

Asean can count on EU to remain a steadfast partner, says top official

Nur Asyiqin Mohamad Salleh

In a world turned topsy-turvy, the European Union (EU) will remain a steadfast and predictable partner, consistent in its commitments and positions, vowed a top official of the bloc yesterday.

"We may be an imperfect union... but you will always know where we stand, and you will always know you can count on us," Ms Federica Mogherini, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, said at a lecture organised by NTU's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

Not once during her 15-minute speech did she name the United States, but its shadow loomed throughout, as Ms Mogherini sought to assure, again and again, in the wake of upheavals caused by the Trump administration, that the EU would not waver in its global commitments.

"In a world that is terribly unpredictable and unstrategic, you can count on us as a predictable and reliable partner, always," she said.

Ms Mogherini, who co-chaired the Asean-EU ministerial meeting yesterday, added: "We stand clearly on the side of a more cooperative global order. We stand on the side

of international rules, including on delicate issues such as the South China Sea. This is our culture, and this is our interest."

Demand for partnership with the EU these past months has been much stronger than in previous years, she noted.

And the bloc has been reaching out as well, stepping up its engagement with Asean and Asia. The EU, after all, has a clear interest in peace and security as well as economic growth on this side of the globe, said Ms Mogherini.

"A peaceful and prosperous Asia-Pacific is an economic opportunity for the EU as well, so we are looking to get more engaged with Singapore and with this region," she said.

A flurry of free trade pacts between the EU and countries in the region is in the works, with Singapore set to be the first South-east Asian country with free access to the massive EU market once the EU-Singapore free trade agreement is ratified, noted Ms Mogherini.

"Let me say this very clearly:

Trade wars have no winners. They have only losers," she said, in a veiled jab at the brewing trade war between the US and China.

"On the contrary, a good agreement can bring benefits to both sides. A true win-win solution."

The EU is also expanding its role in the security domain, added Ms Mogherini.

But she emphasised: "We will never use our military strength to threaten or to impose anything."

"The more dangerous our world becomes, the more we will invest in international cooperation, in the protection of international law, and in multilateralism."

After her brief and optimistic speech came some hard-hitting questions from the audience of more than 300 people, who quizzed her on prickly issues ranging from Britain's departure from the EU to peace in the Middle East.

The EU is determined to continue – and even increase – legitimate economic and trade engagement with Iran despite the US' withdrawal from the nuclear pact, she said.

"Iran is fulfilling all its nuclear-related commitments. If you manage to have, after 12 years of difficult multilateral negotiations, a deal that holds... you don't throw it away," said Ms Mogherini, adding that the pact is a fundamental part of the global non-proliferation architecture.

Warming relations between the US and Russia, meanwhile, will not soften EU sanctions against Russia, which were imposed in response to the annexation of Crimea, until that conflict is resolved.

"They are linked to a very principled position, which is that borders are not changed unilaterally and by force," said Ms Mogherini, adding that the EU did, however, welcome dialogue between US President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin. "We have always believed in dialogue." The more problems you have, the more your responsibility to talk, she added.

The EU has long been pushing for complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation through peaceful

dialogue and diplomacy, and will continue its policy of critical engagement with North Korea, combining sanctions and pressure with open channels of communication.

"The Singapore summit has generated great hopes all across the world, and I am very grateful to Singapore on the commitment to peace through diplomacy that we share," she said. "I believe we have a collective duty now to accompany the negotiations in all possible ways just as Singapore did by hosting the summit."

The EU and Singapore stand on the same side of global politics, Ms Mogherini said in her speech. Among other things, they share an interest in free and fair international trade, and are perceived as reliable, credible and consistent partners on the global stage.

"So, in a very confused moment for global politics, the EU and Singapore are somehow natural partners, and I believe we must invest in this partnership," she said.

asyiqins@sph.com.sg