

US, China do not understand each other: Chan Heng Chee



Professor Chan Heng Chee (left), Ambassador-at-Large with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and former Singapore ambassador to the United States, with moderator Jennifer Lewis at the annual Swell conference yesterday. Prof Chan said China does not understand that the Americans have changed and become less generous, while the US does not understand China's rise and that it is a Leninist state. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

This is despite strategic talks between their stakeholders over the years, she says

Choo Yun Ting

The United States and China do not understand each other, despite the many strategic dialogues that have taken place between their stakeholders over the years, said Professor Chan Heng Chee at a conference yesterday.

"I have to say the United States is autistic, and China is autistic, on the world stage," she said, referencing political scientist Edward Luttwak's concept of "great state autism".

Citing China and the US, she said they do not understand the impact they have on each other.

Prof Chan, Ambassador-at-Large with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Singapore's former long-time ambassador to the US, pointed to areas where they show a lack of understanding of each other.

China does not understand the Americans have changed and become less generous, that US President Donald Trump is not an aberration but a trend, and that the US is

not a declining power, she said. The US, on the other hand, does not understand China's rise and that it is a Leninist state, she added.

Speaking at the annual Swell conference organised by global payments company Ripple, Prof Chan said today's Republicans are angry. "Many feel they have lost out, and they are against globalisation."

Also, today's Americans are less generous and do not want to be on the losing end, she said. This change, which did not happen overnight, was understood and channelled by Mr Trump, whom she said is not an aberration but a trend. "America is less likely to be the policeman around the world. They will pick their wars, and they do not have to be everywhere."

She was responding to the dialogue's moderator Jennifer Lewis, an adviser at Singapore sovereign wealth fund GIC, who had asked what the US and China need to understand about each other amid the trade tensions between them.

On the state of US power, Prof

Chan pointed out that China, as well as other countries, thought that America was in decline after the Iraq war and the financial recession.

But the US economy has bounced back and shown more resilience than others anticipated, she said at a session of the conference at Capella Singapore hotel in Sentosa.

As for the US, Prof Chan said it does not understand China's rise and that China feels it has a right to rise. "Countries in Asia will not stop China from rising. China has the right to be a great power, but we want China to play by (international) rules."

The US also does not seem to get that China is a Leninist state, she said. "It was thought with this openness and (foreign investments in the country), China would liberalise and change and move (onto) the democratic track. But China did not."

She described three scenarios which could unfold in the wake of the ongoing US-China trade tensions: a Cold War, which she said was unlikely because the world has changed and the US would not be able to "line up countries to join them in containment"; a technology containment, which is happening but also getting pushback from semiconductor companies and universities; and competitive co-existence, which is a scenario "not talked about very much now but some of us hope will happen".

She added: "It is (about) the two systems being able to live with each other... it is competitive, but you do not try to finish the other off."

Countries do not want to choose between the US and China, she said.

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