



The Jiayuguan fortress in Gansu province is the westernmost pass of the Great Wall of China. In the Chinese national anthem, the Chinese talked about rebuilding a new Great Wall. This is because it is difficult enough organising the Han people and other nationalities in China, and their foreign policy has always been defensive in character, says Singapore's former foreign minister George Yeo. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

The US-China Cold Peace and Singapore's cultural DNA

This is an edited transcript of a speech by former foreign minister George Yeo at the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives 2019 conference last week.

Two hundred years ago, Stamford Raffles established Singapore as a trading post for the China trade. In the 19th century, the jewel in the British crown was India and India's biggest trading partner was China.

We are now seeing before us a new China trade, much bigger than the one in the 19th century. Our history profoundly affects who we are and what our future will be. In the last 40 years, China's growth has been phenomenal, resulting in China impinging on the rest of the world, causing almost an inevitable reaction.

When the per capita GDP (gross domestic product) of China reaches half that of the US, China's GDP will be twice that of the US. When it reaches two-thirds, China's GDP will be roughly that of the US, European Union and Japan combined.

So this is the future unfolding before us and it's creating considerable discomfort in the neighbourhood and beyond. In Asia, countries are going back to their history books to try to figure out what China was like in the past because in that past lie opportunities and wisdom for the future.

It is numbers but it's not only numbers. China's population will peak at 1.44 billion in 2029, according to Beijing, and India's population will surely overtake that of China.

But it is not just population, it is the fact of China's homogeneity with over 90 per cent of its people Han, believing in the myth of a common ancestry, having common heroes, celebrating common festivals.

Of course there's considerable regional diversity but the Chinese people, including the Chinese outside China, feel that they belong to one race. And because of that, when China is united, its productivity is awesome.

But, of course, when it declines, the decline is also awesome, and that explains the long cycles of Chinese history.

LONG CYCLES OF CHINESE HISTORY
You take the restoration of China under the Ming, 1368, Zhu Yuanzhang, Nanjing. (In 1368, Zhu defeated the Mongol Yuan and

reunited China.) By 1405, which was a mere 37 years after the founding of Ming, Zheng He's great fleet sailed to the Western Ocean and arrived on our shores.

Just 37 years to consolidate a continental country, to develop industry, to generate the surplus, the technology in so many fields. The fleets had cartographers, astronomers, scientists, soldiers, diplomats, farmers. They had chicken farms, they grew vegetables and they had shipyards all over the Indian Ocean because these are wooden ships, they needed repair.

In Cirebon (Java, Indonesia) where there is (the shrine of) Gunung Jati, at the base of it, they had a shipyard. And Tan Ta Sen (historian, author of Cheng Ho And Islam In South-east Asia) told me how the Sultan who owns much of the land there wants to redevelop it as a heritage site for the Belt and Road for there the ships were repaired all the way to Africa.

For those farther away, in particular for America, they don't have the history and when they look at China, they view it very differently. When I met Graham Allison (Harvard political scientist who coined the term "Thucydides Trap" on the inevitable conflict when a rising power threatens another) in Beijing a few weeks ago, he said: "Look, this anti-China mood in America is going to get much worse."

This trial of strength oscillating between a Cold War and a Cold Peace will continue for easily another 20 years to come, each testing the other, but America worried – what does a rising China portend? So both sides have publicly said they're preparing for war.

A few months ago, the former US army commander in Europe Lieutenant-General Ben Hodges said: "War between the US and China likely within 15 years." I was in the armed forces before – if you must fight within 15 years and you know your enemy is getting stronger year by year, you prefer to fight tonight.

Of course, war between the US and China – that's madness, but both sides have to prepare for it. But this is the single most important relationship shaping our world

today – the US-China relations. If it is bungled, all bets are off.

All of us will be torn apart as countries, as cities, as companies, as families. Happily, unlike the old Soviet Union, China is not a missionary power. China does not see maritime voyages the way Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan (American naval historian) saw the oceans.

I tell my American friends: "Think about it. Why does every Chinese dynasty rebuild the Great Wall?" Many of us are familiar with the strains of the Chinese national anthem, Qi Lai (Arise!). In that national anthem recited countless, sung countless, the Chinese talked about rebuilding a new Great Wall. This is because it is difficult enough organising the Han people and other nationalities in China, and their foreign policy has always been defensive in character. Every Chinese leader reads and rereads Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*.

You have to understand war, you

This rivalry between the US and China will continue until the US is convinced that China's nature is different from that of the US and different from that of the Soviet Union. And it will take time and China will have to do its part to reassure its neighbours and the other major powers that its nature is different, that its statecraft is principally defensive. And all of us who are at the intersection between these two great countries should play our part to help bridge the differences.

must be prepared for war, but you are a fool to go into war lightly because war, once it begins, will exhaust you and lead to consequences which you cannot anticipate. If you watch the way China is managing relations with the US now – very careful – and I believe the current trade negotiations are likely to succeed because China will go 80 per cent of the way to meet US demands, not because they are afraid or generous, but because they know that time is on their side.

Last weekend I met a Singapore businessman who goes to China often, has a big business in China, so I asked him, "How's China?", meaning the economy. He said, "Bad." In one word – bad. China has been deleveraging deliberately, giving help only to important sectors which they cannot allow to go down.

