

Vivian lists three ways for Singapore to stay relevant

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To navigate a fractured world order and the accelerating digital disruption, Singapore must stay relevant, and this foreign policy principle remains as salient today as it was in 1965, said Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan.

Speaking at a conference yesterday, Dr Balakrishnan outlined three ways the Republic can achieve this: Remaining open, working to fortify the multilateral system, and diversifying partnerships such as with other Asean cities.

He was addressing 1,200 members from the policymaking and business communities, academia and civil society at the Singapore Perspectives conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

Singapore must always remain open for business, and especially to talent, as well as maintain its reputation of integrity and for being trusted by all, said Dr Balakrishnan.

In fact, Singapore needs to actively create conditions that will attract talent and business. "We will have to continue to strengthen our air, sea and digital connectivity, deepening our economic and investment links with partners across the globe," he added.

Also, Singapore's legal framework must continue to respond to emerging technologies so that intellectual property, data and privacy will be protected, he said.

The second way Singapore can stay relevant is by working to fortify the multilateral system, and to contribute actively to shaping new norms to govern the global commons. For example, Singapore played an active role in the negotiations of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and in the Paris Agreement to combat climate change.

"And Singapore can always be counted on to send our best people to these international expert groups and negotiations so that we make a positive, constructive and outsized contribution," he added.

Singapore must also continue to uphold international law and the rules-based international order, Dr Balakrishnan noted.

Third, Singapore must diversify partnerships as technological disruption will erode borders, revolutionise business models and shift production bases, he said.

Singapore must go beyond conventional markets and break "safe models" to capitalise on opportunities, Dr Balakrishnan noted.

South-east Asia's Internet economy, for example, hit US\$72 billion (S\$97.4 billion) last year, doubling from 2015, and thicker and deeper linkages across Asean cities can be built, creating new partnerships.

A first step in this direction is the Asean Smart Cities Network comprising 26 cities, which was launched last year. This platform allows cities to cooperate, share experiences and work with private-sector partners towards smart and sustainable urban development.

In a broad-ranging speech at the Sands Expo and Convention Centre, Dr Balakrishnan traced how the world economy has been shaped over the decades by the industrial revolution, Fordism and post-war globalisation.

The world is now in a new "digital gilded age", with the rise of smart technologies. This has created winners, such as supra-national technology companies like Google and Facebook, which are growing in economic and political clout, and losers, such as workers who have lost their jobs due to disruptive changes.

As a result, there is increasing polarisation and the hollowing out of the centre, or mainstream politics, in many societies, said Dr Balakrishnan. There is a fractured world order, due to fractious domestic politics which is caused by digital disruption, he said.

"There will be countries that are afraid of change and fearing competition, will question the value of the current liberal world order.

"On the other hand, nations like Singapore believe we need to master the new technologies, face competition head on, double down on interdependence, integration, openness and to seek win-win cooperation," he said.

During yesterday's conference, themed Singapore.World, topics such as the impact of US-China relations on the region and how Singapore can tap opportunities in the region were also addressed.