



Asean should do all it can to be a "neutral place where people from elsewhere can come and be engaged in the region", says Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing. PHOTOS: LIANHE ZAOBAO

Asean can learn from Mid-East woes, says Chan Chun Sing

He adds that regional bloc should not end up as a battleground for proxy contests

Goh Sui Noi
East Asia Editor

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 yesterday.

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 con-

trols the critical "strategic lines of communications" (SLOC) in land, sea and air, he said in his keynote speech on the first day of the two-day meeting that brought together over 300 academics, think-tankers, diplomats and business people.

Mr Chan said that 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".

"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 – the Asian power could come up against the United States' many 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, he 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 lesson 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."

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.

He also touched on Singapore and how its survival depended on the country 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.

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, noted Mr Chan.

Singapore has gone from building the Suzhou Industrial Park in the early 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 western provinces to countries in South-east Asia.

As for the Republic's role in China's next lap of development, Mr Chan pointed to its participation in China's Belt and Road

WORKING CLOSELY TOGETHER

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MINISTER FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY
CHAN CHUN SING

Initiative to build infrastructure in Asia, Africa and Europe.

"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," he said. "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," Mr Chan 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, he added.

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Rules are key, like at school: Ong Ye Kung

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Likening foreign affairs to a schoolyard, Education Minister Ong Ye Kung said yesterday that small states – like young children – thrive best in an orderly environment with clear rules.

But the well-being of both states and students depends ultimately on the individual and is not a function of size, he added. "If you do your schoolwork well, you submit your homework on time and are helpful to the rest of your classmates, chances are, the teacher will know you... and your friends will watch your back," he said.

In the same vein, Singapore is determined to make itself relevant and important to the world despite its small size, said Mr Ong, adding that foreign policy begins at home.

"Ultimately, it is about how our country is run, how cohesive our society is and what value we can bring to the world."

Speaking at the annual conference of the National University of Singapore's Middle East Institute, he also highlighted how technology has fundamentally changed politics around the world.

Now, politics is at risk of becoming a "round-the-clock competition in public relations as opposed to a contest of big ideas for the future... a divisive rather than unifying force". Voters are "bombarded with excessive information of varying accuracies" and may not be sure if they are getting the right information to make informed decisions.

The narrow interests of small groups "can somehow go viral and be amplified to dominate the national agenda", he said. And using big data, campaign managers can "slice and dice" their voter bases into tiny segments.

"The result is an explosion of issues, causes and interests," Mr Ong said. "When technology shrinks politics to that nano level or even smaller, we can imagine democracy starting to break down too."

He said he believes democracy is healthiest when it functions as a "contest of big ideas".

In the ideal democracy, voters pick the best leaders, the losers compromise and respect the results, and society unites and moves forward, he said.

The conference, which ends today, is on China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Middle East. It addresses topics such as China's policy towards Muslims and the broader geopolitical context.

Mr Ong also spoke on relations between China and the United States, and how the move from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources will impact the Middle East.

The US and China are not likely to go to war as there is an "unprecedented level of interdependency" between them, he said. And despite the intense competition, both countries may eventually find that they have no fundamentally irreconcilable conflict of interest.

"Technology may well be the centrepiece of the contest between the powers in years to come, and there has to be peaceful platforms for both sides to work out such issues," he said.

He also said there will be a long-term shift away from oil as an energy source and that many Middle Eastern countries are already trying to reduce economic dependence on oil and gas.

This shift will change the way the US engages with the Middle East, which will in turn affect US-China relations, he said.

Mr Ong also took part in a dialogue, during which he was asked questions such as how Singapore has handled the challenges that have come about from digital transformation.

In response, he underlined the importance of initiatives such as SkillsFuture to help people catch up with technology. "For you to move forward, leverage on this whole new technology, transform your economy, you've got to bring everyone along," he said. "Digital transformation and the digital revolution makes that a lot harder."

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