

**Understanding China's Outlook and US-China Relations:  
A Dialogue between George Yeo and Oxford Professors**

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## Dialogue participants



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**Sir Ivor Roberts** (moderator) is former British Ambassador to Italy, Ireland and Serbia; former President of Trinity College, Oxford University; he currently chairs several charities and is a member of Advisory Board of Oxford Global Society.



**Todd Hall** is Professor of International Relations, Department of Politics and International Relations (DPIR), Oxford University; Director of the China Centre of Oxford University. His research interests include international relations theory and Chinese foreign policy.



**Rosemary Foot** is Emeritus Professor and Senior Research Fellow, DPIR, Oxford University. Her research expertise includes China's resurgence and regional and global order, security issues in the Asia-Pacific, China's regional policy and US-China relations.



**Richard Caplan** is Professor of International Relations, DPIR, Oxford University. His principal research interests are concerned with international organizations and conflict management. He is also a Fellow and chairs the Editorial Board at Oxford Global Society.



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## Background

This report is based on a recent informal dialogue between George Yeo, former Singaporean Foreign Minister, and several distinguished professors at Oxford University, held in mid-October by the Oxford Global Society (OXGS)<sup>2</sup>. The dialogue focused on a series of issues around China-US relations and China's outlook, including China's vision of world order, the Taiwan issue, China's stance on the Russia-Ukraine war, the inevitability of a US-China war, and the role of Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore in navigating the choppy waters amid US-China geopolitical tensions.

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<sup>2</sup> As an independent think tank, the OXGS aims to provide a platform for diverse perspectives around selected issues of global significance and conducts objective analysis.

George Yeo is a former senior politician who served in the Singaporean government for 23 years and has been granted high awards by countries such as Australia and India in recognition of his contributions to bilateral relations. He is also a well-recognized author and China expert with extensive experience in dealing with and talking to a wide range of Chinese actors (officials, academics and others). As Singapore is a country with around three-quarters of its population being ethnic Chinese and has so far maintained good relations with both China and the United States, Mr. Yeo's views about China's thinking and the current geopolitics tensions are particularly valuable to understand China's outlook and US-China relations.

Given that all participating Oxford professors are, coincidentally, from Western countries, specializing in China's foreign policy, US-China relations, or International Relations, diplomacy, and global governance in a more general sense, this dialogue is an invaluable exchange of views between a veteran Singaporean former politician and leading Western academics/diplomats. The OXGS trusts that such dialogue and exchange of views are beneficial for policy makers and the wider public around the world to better understand China's vision of the world and the complexity, historical circumstances and different perspectives around US-China relations, which may be the most important bilateral relations of our time.

## **Executive summary**

Below is an executive summary of the dialogue (followed by the detailed discussion among participants):

**Regarding China's vision of the world order:** Todd Hall and Rosemary Foot pointed to the tensions between China's vision of a moral-based, UN-led multilateral world order and its claims in the South China Sea and anti-Western discourses. George Yeo noted that the South China Sea disputes have historical origins and Western countries including the UK and the US once acknowledged China's sovereignty rights in the area, either explicitly or implicitly. China lost the argument diplomatically on the South China Sea because it did not understand well the operation of international law. He also argued that China does not want to displace the US as the dominant world power as it deems it unwise to get involved in others' affairs.

**Regarding the Taiwan issue:** George Yeo noted that the Taiwan issue is "the core of core issues" of China-US relations and the historical injustice around it makes it "emotional" for the Chinese. For China, it is the last chapter of its civil war, and the US strategy is to keep Taiwan separate from China mainland forever to contain China (Todd Hall pointed out that the longstanding US *official* stance on Taiwan is to avoid unilateral change of the status quo from both sides of the Strait). Yeo observed that China wants a peaceful unification and believes that time is on its side as it gets stronger, and Taiwan independence is a dangerous illusion.

