

Singapore is in a contested geopolitical space, must adapt to thrive: Experts

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History is a "bloody business" and Singapore has to adapt to great power rivalry or suffer the consequences, say experts.

Speaking at a panel session on War and Wealth at the Singapore Bicentennial Conference on Monday (Sept 30), Oxford University professor of global history Peter Frankopan said that maritime powers saw free trade through the lens of self-interest, as far back as in 1819 when Sir Stamford Raffles set up a new British trading outpost in Singapore.

What Raffles wanted was advantage for British traders, he said, while the Dutch interpreted freedom of the seas as something for their benefit.

Singapore leveraged this competitive dynamic to succeed. "Britain's arrival led to the displacement of the Dutch in the region, just as the Dutch had displaced the Portuguese before then."

Today, there are similar tensions between the US and China in the Indo-Pacific region. "The language which has gotten stronger under the Trump administration is that China is seeking to overturn the global order and even displace the US," he said.

"But if (like Singapore) you're able to adapt and position yourself in a changing world, you are able to reap benefits. If you don't, you suffer the price."

The two-day conference held at the Raffles City Convention Centre is organised by the Institute of Policy Studies, to commemorate Singapore's 200-year history since Raffles' arrival. The panel session on Monday was moderated by Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy dean Professor Danny Quah.

Fellow panellist and associate professor of history at the National University of Singapore, Peter Borschberg agreed that Singapore has always occupied a contested geopolitical space.

For instance, the city-state was once a naval base of Melaka, a gatekeeper to towns along the Johor river, and a rendezvous point for Portuguese and Spanish armadas in the 1500s and 1600s.

And even though it is no longer under a colonial power, there is still competition for control of the Malacca Straits, he added.

"Security before 1819 was multipolar and due to this multipolarity, very fragile. And Singapore may revert to that again one day.

It was a series of reinventions or reincarnations of a settlement with different functions, and (what that means for its future) is something we need to think about."

To a question from Singapore Management University student Victoria Birrell on how Singapore should view China's Belt and Road initiative and manage US-China tensions, Prof Frankopan said the formation of Asean in 1967 showed how the region could take a neutral

approach to great power competition, and "find a way to prosper when the world around you is demanding that you take sides".

"The best thing is to be flexible, understand what's going on the world, and work out how to cooperate with people who are in a position similar to you."