Students say...

Myanmar closer to our hearts than Pedra Branca

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Singapore is in the midst of a legal battle with Malaysia over Pedra Branca. Yet, this was not brought up at an informal dialogue session that Foreign Minister George Yeo had with Singapore Management University (SMU) students yesterday.

Instead, the focus was mainly on Myanmar and Singapore’s relations with it.

The Pedra Branca dispute is being heard at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague, Netherlands.

Both Singapore and Malaysia claim sovereignty over the islet about the size of a football field, and two outcrops – the Middle Rocks and South Ledge.

It’s 40km east of Singapore at the eastern entrance of the Singapore Strait.

The hearing at the ICJ opened this week and is expected to go on for three weeks. A judgment is expected next year.

First-year social science student John Kuah, 22, said: "Perhaps most of us are waiting for the results (of the case) to be out."

Another student, Miss Surekha Yadav, 23, also felt it may be premature to discuss (Pedra Branca) because the case is still ongoing.

The final-year political science major said: "The situation with Myanmar, it involves more emotional issues... it's human rights as opposed to land ownership."

"Most people would gravitate towards human rights and it’s fairly recent."

MORE ATTENTION

First-year social science student Ashley Liew, 20, said he chose the Myanmar issue over Pedra Branca because there was greater international attention on the former.

Mr Liew said: "Personally, I think Singapore has total sovereignty over Pedra Branca."

"The Myanmar issue is closer to heart... Singapore has come under attack and when people criticise Singaporeans or Singapore’s foreign policy, you’d feel more passionate about it."

One student asked about the foreign media’s perception that Singapore indirectly supports Myanmar junta through its continued engagement with the country.

Summing up Singapore’s overall position on the issue, Mr Yeo said: "The general policy of Singapore is to continue engaging the government of Myanmar."

"There has to be engagement. There may be sanctions in bad cases, but engagement is necessary because the moment you disengage, then your ability to influence becomes limited."

About 50 students attended the dialogue, which was organised by the SMU Social Science Society and the Punggol Community Club Youth Executive Committee.

Other topics discussed included the effect of a slowing US economy on Singapore as well as Singapore’s role in the global economy.