

The Centre For International Law (NUS) +
US-Asia Law Institute (NYU) Webinar
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Topic: **The ASEAN-China-USA Triangle:
Navigating In A Post-Ukraine/
Russia World.**

Keynote Speaker: **Professor Tommy Koh, Chairman, IAP,
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Salutations:

Professor Joseph Weiler

Professor Tan Hsien-Li

Ladies and Gentlemen

Introduction:

1. There is a saying in Chinese and in Japanese that there can only be one tiger on the hill. Powerful countries compete to be that tiger on the hill. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union waged a fierce struggle to be number one. From the end of the Cold War until recently, the United States reigned supreme. It

is now faced with a near-peer competitor, the People's Republic of China. This competition will go on for a long time. It will be settled by war or by a negotiated agreement.

Competition For Influence

2. The United States and China are competing for influence in every part of the world. There is an intense competition between them in Southeast Asia. Why is this region important to them? It is important because we are a community of 650 million people, and our economy is predicted to become the world's fourth largest economy by 2030. We are important because we have abundant natural and human resources. We are important because some of the world's critical sea-lanes, such as, the Straits of Singapore and Malacca, the Lombok Strait, pass through our waters.

How Should ASEAN Respond?

3. First, ASEAN should aim to occupy the pivotal position in the ASEAN-US-China triangle. This means that ASEAN

should always have better relations with the US and China than they have with each other. ASEAN should try to win the trust of Washington and Beijing. I think this is the happy position now.

4. Second, ASEAN should remain united and neutral. ASEAN's unity and neutrality are being threatened by the fact that a few ASEAN countries have chosen to align themselves with one of the superpowers. Since ASEAN countries are sovereign and independent countries, they have the right to determine their own foreign policies. However, when they meet as 10, they should understand that if ASEAN loses its unity and neutrality, it loses its utility to the world. They should therefore be willing to subordinate their individual preference in favour of the regional grouping's preference. This important point was made by Singapore's first Foreign Minister, Mr S Rajaratnam, in 1967, at the founding of ASEAN. I am afraid that the new members of ASEAN may not understand or accept Mr Rajaratnam's point.

5. Third, ASEAN should encourage the US and China to participate in such ASEAN-led platforms as the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus. We should encourage

the US and China to talk to each other and to cooperate with each other and with ASEAN, to solve some of the region's problems. This is especially important now as leaders of Washington and Beijing are not talking to each other. I am glad that, at the recent Shangri-La Dialogue, held in Singapore, there was a face-to-face meeting between the US Defence Secretary, Llyod Austin and the Chinese Defence Minister, Wei Fenghe. At about the same time, President Biden's National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan had a long meeting with China's State Counsellor, Yang Jiechi, in Luxembourg. Talking to each other is a necessary first step to rebuilding trust between them.

6. Fourth, ASEAN should tell the US and China not to decouple their economies, supply chains and technologies. Such decoupling would be very harmful to their two countries. It would also inflict collateral damage on the ASEAN countries.

7. Fifth, ASEAN should urge the US and China not to start a new Cold War in our region by building coalitions of countries to oppose each other. Our region is at peace, and we want to keep it that way. Our region's economies

are integrating through the RCEP and the CPTPP. Our message to Washington and Beijing is: please don't divide the region.

8. Sixth and finally, ASEAN should remind the two great powers that there are many areas in which they have common interests. Some of the areas include climate change, sustainability, peace on the Korean peninsula, non-proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction, strengthening our capacity to identify and fight the next pandemic, etc. We should encourage the US and China to join ASEAN in tackling these and other regional and global challenges. ASEAN must take the initiative because China will oppose any US initiative and the US will oppose any Chinese initiative. This will reinforce ASEAN centrality.

9. Thank you.

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