

2017, the year of the eagle and the dragon?

By Tan Sri Rastam Mohd Isa



It will be interesting to see how aggressive United State president-elect Donald Trump would be in pursuing his policies towards or against China. Another question is whether he would continue President Barack Obama's legacy of rebalancing to Asia. AFP pic.

POWER POLITICS: It is in China's interest to assure Trump's administration that its rise and influence will not be a threat

THE year 2016 has been most eventful and challenging for Malaysia and the world. It looks like the next year promises to be more challenging. How do we cope then?

As we edge towards the new year" some 10 per cent of the Malaysian population have been affected and inconvenienced by water supply cuts in the Klang Valley. The works certainly have been ill-timed. Despite the debate, blame game and rhetoric, it still begs the question as to whether in such situations TNB should have provided mobile generators on standby at the water treatment plants, or if water companies should have backup generators to deal with such situations.

While we had water problems, people in Beijing and other parts of northern China have been struggling under heavy smog and air pollution that threaten health and curtail daily activity. A few weeks ago, the people of New Delhi suffered the same fate.

High-profile terrorist activities have occurred in Berlin and Istanbul, and arrests of militants have been made in Malaysia and Indonesia, driving home the point that this scourge remains a major threat to all.

Our water supply burden has certainly caused difficulty and inconvenience. But, it is relatively mild compared with the misery and indignity suffered, for example, by millions in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Rakhine State in Myanmar. Their problems extend way beyond clean water and unpolluted air. Theirs is about survival and the right to live amid years of suffering. The ceasefire and evacuations in Aleppo may not necessarily end the civil war. It could be the beginning of another set of problems in a country and region that have seen recurrent conflict, war and foreign interference since centuries ago.

Malaysia obviously has little leverage in efforts to end the conflicts and suffering in West Asia. However, the strong stand and initiative taken by the government on the situation in Rakhine has at least resulted in frank discussions on the plight of the Rohingya and the problems in Myanmar among Asean foreign ministers at their recent retreat in Yangon. Hope-fully, this will lead to concrete measures to deal with the problem, as outlined by Foreign Minister Dato Seri Anifah Aman. The year 2017 will usher in a number of milestone events that could shape the future of the nation, region and

the world. Two major actors will dominate: the United States and China. It could be the beginning of serious confrontation or renewed cooperation between the eagle and the dragon.

Next month, US president-elect Donald Trump will be inaugurated as president, promising, among others, to make America great again, ease tensions with Russia, challenge China's rise, relook global climate change agreements, renegotiate trade agreements, with emphasis on bilateral deals, and fight terrorism and "radical Islam".

Trump has said he will ditch the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Malaysia and other TPP signatories should already be looking at alternatives. The prospect of having to work out a bilateral trade agreement with the US would be daunting for Malaysia given the agony in a previous exercise undertaken a few years ago, the difficult TPP negotiations that we had to undergo and the uncertain economic conditions that await us in 2017 and beyond.

An early indication of Trump's attitude towards Asia Pacific and the Asean region would be helpful. How aggressive would he be in pursuing his policies towards or against China? He has questioned the "One China Policy", but at the same time named Terry Branstad, governor of Iowa and reportedly a good friend of China President Xi Jinping, as the new US ambassador to China. At the same time, would Trump continue President Barack Obama's legacy of rebalancing to Asia? To make America great, Trump would certainly be pushing for greater defence spending, build up the navy and, perhaps, a more assertive stance on the South China Sea.

Around the autumn of 2017, the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China will be held. While Xi is expected to continue leading the party and nation, a new set of young, dynamic leaders are expected to be chosen to carry on Xi's initiatives and pursue the "Chinese Dream". The state of US-China relations in the coming months could be crucial in determining how the Chinese leadership would position China in the regional and international arena in the near future. It would be in China's interest to assure the Trump administration that China's rise and influence would not be a threat to the US.

Asean will commemorate the 50th anniversary of its establishment next year under the chairmanship of the Philippines. Hopefully, there will be a lot of activities to advance the community building exercise kicked off in Kuala Lumpur in November last year. Inevitably, Asean would be part of the equation in the US-China relationship. Asean centrality, unity and cohesion could be under stress again, depending also on how Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte will play his cards vis-a-vis China and the US. His personal views on these two major powers should not get in the way of his stewardship of Asean. Next year could be a challenging year for the Asean community and Asean would have to be deft in negotiating the difficult terrain ahead.

At home, Malaysia would be celebrating 60 years of independence in 2017. Judging by the proceedings of the recent Umno General Assembly, the 14th General Election could possibly be held in 2017. The year would continue to be challenging, with the world economy expected to continue its low growth trajectory. World trade could continue to be sluggish. These would impact our economy. If Trump succeeds in implementing his "America first" policies, the US may benefit in the short term, but the rest of the world, especially emerging markets, including Malaysia, could be in for a rough ride ahead. If the election is held in 2017, water would not likely be one of the hot issues, unless the utility companies bungle once again. There are bigger ones that the government and public would have to contend with. Nevertheless, let us wish for a happy and prosperous new year in spite of the daunting prospects.

The writer is chairman and chief executive of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies Malaysia