

What if Singapore has to choose: China or US?

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The question "What if Singapore has to choose between China and the United States?" featured prominently at a conference yesterday.

Professor Joseph Liow, dean of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, said it is unlikely Singapore will reach that crossroad.

China's growing clout in the Asia-Pacific, and concerns that America's engagement with the region will weaken should it turn inward, had led some observers to wonder whether countries in the region will have to take sides at some point.

However, Prof Liow noted, among other factors, that the scope of bilateral relations between the US and China has expanded.

Both countries share a complex relationship with intertwining interests, which have expanded beyond trade and exchange rate issues to include topics such as territorial disputes, climate change and counter-terrorism efforts, he pointed out.

China will not want the US to "entirely disengage from the region", and neither does the US want to do so, Prof Liow told the annual Singapore Perspectives conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies. Singapore has long maintained that it does not want to choose between powers.

Still, Prof Liow noted that recent developments in Malaysia and the Philippines have been portrayed as the countries making a choice.

At another panel, Education Minister (Higher Education and Skills) Ong Ye Kung was asked about some of the hardest policy choices within the PAP. He cited the shifting geopolitical landscape as one issue.

Meanwhile, Banyan Tree executive chairman Ho Kwon Ping said Singapore could face its first major crisis if relations between the US and China worsen to a point where it has to pick a side.

Should Singapore ever have to make a choice, said Prof Liow, it will need to consider these terms:

First, the choice must be based on national interest, and not on countries. It should also not be made "at gunpoint", he said.

The superpower should also not interfere in domestic politics, though ensuring this will pose a challenge for the government of the day, he said.

Singapore also needs to be mindful of how other countries will interpret its move.

Prof Liow also highlighted two other points to keep in mind - that other Asean states are also navigating the same dilemma, and that there are other major players who have a hand in determining the state of regional affairs - such as Japan, Australia and Russia.

What Singapore should do, said Prof Liow, is to "look into diversifying engagement ... with external players of consequence in regional affairs".