India, China on their own roads to greatness

They’re not adversaries, says Lee; it’s the US that China ‘considers its main rival for influence’ in the world

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WHILE both economies are powering ahead and poised to overtake the United States in the coming decades, the emerging superpowers of India and China are on distinct growth paths and do not view each other as adversaries. This was the view of former premier and minister mentor Lee Kuan Yew, who was asked to comment on the rapid expansion by the two nations and how their rising influence could impact the balance of power within East Asia and South Asia.

“I do not see the growth in China and India as one counter-balancing the other,” he said during a dialogue session at the close of the two-day South Asian Diaspora Convention yesterday. The hour-long event was moderated by Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy dean Kishore Mahbubani.

“China considers its main rival for influence to be the Americans, not the Indians. China is more focused on the US because the US is the bigger partner for trade, technology, investments – which China dearly needs. China just wants to keep the Indians at arm’s length,” said Mr Lee.

A frequent question that was posed to the 87-year-old was what he would personally do to take India forward if he were at the helm of the populous country’s affairs today.

“It is important for whoever leads India to find acceptance among the widest group of Indians possible,” said Mr Lee, citing the difficulties of governing a nation that spoke more than 300 different languages and dialects. “It’s very difficult for any Indian leader to find more than 40 percent of Indians believing that he represents them. It’s a structural problem which cannot be easily overcome.”

In China, however, the situation is very different as 90 percent of the population speak the same language – which makes running the country “much easier” because the citizens understand what the leaders are trying to communicate to them, said Mr Lee.

As for the role that Singapore – being the success story that it is – could play in India’s ongoing development, Mr Lee chose to downplay such an expectation as it was not possible for the tiny island-state to “infuse our dynamism” into India.

“We are small compared to this vast sub-continent. I won’t envisage any role that we can play that can make a difference to India’s future and ours. What we can do is use India’s dynamism and ride on it,” he said.

DBS chief executive Piyush Gupta, who was seated among the 600-strong audience at Resorts World Sentosa, asked Mr Lee about the thinking behind Singapore’s contentious foreign talent policy, given the fact that many among the South Asian diaspora had benefited from it, with some even making Singapore their permanent home.

Acknowledging that Singaporeans have felt the competition from “talented foreigners”, Mr Lee said:

“I’m a firm believer that the more talent you have, the better your society will get. If Singapore relies only on three million people, we won’t be able to punch above our weight.” He added: “We either accept foreign talent to increase the megabytes and computer capacity, or we can reject them and have a slow-working computer. In the case of Singapore, we accept the extra megabytes and that is why we are more successful than we would otherwise be.”