

Chan Chun Sing: Asean can learn from Middle-East woes

A region must have cohesion if it does not want to be a platform for proxy contests by major powers, he says

Singapore

SINGAPORE and Asean can draw a lesson from the unstable situation in the Middle East that a region needs to have cohesion if it does not want to be a platform for proxy contests by major powers, said Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing.

The intra-regional rivalry and lack of unity in the Middle East – together with its strategic location and abundant energy resources – have made it a proxy battleground for extra-regional powers, he said at the annual conference of the Middle East Institute of the National University of Singapore on Monday.

The Middle East through its long history has seen attempts to dominate it by people as diverse as the Egyptians, Persians, Arabs, British and French principally because of its strategic location at the confluence of Europe, Asia and Africa.

Its location has meant that it controls the critical “strategic lines of communications” (SLOC) in land, sea and air, noted Mr Chan in his keynote speech on the first day of the two-day conference that brought together more than 300 academics, think-tankers, diplomats and businesspeople.

Many, if not all, global and regional powers in history “desire to secure their interests in the region that include lines of communications, energy and even religious authority”, he said. “Since the Middle East has seldom been united, it has also become a convenient proxy battleground for wider global geopolitical contests,” he added.

With China’s interests in the Middle East growing – including in SLOC, energy resources and religion, particularly the influence of Islam on China’s Muslim minorities – there is a possibility of the Asian power coming up against the United States’ many if diminishing interests in this region. “Both the US and China have interests



in the Middle East that are sometimes shared and, at other times, contested as part of a wider global backdrop of cooperation and contest,” he said.

Later during the question and answer session, Mr Chan drew a parallel between the Middle East and South-east Asia as strategic locations, the Middle East with its Suez Canal and South-east Asia with the South China Sea and the Malacca Strait – all important shipping lanes.

One of the lessons that can be drawn from the Middle East experience, he said, is that if the region is not integrated and coherent, it can become a platform for proxy contests. “It is in the interest of Asean countries to work closely together to make sure that we can chart our way forward, without which we may end up being a battleground for proxy contests.” He added that all countries in Asean believe it is in their individual and collective interests to remain connected to the world, including the major

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powers. “I think Asean countries want to see themselves being connected to the US, to China, to Europe,” he said.

Asean should do all it can to be a “neutral place where people from elsewhere can come and be engaged in the region”, he said.

Mr Chan also touched on Singapore and how its survival depended on its staying connected with the rest of the world and making the world its hinterland. “For the world to be truly our hinterland, we must have a deep understanding of what’s happening around the world, not just the US and China or Europe, but many of these other places like Middle East, Central Asian republics, and also increasingly Africa,” he said.

He urged Singaporeans to travel as widely as possible, “not just the usual well-trodden paths”, but also other parts of the world to understand what other people’s interests are and how Singapore can play a role and be relevant to them.

Nearer home, Singapore has been playing a role in China’s development. But as China’s needs evolved, so has Singapore’s relevance to it, he noted.

Singapore has gone from building the Suzhou Industrial Park in the earlier days of China’s development in the 1990s to the Tianjin Eco-city, initiated in 2007, which epitomised China’s desire for sustainable development, he said.

It has since gone beyond geographically bound projects to the Chongqing Connectivity Initiative to connect China’s less-developed western provinces to countries outside China in South-east Asia.

As for Singapore’s role in China’s next lap of development, Mr Chan pointed to the Belt and Road Initiative to build infrastructure linking China to the rest of Asia, Africa and Europe, saying Singapore is looking at working with China in third countries, providing legal and financial expertise. “This is one area where Singapore can contribute to China, in its outward push in its connectivity to the rest of the world,” he said.

Another area that is of interest to China is how Singapore has continued to remain successful and cohesive with its diverse and multi-ethnic population. “China finds us quite interesting,” said Mr Chan. “They try to understand how we can keep a multi-ethnic, multiracial society together, one that does not have a lot of common history (but is) united by a common vision, a set of values, meritocracy, incorruptibility, multiracialism,” he added.

This is as China is also looking at ways to maintain its social stability amid disparate forces that threaten to pull its society apart.

As for Singapore, it needs to remain successful if it is to stay relevant to China and the rest of the world, he said. It is only when Singapore is successful that others will find it interesting.