

Tougher to articulate Singapore's national interests amid US-China rivalry: New S R Nathan Fellow

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SINGAPORE - It has become more challenging for Singapore leaders to articulate the country's foreign policy interests – and for society to understand them – against the backdrop of sharpening geopolitical rivalry, said international affairs scholar Joseph Liow on Tuesday.

It is right for Singapore not to choose sides between the United States and China, and to choose only its national interests, he said. But what exactly these interests are in relation to the major powers is no longer as evident as before, and Singapore policymakers cannot let up on efforts to explain the issues to the public, Prof Liow said.

The dean of Nanyang Technological University's College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences was speaking at the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) 13th IPS-Nathan Lecture Series, on Navigating Uncertainty: Our Region in an Age of Flux.

It was the first lecture in a three-part series examining the challenges and dynamics that shape South-east Asia, and the strategies that Singapore can take in a rapidly changing global environment.

Prof Liow is the 13th person appointed by IPS as its S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore.

"The US and China are locked in intense strategic competition that grows sharper by the day," he said. Navigating this great power competition is the foremost foreign policy challenge today, he added.

Five paradigms can help observers understand the dynamics behind US-China relations and their trajectory going forward, he said.

The first is China's rise, which challenges the status quo and the US' hitherto dominance – what scholars of international relations call the "power transition theory".

A second factor is a cycle of heightened insecurities, rooted in certain perceptions or misperceptions of each other's intentions.

"China's assertiveness has made smaller regional states feel less secure, resulting in their efforts to strengthen ties with the US. This has in turn made China feel less secure as Beijing accuses the US of trying to contain it. We also see something of this dynamic in the Taiwan Strait," Prof Liow added, referring to how the island has come under increasing military and political pressure from Beijing.

The other three paradigms shaping US-China dynamics are ideology and nationalism, domestic politics, and personality-driven policies. President Joe Biden has cast the US-China rivalry as "democracy versus autocracy", while China under President Xi Jinping is trying to "restore the ideological foundation of the country", he said.

Against this backdrop of great power rivalry, Prof Liow said that Singapore will find itself increasingly squeezed between the US and China, and will need to prepare for this growing pressure.

Singapore will need to maintain good relations with both powers, and strengthen its value proposition. It will also need to be sensitive to increased scrutiny by the US and China of its choices, and stay ahead of the geopolitical curve by being a pathfinder of new domains in the future economy and security environment, he said.

Prof Liow added that even as Singapore will not choose sides but will choose only its national interests, “the devil is in the detail” of “what... our national interests are as they relate to foreign policy towards these two great powers”.

He said that in Singapore’s early years post-independence, foreign policy interests were clearly articulated by its leaders and accepted by the vast majority of the population, mostly without question. However, the situation has become “more complex” today, he said.

Citing Singapore’s position on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as an example, Prof Liow said that “the Government has spared no effort in making its position very clear and has gone to great lengths to explain it”.

“Yet I know there are still a considerable number of Singaporeans who are not entirely convinced, and who persist in – if not, insist on – viewing our position on the Russia-Ukraine war through US-China lenses even though our opposition to the invasion has nothing to do with our relationship with Washington or Beijing.”

Singapore has strongly condemned Russia’s attack on Ukraine. It imposed sanctions on Russia, targeting several banks and goods like electronics, computers and military items.

Adding to the complexity is the presence of “narratives emanating from some external powers that are designed to appeal to diasporic communities”.

Against this backdrop, “our leaders and policymakers (need) to explain, educate, explain, educate, and then explain some more, why our foreign policy imperatives and priorities are what they are. There can be no letting up on this effort, because it can no longer be assumed that the logic behind what our national interests are as they relate to foreign policy is self-evident,” said Prof Liow.

During the question-and-answer session, moderated by Associate Professor Simon Tay, chairman of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs, Prof Liow was asked to comment on the implications of the conflict between Israel and Hamas for the US’ foreign policy outlook and US-China rivalry.

“This conflict initiated by Hamas is taking place at a very critical time. We were looking at some sort of reconfiguration of dynamics in the Middle East,” said Prof Liow. The Abraham Accords, signed in September 2020, normalised relations between Israel and several Arab states, and China also brokered an agreement for the resumption of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

He added that the conflict raised questions about whether there would be a reconfiguration of these shifting dynamics, and would compel to some degree a reconfiguration of American engagement and deployment of resources towards Israel, an ally.

“I think that the Americans have realised that they have, for want of a better phrase, dropped the ball a bit on the Middle East. They took a step back, they shifted their focus to the Indo-Pacific, China, and then this thing blows up.”

“Israel, an old ally, old friend, coming back into the picture requiring that support -- that will complicate things even further,” said Prof Liow. The US, already facing the fatigue of being a global power, would be really stretched, he added.