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**Fireside Chat with Ng Eng Hen**

[**Ng Eng Hen**](https://www.aspensecurityforum.org/2024-asf-speakers/ng-eng-hen-)**,** Minister of Defence, Singapore

*Moderator*: [**Ravi Agrawal**](https://www.aspensecurityforum.org/2024-asf-speakers/ravi-agrawal-), Editor in Chief, *Foreign Policy*​

Session link: <https://www.youtube.com/live/sU2pr-w7PnY?si=1XDyQkt7_yDAYqy9>

**Ravi Agrawal**

Minister Ng Eng Hen, it's a real pleasure to have you here. Welcome to the United States. Welcome to Aspen. You must be jet lagged, so there's a lot that I want to cover with you, and I thought I'd begin with a topic that many of us in the West like to ask Singaporeans, about China and listening to the previous discussion, you know, as little question now that over the last decade or so, China has just become a lot more belligerent. You can speak to the Indians about that on their border. Speak to the Filipinos, speak to the Australians. China is, of course, threatening Taiwan. It is providing components to Russia that are aiding it in its war in Ukraine. And the question that I want to ask you, and I have been trying to understand for some time, is why? You understand the Chinese well. Why do you think they have shifted in the last decade or so to become more assertive and belligerent?

**Ng Eng Hen**

Well, thank you. Ravi, first. Thank you very much to the Aspen Security Forum for inviting me here. It's my first time to Aspen. I've been to United States quite often, but didn't have the opportunity to come to Aspen. And I sort of asked why a security forum in Aspen? So my wife is here with me, and when we came from D.C, and when I saw Aspen from the air, I had an epiphany. I know why you have a security forum in Aspen. So thank you for being… I told my wife…

**Ravi Agrawal**

Shangri-La in Singapore is also lovely.

**Ng Eng Hen**

I told my wife, I said, look, there's a Republican convention going on. You know, they're investigating the would-be assassination. There won't be many people in this forum, and they all came to listen to me. Well, thank you. I don't pretend to be to understand China, or to be, want to be an apologist for China. So let me frame our perspective. We have two theaters of conflict, right? One, in Ukraine, from February 24 2022, as Joe Nye said the third year of conflict, military objectives can't be achieved on either side. Zelenskyy doesn't want to deal with a diplomatic solution, which he says publicly, and he said in Shangri La Dialogue. You have one which started October 7, Hamas attack. The retaliation, the retribution by the IDF, is painful for all of us, but the greater problem there is that it can expand beyond Gaza and Israel. And I would say that we can ill-afford a third theater of conflict in Asia. First, I don't think we would… the system can take it, but I think, more importantly, I think the reasons for casus belli are simply not there and not yet, or at least not yet. So I know you asked a lot of questions, but let me stop there, because I'm sure having framed it the way Singapore sees it, you would have more specific questions.

**Ravi Agrawal**

Sure. Well, I mean, so once again, you're such an astute observer of China. Can you try and explain, from speaking to them, from your interlocutors there. How are they seeing the world, and why do you think they're acting as they are?

**Ng Eng Hen**

Well, if you sort of situate yourself in China, a lot of things that they're doing seem to make sense to them. I'm not saying they didn't make any mistakes. So to build, for example, features within the South China Sea to move their forward defense line a couple of 100 kilometers forward, makes perfect military strategic sense. The island chains concept was an American concept, and it was meant to contain China. And from their point of view. If I could do it, I would, and they did us. Attention was elsewhere after 911 and they fortified some of the features. The tribunal ruling said that they couldn't claim anything beyond the features. Tribunal ruling talked about what effectivities These islands or land masses or low tide elevations, had from I think the South China Sea, the assertiveness of the South China Sea, excuse me, was probably a bad foreign policy. If you speak to them quietly and candidly, they say that they don't claim every inch of water. They said so, but in private, they say they don't how to roll it back. I think is something that they need to deal with. So that would be positioned in South China Sea. We can talk about Taiwan, and we can talk about trade. They articulate, articulated a number of aspects on us, on their position vis a vis us. I think some of some of it was born out of hubris. It helps for economies to go through cycles. And I think it will be a salutary effect for China to be going through a difficult period. I hope it tempers and it gives some sense of reality. But not all that they did over the last 30 years would be from their position against their interests. So you talk about India, I agree with you. People didn't realize that at one point, at a time where 400,000 troops, 200,000 on each side, and it could have gone very wrong.

