

It's a pleasure to welcome the Australian Bar Association to Singapore for this conference.

You are here at a time when the relationship between our two countries is as strong, if not stronger, than it has ever been in the 54 years since Singapore became a nation.

In 2015 we signed the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Prime Minister Lee Hsieng Loong spoke in our Parliament, marking that occasion.

He spoke eloquently of the depth of the relationship between our two countries and our peoples.

The relationship is built on strong foundations – the more than 200,000 Singaporeans who were educated by an Australian institution and the 70,000 who live in Australia now; the more than 30,000 Australians living and working here. And the decades of joint training between our militaries.

We are building an even stronger relationship on these foundations. We are working together to counter terrorism and radicalisation; to resist cyber threats; to enhance resilience in the region; to forge new partnerships in science and technology, and in digitalisation.

Singapore is our most capable and like-minded partner in the region. Increasingly, our bilateral discussions look outward at a region and a world of uncertainty and challenge.

You asked me to talk today on the theme Australia in the Asian Century. Some of you will be aware that that was the title of a report released in Australia in 2012. It focused on the opportunity of Asia for Australia if we worked hard and were clever.

The opportunities in the region arising from economic growth, an emerging middle class and its demands, are as great now as ever.

But I think it's also fair to say that the sunny optimism about Asia's future can now be contrasted, just a half dozen years later, with an outlook that also has many storm clouds gathering. And can I say – with an eye to your conference title – the times seem characterised by divergence as much as convergence.

The big geopolitical shift that has been underway for decades has now come more clearly into view, as China rivals the United States in many areas.

This in turn is creating new areas of tension. Judging from the trade and technology war underway now, we are entering an era of strategic competition, which perhaps might have decades to run.

The creator of the world order we have enjoyed for the last 70 years, the United States, now seems set to defy and indeed dismantle aspects of that order.

China's repression of dissent at home and its assertiveness abroad has many in this region and elsewhere anxious about what sort of power it will be.

This big story is interwoven with other stories of change and disruption.

Rapid technological change is outpacing the capacity of public policy and making many in our communities anxious about the future.

New social media is feeding populism, and governments are struggling with the use of the internet by criminal and terrorist networks.

Protectionism and unilateralism is on the rise, and is getting worse even as we get further from the GFC, the global financial crisis.

The Osaka G20 communique released a few weeks ago represents a new low. Neither the US or China could agree to references to the rules-based order – they both said they didn't know what the term meant.

One commentator summed up "The Osaka G20 Summit may be remembered in history as the moment the global rules-based order was lost."

Does this matter? Well to begin I assume that in a room full of lawyers I don't have to work too hard to draw a line between the rules-based order and the rule of law, or to make a case for its importance.

Of course it matters greatly. The order that we have enjoyed for the last 70 years has underpinned a period of relative peace and prosperity for most of us. It provided important constraints on the most powerful and protections for the weak.

International orders ultimately evolve or die.

Now, even at a time of complex interdependencies and as the world struggles with immense and wicked problems of the global commons, both the US and China seem to favour unilateral approaches to the use of their power. Both seem to think that aspects of the rules-based order are unfair to them.

The United States and China most likely will be the pre-eminent powers globally for much of this century, even if India continues its rise and Europe and Japan remain significant.

We don't yet know what this co-existence will mean for the world other than that it will be a different world, and perhaps more dangerous. How the US and China co-exist matters to the rest of us greatly.

So what are we to do?

The simple answer is that those of us like Australia and Singapore will have to do more, to carry more weight. We must protect and advance, and indeed help change and adapt, the rules-based order. Open economies and trade,

the protection of the less strong, sovereign rights, freedom from arbitrary use of power or coercive action, are important.

We must urge others to resist the temptations of bifurcated systems of rules and institutions.

We must work with the US to keep it positively engaged in this region and globally, to play a leadership role consistent with its values. We must work with China to persuade it to accept limits to the exercise of its power, to be less assertive and coercive.

We must encourage the US and China to find convergent interests where they can.

With our good friends in Singapore, we talk about how in the different world we face we can separately and together help shape a sustainably secure, prosperous and just future.

I hope that's an objective you would share.

I wish you the best for your conference, and thank you for your attention.