

Singapore's foreign policy: 'We don't take sides, we uphold principles'

Republic's principled and consistent actions based on long-term national interests: Vivian

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Singapore's foreign policy approach is not to be neutral, but to act in a principled and consistent way based on long-term national interests, said Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan on Aug 27.

"We do not take sides. We uphold principles," he said in a speech on how small states like Singapore can navigate a divided world. "I found that actually, by being consistent, sticking by the rules, upholding principles, I get less pressure. It allows me, whether I go to Washington or Beijing, to say exactly the same thing."

Sometimes, other states are pleased because Singapore seems to be on their side, he said, while other times, the converse happens. "But it is not a wishy-washy shiftiness where, if I put enough pressure, I can pressure you and you will change your mind," he said. "When we say yes, it is valuable. That is the point. We are not aiming for neutrality, we are not choosing sides, we are upholding principles."

He added that Singapore has to be a credible, reliable and predictable partner to all, promoting friendly relations to advance Singapore's national interests.

"Having a friendly relationship with the person across the table, at a minimum, ensures that you do not miscommunicate... Ideally, having a friendly relationship also enables you to look for compromises – landing zones where you can win some, lose some, or ideally, win-win," he said.

Dr Balakrishnan was addressing about 250 attendees at the Kent Ridge Ministerial Forum 2024 – Majulah: Navigating the Next Chapter of Singapore's Story, held at the Shaw Foundation Alumni House Auditorium at NUS.

Organised by the NUS Students' Political Association, the annual forum gives academics and students from various tertiary institutions a chance to engage in dialogue with senior political leaders in Singapore.

In setting out Singapore's approach to foreign policy, Dr Balakrishnan said Singapore had previously "caught the tides and the winds" at the right moments, maximising its lift to achieve today's success. However, the world has changed dramatically today.

The 1980s and the 1990s were the golden age for economic liberalism, he said. Instead of ideology, people were focusing on economics, on being pragmatic, on grow-

ing productive capacity and creating jobs. This was also a period in which the United States and China were strategically on the same side.

In that climate, Singapore was a non-communist city state that was trying to do business with the world, and willing to overcome xenophobia and colonial hangovers, he said.

"We were trying to be global or to run a globalised economy even before the word 'globalisation' was popularised," he said, adding that Singapore had no choice but to do so when it was cut off from Malaysia in 1965.

"It is no surprise then, in retrospect, that for that practice and the fact that we had honest, competent leadership and hard-working, disciplined people, Singapore's per capita GDP (gross domestic product) grew from US\$500 (about S\$1,500 then) in 1965 to about US\$85,000 (S\$110,800 today)," he said, calling this an "incredible rate of growth", which occurred in 59 years – very few countries, even cities, have experienced that kind of trajectory.

Today, the world is becoming a multipolar one, with a fundamen-



Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan speaking at the Kent Ridge Ministerial Forum 2024 at NUS on Aug 27. PHOTOS: MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

tal lack of strategic trust between the US and China, he said.

This is worrisome as America was and continues to be Singapore's largest foreign investor by a long way, while China's reform and opening up since 1978 benefited Singapore tremendously, he added.

"Even if the US and China do not go to war, if relations are fraught, if their economies diverge, then the situation for us will be very tricky. It can easily slip, if there is a mis-

take, from the best of both worlds to the worst of both worlds," Dr Balakrishnan said.

Other concerns include wars in the Middle East and between Russia and Ukraine, which will impact energy and the economy, as well as climate change and the question of whether the world is ready for the next pandemic.

What has not changed is Singapore's geographical position, he said, adding that the Republic remains a small, low-lying island city

RULES OF DIPLOMACY

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FOREIGN MINISTER VIVIAN BALAKRISHNAN, on why Singapore must be consistent in its relationship with other nations.

world stage, he noted.

"If Singapore disappeared tomorrow, sea levels rose and we just disappeared, there would be no shortage of alternative sites to perform many of the functions that we perform," he said. "We have to be smarter, more hard-working, more organised, more useful, more constructive, and more dependable than everyone else."

In short, Singapore has the same fundamental set of vulnerabilities despite its changed circumstances, Dr Balakrishnan said.

Given this context, Singapore has to be a consistent stalwart advocate for a rules-based world order and for international law, he said.

"The reason is because we are small, and if you do not operate by rules, the law of the jungle applies to diplomacy, which is that might is right, and big is powerful."

In practice, this means the Republic must be prepared to call out violations of international law, breaches of the United Nations Charter, or where fundamental principles are at risk.

He set out Singapore's stance on the Israel-Hamas war in this context.

When Hamas conducted its raid and took hostages on Oct 7, 2023, Singapore had condemned the attack as an act of terror and asserted that Israel had the right of self-defence.

