

George Yeo: With US-China tensions predicted to be long-term, Singapore must become capital city of Asean

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Singapore — Former Foreign Minister George Yeo underlined on Jan 11 (Tuesday) the importance of establishing a strong presence in Southeast Asia as well as strong ties with Singapore's neighbours, as tensions between global superpowers the United States and China may last for "easily" up to 30 years.

At the yearly Singapore Perspectives conference organised by think-tank Institute of Policy Studies, Mr Yeo, a Visiting Scholar at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, called for Singapore to think more regionally so as not to get caught between the US and China.

The theme of this year's conference is "City".

"The current tension between the US and China will mark this period of history and it will go on for years to come... sometimes high tension, sometimes low tension," said Mr Yeo, adding that Singapore may often find itself between a rock and a hard place.

Therefore, the country must "reroot" itself in this part of the globe and become a capital city of ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

He also stressed that Singapore, while maintaining cordial relationships with all, is autonomous.

"We are part of many networks – the American network, the Chinese network, the Indian network. And every network has to capture us, naturally, so we have to be careful. We are friendly to everybody, but we are autonomous," a report in The Straits Times quotes Mr Yeo as saying.

During the session, one viewer asked how the country may thrive as it finds itself between the influences of the US and China.

To answer this requires an examination of identity, he answered.

Singapore is special because our different communities retain their ancestral cultures... and we encourage them to be proud of their ancestral cultures. Our diversity is not based upon everybody curbing themselves to become Singaporean, but everybody being bigger in accepting others who are not like themselves.

If we can make this happen—that to be Singaporean is to be bigger than what you were when you were in China or India or Indonesia or Thailand... then to be a Singaporean is to become bigger.”

The notions of identity and “becoming bigger” is not a new concept for the ex-Foreign Minister and onetime even presidential hopeful.

The book *George Yeo on Bonsai, Banyan and the Tao*, which is a compilation of speeches from his over two decades of public life, quotes him as saying,

“However, there is one requirement to being Singaporean which is this: a new citizen has to enlarge his heart and broaden his mind to embrace those who are different from him.

In other words, becoming Singaporean means becoming a bigger person even though Singapore is a small country. Needless to say, those of us who are already citizens should also manifest this same largeness of mind and spirit.”