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S-E Asia gravitating towards China, warns US scholar

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South-east Asia, including Singapore, is increasingly gravitating towards China, and that could be negative for the United States, a US scholar has warned.

As proof of this, Professor David Shambaugh of George Washington University cited Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean's speech on China in a transitional global order.

Speaking after Mr Teo at a forum yesterday, Prof Shambaugh said there has been a reset of US-China ties since President Donald Trump took office in January.

This broke a logjam in the relationship that arose during the administration of Mr Trump's predecessor, Mr Barack Obama, said the China expert at the forum held as part of the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the East Asian Institute.

Back then, increasing levels of geostrategic competition between the two powers outweighed the cooperative aspects of their relationship, he said. "By the end of the Obama administration, the relationship was deeply strained."

For the US, there was no real cooperation on the North Korea nuclear issue from China and hostility towards its alliances, alongside Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea and the intimidation and manipulation of Asean.

China, for its part, had its quarrels with the US. These included the continued support and sale of arms to Taiwan and the blocking of technology transfer to China. There was also the perceived strategic containment of China around its periphery and perceived subversion of the Chinese political system by the US.

The US-China relationship became dysfunctional, "filled with mutual mistrust, suspicions, acrimony, disillusionment and real policy differences", said Prof Shambaugh.

While Mr Trump had attacked and criticised China during his election campaign, there was a 180-degree reversal of policy towards China after he took office.

"He has abandoned all his threats and embraced fulsome engagement with China," he noted.

This included withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a 12-nation trade deal that excluded China, no labelling of China as currency manipulator, and commitment to the one-China principle.

He warned, however, of a clear gravitational pull towards China in the region: "Each Asean country is pulling towards China, reorienting towards China and therefore away from the US." When the Trump administration gets around to focusing on Asia, it will find a different landscape "and not necessarily a positive one for the US", he said.

Other speakers at the event, titled "China in a Transitional Global Order", included Professor Shi Yinhong of Renmin University.

While he acknowledged that the US-China rivalry would not worsen in the next few months, he also warned against too much optimism in the relationship.

He said China started to soften its assertiveness towards the region from last year because of its slowing economy, worsening ties with neighbouring maritime states and Mr Trump's election.

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