**Regarding China's stance on the Russia-Ukraine War:** Ivor Roberts questioned China's stated principle of respecting each other's sovereignty while aligning with the invader of the Russia-Ukraine war. Rosemary Foot noted that China's contradictory position on the Russia-Ukraine war made it an enabler and sympathizer of Russia in the eyes of the EU, the United States and some other countries. George Yeo said that China understood the Russian explanation for moving into Ukraine but stuck to its position on territorial integrity: despite assurances made, NATO has been relentlessly moving eastwards and threatens Russian security (Richard Caplan noted that the assurance was never enshrined in an international treaty or agreement). Yeo added that China's stance on the war is also a carefully considered strategic choice. China is not anti-West and wants a strong Europe to balance the US, and what it feared the most was that Russia would be on the US side, but now Russia has been pushed into China's arms by the West. He believed that if Russia collapsed, China would shore up Russia.

**Regarding the inevitability of a US-China war:** Referring to the so-called "Thucydides trap", Ivor Roberts raised the question about whether a war between the US and China is inevitable. Todd Hall, Rosemary Foot and Richard Caplan all doubted the inevitability of such a war, given that the conditions for past wars between a rising power and the existing hegemony don't hold in today's world, the US and China have more regularized dialogue mechanisms, and there are differences between strategic competition and inevitable armed conflicts. George Yeo observed that the "Thucydides trap" may be a useful lens to view the Western history, but not East Asian history. This is mainly because China's thinking is different from the West's balance of power or hegemonic

mindset. In China's historical tributary system, what China wanted is face, respect and feeling "morally superior", rather than hegemonic power over others.

**Regarding the role of Southeast Asian countries in navigating the US-China geopolitical tensions:** Rosemary Foot argued that while in Northeast Asia, South Korea and Japan are aligning more closely with the US and hardening their positions in relation to China, the Southeast Asian countries seem to have gravitated more towards China. George Yeo noted that Southeast Asian countries want to see a prosperous China and benefit from it, while keeping their sovereignty. Southeast Asian countries also wanted diversification. The more their China economic accounts grew, the more they would want other major powers participating in their economies to achieve diversification. In responding to Denis Galligan's question regarding the role of small countries in navigating geopolitical tensions, Yeo noted that for Singapore, it must be cold-blooded in positioning itself between great powers to gain the best position for itself.

## Dialogue between George Yeo and Oxford professors<sup>3</sup>

### *Tensions around China's vision about the world order*

**Ivor Roberts:** What does China want? What is their vision of the world and their place in it? How do you see the key historical and contemporary Chinese narratives that we need to understand China and its aspirations?

**Todd Hall:** That is a very large question. On the one hand, there is the story of China's moral mission in the world. It goes under a variety of monikers, but probably the most central one at the moment is the "community of shared destiny for humankind" (人类命运共同体). And that's a vision of a certain type of international relations in which China brings a moral purpose to the international system. It is a certain understanding of how international relations can function which includes the Five Principles of Co-existence, non-interference in other states' affairs, as well as a certain focus on development over human rights.

There is another story it's telling, which is a story of China's core interests, of things that are important to the People's Republic China (PRC) for historical national reasons. These include China's concerns about Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet, as well as the position of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) within China. I think these two stories are the major clusters of the way in which the PRC is articulating on the international stage what matters to it. But I would call these quasi-official discourses and there are a lot of other discourses within China. I think there sometimes can be *tension* between those two stories, because if you go out and say we want peace, harmony and mutual respect, this can come into tension with the fact that at the same time you are saying certain maritime rights here are ours, not yours (as in the South China Sea).

**Rosemary Foot:** I've been working on China as a multilateral actor for some time and looking at China within the United Nations in particular. And one of the stories that the Chinese leadership tells is that it wishes to live in an UN-led order rather than a US-led order. So, it describes itself as

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<sup>3</sup> Editors' note: This edited dialogue is not a verbatim transcript of what was said during the event, but the main views and insights of the participants.

