

Bipartisan consensus a ‘blessing’ for Singapore’s foreign policy: Vivian Balakrishnan

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SINGAPORE: Singapore’s foreign policy has been underpinned by bipartisan support and the absence of interference from party politics is a “blessing” that must be maintained.

This was Foreign Affairs Minister Vivian Balakrishnan’s response to a question at the Singapore Perspectives conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) on Monday (Jan 28).

Towards the end of a 90-minute long dialogue session, IPS director Janadas Devan mentioned how “politics stops at the door” when it comes to matters of national interest, and asked the minister how this can be maintained in years to come.

Noting that “foreign policy always begins at home”, Dr Balakrishnan replied: “Because we are successful and united, we are in a happy position where I can tell my colleagues (that) Singapore will never be intimidated or bought.”

On how that has been achieved thus far, he said for any significant foreign policy, an enormous amount of time is spent on discussions within the Cabinet and the opposition is also briefed on these matters.

“I’m glad to tell you that based on my experience so far, there has been no gap. No party politics has supervened or interfered in our pursuit of foreign policy. This is a blessing.”

It will be important to maintain this bipartisan consensus given how Singapore, being a small country, cannot afford “the kind of ruckus, to-ing and fro-ing which often happens in other countries”, added Dr Balakrishnan.

“(It’s) better to take someone into confidence, argue it out privately than to display disunity in Parliament,” he said.

“Certainly the current opposition, they have played that part and we have taken them into confidence so it makes my job so much easier.”

“Very uncertain” world

At the annual conference, Dr Balakrishnan also spoke at length about his observations of the world, which has become “very uncertain” and “volatile”.

This can be seen from brewing “strategic tensions” between the world’s superpowers such as the United States and China; the simultaneous rise of right-wing and left-wing populism that has resulted in a consensus breakdown in the domestic politics of many countries; the deep anxiety, particularly among the middle class, over wage stagnation, future of jobs and rising inequality; as well as concerns about the next endemic.

"We are witnessing a fractured world order due to fractious domestic politics that is caused by a digital disruption," he said.

In a wide-ranging speech that also touched on the industrial revolution and post-war globalisation, Dr Balakrishnan said technology has been a key driving force of change throughout the world economy's history.

Each time there is a major technology breakthrough, "revolutionary shifts" in the means of economic production will follow, which will in turn disrupt societies, change politics and alter the global balance of power.

With the advent of smart technologies, the world is now at a new "digital gilded age", he added.

The rise of robotics, machine learning, artificial intelligence and 5G have revolutionised a myriad of industries ranging from finance, commerce, defence, logistics and health.

This has created winners and losers, according to Dr Balakrishnan.

The former refers to supra-national tech companies, such as Google, Amazon and Facebook, which are growing in political and economic clout given their ownership of data.

On the other hand, losers include workers who have not been able to brush up their skills and have lost their jobs due to these disruptive changes.

Dr Balakrishnan added he is worried that current technological advancements could affect not just blue-collar jobs, but also white-collar roles.

"It's true that new jobs will be created but I worry that they will not be created fast enough to replace old jobs and this will cause further dislocation (and) fractious domestic politics."

In a world where the ownership of smart technology and big data holds the keys to maintaining economic and geopolitical relevance, the foreign minister said: "It is this tech contest and its impact on the economy that underpins the conduct of foreign policy."

"The cut and thrust of politics may dominate our attention from day to day (and) make headlines but in reality, these are just the froth on top of tectonic shifts."

Singapore must stay open

With that, Singapore will need to remain open to businesses and global talent, maintain a fair society, fortify the global multilateral system, diversify partnerships and help Singaporeans be equipped with new skills to face competition head-on.

This is so as to ensure Singapore's relevance – a key principle in the country's foreign policy which remains as salient today as it was in 1965, said Dr Balakrishnan.

"We are a small county with no natural resources. We cannot afford to build walls to shelter our population because hiding from inevitable changes is not a survival strategy."

He added: "So our doors, by definition, must remain open to everyone who wants to engage us and we need to actively create the conditions for that."

This can be done by strengthening the country's air, sea and digital connectivity, while deepening economic links with partner countries around the world. The country will also need to update its laws and put in place safeguards for intellectual property, data and privacy, the minister elaborated.

Singapore will also need to continue upholding the global rules-based multilateral system, and actively contribute to shaping new norms in emerging areas, such as cyberspace and outer space regulations.

Given how technological disruptions can erode borders, revolutionise business models and shift production bases, Dr Balakrishnan noted that the country can remain relevant by diversifying its partnerships.

"No advantage is engraved in stone. We have to be prepared to go beyond conventional markets and we have to be prepared to, sometimes, break safe models and capitalise on new opportunities," he said, citing ASEAN as one burgeoning market to focus on.

But all engagements with its neighbours and the world's major powers will be done in a "principled and disciplined way", stressed the foreign minister.

This is to preserve the country's neutrality. "That is why from time to time, Singapore must have the ability to say 'no' to our neighbours and to say 'no' even to the superpowers ... in a principled and disciplined way."

In closing, Dr Balakrishnan said: "We will never be a global superpower, but we can and we must master the technology if we are to remain successful and preserve our independence to make decisions based on our sovereign interest in the coming age.

"By playing our cards right, we can remain in a sweet spot just like how we have in the past five decades."