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S'pore must keep eye on fault lines as world hits turning point: Eng Hen

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SINGAPORE – The pushback against globalisation, how countries would behave in a multi-polar world, and a rising tide of populism are some of the issues to be watchful of in the coming decades, said Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen yesterday, as he warned of a world at an inflexion point not seen since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 which marked the end of the Cold War. Dr Ng noted three fault lines that are coming under "severe pressure", and could well spiral into social and political upheaval: Globalisation versus nationalism, global rules versus the regional order, and collective good governance versus individual rights.

"The ability to change and adapt

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Students had a 45-minute dialogue with Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen after he delivered his keynote address at the Yale-NUS College Asia Pacific Model UN Conference yesterday. PHOTO: JASON QUAH

Don't measure progress by number of political parties, says Defence Minister

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SINGAPORE – The extent of progress in a country should not be measured by its number of political parties, said Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen yesterday at a dialogue with Yale-NUS students, in response to a question on whether having one or multiple parties is better for governing a country.

"If the country's progress is measured by the number of political parties in it, I think you will have an interesting result. That's not been shown to be the determinant to how a country progresses," said Dr Ng, who spoke after delivering his keynote address at the Yale-NUS College Asia Pacific Model United Nations Conference.

Turning to China as an example, he noted that despite being led by a state party, no one has questioned the economic progress the country has made in the last few decades.

On the other hand, countries with multiple parties can draw on the good ideas from each party, but they could also face political gridlock, such as in the case of Australia and the United Kingdom, noted Dr Ng.

"I asked the question, why there was this trend globally, as we've seen in the last decade, towards even more authoritarian leaders and systems?"

"It is the fact that that model hasn't delivered as well. And the reason is political gridlock, there is a price to pay for accommodation, in other words you have a coalition party," he added.

A wide range of questions was posed to Dr Ng during the 45-minute dialogue, ranging from his views on the Israeli settlements on Palestinian-occupied lands, to what the Government's plans were for women to play a larger role in defending the country.

In response to the last question, Dr Ng noted that the number of countries with such military conscription have dwindled, and Singapore is one of the few countries that are able to continue with it.

"The reason why it's been very difficult for other countries (to do so) ... is that you can only maintain the commitment to national service if you are fair to everybody," he said.

As such, it would be hard for Singapore to do what others have suggested: Enlist men for the army and bring women in to make them nurses or teachers.

"I find it very hard to tell people or (for) any government to say to its population, I want you to subsume your individual needs for a need other than military defence," he said.

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seems to be so relevant today because I believe that the world as we know (it) is at an inflexion point," said Dr Ng at a conference held at Yale-NUS College. "We do not know what shape it will take in 2050, but of this we can be certain: Some fundamental rules will be changed, and with it the fate of nations."

He was addressing more than 250 students from seven countries (including Singapore) attending the Asia Pacific Model United Nations conference. "Your generation will have ringside seats to not only interesting times, but dramatic interludes where the world is being re-shaped," he added.

Dr Ng noted there is a growing strain between those who champion globalisation and nationalists who want to protect jobs and stop immigration. This can be seen in British voters' decision to leave the European Union, United States President-elect Donald Trump's victory, and the rise of anti-EU parties in Europe.

While expanding global trade has grown wealth and driven down poverty, "it's very hard to convince a worker who has lost his job of these benefits", he noted. He added that the "backlash against globalisation is emotional and will take time to resolve".

The question of "who sets global rules" represents the second fault line, said Dr Ng, noting that the days of the US being the sole global power with unprecedented commercial heft and military reach is under challenge.

Historically, regional politics has also exerted a dominant force, he added. And in this interplay, whether rules could change as bigger countries, such as China, India and Indonesia, rise was something to think about, he noted.

"Can a global system, can citizens of the world operate under global trade, commerce, and security interests within a multi-polar world?" Dr Ng asked.

The third fault line lies between favouring collective good governance and paying attention to individual rights, said Dr Ng.

The rising tide of populism has meant that individual interests must now be given greater attention, he added. "If all individual interests are taken into account, the shared interests must necessarily shrink. That kind of domestic politics will polarise communities, as we are witnessing today."

"So if you're a political party and you want majority or popular support, I can't have a central platform. I have to cater to many, many small interests, bring them together and hope that I can win the popular vote by a slim majority or by coalitions ... but at the expense of an inclusive ideology and at the price of an ever-reducing common space," he added.

Amid these trends, Singapore needs to revisit questions its founding leaders faced, of how to stay relevant and create good jobs, how a small state like it can help shape the world, and how to avoid the divisiveness that arises from populism.

While the country is in a much stronger position than during its founding years, Dr Ng said the next generation will need to make "wise and enlightened decisions" to ensure Singapore's place in the 21st century.

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