

A multipolar world can benefit both US and China: George Yeo

But both sides need to work hard to get there peacefully, says ex-foreign minister

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A multipolar world can be good for both China and the US, but both sides will have to work hard at achieving a peaceful transition to it, said former Singapore foreign minister George Yeo on Thursday. "The US is not used to the idea of a multipolar world, but it is not necessarily bad for the US. In fact, I would argue that it will help extend the period of US ascendancy in the world, and in a good way," he said.

And as a multipolar world benefits China, the country should act in a way which, over time, persuades the US that the kind of multipolarity China envisages is also good for the US, he added.

Mr Yeo, a visiting scholar with the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, was speaking on the theme of "China in a Multipolar World" at the Goh Keng Swee Lecture on Modern China held at the National University of Singapore.

This year's lecture commemorates the 25th anniversary of the East Asian Institute, which Mr Yeo officially opened 25 years ago.

In his one-hour lecture, he posited that the United States is more likely to renew itself as a beacon for the world by moving towards multipolarity instead of preventing it. This is because its efforts to maintain dominance, as shown in its current policy of identifying



Former foreign minister George Yeo with East Asian Institute director Bert Hofman, who moderated the question and answer session at Thursday's Goh Keng Swee Lecture on Modern China at the National University of Singapore. This year's lecture commemorates the 25th anniversary of the East Asian Institute, which Mr Yeo officially opened 25 years ago. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

Russia as enemy and China as strategic competitor, are likely to be unsustainable.

China, on the other hand, never had the ambition of making itself the single pole, Mr Yeo added. This would have been too difficult, and would also affect China's homogeneity and make it more difficult to govern.

China's strong preference has always been to manage difficult neighbours using economic leverage rather than to subdue them militarily, Mr Yeo said.

However, China needs to act in a way that shows the multipolar world it believes in is also good for the US, he added.

In the short term, Russia's invasion of Ukraine may have taken some US heat off China. China is also carefully analysing the Ukraine war, as a similar but larger hybrid war may be unleashed on it should it decide to move forcefully on Taiwan, Mr Yeo told an audience of about 300 people.

But it is unlikely their bilateral relations will improve at this time.

"The US sees China's rise as a challenge to its dominance in the world and would want to slow or put it down if it could," Mr Yeo said. "It is determined to deny China cutting-edge technologies, especially those which can be put to military use, like artificial intelligence and quantum computing."

However, by anticipating an eventual multipolar configuration in the world, the US can get into a more sustainable long-term position, Mr Yeo said.

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PERCEIVED CHALLENGE TO U.S. DOMINANCE

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FORMER FOREIGN MINISTER GEORGE YEO

FIRST AMONG EQUALS

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MR YEO

everywhere, the US should focus on the areas where its political and military power can tilt the balance."

He added: "This means it has to

accept many parts of the world for what they are, warts and all, and not try to transform them in its own image."

Citing China's Belt and Road Ini-

tiative as an example, Mr Yeo said that if the US takes a more relaxed attitude, every country involved in it will naturally want a stronger American presence so that it will have greater negotiating leverage with China.

In the South China Sea, US naval ships should stay beyond the horizon but within radar range so that Asean countries have a potential counterweight that is unspoken and best left unused in their negotiations with China.

For China, in the case of the South China Sea, it should meet Asean 60-40 on the code of conduct instead of halfway, since it is so much bigger and stronger. This will help defuse an issue that is easily exploited by external powers.

Mr Yeo said the original liberal idea of accepting diversity created the US and made it the greatest country on earth.

He noted that Singapore's founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew admired the US for its ability to attract and incorporate talent from all over the world. In recent years, though, the US liberal idea has become intolerant, dividing American society from within.

"Whether the US can be primus inter pares in a multipolar world depends on the outcome of the ongoing drama in US domestic politics today," Mr Yeo added. "China should not be embroiled in that drama by making it clear that, in a multipolar world, it is happy to live with the US as first among equals."

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