

## **S'pore shouldn't choose between China and US for as long as it can: Ambassador-at-Large Chan Heng Chee**

***Wong Pei Ting***

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- No country in Europe or Asia would like an exclusive relationship with the US or China, Professor Chan Heng Chee said
- She believes that coalitions of a few states may “point the way to newer regional subgroupings”
- She also said that Singapore must be optimistic and active, “look for solutions and build a path forward”

Singapore should not choose between China and the United States for as long as it can, although South-east Asian countries had been pressed to take sides as the rivalry between the two powers intensify, Ambassador-at-Large Chan Heng Chee said.

“Singapore will not be put in a position to make a final choice like a marriage, nor need it. We should not make a choice for as long as we can,” she said on Wednesday (July 15) when delivering an online lecture hosted by the independent think-tank Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

Choice will be exercised by each country to line up with the US or China depending on what the two powers put on the table, the former Ambassador to the US said.

Also stressing that the choice is “not binary”, she said: “The indications are that no country in Europe or Asia would like an exclusive relationship with the US or China... All want to be able to develop relations with both powers.”

Professor Chan believes that Singapore will continue to see the US as “the preferred strategic and defence partner or friend in Asia” in the next decade or two, if it is not seen to be retrenching its interests.

And China will emerge as the “important and sought after” economic and, increasingly, technology partner, she added.

“Over time, it will be discernible if the flavour of the region has changed perceptibly. But it will not just be about how many US or Chinese initiatives a country selects from each side.

“The question is whether strategic choices are more important than economic choices and are more telling, revealing. But increasingly, it can also be argued that economics and markets is hard power, too, and just as fundamental.”

When asked by a member of the audience if it is indeed possible for Singapore to maintain close ties with both the US and China, Prof Chan said that people will read what they want to read in all initiatives.

“Sometimes, people tell us we are too pro-US. Sometimes, the Americans say we are too pro-China, so we must be somewhere in the middle... We are dead centre.”

## Alignments 'will be different' should cold war arise

Prof Chan was delivering the last of her lecture series as an SR Nathan fellow of IPS.

In the wide-ranging lecture, she gave her analysis on the recently concluded General Election and spoke about how the Singapore Government should focus more efforts on helping small- and medium-sized enterprises and approach the issue of rising inequality, among other things.

Her final lecture was titled, Singapore in a Time of Flux: Optimism from the Jaws of Gloom. Prof Chan concluded it by saying that she is optimistic of Singapore's outlook in a time of flux, although she recognised that it will become "harder increasingly" to navigate the waters ahead.

She then said: "If there be a Cold War 2.0 or 1.5, it will look different and alignments will be different. It will not be the old Cold War. Countries will want to have relationships with both powers."

Earlier in her lecture, Prof Chan noted that there is an emergence of a consolidation of like-minded countries that "simply want to carry on doing their business, supporting their growth and development".

"They are just like-minded countries who can work together on specific issues," she said.

For instance, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Singapore forged co-operation with six countries — Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Myanmar and New Zealand — to ensure that trade lines remained opened for the flow of goods and essential supplies.

Singapore and 12 other countries, which included neither the US nor China, also pledged to pool research and scientific resources and share findings in an effort that "clearly (took) a neutral path", she noted.

Regionalism or coalitions of a few states for very practical purposes on how to deal with the opening up after the pandemic — this may "point the way to newer regional subgroupings", she believes.

Given that there is a lack of global leadership, such regional groupings are trying to come together to "make up for a deficit" by offering regional leadership, she added.

"Today, the world is getting very complex, so it is very hard to see giants stride across the stage. You would be lucky, for the leader, if they do not leave the stage with their tail hanging behind them."

In ending her speech, Prof Chan said: "We cannot predict the future but we must be optimistic and active... we look for solutions and build a path forward. Gloom is not destiny."