**Ravi Agrawal**

Yeah, indeed. So let me flip that question now, when you look at how America's approach towards China has changed dramatically in the last seven or eight years. Does that worry you? Do you think it's justified?

**Ng Eng Hen**

It does, but let me try to reframe it. China today is a wonderful testament of great American foreign policy from the 1960s to 2000 in fact, the whole of Asia. You talk across administrations, starting from President Kennedy, that one form of colonial control should not be replaced by an iron tyranny that was in 1961 where America spearheaded the fight against communism. Talk about Ronald Reagan for the coming down the Berlin Wall, winning the Cold War as you were you talk about President Clinton sponsoring China's ascension into WTO and the reason he gave and that he could convince both sides they are was that it was important for the security of Asia. Now, if you ask yourself, from that perspective, American foreign policy from the 1960s to, I think, somewhere in 2010 consistent, building a global system that benefited small and large countries, and the results have been spectacular. Economically, China is now 17% of world trade. Economy of 17 trillion US is still leading at 28 trillion but 800 million people lifted our poverty, nowhere. Historically has any country ever done ASEAN? In1960s if you take all of Asia, they accounted for 4% of global trade. It's now 30% all these have been American successors. Now, what's changed since then?

**Ravi Agrawal**

Well, I noted you kind of stopped at 2010 there. What about 2010 to 2024?

**Ng Eng Hen**

The moving spirit did a vote phase and decided that the institutions in which created for globalization didn't work in its process. And I think the former director general WTO of Pascal Lamy lamented this. I mean, the building passed in 2022 but this was America trying to get out of the WTO, right? That was one. Two, tariffs, pulling out of the TPP. So America would have been the moving spirit for globalized world, for trade, finance, that was where we benefit small and large countries is now changed. We don't know where it will go, and I don't think China is the only reason. And we'll have to ask ourselves, and that panel proceeding was fascinating. We have to ask ourselves, in the future, where will US be? Where will China be? Because the reality now for China, from the Asian perspective, China is now the largest trading partner for almost all countries in Asia. Now, with Joe Nye talks about soft power, Kissinger talks about legitimacy, and here's a question for you. Can US sustain its global presence and its military presence in Asia solely predicated on military power?

**Ravi Agrawal**

I'm guessing the answer is no. I mean, that was a rhetorical question.

**Ng Eng Hen**

In the 1960’s, in case you haven't noticed, I'm sorry to have to say it is, Americans weren't always popular in Asia. In the 1960’s, as I said, there was a real anti-American backlash, even though they understood the fight against communism. Sukarno spoke against US and the situation in Laos, in Cambodia, the bombing didn't help. My founding Prime Minister was man of great wisdom, and he stuck to the courage of his convictions. In 1966 he announced that American soldiers who were based in Vietnam could come to Singapore for an R’n’R. Now in the 1990’s, when America had been more popular, because basically, foreign policy worked. The ASEAN economies that had decolonized had rising, rising tide lifted all boats, and the ASEAN economies grew. But when American forces had to pull out of Clark and Subic, we offered Singapore not as a base, because it was just too small. But even today, American ships and planes are the largest user. They rotate through Changi and naval bases. So from Singapore's perspective, we've held that the US presence in Asia is a force for stability, we say, is indispensable. But that was of a US that was leading the global charge. And Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, when Yew addressed the US Congress in 1985 he said this. He said, America as a hyperpower, a superpower, will have to decide on the rules and enforce it, which America did marvelously, I would say, for 20 years hence. Today, I would argue that it's a different America, and one that may… has to be careful to maintain its moral legitimacy, even in Asia.

