

## Time for caution

By Dato' Steven Wong

**AVOID USING FORCE:** *We need to emphasise our differences and strengthen relations*

READ the headlines of the mass media and it is easy to come to the conclusion that while there are global risks and uncertainty, life as we know it, will proceed as usual on an upward trajectory.

The atrocities and mounting death toll in the Middle East, from Syria to Iraq and neighbouring states, are too far and remote to be able to affect the economic and political stability in our part of the world.

Ongoing tensions in the Ukraine and Eastern Europe are even farther away and cannot dislodge us from our comfort zones. The factors leading to these tensions in the first place are either not thought about or discounted. Closer to home, we assume that conflicts in the East and South China Sea will somehow be managed, even if not settled, peaceably.

That large and powerful countries are barely on speaking terms is not seen as cause for concern. At home, demonstrations of religious and racial diatribe and intolerance are not expected to derail the economy.

The weakening of institutional pillars, particularly the rule of law, is not seen by many to be terribly problematic.

Humans have a great psychological tendency to assume the best — that is until events prove incontrovertibly otherwise. They have a habit of filtering out the things that are either discomforting to them or else not in their interest.

Yet, over the span of history if there is one thing discomforting reality, it is the tendency of humans to solve disputes through violence, conflict, coercion and repression. This is through military means but also these days, political.

In an age of democratic and civilised liberal norms, at a time when we are supposed to be educated enough to know the difference between right and wrong, between what works and what does not, we ought to be in a very good place.

And yet, we are not far from it. Might is still considered right and all too often the means still justify parochial, narrow sectarian ends. We preach justice, morality and inclusiveness but, in tribute to Machiavelli, practice the exact opposite. Although countries have accomplished much (actually only some have), there appears to be no hesitation to put everything on the line by advocating the pure unadulterated use of state power to achieve one group's goals.

For the ordinary Malaysian, all this may seem overly bleak. After all, the economy appears to be doing well. The United States is back on the growth path and Eurozone countries seem to be on the road to recovery. China continues to chug along.

But ask anyone involved in the wealth management industry and they will tell you that there are major geopolitical risks. Markets have never really been good at predicting these outcomes until it is too late.

This demonstrates yet again the human tendency to avoid pain, to be complacent and take things for granted. At another level, it inspires those with power (military, political, economic or social) to secure their interests at the expense of others.



*Ongoing tensions in the Middle East and conflicts in the South China Sea can potentially affect our own peace and security if we are not careful.*  
Agency pix

This would help explain why the seemingly most religious zealots, together with the seemingly most educated, altruistic and tolerant, can commit or condone the most destructive, amoral and illogical acts in this day and age.

Malaysia may be special to us but not so special as to remain above-the-fray by all of this. Already, we have seen an escalation of disturbingly unproductive behaviour, ones that do not seem to be sufficiently state or socially sanctioned.

From the war of words to practices that undermine the rule of law and the role of the judiciary, it does not seem premature to sound the alarm bells. Caution and good sense appears to be thrown out the proverbial window. Yet, just turn on to any cable news network and we can see images of the nightmare that we could become. It does not take that much to become fodder for the voracious world media. It begins simply with distraction and neglect.

We must avoid at all costs a Machiavellian Malaysia, one where force is discriminately used to coerce, suppress and purge dissent. More than ever before, we need to emphasise our commonalities, not differences, and strengthen relations.

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