"What I was really thinking about was if someone had fired 1,000 rockets at Bukit Panjang, if an insurgent force had come into Woodlands," Dr Balakrishnan said.

"If that similar situation happened here, we would have to do what we needed to do – to deter and to salvage the situation and to bring our people home."

But Israel's response to the attack would still have to comply by international law. When Singapore decided the Israeli response in Gaza had gone too far, the Republic said so, he noted.

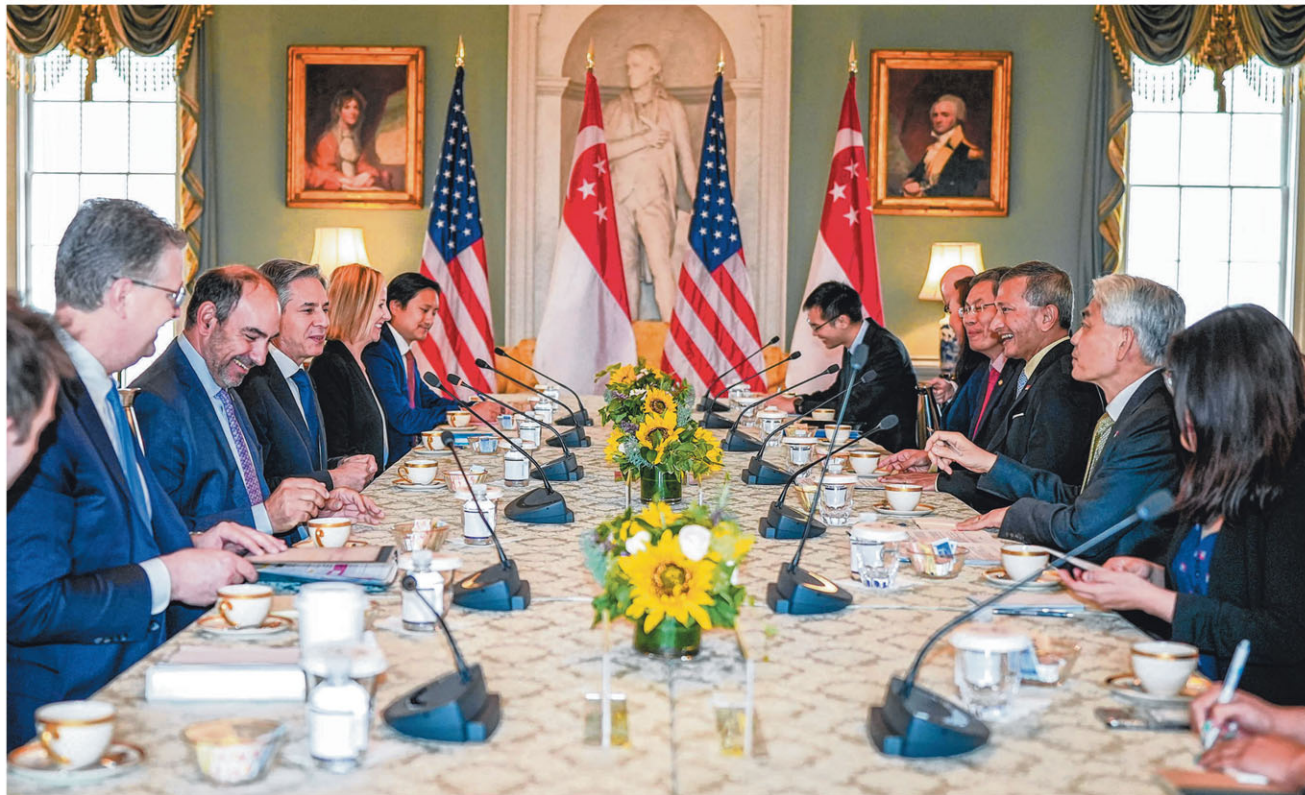
"The point I am trying to make is that you have to take a step on principle to defend international law, but we are doing so not in an ideological sense but practically because every time something happens, I think about Singapore and Singaporeans and what we need to do in those circumstances."

He gave examples of other occasions on which Singapore has called out violations of international law. These included the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, as well as Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1978, and the US intervention in Grenada in 1983.

Dr Balakrishnan added that foreign policy begins at home.

"Our unity, our cohesion, the compromises and the special arrangements that we have made for Singapore to be united and successful are why people even bother to look at us with interest," he said.

He added: "The day we are divided, the day our delegations no longer reflect our diversity, the day that the positions and speeches made do not reflect a confident, united, successful, multiracial, multilingual state in the heart of South-east Asia – that is the day our foreign policy becomes irrelevant."



Dr Balakrishnan in a meeting with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (fourth from left) in June 2023. The minister said the world is becoming a multipolar one, with a fundamental lack of strategic trust between the US and China. Other concerns include wars, climate change and global readiness for the next pandemic.

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