a “true multilateralist” (unlike the United States it avers) and one that is seeking a strong relationship with the Global South arguing for its improved representation, greater voice etc in the major multilateral organisations in world politics. But much of the discourse, when you examine it in more detail, is a very *anti-US discourse*, a very *anti-Western* discourse, and in some senses, that discourse undercuts the message that China otherwise has been trying to promote: that is, the idea of itself as a “true multilateralist” looking for peace and stability. But it seems to frequently narrow down to the particular state of its relationship with the United States. Behind that, within that multilateral setting, it’s quite clear that China is trying to promote various initiatives, particularly the global development initiative, the global security initiative, and the global civilization initiative. These have come to define key aspects of its foreign relations, and it is using multilateral organizations of various kinds to promote its ideas about development, security, and about the idea of civilizational difference. What it promotes therefore is a world of diversity, a pluralist world, a state-based perspective on world politics: that’s the central message that is coming through. It is certainly coming through in Southeast Asia. Those initiatives, plus the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), have been very much part of the discourse between China and individual Southeast Asian nations or China and ASEAN. As I understand it, there are different responses within the region, within the ASEAN ten. There are some countries that are much more sympathetic to those particular initiatives and ideas, and others that are much worried about what it actually means.

**George Yeo:** On the South China Sea claims, it is unfair that for the newly born countries, like the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, their sea boundaries have already been claimed by China almost right up to their horizons. But legally speaking, China’s claim goes back to the Qing Dynasty when China opposed French incursion.<sup>4</sup> The British were wary of the French, and were wary of the Americans coming to the Philippines. In British archives, it is acknowledged that these islands in the South China Sea belonged to China. And right up to the 1960s, the US Navy, when it conducted surveys in the South China Sea, sought Taipei's approval. So the Chinese say, you claim these islands don't belong to China only because you now want to contain us. China had opted out from compulsory arbitration under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)

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<sup>4</sup> Referred to conflict between China and France over Vietnam (formerly a vassal state of China) in 1883 to 1885.



and was outmanoeuvred by the Philippines (really the Americans) and lost big diplomatically.<sup>5</sup> The UNCLOS tribunal judges argued that China's ability to opt out was itself justiciable. When China refused to participate, the tribunal ruled against it. The same thing happened with the main proceedings. The tribunal adjudged that there was no island in the South China Sea which merited maritime rights. At that time, China did not understand enough about the way international law operated and was naive. Now they know.

China has no wish to displace the Americans. For them, it's not because they can't, but because they think it's unwise. "Do I really want to get involved in your family's problems?" Their view is no. Being a country with 1.4 billion people, they have their own problems. And when they see the Americans doing that (i.e., getting involved in others' affairs), they think it is unwise and even foolish and China would not want to get entangled in the domestic affairs of other countries unless its own vital interests were involved. But the Americans said China would do what they have done, what the Europeans have done when they were powerful. So only time will tell whether the Chinese really are who they claim to be. Singapore is a nation of three-quarters ethnic Chinese, and in Southeast Asia, we've seen China in all its previous incarnations. China's preference is for a multi-polar world, and it will then be one of the very big poles in such a world.

*Taiwan issue: "The core of all core issues for China"*

**Ivor Roberts:** Minister George, would you like to comment on China's recent military exercise around Taiwan?

**George Yeo:** I've not been following that in detail, but it was in response to the speech of William Lai on October 10th. If China wishes, they can just walk into Taiwan because there is not a single US aircraft carrier in the Pacific. But they are not doing so because they want peace, and they know they're getting stronger in relative terms. There's a deep sense of historical injustice in China. In 1943, it was agreed in the Cairo Declaration that Taiwan would be returned to China after World War II. So, the Chinese feel the legal claim is incontrovertible, and the only reason why Taiwan is still separate is the final chapter in the long civil war, which they hope will close peacefully. They

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<sup>5</sup> "South China Sea: Tribunal backs case against China brought by Philippines". 12 July 2016. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-36771749>

know the US strategy, which is to keep Taiwan separate, if possible, forever from China. When Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met his German counterpart, he once said, "We supported German reunification. We hope you will support Chinese reunification". Germany was divided because it was an aggressor; China was divided because it was a victim. So, this [thinking] is very deeply held in China.