But the last easing after the global financial crisis created a lot of excesses which they are trying to squeeze out of the system. And they know in every field they're advancing slowly, feeling their own strength.

DEFENSIVE STATECRAFT

This rivalry between the US and China will continue until the US is convinced that China's nature is different from that of the US and different from that of the Soviet Union.

And it will take time and China will have to do its part to reassure its neighbours and the other major powers that its nature is different, that its statecraft is principally defensive. And all of us who are at the intersection between these two great countries should play our part to help bridge the differences.

You take the TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership) as an example. I was involved in establishing it together with Brunei, Chile and New Zealand many years ago.

I remember trying to persuade Shi Guangsheng, China's Trade Minister, to join. He said: "No, no, no, we've already given too much joining the WTO (World Trade Organisation). We can't do this." And then the Americans came in and under (Barack) Obama and they turned it into an anti-China coalition, which I thought was a mistake.

Then by happenstance Donald Trump became president and the US removed itself from the TPP. Fortunately (Japanese) Prime Minister Shinzo Abe decided to see it through, push it through. I think Singapore, Japan and other

countries should encourage China to join the TPP but prolong the negotiations.

This will encourage, even force the US to come back in. But we must do this artfully, coordinate the negotiations so that they join at the same time. And whatever China is prepared to give to the US, we say give it to the TPP.

Now intellectual property (IP) is the single most important trade issue in the coming years because of digitalisation. When (Singapore diplomat) Tommy Koh negotiated the free trade agreement between Singapore and the US, IP was a big issue and threatened to derail negotiations. And I remember as trade minister calling a special meeting and we asked ourselves – what is our own future? And we came to the conclusion that it was also IP.

So instead of fighting the US, we went with the US and today Singapore is a major intellectual property centre in all of Asia, to our great advantage. So it is in China's interest to move on IP. And it's in the US' interest. And if the TPP includes China and the US, the WTO will have to follow in its wake and you will have a safer world.

Mr Trump thinks that the US enjoys an advantage in bilateralising relationships. So they reduced the importance of the WTO, the UN (United Nations), other international organisations. Imagine one day China inheriting a bilateralised global system – (and consider that) imperial China (had) perfected it through the tribute system – it is almost instinctual for China to bilateralise relationships and to use economics for political purposes.

But it is not good for China and it is not good for the US, or any of us, for the world to become like that. So moving on the TPP, getting both China and the US in is in fact an important road to a much safer future for all of us. For Singapore, you know, every country, every region is now re-triangulating because of the rise of China.

SINGAPORE'S CULTURAL GENOME

And for Singapore, Asean is very important because Asean gives us buffer, shelters us from the cold winds of superpower rivalry. And it is enlightened self-interest why Singapore puts Asean at the centre of its foreign policy. But what drives our future is not only the external environment; it is who we are inside.

Singapore may be a very small city state, but if you look at our cultural genome, we have a very big

genome, because of Raffles, because of our role in the old China trade, because of our role in the coming China trade. So in us we have a protean capability to evolve in different directions.

So as China becomes more important, we deepen our knowledge of China. India will become the world's second-biggest economy some time later this century. And we will grow our links with India. Indonesia will be the fourth.

And Bahasa, which some of us thought had become a relic language in Singapore for the non-Malays, will become important again because of Indonesia. Politically it's always difficult to manage this diversity in our genome. So the preference is always to simplify it, reduce it, so that we are at the lower homeostasis, as it were.

But it would be suicidal because it is because of our genome that we have this resilience and this ability to adapt to a range of possible futures. It's our best foolproofing, future-proofing of our economy and of our country.

We sometimes get so caught up with the inconvenience, with the quarrels among ourselves that we say, no, no, no, no, let's reduce the diversity.

Last night Pak Marty (former Indonesian foreign minister Marty Natalegawa) and I had a leisurely stroll along Changi Beach and I wanted to show him a monument we erected in 1992, the 50th anniversary of the fall of Singapore, to mark Sook Ching, the killings on Changi Beach.

And we deliberately did it in four languages, four official languages, with Japanese at the bottom, because it is important for the Japanese to know this history too.

I was so dismayed to find that that monument had been replaced by one which is purely in English. Now, I understand the reasons why it is convenient, whether it's in Changi Airport or whether it is at our museums, to have one language.

This is deliberately reducing our cultural genome because sometimes it creates autoimmune reactions and so on for short-term purposes. It is denying us of a powerful capability, a precious inheritance from the past which in fact will secure our future.

We cannot avoid in Singapore always having debates about race, language, religion, identity. Every link which connects us to China, to India, to Indonesia, to the Middle East – every link is both a plus and creates problems.

Every link is two-way. What connects is also a method of infiltration. So we have to adjust to all this. The day we decide that it is too tiring to do all this, that day we will shrivel and become inconsequential.

I go to the Vatican five times a year for meetings of the Council for the Economy. At every meeting, interpreters, earphones. The day the Church stops using earphones and interpretation, it is no longer the Church. The day Singapore decides to reduce its genome so that we become homogenised, that would be a very uninteresting Singapore.