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Bush must be open to others' views

K.P. Waran

THE last cliffhanger I remember was who shot JR. It kept the Americans and worldwide followers of the soap opera Dallas in suspense for months before it was revealed that Sue Ellen's sister Kristin (played by Mary Crosby) had pulled the trigger.

For the past five weeks another cliffhanger had viewers switching from one news channel to another as they tried to keep track of the happenings in Florida to find out who would take the hot seat in the Oval Office in Washington.

It was a close call with the US Supreme Court deciding 5:4 to deny Al Gore's insistence that ballots in certain counties be manually counted.

The decision paved the way for George W. Bush to become the 43rd President of the US and only the fourth person to move into the White House after coming second in the popular vote.

Now that the decision has been made, Bush has the arduous task of putting together a strong government which can carry out its programmes and policies.

Although Bush began his election campaign in September last year in a very uncharacteristic fashion - stumbling for a message, hounded by minor missteps and mangled elocution on the campaign trail, he surprised many doubtful voters by effectively competing against Gore in three presidential debates.

It has been reported that in the foreign policy realm, he believes European countries should shoulder more of their defence needs and foreign aid should be directed towards encouraging free-market reforms, and undeserving debtor governments should not be bailed out.

On the Middle East, he has praised the Clinton administration's peace efforts but some of his advisers say the administration has been over-hasty in seeking a deal within its own time-frame.

He has named as Secretary of State Colin Powell, 63, who would be the first black to serve in the post. The retired general was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 1989 to 1993 under the George Bush Sr and Clinton administrations.

It cannot be doubted, that in the unipolar world of today, the US wields a lot of influence. Being one of the most developed and richest nations, it has a strong voice in the international community.

It is hoped that the new Bush administration will be more open to the views of other nations, organisations and individuals, and be fair in making decisions that would have an impact on other countries.

Bush, being a self-proclaimed delegator and macro-manager, is generally expected to have a pool of advisers for foreign policy and other fields and hopefully will be more in touch with the reality of situations in other parts of the world.

It is hoped that he will take a leaf from the pages of his father's book and hold consultations with other leaders before making decisions.

The elder Bush is known to have telephoned world leaders (including Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad) when he wanted their support in major decisions involving the United Nations Security Council.

Many analysts are of the opinion that the Republican President will have a different agenda from Clinton in dealing with Asia including possibly a tougher line on China, reinforced support for Taiwan and will breathe new life into the relationship with Japan.

Washington needs to be pragmatic and practical in its approach and its decisions and policies should not herald a new Cold War that could destabilise the balance of power in Asia.

Decisions on Asia should take into cognisance the intricate relationship between Asian countries and the various mechanisms and confidence-building measures undertaken in the region to ensure stability and harmony.

Apart from bilateral modalities, the Asean-initiated Asean Regional Forum (ARF) which also includes the US, has become an excellent avenue to discuss security issues and ease tensions in the region.

The ARF meeting last July for the first time included North Korea and thus brought together nearly all the major players in Asia, and also Asean's dialogue partners, which makes it possible to hold constructive discussions on issues affecting the region. Being part of the ARF, the US is in a good position to broach any subject on regional security and also listen to the views and explanations of fellow members on the actual situation on the ground.

It is hoped that the Secretary of State, who will most probably be attending the next ARF, will "get the feel" of the situation in Asia before embarking on major changes in US policy towards Asia.

Instead of portraying itself as the "policeman of the world", the Bush administration stands to gain much more respect from the international community by becoming a "friend of the world".

By having advisors well-versed in Asian issues and prepared to engage in dialogues with Asian nations, the new administration can gain the confidence of countries in this region and embark on joint, mutually beneficial programmes

The world, having waited patiently for the complex US system to name its leader, now waits for Bush and his team to spell out its foreign policy objectives. It is hoped these will strengthen ties among nations and bring about a world order where every nation has a role to play.

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