
ESSAY

Why America Should Drop Its Obsession With Being No. 1

A letter from Singapore to the next U.S. president.

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By *Danny Quah*

What would you want to tell the next U.S. president? FP asked nine thinkers from around the world to write a letter with their advice for him or her.

Dear Madam or Mr. President,

Congratulations on leading the United States in a political refresh. From here in Southeast Asia, we have for decades admired and valued your country's many gifts to the world. The United States gained our admiration by sharing with us your American Dream, showing how you succeeded, and leading by example.

But there is no denying that things have changed. Even the outcomes for which you early on fought—multilateralism, or a level playing field; a jointly stronger world economy—now seem to work against you. Toward the end of the 20th century, you advanced three grand ideas: political convergence, economic efficiency, and comparative advantage. These promised a more prosperous and egalitarian global society. But they have not delivered the outcomes for which you had wished. That must be dispiriting and exhausting.

However, I believe the world can continue to work well for you and, indeed, for all of us. To succeed, we only have to avoid gridlock. We don't have to explicitly cooperate or even agree.

I have three suggestions.

First, ask yourself what really matters; forget that talk about being the world's No. 1. Do you know what will happen to the American people's way of life and the U.S. system of government if you become No. 2? Absolutely nothing.

It makes exactly no difference to how we in Southeast Asia behave and engage with you or

with China or with anyone else. We understand that a country might be No. 1 because it truly excels. Or it might be No. 1 just because it deliberately keeps others from rising. You come to Southeast Asia and ask us to choose between you and China, invoking the image of the both of you locked in great-power competition. We have already said we will not choose.

Second, what we think really matters is to take care of your people. The plight of the unfortunate, the weak, and the vulnerable in your own society doesn't fit the success you claim for your national economic and social development. Why is your system so underperforming that the bottom 50 percent of your population today is barely better off than it was decades ago?

Third, be at ease in the world. This doesn't mean closing yourselves off to where you are only surrounded by friends to your north and south and by fish to your east and west. Nor are we asking for the other extreme, that you run around the world looking to pitch in on every single global public-good project. That is a sure formula for overreach.

Instead, we want you to pursue only your self-interest. As economist Adam Smith pointed out in *The Wealth of Nations*, we expect food on our dinner table not because we think the butcher, brewer, or baker benevolent. It is precisely because we know they are self-interested that we rely on them for our meals.

We in Southeast Asia ask only for inadvertent cooperation. In our region, we already practice this. Different individual nations have overlapping territorial claims in the South China Sea. Even though everyone's interests are obviously in mutual conflict and each of us has our own agenda, we nonetheless were able to come together with a collective agreement over that body of water. By contrast, trying to get cooperation through agreement doesn't generally work because concordance can be difficult to reach. The Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal, over which we and you labored for years, quickly dissolved when at the last minute you alone decided it didn't work for you. When full cooperation is needed, not quite reaching it can be an epic fail.

Next, let me be frank. We don't want you running around pitching in everywhere because sometimes when you do that, you mess things up. When you don't have your heart in a project or you're not particularly good at it or you don't understand what the rest of us want, feel free to step back into friends-and-fish territory. We are quite comfortable with plurilateralism, where we each keep to our own side of the fence regarding those problem domains where we would otherwise disagree. The world does not have to be all multi-lateralism all the time.

Here's how these three suggestions might translate into policy. Remember that Southeast

Asians go by evidence. When we see what you proclaim to be true, say no more; we're in. But show it—don't shout it.

Once you give up on the obsession with being No. 1, your engagement with China no longer needs to be confrontational. There is a win-win outcome possible here, where China continues to become richer and you enjoy economic security.

Your leading diplomats have talked about the ebb and flow of democracy in your own nation. Antony Blinken, prior to becoming secretary of state, noted how even as democracy was in retreat around the world, so too in America, with then-President Donald Trump “taking a two-by-four to its institutions, its values, and its people every day.” Yet for so long you were so convinced that your political and social values were universalist—and that your brand of democracy was robust and resilient.

If the level playing field built on multilateralism and globalization—wonderful ideas and institutions that you gifted the world—is being undermined by those who don’t obey the rules, the right solution is to figure out why this system is so fragile and easily manipulated. It is not the right solution to have your protectionist, anti-globalization forces tear down a system that has brought hundreds of millions of people around the world out of poverty and provided opportunity for continued advancement here in Southeast and East Asia.

There will be those around you who insist on calling this time of U.S.-China rivalry a new cold war. Resist that language. In the 20th-century Cold War between you and the Soviet Union, your antagonist attempted to provide an ideology and a socioeconomic system that threatened the American people’s way of life and undermined the U.S. idea of government. Today, Beijing, for all its faults, comes nowhere close to having any such designs on U.S. society and government. In today’s rivalry with China, you face the threat of losing American jobs, of U.S. industries being dismantled, of ghost towns emerging out of where your middle-class communities now thrive. No one ever saw anything like this in your contest with the Soviets. Calling this time a cold war is an attempt at reviving a playbook that worked once against a different rival.

From Southeast Asia, we recognize that there is a two-way causality and an interconnectedness between your domestic challenges and your international conduct.

Improving the well-being of the weak and vulnerable in your society and providing them opportunity through strong domestic public institutions and infrastructure and open world-class universities will help not just your own social cohesion and fabric but again make you both our envy and idol.

In 1967, Richard Nixon wrote of China: “There is no place on this small planet for a billion of its potentially most able people to live in angry isolation.” Ever since then, we have worked hard to build a world that made room for a rising China. In Southeast Asia and in all the rest of the world, we don’t now have the capacity to build a world that also makes room for a dysfunctional and insecure United States. We want America in our world—just as we want China in it, too.

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