INSIGHT

Rise of the technocrat

Parag Khanna explains why Asians, no longer in thrall to democracy, are choosing pragmatic governance

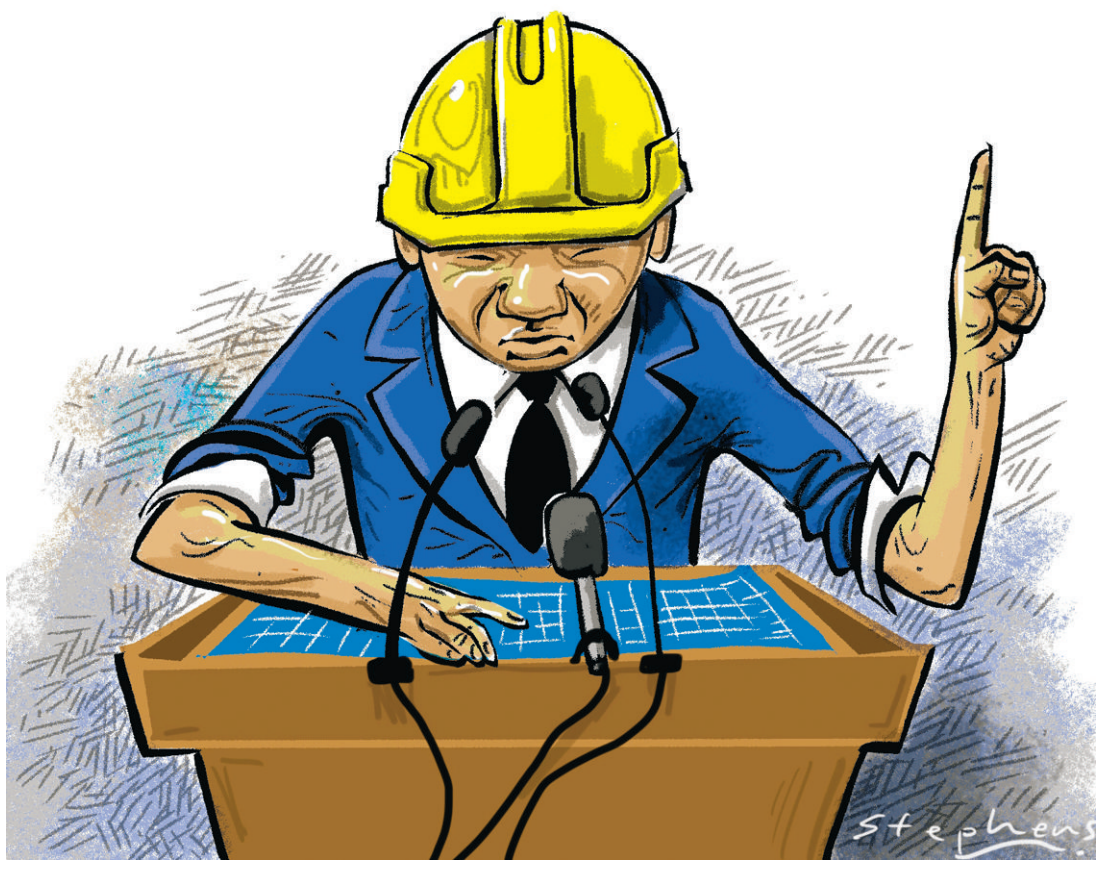
After a 2016 that will forever be remembered for Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, most commentators have taken it as a foregone conclusion that 2017 will feature yet more populist electoral victories in Europe, to say nothing of the global fallout from Trump's planned trade policies. Combined with slow global economic growth and rising geopolitical tensions, it is all too easy to assume that the world is going down the same path of nationalism and protectionism that sparked the first world war and the Great Depression.

But what may be true for the West need not derail the East, where governments have generally stayed a pragmatic course. The difference is more than just politics; it is about systems. While Western democracies are creaking, Asia's more technocratic governments are committing maximum effort to address the underlying challenges of infrastructure, education and jobs. This is good both for Asia and the world.

In the Western and particularly American narrative, a deep complacency has set in that confuses politics with governance, democracy with delivery, process with outcomes. Good governments are equally focused on inputs and outputs. Their legitimacy comes both from the process by which the government is selected and the delivery of what citizens universally proclaim they want: solid infrastructure, public safety, clean air and water, reliable transportation, ease of doing business, good schools, quality housing, dependable childcare, freedom of expression, access to jobs, and so on.