For China, of all core issues, Taiwan is the core of all core issues. Henry Kissinger recounted when he met the late Chinese leaders Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong [in early 1970s]: "You could talk about everything, but the Chinese leaders kept coming back to Taiwan. On this issue, it's a very clear red line. And what were they telling us there? We can walk in today, but we are not [doing that]. But please know the history." In the latest Taiwan election, around 60% Taiwanese voted against the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Among young people, maybe a majority would want independence. But independence is an illusion. And if you build your hopes on an illusion, it will lead to tragedy, not only for the Taiwanese, but also for China and the world. For China, the Taiwan issue is deeply emotional.

**Ivor Roberts:** Regarding Taiwan, while the US is happy to see the status quo, Xi Jinping is very patently not happy to see the status quo indefinitely. Is there a realistic time scale that he is operating to?

**George Yeo:** The Chinese believe that time is on their side. They're getting stronger. They're also watching with great interest the internal dynamics within the US and Europe, the internal contradictions. Some of them feel that the US will eventually exhaust itself in too many foreign ventures [including Taiwan]. So, there's a sense in China that time is on our side. The fruit will be sour if it is plucked. It will eventually ripen.

**Todd Hall:** I can't speak to what US policymakers think, just like I can't speak to what PRC policymakers think. But I do know that the US position has consistently been to avoid *any unilateral changes* to the status quo, particularly through the use of force. That has been the US's official position. I think different policymakers probably think different things, but I would be careful not to say the US official position is to maintain Taiwan's separation from China mainland.

## *China's "contradictory" stance on the Russia-Ukraine War*

**Ivor Roberts:** What I find hard to get my head around is that we've heard that what China wants is an UN-led world order, not a US-led world order, but how can that be squared with tacitly accepting what Russia has done in the case of Ukraine, invading a sovereign country and breaking every international norm?

**George Yeo:** China understands the Russian justification that despite assurances made, NATO has been relentlessly moving eastwards but hold on to their principle of territorial integrity. The Russians believe that the ultimate objective of NATO expansion is first to westernize Ukraine then Belarus, and eventually to reduce Russia itself into smaller states if possible. A putsch was attempted in Kazakhstan but failed. This is the way Putin looks at the world and looks at NATO and the West. China's stance on the Ukraine-Russia war is also in its own interest. It is not anti-West. But it is not pro-West either especially when the US is preventing its reunification with Taiwan. China wants Europe and the Euro to be strong. China wants a strong Europe to better handle the US. What China feared the most was that Russia would be on the US side. But Russia has been pushed into China's arms. They can hardly believe this! And with Ukraine being unresolvable for decades to come, Russia will be close to China for decades to come.

**Richard Caplan:** Regarding NATO's eastward expansion, there were diverse views within the United States government and among the allies of the US. But NATO's promise of not expanding eastwards was never enshrined in an international treaty or agreement. That doesn't mean that what has been done by NATO subsequently hasn't perhaps been in bad faith. But all this is ignoring what the majority of Ukraine population itself wished for its future. And Russia has not observed the arrangements to which it agreed to ensure the sovereignty of Ukraine. So China sees all of this clearly. Yet I appreciate [Yeo's view] why from a strategic standpoint, it might be important for China to have good relations with Russia in thinking about the larger question of shaping the global order.

**Ivor Roberts:** The effect of Putin's invasion of Ukraine in terms of NATO expansion is to bring Sweden and Finland into NATO, which, I would have said 5 years ago, was absolutely impossible. And this is the direct result of what Putin has done.

**Rosemary Foot:** I think China gets itself into a really contradictory position. It did not recognize the outcome when Russia moved into Crimea. In fact, on the eve of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022, it was celebrating 30 years of China-Ukraine relations and emphasizing support for the national unity, territorial integrity, and state sovereignty of Ukraine. In the past, China has been wary of Russian action with respect to Ukraine, so the shift after the war is a real tension in Chinese foreign policy.

