New Straits Times* after taking part in the 31st Asia-Pacific Roundtable here yesterday as a panelist for a session titled "Wither Economic Cooperation in the Asia Pacific: More Ingredients for the Spaghetti Bowl?"

She said there was still much value to be gained from the pact, adding that a lot of resources and time had been invested in the process by all countries involved.

"Going around and meeting each other whether it was in Asean meetings or APEC meetings... the ministers, leaders and officials met every opportunity they had. At the end, the package was meaningful for every country (involved) and the outcome would have benefited all," said Sta Maria, who is now senior policy fellow at the Economic Research Institute for Asean and



(From left) Peterson Institute for International Economics senior fellow Jeffrey Schott, Singapore Institute of International Affairs senior chairman Associate Professor Simon Tay, Economic Research Institute for Asean and East Asia senior policy fellow Tan Sri Dr Rebecca Fatima Sta Maria and Asian Trade Centre executive director Dr Deborah K. Elms at the 31st Asia-Pacific Roundtable at Hilton Hotel in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. PIC BY MUHD ZAABA ZAKERIA



East Asia.

She called for all the countries involved to now forge ahead using the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) as a platform.

This, she said, could be done by, among others, tweaking the pact's clauses and taking out portions related to the US.

Sta Maria, however, said the role of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) between Asean and its six dialogue partners should not be discounted.

"RCEP is not getting the kind of attention that TPPA had because it was shrouded in controversy as people saw it as the US pushing its agenda. But RCEP (is at an advantage) as it is not viewed as a hegemonic drive by a dominant country or

leadership," she said, adding that she hoped the partnership would make more headway and quicker progress.

Sta Maria also called on Asean to take a page from the US on how it campaigned for TPP by holding prompt, consistent, coordinated, deep and structured engagement with all stakeholders.

In her session earlier, she said Asean nations were "often too polite and focused on speaking with one voice", often leading to delays and under-performing economic cooperation.

On Monday, International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Mustapa Mohamed had said he had not ruled out the possibility of Malaysia's continued involvement in the TPP.

He had said it was important to consider whether Malaysia would miss out on economic opportunities if it sat out while the 10 other countries went ahead with the agreement.

Mustapa had said that if the TPP was going to proceed without US participation, Malaysia needed to ensure that its interests remained protected and the benefits derived from it still outweighed the costs.