The Asian technocratic mindset is that delay in getting these things done is itself a form of corruption. Instead of indulging in perpetual blame games, good technocracies are always out to solve their problems. The only ideology of technocracy is pragmatism.

As far as Asian societies are concerned, for democracy to be taken seriously, it has to deliver



Because Asian societies are modernising, they will evolve towards better governance that balances political openness with goal-oriented technocracy. But there's no way they want to wind up as the divided societies they once were and that Western nations have become. As far as Asians are concerned, for democracy to be taken seriously, it has to deliver.

Technocracy, then, is a more important feature of Asia's future than democracy. Asia's major democracies – India, Indonesia and the Philippines – are all in the process of getting their act together in the hope of emulating the region's better-run technocracies.

This means not just Singapore and China but even Malaysia, Vietnam and Thailand. Malaysia is mired in corruption but is a stable, modern multi-ethnic state with first-world infrastructure and rising prosperity. Vietnam is a one-party regime yet has massively modernised the country and reduced poverty. Thailand's 2014 coup ousted incompetent democratic leaders in favour of a military junta, and Thais backed a permanent political role for the military in a referendum last year. These aren't ideal regimes, but they are superior in their post-colonial performance than numerous large Asian democracies such as Bangladesh.

It is precisely because India, Indonesia and the Philippines have each endured decades of forgettable or regrettable governments that they have all, in recent years, elected leaders with explicitly technocratic pretensions. Indians, Indonesians and Filipinos are no longer content to be part of vibrant commercial societies but with dysfunctional governments. Fed up with patronising cliches about how they thrive despite their political systems, they have voted in governments with no-nonsense agendas focused on infrastructure, jobs, education and technology.

In Asia, technocracy has become a form of political salvation. Democracy eventually gets sick of itself and votes for technocracy.

In the long run, the quality of governance matters more than regime type. That is why the most important institution in a technocratic society is not the office of the prime minister but the civil service. In major Western countries such as the US and UK, the professional civil service has withered since Reagan and Thatcher. In America, independent agencies have lost autonomy, and government bureaucrats have no upward mobility as the top ranks are all reserved for political appointees and friends of the president. In Britain, after the Brexit results emerged, a civil service committee was hastily cobbled together to examine the implications of the decision.

Pragmatic leadership that avoids excessive populism should be circumspect about nationalism

In a proper technocracy, the civil service studies the scenarios and consequences of issues before the parliament or people decide which course to take – not after. Not surprisingly, today it is Singapore's Civil Service College and the China Executive Leadership Academy Pudong that have become the epicentres for rigorous thinking about how to bridge data and governance, with emphasis on foresight and economic master-planning.

What Asia now needs most is more technocratic thinking at the regional level. Indeed, pragmatic leadership that avoids excessive populism should also be circumspect about nationalism. China, Japan and India must be careful not to let the messaging aimed at domestic audiences seep into their foreign policies, which have on the one hand already sparked international crises in Asian waters while also fortunately stopping short of uncontrolled escalation.

But hope is not the strategy of true technocracies.

If Asian powers want to be seen – both individually and collectively – as the world's geopolitical and geo-economic centre of gravity, then they will have to take credible steps towards resolving deep insecurities.

For example, there are ample precedents for joint exploration and revenue-sharing agreements over disputed maritime boundaries and energy deposits that can be applied to the South and East China sea regions. An independent working group of experts from littoral states could determine the political contours of such an agreement, while an international consortium of oil and gas companies could financially distribute the gains from extraction in these waters.

Such a step would go a long way towards reassuring the world that Asian nations don't require Western security forces to guarantee freedom of navigation and commerce in the world's most heavily transited waterways on which most global goods trade depends. Asia now carries the mantle of defending the continued globalisation of trade, but must do its part to maintain the stable foundation of global markets as well.

The combination of Brexit and Trump has made 2016 the year when the hegemony of Western political thought finally crumbled. Every country is now in the same race, not to emulate America but to deliver security and welfare to its population by whatever means necessary. In this new competition, rigorous technocratic approaches will prove superior to haphazard democratic cycles. Winners and losers in the 21st century will be determined not by hewing to a Western political arc but through rigorous technocratic learning and adaptation.

