

US-China tensions will continue for at least 20 more years: George Yeo

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Yahoo News Singapore, 28 January 2019

Tensions between the United States and China will go on for at least the next two decades, said former Singapore Foreign Minister George Yeo on Monday (28 January).

Speaking at Singapore Perspectives 2019, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies, Yeo noted that the Sino-US relationship is currently “oscillating between a cold war and a cold peace”.

“Both sides are publicly saying that they are preparing for war. That’s madness,” said the 64-year-old. “It is the single most important relationship shaping our world today. If it is bungled, all bets are off.”

Yeo, who stressed that China is not a “missionary power” like the defunct Soviet Union was, added, “This rivalry...will continue until the US is convinced that the nature of China is different from that of the US, and different from that of the Soviet Union.”

Yeo, who retired from politics after his electoral loss in Aljunied GRC in 2011, was speaking on a panel entitled “Singapore and the World” with renowned historian Professor Wang Gungwu, 88. The panel was moderated by Ambassador-at-Large Professor Tommy Koh, 81.

Yeo is currently a visiting scholar at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

The panel was focused on the current state of relations between America and the Middle Kingdom, and how it affects Singapore. The two superpowers are currently engaged in a trade war, which would have attendant consequences for the global economy if it were to escalate, according to analysts.

China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea have also become a potential flashpoint, not only for the two largest economies in the world but for other countries in the region. Last November, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong even warned that Southeast Asian nations may eventually be compelled to choose between the rival visions of China and the United States.

The role of Asean

Yeo stressed that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) “shelters us from the cold winds of superpower rivalries”, due to its collective influence in a wider region.

Prof Wang, who chairs the East Asian Institute, noted that in light of the South China Sea conflict, Asean is being reimagined as a strategic zone for all the powers. In this light, “Asean members know that it is more crucial than ever for to be united”.

“The Indo-Pacific as redefined by a hegemonic power on the other side of the Pacific means that Southeast Asia, as the only region that faces both oceans, will become more critical than ever.”

Noting that the geographical location of the US means it does not have any real enemies, Prof Wang concluded that the Americans feel China is threatening their hegemony. Alluding to the Asian giant's centuries-old maritime and historical links, however, he noted that "China very much has been a dominant power in this region from very early on."

The Trans-Pacific Partnership

Prof Koh said, "The Americans now believe that the era of cooperation is over and that they have entered a new era of strategic competition."

But he also alluded to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which survived and morphed into the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for TPP (CPTPP), even though President Donald Trump pulled his country out of the TPP in January 2017.

"The moral of the story is that the US is important but it is not indispensable," said the diplomat.

But Yeo proposed that Singapore, Japan and other countries work to persuade China to join the TPP, "but prolong the negotiations, so that the US is forced to come back in". He noted that if the TPP can include both superpowers, it would account for some 60 per cent of global GDP.

He also stressed that the US needs to understand Chinese foreign policy has always been defensive in nature and often looks to its past for guidance. "I often ask my American friends: think about it, why does every Chinese dynasty rebuild the Great Wall?"

"Every Chinese leader reads and re-reads 'The Art of War' (by ancient military strategist Sun Tzu)...the supreme commander achieves his objectives without having to fight."

Held annually, this year's edition of Singapore Perspectives brought together almost 1,000 people from the policymaking and business communities, academia, and civil society at Marina Bay Sands.