US, China do not understand each other: Chan Heng Chee

This is despite strategic talks between their stakeholders over the years, she says

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The United States and China do not understand each other, despite the many strategic dialogues that have taken place between their stakeholders over the years, said Professor Chan Heng Chee at a conference yesterday.

“I have to say the United States is autocratic, and China is autocratic, on the world stage,” she said, referencing political scientist Edward Luttwak’s concept of “great state autism.”

Citing China and the US, she said they do not understand the impact they have on each other.

Prof Chan, Ambassador-at-Large with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Singapore’s former long-time ambassador to the US, pointed to areas where they show a lack of understanding of each other.

China does not understand the Americans have changed and become less generous, while the US does not understand China’s rise and that it is a Leninist state.

Chan pointed out that China, as well as other countries, thought that America was in decline after the Iraq war and the financial recession.

But the US economy has bounced back and shown more resilience than others anticipated, she said at a session of the conference at Capella Singapore hotel in Sentosa.

As for the US, Prof Chan said it does not understand China’s rise and that China feels it has a right to rise. “Countries in Asia will not stop China from rising. China has the right to be a great power, but we want China to play by international rules.”

The US also does not seem to get that China is a Leninist state, she said. “It was thought with this openness and foreign investments in the country, China would liberalise and change and move (onto) the democratic track. But China did not.”

She described three scenarios which could unfold in the wake of the ongoing US-China trade tensions:

1. A Cold War, which she said was unlikely because the world has changed and the US would not be able to “line up countries to join them in containment”;
2. A technology containment, which is happening but also getting pushback from semiconductor companies and universities; and competitive co-existence, which is a scenario “not talked about very much now but some of us hope will happen.”

She added: “It is (about) the two systems being able to live with each other... it is competitive, but you do not try to finish the other off.”

Countries do not want to choose between the US and China, she said.