

# 2022: A year of fear, sorrow, hope and joy

Fear at the prospect of war over tensions in Europe and Asia, sorrow over the situation in Myanmar, hope for an end to the coronavirus pandemic, and joy at celebrating three important anniversaries



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For *The Straits Times*

As I look forward to the new year, I feel fear, sorrow, hope and joy. Why do I have such mixed emotions? I do so because they reflect the realities of the world we live in.

## TO BE FEARFUL

What do I fear the most in 2022? I fear the prospect of war between Russia and Ukraine and between the United States and China.

Ukraine used to be part of the Soviet Union. It became independent in 1991. There are strong historical and cultural links between Ukraine and Russia. There is also a significant number of ethnic Russians living in the eastern part of Ukraine.

The central question is whether, in view of these facts, Ukraine should remain in the Russian sphere of influence, join Nato or be a neutral country. The Ukrainians want to join the Western military alliance and Russia objects, saying that it would pose a threat to its security. Russia wants a guarantee from Nato that it would not admit Ukraine.

Talks will be held soon to try to resolve the dispute peacefully. If the talks fail, Russia may invade Ukraine, resulting in a war between them. Although neither the US nor Nato would come to the defence of Ukraine, the result would be a further deterioration of the already bad relations between Russia and the US, and between Russia and the EU.

A war between the US and China

would be a disaster for the two countries and for the world. I have grown increasingly nervous about the danger that the US and China could clash over Taiwan.

The Chinese civil war between the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Communist Party of China (CPC) took an unexpected turn in 1949, when the KMT retreated from the mainland to Taiwan. The CPC's ambition is to end the civil war by taking over Taiwan. The KMT's ambition is to take over the mainland.

Those two parties share the same view that the mainland and Taiwan belong together. The governing party of Taiwan, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), does not share the same narrative. It believes that Taiwan should become an independent country.

China will use force, if necessary, to prevent Taiwan from becoming an independent country. The US used to be ambiguous about whether it will defend Taiwan in the event of a war between China and Taiwan.

US President Joe Biden has removed the ambiguity and has declared that the country will defend Taiwan. In the event of such military action, Japan will support the US. The stakes are very high. This could lead to World War III.

## TO BE SORROWFUL

My heart is filled with sorrow when I look at the situation in Myanmar.

Myanmar was making good progress on its road to democracy. On Feb 1 this year, that progress was brought to a halt by a military coup. The military government seems determined to stay in power and is using lethal force against its opponents.

Although the military leader attended a special Asean summit and accepted a five-point consensus, he has since obstructed



Myanmar actress Paing Phyo Thu holding up the three-finger salute on Feb 17, during one of many protests this year against the coup. The writer hopes Myanmar's military government can be persuaded to end the violence resulting from the coup and return to the negotiating table. PHOTO: NPTIMES

the implementation of the consensus.

The United Nations has appointed a Singaporean, Dr Noeleen Heyzer, as its special envoy for Myanmar. Let's hope that she and the Asean envoy will succeed in persuading the military government to end the violence and to return to the negotiating table. In the meantime, the Myanmar economy has collapsed and the people are suffering. In addition, the International Court of Justice is considering whether Myanmar has committed genocide against the Rohingyas.

## TO BE HOPEFUL

We must always have hope. According to the scientific data, all previous pandemics have ended after one to two years. Based on past experience, I hope Covid-19 will fizzle out in 2022. There is, however, no guarantee that it will do so. Covid-19 seems to be a very wicked virus and has an infinite capacity to reinvent itself.

Unlike Greta Thunberg, the young Swedish environmental campaigner, who declared November's global climate summit COP26 in Glasgow a dismal failure, I think a lot of progress was achieved. It kept alive the hope that we can limit the rise of global temperature to 1.5 deg C. The leaders of the world agreed to phase down the use of coal by 2050, to end deforestation by 2030 and to start the trading of carbon credit, in accordance with agreed rules.

Let's hope that COP27 next year, in Egypt's Sharm El-Sheik, will consolidate the achievements of Glasgow and make progress in the areas in which this year's summit failed to do.

## TO BE JOYFUL

We should be joyful in celebrating three important anniversaries in 2022.

### 1 Unclos at 40

The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, or Unclos in short, was adopted in 1982, after nine years of negotiation. It came into force in 1994. It has 168 parties, including the European Union. There is a Singapore connection to Unclos. In the final year of the conference, I was elected as its president.

Why is Unclos an important treaty? It is an important treaty for several reasons.

First, the oceans cover 70 per cent of the earth's surface. They are a source of food for the people of the world. They are the highways for shipping and maritime trade. They function as the blue lungs of the planet. Unclos seeks to regulate all aspects of the uses of the oceans and their resources.

Second, Unclos has given the world clear legal rules on the maximum breadth of the Territorial Sea, the extent of the exclusive fishing rights of coastal states, special regimes of passage for ships and aircraft through and over international straits and archipelagos, and so on.

Third, Unclos is a victory for international cooperation, for multilateralism, and for the rule of law. Because of Unclos, there is peace at sea.

### 2 Forum of small states at 30

The UN has 193 members. The majority of the members are small countries. The world favours the big and strong. Small countries often feel that they are being

treated as second-class citizens. A glaring sample of this inequality can be seen in the composition of the UN Security Council. The five permanent members – US, China, Russia, France and UK – are big countries.

In 1992, Singapore took an important initiative at the UN. It established the Forum of Small States (Foss). Any country whose population is below 10 million is eligible to join.

Foss has 108 members. This is more than half the membership of the UN. Since every country has one vote at the UN, the combined voting power of Foss gives it salience. Before Foss, it was difficult for small countries to get elected to various UN bodies. It is less difficult now.

By joining forces, Foss has empowered small countries in other ways. The big countries can no longer afford to ignore the small ones. The senior officials of the various international organisations welcome opportunities to meet with Foss.

Foss has amplified the voices of the small countries. It has also strengthened the negotiating leverage of small countries. We still live in an unequal world. Foss has made it a little less unequal.

### 3 Asef at 25

The second prime minister of Singapore, Mr Goh Chok Tong, is responsible for many important international initiatives. One is the Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem). Mr Goh felt it was strategically important to build a bridge linking Asia and Europe. He proposed a summit meeting between the leaders of Asia and Europe. This was held in Bangkok in 1996.

At the Asem summit in Bangkok, PM Goh proposed the

establishment in Singapore of the Asia-Europe Foundation (Asef). The proposal was adopted by the summit. The objective of the foundation is to promote better mutual understanding between the people of Asia and Europe. We seek to achieve this objective by bringing together students, youth, intellectuals, artists, parliamentarians, think-tanks, universities, museums and so on, from the two regions.

I was appointed the first executive director of Asef. My deputy was from France. My other senior colleagues came from Germany, UK and China. We were energised by our historic mission. I was in Europe almost every month, helping to organise inter-regional meetings or speaking at conferences. It was a very busy period of my life.

During my tenure, Asef had 13 Asian members and 15 European members, plus the European Commission. Today, Asef has 21 Asian members and 30 European members. The substantial increase in its membership is one indication of the success of Asef.

The year 2022 will be one of contrasts. There will be highs and lows. The danger of war has not abated. It is hard to be optimistic about Myanmar. However, I expect progress in our fight against Covid-19. I expect the world economy to recover. I expect further progress in our quest for a more inclusive or sustainable world.

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