

Singapore must adapt to great power rivalry to thrive, say 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 yesterday, Oxford University professor of global history Peter Frankopan said that maritime powers saw free trade through the lens of self-interest, even 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 to 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 them."

Today, there are similar tensions between the United States 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," Prof Frankopan said.

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

The two-day conference at the Raffles City Convention Centre is organised by the Institute of Policy Studies to commemorate Singapore's 200-year history since Raffles' arrival. Yesterday's panel session was moderated by Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy dean 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 Singapore is no longer under a colonial power, there is still competition for control of the Malacca Strait, he added.

"Security before 1819 was multi-polar and due to this multipolarity, very fragile. And it may revert to that again one day.

"Singapore 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 the audience's question on how Singapore should 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 and understand what is going on in the world, and to work out how to cooperate with people who are in a position similar to you."