

Singapore has to 'run even faster' amid rising competition: Heng Swee Keat

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Singapore has to "run even faster" and evolve its systems to remain relevant to the world, said Acting Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat on Monday (Sep 30).

"If Singapore can no longer make a contribution to the world, we are no longer relevant, then nobody will be interested in our survival, or success," he said on the first day of the Singapore Bicentennial Conference, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies.

He was responding to a question on whether Singapore would diminish in importance - as it had at various points over the course of its 700-year history - at a dialogue moderated by Ambassador-at-Large Professor Chan Heng Chee.

"Do you see a time when Singapore will be marginalised again ... and what should we do?" asked Prof Chan, who is also chairman of the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities at the Singapore University of Technology and Design.

In a rapidly changing and interdependent world, Singapore needs to evolve its systems as well as build strong, cooperative relationships with other countries, said Mr Heng.

Mr Heng, who is also Finance Minister, added that building a sense of unity among people here is key, noting in the past nations had broken up as their citizens did not feel united.

"The sense of unity is critical, the feeling that you and I are Singaporeans, and that we want to make Singapore work," he said.

These were among the wide range of issues Mr Heng tackled during an hour-long dialogue attended by nearly 900 people.

"VOICE OF REASON"

In response to a question from an audience member on whether China's Belt and Road Initiative poses a threat to Singapore's relevance, Mr Heng said that Singapore was a strong supporter of better connectivity and infrastructure, but the country cannot stay still as other nations in the region develop.

"We would like to work with our partners to see how we can all grow together. What it means is that Singapore needs to change and run even faster," he said.

Mr Heng was also asked about what role Singapore should play in the US-China trade war. He said the tensions between both powers are now about a bigger set of issues - such as competing values and systems.

Amid the growing tension between the United States and China, the country hopes to be a "voice of reason", he added.

"Both parties can actually do a lot to deal with major global issues. Both should play a leadership role, in keeping the multilateral system going," he said. "What can Singapore do? We can only work with like-minded countries."

Tackling a question on whether Singapore's fourth-generation leadership would continue the trend of expanding social programmes seen since 2011, Mr Heng noted that Singapore's social and economic policies are closely interlinked.

"If the economy doesn't grow, you would not have the resources to help our people ... however well-meaning we may be," he said.

"For most individuals, having a job is the best that you can do for everyone. Hence our policy about workfare, not welfare, is a very important aspect of it."