

What Asean wants: Powerful, peaceful, rich China

By Tommy Koh

MOST of the Asean countries have a benign view of China. This is based in part on their reading of Chinese history and, in part, on the behaviour of China in the past 20 years.

Our understanding of Chinese history leads us to conclude that, except for the two periods when China was ruled by the Mongols in the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) and the Manchus under the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), it was not an aggressive or expansionist state. On the contrary, China was frequently invaded by foreigners. Its preoccupation has been to defend its sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity.

China's relations with South-east Asia go back many centuries. During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the kings and sultans of South-east Asia acknowledged China as the superior power and civilisation. They sought China's protection and rendered tribute to the Chinese emperors. A sultan of Sulu and a sultan of Brunei, for example, died while they were in China.

Their tombs have been maintained by the Chinese authorities through the centuries.

In subsequent centuries, China turned inward and declined. At the same time, the West colonised many of the countries in South-east Asia. During the period of Western domination, relations between China and South-east Asia progressively declined.

However, during the early part of the 20th century, the Chinese diaspora in South-east Asia played a crucial role in supporting Sun Yat Sen's revolution to overthrow the Qing Dynasty and introduce republican rule. There are centres in Singapore and Penang, Malaysia to honour Sun and to commemorate the contributions of the Chinese communities of the two countries to the 1911 revolution and the end of dynastic rule in 1912.

During the Japanese invasion of China, many idealistic young men and women in South-east Asia of Chinese descent volunteered to help China. Some volunteered to drive the trucks which brought much needed fuel, food and other essentials, through the perilous mountains of Myanmar and Yunnan, to Kunming.

Many lost their lives. Others were stranded in China when the project was abandoned. Other young men brought relief by air, piloting decrepit planes in a squadron dubbed the Flying Tigers, with US General Claire Lee Chennault. It is only in recent years that the archives of China and Singapore have curated exhibitions to honour the memories of those brave young men and women.

After World War II, many countries in South-east Asia gained their independence. Relations between the newly independent countries and the People's Republic of China went through some difficult years during the 1960s and 1970s, because of the Cold War and because some of the Asean countries were fighting against insurgencies which had the support of external parties, including China.

The tour by then Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping to Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore in 1978 was a turning point. Relations between China and Asean have grown better and stronger in the past 20 years. The conclusion of the Asean-China Free Trade Agreement was a critical moment. Today, China is Asean's No.1 trading partner.

Asean wants China to be a strong and prosperous country. The reason is that Asean has benefited from China's growing prosperity. Asean prefers a China which is exporting goods, services and investments. A weak and disgruntled China would be more difficult for Asean to deal with than a strong and prosperous China.

However, as China's power continues to rise, it should be very sensitive in its dealings with its smaller neighbours. In China's conduct of its disputes with Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam, in the South China Sea, it should scrupulously eschew the use of force or the threat to use force.

The disputes should be settled peacefully, through negotiations, mediation, arbitration or adjudication or by way of joint development. The disputes should also be settled in accordance with international law, especially the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

During the past two decades, China has pursued a policy of good neighbourliness towards its neighbours in South-east Asia. China has also been generous towards and supportive of the Asean countries. This has gained China enormous goodwill. China should not squander this goodwill, but continue to treat its neighbours with equality and mutual respect. As China grows more powerful, it should learn to speak more softly and exercise its power with great sensitivity.

The rise of China is the biggest story of this century. As I look to the future, my wish for China is that it will be inspired by the China of the Tang Dynasty (618-906).

During that dynasty, China was a superpower. It was rich, cultured and powerful. It was at peace with itself and with the world. It was cosmopolitan and open to other countries and civilisations. China had good relations with all countries, including those in Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe.

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