**Ravi Agrawal**

Are you saying America has lost its moral legitimacy in Asia?

**Ng Eng Hen**

It has to maintain its moral legitimacy.

**Ravi Agrawal**

Let me find another way of asking you this question, so I'll talk about a few other arenas.

**Ng Eng Hen**

Let me answer that in the Chinese.

**Ravi Agrawal**

Please.

**Ng Eng Hen**

The Chinese say to us, you know, you ASEAN countries or Asian countries. You're very difficult. You choose China when it comes to trade, and you choose America when it comes to military power. So we look at them and says, why not?

**Ravi Argawal**

Fair. And you know, in a sense, there are many countries now in the Global South that, you know, sense a shifting world order. That sense, not absolute American decline, but relative, in relative terms, relative American decline and a relative rise to China. And that changes things. And I'm curious, as you know, we're here at Aspen Security [Forum], but you host Shangri La and you get to see all these defense ministers from around the world who come there. Just last month, your counterparts from America and China were there. I'm curious, if there were to be a skirmish in the Indo Pacific, what would that look like? What happens?

**Ng Eng Hen**

What happens that will be cataclysmic, whatever they all come it would test Pax Americana and discovery, I think, is what we want to avoid. Let me clarify that. In the third Taiwan Straits in 1995, 1996 you remember President Clinton mobilized two aircraft carriers. The Chinese had missiles pointing towards Taiwan. And thankfully, both stood down, or at least both claimed that they stopped their exercise. If you had another situation today, I'm not sure what the outcome is, and I'm not sure that we want to discover it, because it won't be a simple or short outcome. I've said that Taiwan is not Ukraine and China is not Russia. Taiwan is an island. To resupply Taiwan, you will need Japan and Korea and draw them in. And China is not Russia. China is that's got military capabilities 17% of trade, but effect on us will be devastating. So this is a very complex situation we talked about. You know what Americans policy is when it comes to commerce and trade. The truth is we really not quite sure how that goes. But from security perspective, I think all of us should be very, very careful to avoid any physical conflict for at least for at least this decade, if not for the longer because discovery will be very painful and will be probably life changing. If America is able to maintain its military supremacy in Asia, that won't stop China. China will hunker down. Global trade will end with China. China will spend more on military spending, and the contest will go on for another couple of decades, maybe even more than one generation. If America, we discover, can't maintain its military supremacy, I think that's the beginning of the end of Pax Americana.

**Ravi Argawal**

I'm only going to ask you one question about Donald Trump.

**Ng Eng Hen**

I won’t answer.

**Ravi Argawal**

I’ll put it to you hypothetically…

**Ng Eng Hen**

Nice man. Hope his ear recovers.

**Ravi Argawal**

Yeah, we all do. We, in all seriousness, we all do. But hypothetically, we've, we've all heard now several potential ranges of what a Trump 2.0 China policy could look like, ranging from, you know, we will dismiss managed competition. We're in it to win it. You heard about the trade tariffs. A lot of that would rock the boat significantly. Is anything going on behind the scenes to try and…