**Todd Hall:** The Russian invasion of Ukraine was probably not something that the PRC welcomed. But it was something that China had to deal with because, in the grand view of things, you still have to keep Russia on your side. First, this is because when Chinese actors see the US as engaging in competition and even believe that the US is trying to keep it down, and therefore the relationship with Russia becomes a strategic decision. This is also because China has an over 4,000-kilometer border with Russia. During the Cold War, that border was militarized and was quite a burden for China, if not a threat. Also, Russia serves a very good function for standing up on certain issues so that the PRC sometimes doesn't even have to, or at least not do so alone. So, the Russia-Ukraine war does make for uncomfortable positions for the PRC, but then it says, well, it advocates for peace, dialogue, and respect of the UN Charter. It hasn't renounced any of those norms. We read all the PRC statements. It is always the UN comes first and then come historical circumstances. This is just my attempt to interpret China's position.

**George Yeo:** On Russia and Ukraine, China's position is highly calibrated. It may be 55 to 45, sometimes it's 60 to 40, sometimes it's 53 to 47, but it will never be 50 to 50. *If the war turns against Russia and Russia itself was in danger of collapse, I believe they will shore up Russia.* But it is not needed now. China is skillful in keeping options open for the future.

**Denis Galligan:** What are the differences between China's relations with the United States and China's relations with Europe?

**Richard Caplan:** I think this is relevant to the earlier conversation we were having about Ukraine and NATO expansion because we forget perhaps that NATO operates on a consensual basis. And so decisions such as further expansion of NATO are decisions that would have to be taken unanimously. That is unlike for many other organizations, certainly with the international financial institutions, because of the voting rights where the US has greater dominance. And it's not to say

the US is not persuasive in the neighbourhood. It certainly is. But I think that's something that needs to be borne in mind. As for the difference [between China's relations with the US and Europe], it partly depends on Europe itself, and there are splits even within the European Union. There's been quite considerable unity around the Ukraine question, but there are outliers, dissenting voices, and Hungary has certainly been one.

**Rosemary Foot**: China has always looked at the world through the lens of the United States. For China, Europe has been seen through the lens of "how can we use the Europeans in some way in order to weaken the United States with regard to certain policies". And they veer between thinking of the Europeans as simply another arm of the United States, and saying to them "if you're really serious about being an independent force in world politics, then you should be standing up for your particular perspectives because they're not the same as the United States". There is a tension in their position towards the Europeans. As Richard said, clearly Europe is a diverse group of states. You've seen the way that Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban, for example, has courted both Putin and Xi Jinping. Orban is very interested in the BRI, as are a number of European Union countries, less so than they used to be incidentally, in part because of the lack of success with some of those policies. There is also the case of Lithuania which now has a more negative perception of the Chinese leadership partly due to China's engaging in coercive diplomacy because of a position that Lithuania took on a question involving Taiwan. So, it's been a difficult road for China to stabilize the relationship with Europe, and it's made much more difficult because of its perceived sympathetic position towards Russia. China may try to set itself up as a neutral player on the matter of the Ukraine war, but within the European Union, particularly at the level of the European Commission, the idea is that China has enabled Russia, both by buying its energy resources and by potentially sharing dual-use technologies with it, and the like. So when I talk to Chinese about China and Europe, there is a constant desire to try to build a relationship. But the European side is extremely concerned about market access, about investment rules, about China's relationship with Russia, and all of these things have complicated that particular Chinese aim. Of course, Germany still has very great interest in the commercial relationship with China, but the tensions in the China-European relationship are palpable.

## *A US-China war inevitable?*

**Ivor Roberts:** I wanted to ask if anyone around the table shares the political scientist Graham Allison's view that China and the US are currently on a collision course for war. He was, of course, the man who popularized the "Thucydides trap".

**Todd Hall:** Graham Allison tells the story that if you look at rising powers and existing hegemonic powers in the past 500 years or so, 12 of the 16 cases he studied ended in war.<sup>6</sup> The issue is that if you do this to predict the future—to steal a phrase from the IR scholar Alex Wendt—means you are driving with the rearview mirror. And you're looking back at a time when nuclear weapons didn't exist, when a great power war was thought to be a means by which you could achieve international leadership, when you have very thin international institutions, and when the international system itself was very limited in the number of major players who could oppose you or who you need to get on your side once you achieve that victory. I don't think any of those conditions hold at the moment. So, trying to use the past to make sense of the contemporary period is very problematic. That's not to say that conflict couldn't exist between the United States and China, but I don't think the pathways or the reasons would be the same as in the past.

