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Panel I: Singapore and the World

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Salutations

I would like to begin by thanking Janadas and the IPS family for giving me the honour of moderating this panel. It is a privilege which no money can buy. Professor Wang Gungwu is my Confucius and I am one of his many disciples. I had served George Yeo three times: when he was our Minister for Information, Communication and the Arts; when he was our Minister for Trade and Industry, and when he was our Minister for Foreign Affairs. He was an inspiring and caring boss.

The Topic Of Panel

The topic of this panel is, Singapore and the World. I hope Janadas will not be offended when I say that I do not like the narrative for this panel scripted by IPS. The United States and China are very important countries but the world is bigger than just those two countries. For example, the biggest economy of the world is neither US nor China. It is the European Union.

The top 10 Developments in 2018

In place of the IPS narrative, I offer you my list of the top 10 developments in the world in 2018.

No. 1: Singapore's Place In The World

Singapore's image, brand and soft power rose to an unprecedented height in 2018. This was due to our successful hosting of the Trump-Kim Summit, our successful chairing of ASEAN and the Hollywood blockbuster, Crazy Rich Asians.

No. 2: ASEAN's Successful Year

ASEAN had a very successful year. It managed to maintain its unity, neutrality and centrality. It was adroit in managing its relations with the US, China, Russia, Japan, India and the European Union. For example, ASEAN conducted joint naval exercises with China in 2018 and will do the same with the US in 2019. Under the chairmanship of Singapore, ASEAN launched new initiatives in smart cities, e-commerce and cyber security.

No. 3: The TPP Did Not Die

PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY.

When President Trump pulled the United States out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), many people thought that the TPP would die. The remaining 11 members of TPP modified it to become the CPTPP and it has come into force. It is open to accession by other countries, such as the UK post-Brexit. The moral of the story is that the US is important but it is not indispensable.

No. 4: The Paris Agreement Is Alive and Well

In a similar way, when the US announced its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, some people wondered whether it will survive without the US. The happy news is that no other country has followed the US out of the agreement. Even in the case of the US, many states, cities and leading companies have pledged to honour the commitments made by the Obama Administration. The Contracting Parties recently held its 24th meeting in Poland. The meeting adopted the so-called Katowice Rulebook, for the implementation of the Paris Agreement.

No. 5: Peace or War on the Korean Peninsula?

In 2016 and 2017, there was a danger of a nuclear war between the United States and North Korea. North Korea had acquired the capacity to strike the US mainland with nuclear weapons. This was viewed by the US as an unacceptable threat to its security. In June 2018, President Trump and Chairman Kim had an historic summit in Singapore. They signed a joint communique containing four points. The officials have been unable to agree on how to implement the Singapore communique. The two leaders are planning to hold a second summit soon. The question which I wish to pose to the two panellists is what does Chairman Kim want? Does he want to emulate Deng Xiaoping and open up North Korea or is he dissembling?

No. 6: Free Trade Versus Protectionism

The conventional wisdom is that free trade is a force for good. Thinkers from Adam Smith down to the present have subscribed to this view. The theory is supported by the facts. Many developing countries, especially in Asia, have been able to trade themselves out of poverty. The same is true of globalisation. There is however a counter-revolution, led by the United States. It is to oppose free trade and globalisation and is championing economic nationalism and protectionism. The happy news in 2018 is that the counter-revolutionaries have not prevailed. It is therefore strategically important for us to conclude the 16 nation, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) negotiations, as soon as possible.

No. 7: Multilateralism At Risk

The world has grown increasingly inter-dependent and inter-connected. Trade, travel, technology and globalisation have changed forever the nature of the world we live in. Some of our most important challenges, such as, global warming and climate change, the mass extinction of the species, the warming and acidification of our oceans, terrorism, mass migration, can only be solved through international cooperation and multilateral institutions. In parts of the West, we have witnessed the rise of right wing populists who emphasise nationalism and denounce so-called globalism. They wish to destroy the multilateral institutions, such as, the WTO, UNESCO, etc. We must not allow these right-wing populists to prevail in this fight. At the same time, we must not allow the growing inequality in our societies to produce the phenomenon of the “angry voters”.

No. 8: Messy Middle East

PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY.

The Middle East has never known peace in the last 70 years. The dream of a just peace between Israel and the Palestinians has vanished into the desert air. The cleavage between the Sunnis and the Shiites has deepened and become violent. This is manifested in the proxy wars in Syria and Yemen. The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has become toxic. To add to the complication, four Arab countries, namely, Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have imposed a blockade against Qatar. Incidentally, all five countries are Sunni. In the meantime, ISIS, has lost most of its territory in Syria and has gone international. Its Southeast Asian franchise was responsible for the takeover of Malawi, in the Philippines.

No. 9: Europe Without The UK

The UK is the first country to ask to leave the EU. The departure of the UK is a loss to the EU and a loss to the UK. The two sides have not yet agreed on a divorce agreement. It is only after the divorce agreement has been approved that they will negotiate a new trade agreement, which will govern their relationship post-Brexit. The British Parliament has rejected the divorce agreement. It is unlikely that PM May will hold a second referendum. We are therefore likely to see the UK leaving the EU on 29 March 2019, without any agreement. This will have very serious repercussions for the UK, the EU and other countries such as Singapore.

No. 10: The US and China: Destined For War?

The most important development of 2018 was the paradigm change in the nature of US-China relations. The US intellectual consensus on China has changed. The Americans now believe that the era of cooperation is over and that they have entered a new era of strategic competition. The competition is not just in trade but also in technology, military power and global influence. Vice-President Mike Pence's speech at the Hudson Institute on China, on 4 October 2018, is a fierce attack on China. If the speech represents the Trump Administration's China policy then we have clearly entered a new era. I don't know what is the appropriate word to describe this new era. Is it "containment", "cold war" or "*konfrontasi*"?

In preparation for this meeting, I have re-read three books: (i) Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*; (ii) Michael Pillsbury's *The Hundred-Year Marathon* and; (iii) Graham Allison's *Destined For War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* My questions to Gungwu and George are: First, how would they describe the new era of relations between the US and China? Second, has the rise of China instilled fear in America as the rise of Athens did in Sparta? Third, are the two countries destined for war?

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