**Ng Eng Hen**

Well, it is what it is. But I would remind you that, you know, we've worked with the Trump administration for meetings with Singapore, and he was very happy with Singapore. Singapore, because we have a trade surplus with you, and security wise, it was in 2015 that my Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong renewed the MOU, MOU, the military MOU, to continue American ships and planes going through Singapore. So we've worked at the Trump administration. I'm not so much concerned, because it makes a big difference. But on trade, and you have experts talking about it now, when it comes to lists, I think it's possible to try to have small yard high fences, and you talk about strategic, non strategic, but when you break it down, you're not quite sure, because the fundamental aspect, I think it was touch upon, if you talk about trade, it's not quite trade, it's information, information. And we talked about how electric cars can if you ask, well, if I'm trying to protect information, and that becomes a security risk, then the yard goes bigger. If you talk about security, food security, interdependency, the yard goes bigger. If you talk about capital, which is the most fungible of all, it's already begun. You invest in a Chinese company that has a holding which has security aspects, and therefore you cannot do business with America or America's company, then it becomes very difficult, and probably, I think it's not undoable, but I would humbly submit that we are not sure. It's very hard to decipher what the real outcome of this new industrial policy is.

**Ravi Argawal**

Fair, I want to ask you about the war in Gaza. In Southeast Asia. You're surrounded by a lot of countries that have significant Muslim populations, Indonesia, Malaysia, your own country as well. What is the mood like? And how are you gauging the West's role in the Middle East?

**Ng Eng Hen**

Oh, anger. Singapore has a Muslim population of 15% and you had this announced two people that were picked up because they were radicalized to and this was a 14 year old boy who pledged that he would commit jihad. So obviously, there are effects, and it's been difficult for countries that whether they have Muslim populations or not. I think the problem is that you've radicalized another generation would-be terrorists in Gaza and elsewhere. So, we hope that the violence in Gaza would end soon, and all we have done is to try to help in giving humanitarian aid. We gave airdrops to Gaza by way of Jordan. But really this, I think, has a longer tail, and it's unfortunate that it happened and but the larger problem, of course, is Iran, and the Israelis know it, and the progressive Arab States know it. How much this has upended the Abraham accord, I think it has. I think some of the states want to resume relations with Israel. But domestically in their politics, this has made it very, very difficult for them to sell their message.

**Ravi Argawal**

Do you think America, given what you're saying? I mean, the first word you said was anger. Is America losing soft power?

**Ng Eng Hen**

Not so much soft power, but I think across many countries, we've lost the young on this. The young are even in Singapore, particularly incensed them about the violence and the fact that nothing is done to stop it, so you would lose political support, I don't think not so much in soft power and some of it, but there are other issues that I talked about in terms of, what does America want to do about trade? What? What Asians people, I suppose don't, can't wrap their minds around is, how can the US says that the trade practice is unfair when it's to them, they're the richest country in the world, where America's, you know, 28 trillion economy per capita, GDP. There may be inequality in America, but when they see America, they see a rich country. So when you talk about unfair, unfair trade practices, and they're not talking about us and talking about us and them, they find that difficult to understand. So if there was a plea which every person occupies the White House, is that we believe that America's military presence should continue and we will facilitate that. We believe that America should continue to be a global leader in setting the rules of trade. We believe that America should continue to trade, and we, and I am fully in agreement with the previous panel to talk about engagement. Last time the defense ministers visited each other from US and China was in 2018 this was Jim Mattis and Wei Fenghe. I think that has to resume very quickly. I think the lines of communication should be set up between military to military. I agree completely with Anja that it's very dangerous not to have comms. It's a good thing that Dong Qin, who's the new defense minister, agreed that he wanted more communications with Secretary Austin. So I hope whoever occupies the White House and the new defense minister that they would follow up.

**Ravi Argawal**

Your country's been investing a lot more in defense itself. I think if you look at the last four years, the percentage increase has been, you know, ranging between five and 12% increases year on year, which is quite a lot. Talk to us a little bit about how you're thinking about defense regionally, and is this coming from a place of fear about potential adversaries?

**Ng Eng Hen**

Well, it comes from paranoia.

**Ravi Argawal**

Paranoia about what?