**Rosemary Foot:** Graham Allison has tried to reverse himself a bit on that and reminded us that he did put a question mark in the title of his book and so on. But the other thing I would point to is that now we do actually have a slightly more regularized dialogue between the United States and China going on. This is what we should be encouraging, that these two countries really do talk about issues and can cooperate on some of them, and that's what I hope for.

**George Yeo:** Well, if I'm a westerner, then that lens through the Peloponnesian War is an important one. It applies to France, to Germany, to Russia. For these countries, you always try to prevent a dominant power on the European continent. So there are no permanent allies, no

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<sup>6</sup> Graham Allison. 24 September 2015. "*The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?*" <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>

permanent enemies, but just a continuing need for balance in the West. In China, you need one eye on the rearview mirror because for the Chinese, the past lives in its present and guides its trajectory into the future. You can't have a conversation with Chinese scholars without repeated references to what happened in this dynasty and that dynasty. But China has always been happy with a multipolar world. They want the respect. This is a tributary relationship, but it's not the Roman tributary relationship or the Ottoman tributary relationship. You pay China in order to get access and benefit far more than you paid. This is not protection money, and they (the Chinese) just want face. They want to feel that they are morally superior. That's their thinking. So it's not very useful to look at East Asian history through the lens of Thucydides. But for the West, it's a very useful lens.

**Richard Caplan**: There's also a distinction between the inevitability of war and of strategic competition. And that's been acknowledged, certainly in the US. There's continuity with the Biden and the Trump administrations on this. There are precedents, institutions, and norms that allow for the management of that competition. You could say there's a certain inevitability about tension between the two parties, but not necessarily about the outbreak of war.

### *The role of Southeast Asian countries in navigating China-US geopolitical tensions*

**Denis Galligan**: Thinking of Singapore, a small country out there in the Southeast Asian area, how does it negotiate this complex world between China and United States, Europe even? How does it navigate these rather choppy waters?

**George Yeo**: We are a price-taker. We have to accept the world for what it is, not for what we wish it to be. We are like a raft flowing down the river. The better we understand what's ahead, the more we can get into a good position early and avoid being sucked into a vortex but instead gain from the momentum which the water gives you to propel forward. Henry Kissinger once said, the Singaporeans are "cold-blooded" [in their international relations policies], which I think was a compliment. Our only agency is to decide where and how to position ourselves within those forces. So there's no emotional commitment to a preferred outcome. If China is ascending, there's an opportunity, but it's also a danger. If China is collapsing, there's a danger, but there's also an

opportunity. To navigate choppy waters well, the most important is that the crew itself must be united; if we are divided within, we will fail.

**Rosemary Foot**: I've been thinking about the region as a whole, the ASEAN-10, but also the plus 3, Japan, South Korea, and China. And I wonder whether there is a pulling-apart of the Asia Pacific in some senses because all the public opinion polls are suggesting that Southeast Asia has been gravitating towards China. These polls ask questions such as "if you were forced to choose alignment with the United States or with China, which country would you choose?" And those figures are showing drifts in China's favor. The Northeast Asians, that is South Korea and Japan, on the other hand, seem to have developed and strengthened their alliance relationships with the United States. So I wonder whether bodies such as the ASEAN Regional Forum or the East Asia Summit, or ASEAN and its dialogue partners -- that organizational and security framework for the region -- is in some senses weakening because of that pulling apart? Maybe my perception of it is wrong, but from an outsider perspective, it looks like whereas from the 1990s onwards the region was coming together as the Asia Pacific, now, we have the idea of the Indo Pacific as a counter to that earlier framing. There's also a sense in which the South Koreans and the Japanese have actually hardened their position with respect to China, whereas Southeast Asians, as I say, have gravitated towards China.