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Tightrope act as India balances superpower ties

Neeta Lal says India knows economic links with China are too valuable to risk over other geopolitical tussles, which calls for a delicate balance amid warming relations with the US

The year 2016 witnessed a subtle yet significant recalibration of China-India ties. Though Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping (習近平) had several opportunities to engage at multilateral forums like the G20, and the BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summits, relations between the neighbours seem to have hurtled downhill, as both leaders often found themselves on opposing sides while pursuing their respective foreign policy agendas.

In a bid to assert regional primacy, India resumed testing its intercontinental Agni V missile. With a powerful strike range of about 5,500km, the message to China is that India is capable of hitting targets anywhere across its vast territory. Further, defence cooperation with Vietnam, a civil nuclear deal with Japan and direct references to the South China Sea in bilateral statements have underlined an increasingly assertive India under nationalist Prime Minister Modi.

India has also campaigned against China's opposition to its membership of the Nuclear Suppliers' Group, lack of enthusiasm for India's claim for permanent membership of the UN Security Council, and its block on UN sanctions against Maulana Masood Azhar – chief of Jaish-e-Mohammed, an extremist Islamist group blamed for several attacks on Indian soil. India would be averse to abandon the gains of a growing economic partnership that China also remains keen to sustain, but shifting Asian power equations have created fresh fissures in bilateral ties.

Beijing's territorial expansion and its growing regional heft, as well as deepening alliances with Pakistan and Russia, are alarming Delhi. China's outreach to Sri Lanka and the Maldives, through its "Maritime Silk Road" initiative, is seen by India as encroachment in its own strategic backyard, and conflicts with Delhi's "Act-East Policy" to bolster ties with neighbours in Southeast and East Asia.

Beijing is also rapidly developing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, part of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, which India feels is likely to be a threat to national security. Territorial disputes also continue to create rancour, with the border issue remaining as fraught as ever decades on, amid sporadic skirmishes in the mountainous reaches of Arunachal Pradesh.

To find resonance with both [China and the US], Delhi should try to regain its economic growth trajectory

Though growing economic ties are often used by both sides to tide over political differences, the huge trade deficit with China (nearly US$53 billion in 2015-16) rankles Delhi. With China challenging US primacy in Asia, balancing relations with both superpowers is proving to be a high-wire act for Delhi. Matters are not helped with Russia joining the China-Pakistan axis and Delhi partnering with the US and Japan.

Amid this geopolitical churn, India sees a growing political and economic convergence with the United States, with which it enjoys robust trade ties. Big-ticket military and defence alliances are also under way. Washington has helped Delhi contain cross-border terrorism from Pakistan while publicly buttressing India's membership of the Security Council and the NSG. India and the US share a common goal of ensuring the safety and security of the sea lanes in the Indo-Pacific. The two have also decided "in principle" to sign a logistics support agreement allowing US and Indian militaries to share facilities for refuelling, supplies and spares.

But India can't dismiss the urgency of maintaining cordial relations with a powerful neighbour like China. And although US President-elect Donald Trump's brusqueness towards Beijing – while describing India as a "strategic trading power" and "important Pacific partner"– may please Delhi, it would be naive to assume that it will reap any significant benefits from US-China hostility. It is more likely that Trump is biding his time to work out a formula that will give him economic and political leverage over Beijing.

Despite their power tussles, bilateral US-China relations will assume far greater importance for the two superpowers than their relations with India. Delhi recognises this and, to find resonance with both, should try to regain its economic growth trajectory and emerge as an attractive global investment destination. And while expanding its partnership with the US, Delhi will also have to learn to "manage" Beijing. A tightrope act for sure, but one that India will simply have to walk.

Neeta Lal is a New Delhi-based senior journalist



Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi often find themselves on opposing sides with respect to foreign policy. Photo: AP

British files reveal HK needs an archives law, now more than ever



Gary Cheung says declassified files on a pre-handover deal over direct elections underline the need to preserve public records, especially in the electronic age

Direct Legislative Council elections in Hong Kong for 1988 were killed off after Britain and China secured a secret deal in October 1987, according to recently declassified British cabinet files from the National Archives in London. Under Beijing's "private commitment", provisions for direct Legco elections would be included in the Basic Law if they were not introduced until after it was promulgated three years later.

The secret deal was struck when a consultation on the development of a representative government was under way. The local government was criticised at the time for manipulating the views of some Beijing-friendly groups to ensure that no clear mandate for direct elections in 1988 emerged, even though many surveys showed more than 60 per cent support.