**Ng Eng Hen**

IF you know our history, we were separated from Malaysia, and it was a difficult time for Southeast Asia, there was a threat of communism. Actually, our defense spending has come down. We used to spend as much as 5% of our GDP or defense, and I was spending about 333, point one, 3.2 and I think it will be stabilized to that. But you're right in nominal terms, is absolutely and we believe that defense is the best deterrence we have. We have no plans or no capability of projecting ourselves, and we don't want to project ourselves anywhere but Mr. Lee. Mr. Lee had this term poison shrimp, for defense forces. We think we're bigger than a shrimp now, but we're still poisoned, so we'll keep it as that. And we think that we'll continue to spend, by the way, we have conscription, so every 18 year old spends two years full time in the military, and then, you know, we call them back for a few weeks 10 years after that. So it's a People's Army, but we're fairly well equipped, so we think we project the good image of deterrence, and if the government continues to fund it, my department continue to raise that armed forces that we think we need.

**Ravi Argawal**

I want to talk about your country's fairly studied neutrality when it comes to world events, and that's of immense value, clearly. I mean, just listening to you talk, your perspective is so useful. But I'm curious how you think about neutrality a world that is in flux, in a world that is at war.

**Ng Eng Hen**

I'm not sure that we believe neutrality. I mean, again, I quote Mr. Lee, because he's a profound influence. But he and Prime Minister, Lee and lung and all of us are quite taken with you know, the media dialog. The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must. That's our ethos. And if you're weak, then what do you do? Well, we believe not so much in neutrality, but in information, in observing, in trying to be ultimate realists and saying what works what doesn't. And we don't believe that we can balance superpowers, but we would speak to them, and we would try to find some space where all sides need us, whether we can succeed. I mean, history will tell, but the US China conundrum will will decide the fates of all our nations for this decade and next. And America has to decide. And I understand all the policies of small yard high fences, security alliances, but ultimately it's a foreign policy towards China. I'm not sure that I have a clear idea. Is China me an enemy. Is China an enemy? For how long? Can China be your friend? And how would you go about it? Those are difficult questions.

**Ravi Argawal**

Have you asked those questions?

**Ng Eng Hen**

Oh, constantly. Every day, we're looking at you and saying, what's up? What gives?

**Ravi Argawal**

Very quickly, just a last thought I talked about a world in flux. This is also a world in which, you know, there are all these grand ideas and terms being thrown around, a new Cold War, a new battle between democracies and autocracies. And again, I mean, your point of speaking to all sides is well taken. But how do you fit in values when, when you see countries profess competing agendas and values, essentially.

**Ng Eng Hen**

If you this is not a contest of ideas or ideology, at least, well not not overtly, like capitalism and communism, it is a contest, but if you look at us, no one should bet against the US. We talked about advanced technology. I'm trying to answer your question, but bear with me, man for man, and I was Minister of Education, so I visited the universities in China, whether it was searching or Shanghai, jiao hung or Futan University, man for man, the Chinese students can match any American student. You know it. You have them. But systems wise, the American system is still ahead, and that's the reason why you have more Chinese you or Japanese win Nobel Prizes when they come out of their countries. That's what you still have, and that's what you continue to have. What value system produces that? Well, that's psychoanalyzing us, which is too difficult. But whatever you have, you have it, and you should keep at it. But is China led by the CCP, the Communist Party of China, one that has wrong values? Kissinger called China a historical singularity. It's what palim says. In other words, if you strip away different forms of government, there's still China and goes way down deep, the values deep. And I think that if you want to make China an enemy, it will be a self fulfilling prophecy. But I, I feel very strongly that engagement is important, that, as you did previously, that China is worth becoming a friend. And we know Graham Allison's book that you know, says that the outcome for maybe war, but there are good reasons to believe that if US can have a positive trajectory with China, I think it will make for certain greater stability, certain greater growth, and I believe it is within the powers of American leadership, if not now, maybe later, but I well believe that when, when, when you need something innovative, when you need to fix a difficult problem, that Americans have always shown us that you can do it. So, we look to you for leadership.

**Ravi Argawal**

This is a really useful perspective, Minister Eng. Thank you very much.