**George Yeo**: I would say on the whole, Southeast Asians are glad to be in Southeast Asia, and not in some other part of the world. We've enjoyed peace with relatively stability everywhere, except Myanmar. Just a few weeks ago, I took the train from Vientiane (capital city of Laos) to Long Pabang (a city in Laos) and from there to Kunming (capital city of China's Yunnan province). By Chinese standards, it's a slow train because it moves at only 160 kilometres an hour. That new corridor is part of the change in the history of the region's relationship with China. Southeast Asian countries are realistic. I think 20, 30 years ahead, China will be huge, and we intend to benefit from that China, while maintaining our own political sovereignty, which I think we can. In the case of South Korea and Japan, in the short term, they have to align with the US, but the people there know that in 20 to 30 years, the relative positions of China and the US will change. How then should they be positioned for that future? For how long can you keep 40,000-50,000 American G.I.s (i.e., soldiers) in Japan and 30,000 in South Korea? Are you still occupied



countries? And historically, how has your relationship with China been? In the past clashes between China and Japan, Koreans had been on the side of China.

**Richard Caplan**: What about the North Korea factor? This is something which South Korea and Japan share in terms of their concerns. And isn't that an enduring concern for these countries, which partly explains the affinity that they have for continued strong strategic relations with the US? And China obviously is an important factor as well in relation to North Korea.

**George Yeo**: I've been to North Korea twice. I went there when I was Foreign Minister and went back there in 2019 just before COVID. In those 10 years, despite sanctions, North Korea had made huge improvements. Pyongyang looked much better. On both trips, I went down to the demilitarized zone (DMZ).<sup>7</sup> The country looked better, and I don't think sanctions have been completely effective. And everywhere I went, I saw Chinese tour buses. Tourism is not subject to sanctions. But the Chinese treat the North Koreans very gingerly. They know they are prickly. North Korea will never countenance the idea of Chinese troops being based in North Korea, and they're quite contemptuous of the fact that American G.I.s are in South Korea. That's how they look at the world. Of course, when we look at North Korea through the prism of the Western media, it looks kind of funny and strange. But when you are there, they are warm people, and they're astonishingly clean. And now, with Russia helping North Korea and China seeing North Korea as a friend more and more, they'll be okay.

**Richard Caplan**: East Asia is a very diverse region with different histories, different relations with China, and it is evident that there are differing perceptions and concerns about developments that we've been discussing.

**George Yeo**: ASEAN is already China's biggest trading partner, overtaking the US and Europe.<sup>8</sup> There's a natural complementarity in terms of how we can work together to help each other. And, historically, this has always been the case. Whenever China was united and ascendent, it brought prosperity to the Southeastern kingdoms. And in fact, sometimes, they fought each other to gain preferential access to China. And the Chinese will always play to use the fact that it is the biggest market, so it will favour one over the other when it's convenient for it to do so. Even something

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<sup>7</sup> A heavily fortified buffer zone between North and South Korea established in 1953 after the Korean War.

<sup>8</sup> "China, ASEAN are natural partners". 20 September 2023. [https://regional.chinadaily.com.cn/en/2023-09/20/c\\_926787.htm](https://regional.chinadaily.com.cn/en/2023-09/20/c_926787.htm)

like durians, which is a fruit which, happily, westerners do not like. They're buying durians from Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and use it as part of foreign policy. You're nice to me? I'll give you a bigger durian quota allocation.

**Rosemary Foot:** So that means your policy autonomy could be constrained by China if you become so dependent on it economically. If you do something, say Singapore says something at East Asia Summit about the South China Sea, which it did last week, China could turn around and constrain it.

**George Yeo:** They do that all the time. They much prefer to use economic carrots and sticks than to use missiles and gunboats. That's always been their approach to statecraft. In any bilateral relationship, you often need China more than China needs you. You may see this as economic coercion. But it requires both sides to agree to trade goods. And if I don't agree, you cannot call that "coercion". Would you say that about the United States as well?

**Ivor Roberts:** I am conscious of the time. Thank you all for a rich and frank discussion.