A note to then British prime minister Margaret Thatcher on October 2, 1987, from then foreign secretary Geoffrey Howe, called the initial findings of the consultation "highly satisfactory". Eventually, Hong Kong introduced 18 directly elected seats in 1991.

I went through a number of declassified files relating to Hong Kong from 1986 to 1989 and, as a supporter of the introduction of direct elections for 1988, I was furious to learn how democratic development was delayed because of the behind-the-scenes deal.

Yet credit is due to the British government for keeping the well-documented records, as required under its Public Records Act of 1958, which says all government records should be transferred to the National Archives after 30 years.

Maintenance of public records is vital for institutional memory and is a key component of good governance. Public officials would behave more responsibly if they knew all may be disclosed decades later. However, the absence of an archives law means details on controversial issues, such as the scrapping of ex-chief executive Tung Chee-hwa's target of 85,000 flats a year, or his feud with former chief secretary Anson Chan Fang On-sang, may never be revealed.

The proliferation of easy-to-delete electronic records adds to the fears of those who have long called for an archives law to prevent a historical black hole. In 2011, the government admitted to destroying documents that, if stacked up, would be almost three times the height of the Two IFC building, before moving into its new headquarters in Tamar. Are records on discussions between Chief Secretary Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor, who spearheads the controversial Palace Museum project in West Kowloon, and Beijing being properly kept?

The absence of an archives law leaves it up to bureaus and departments to transfer documents to the Government Records Service. In 2014, the offices of the Chief Executive, the Chief Secretary and the Financial Secretary – the nerve centre of the administration – transferred a total of 130 records to the service. That accounted for 0.2 per cent of the total records from all government departments transferred to the government archivists that year.

Campaigning for chief executive in 2012, Leung Chun-ying signed a press freedom charter drafted by the Hong Kong Journalists Association, which included a pledge to facilitate the enactment of a freedom of information law to grant the public easier access to public archives.

Retired judge Woo Kwok-hing, who will be contesting the chief executive election in March, has pledged his support for enacting an archives law. Another candidate, Regina Ip Lau Suk-yee, said she supported the move "in principle".

It remains to be seen if Lam and John Tsang Chun-wah, also expected to join the race, will endorse the idea. It is time to renew the momentum for an archives law before it is too late.

Gary Cheung is the Post's political editor

Livelihood issues come first

Holden Chow says our next leader must continue to make long-term investments for the good of HK, and candidates must explain how they will do so

The news that Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying will not be seeking re-election has disappointed some people, including myself, but I respect his decision. Though he failed to establish a good working relationship with the pan-democrats, Leung should be commended for his work on livelihood matters, including the launch of a technology bureau and his efforts to boost housing supply.

The next person to take the top job must sustain this good work. In particular, he or she must continue to push for long-term planning for the good of Hong Kong. The plan to build an artificial island next to Lantau that will house up to 700,000 people, for instance, will benefit future generations and must be supported.

Another important issue is social mobility. Over the past decade, the average income of our white-collar workers has remained largely unchanged while living costs have surged. As a result, their standard of living has declined. How can we generate more income for these hardworking individuals and families? Candidates running for the office of chief executive should explain how they intend to tackle the problem. This means suggesting ways to create more business and enlarge Hong Kong's market share in various industries. Furthermore, candidates must show they can convince Hong Kong people that we must make full use of our ties to the mainland for economic growth, and that escalating the tension between Hong Kong and the mainland will only harm us.

The global economic prospects look bleak. Nevertheless, the Hong Kong government is expecting a budget surplus at the end of this fiscal year. In light of the uncertain economic environment, the financial secretary should raise the upper limit of tax refunds for small and medium-sized enterprises, which are a pillar of our economy.

The government should also invest in technology to enhance SMEs' business opportunities.

Whoever is the next leader, he or she must direct fiscal policy towards making long-term investment. The government should play a role in redistributing wealth, not just uphold the laissez-faire principle. We must not forget that it was the Donald Tsang administration's decision to limit housing supply and suspend the provision of subsidised housing that led to our housing crunch. This is a painful lesson we must learn.

Hong Kong bureaucrats generally dislike trying new things, but the current government has attempted to cut through inertia by launching some bold projects involving long-term commitments, such as the East Lantau Metropolis project.

I hope Leung's successor will continue such efforts.

Holden Chow is a DAB legislator