

# Czech PM wants to reopen embassy here

Embassy will help promote ties, he says, while noting Singapore's importance as regional trade hub

Rebecca Lynne Tan

One of the first things on the agenda for Czech Republic Prime Minister Andrej Babis when he returns home after his first official trip to Singapore, and to Asia, will be to reopen its embassy here.

"To help and promote relations, I have decided to reopen the embassy," Mr Babis said, noting Singapore's importance as a hub for trade and finance in the region.

He told The Straits Times yesterday: "I don't understand why we don't have an embassy here... but we have to reopen it."

The Czech Republic Embassy here was closed in 2008. Since then, the country's ambassador to Indonesia has been responsible for matters with Singapore.

Yesterday, the second day of his two-day trip, Mr Babis visited the Singapore Botanic Gardens, where an orchid was named in his honour.

He also delivered a keynote speech at the fourth Singapore-Czech Republic Business Forum held at The Ritz-Carlton, Millenia Singapore.

Present at the forum were Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan and Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry and Education Chee Hong Tat, who also spoke.

Mr Babis, who also met Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat, described their meeting as "fantastic" and "educational". They spoke "very concretely about debt, assets and so on", he said.

He added that he is happy that he and Mr Heng share a similar opinion on economic strategy.

On Monday, Mr Babis called on President Halimah Yacob and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, who hosted him to an official dinner.

When asked if his country, which has been part of the European Union since 2004, would join the euro zone – the bloc of EU member countries that have adopted the euro as their currency – he was



Left: Foreign Affairs Minister Vivian Balakrishnan and Czech Republic Prime Minister Andrej Babis arriving at The Ritz-Carlton, Millenia Singapore, for the fourth Singapore-Czech Republic Business Forum yesterday. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

Below: Mr Babis, flanked by Mr Chee Hong Tat (left) and Dr Leong Chee Chiew (NParks' deputy CEO), had an orchid named after him at the Singapore Botanic Gardens. PHOTO: LIANHE ZHAOBAO

quick to respond with a "no".

"No. If I am in government, definitely not," he said.

On maintaining an independent currency, he said: "We are very much an export(-oriented) country. If we were to enter the euro zone, then of course, we will be in the club with countries which don't perform very well – they are not very much responsible for the budget, they have a high debt..."

"It is also a question (of whether) to be independent. I know we have some obligation to enter the euro zone but the euro zone will need to reform because there are some countries which have high debt."

Another item on Mr Babis' list is to establish a direct airline connection between Prague and Singapore to better facilitate economic relations and promote tourism.

The Czech Republic is Singapore's 14th largest trading partner in the EU. Bilateral trade stood at \$1.15 billion in 2017, with imports amounting to \$486.5 million and exports worth \$660.2 million.

In 2005, trade between Singapore and the Czech Republic amounted to \$300 million.

Mr Babis also visited Nanyang Technological University's Centre of Excellence for Testing & Research of Autonomous Vehicles.

The university signed a memorandum of understanding with the University of Chemistry and Technology, Prague, on a partnership for research in energy storage and future mobility solutions.

Mr Babis heads to Thailand and India after Singapore.

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