

The Straits Times

Published on Jul 1, 2012

# When US noticed the 'little country that could'

Outgoing envoy to the US Chan Heng Chee recounts her 16 years in Washington

By Tracy Quek



Prof Chan receiving the inaugural Asia Society Diplomatic Achievement Award for her contributions to promoting US-Asia relations, with US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell and Asia Society president Vishakha Desai at a recent Asia Society awards dinner in Washington

In a town where politics and policy are the *raison d'être* for many of its residents and networking is an art form, Singapore's outgoing Ambassador to the United States Chan Heng Chee is a diplomat who appears to be very much in her element.

In her 16 years in Washington, Professor Chan, 70, has come to be noted for her 'salon dinners' at the Singapore Embassy, gatherings that bring together Washington's strategic thinkers, media personalities and policymakers to discuss hot-button issues of the day over a good - often Singaporean - meal.

Frequently sought for her views on Asian affairs, she is also known for her rapport with high-level US officials and diplomats, her support of charitable and cultural causes, as well as the elegant qipao she dons to the many formal events she hosts and is invited to.

Her reputation today as a distinguished figure in Washington's diplomatic circles, however, belies a difficult start to her job when she arrived in 1996 against the backdrop of tense Singapore-US ties following the caning of American teenager Michael Fay in 1994 for vandalism.

In a wide-ranging interview just weeks before her last day in Washington on July 14, she looked back on that tough beginning and how Singapore-US ties have developed. She also offered insights into the twists and turns of US domestic politics and the impact of social media, as well as shifts in US foreign policy - all of which she has witnessed from a unique diplomatic vantage point.

Upon her return to Singapore, Prof Chan will be Ambassador-at- Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She will also be executive chairman of the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities at the Singapore University of Technology and Design. Mr Ashok Kumar Mirpuri, 53, who has ended his term as Ambassador to Indonesia, will be Singapore's next Ambassador to the US.

In an hour-long exclusive interview with The Sunday Times, Prof Chan recalled that the Singapore-US relationship was 'not in a good spot' when she arrived.

'As the norm, Singapore and the US enjoy good relations; it is substantively and atmospherically good. But I had to work from that,' she said.

The first task she set herself was to change the American media's 'hostile' perception of Singapore, she said, noting that 'everybody was writing of Singapore as this authoritarian state and (putting) us in the same sentence as Iraq, China and Myanmar'.

The turning point was the 1997 Asian financial crisis. 'That was when Singapore started being regarded in a different way, not associated with Michael Fay, but as the country and economy that seemed to stand above the rest, because our currency did not swoon, we had good corporate governance,' she recounted.

After the financial crisis, Singapore's achievements in maths and science were evident, and the Republic was also developing technopreneurship and biotechnology. All these made people here sit up and say 'what is this little country that is doing all these avant garde things that bring you into the modern economy', she recalled.

Today, Americans tell her that Singapore is the 'little country that could'. They also see Singapore as a country that gets things right and as a nation that comes up with the right solutions, she said.

'I know in Singapore, we have social media and people have become more critical, and that is our evolution. But we forget that so many other countries have things so much worse and

wrong,' she said, adding that 'as you are trying to right things, you can make some mistakes, and to me that is better than to not do anything'.

The US is interested in Singapore's maths and science curriculums, how it retains good teachers, how it manages traffic, and how it attracts talent, she added. 'For the same reasons that Singaporeans are criticising the Government, Americans see it as answers for the future.'

Asked how she sees Singapore- US ties evolving, Prof Chan said the aim of Singapore's diplomacy was to make sure the Republic 'remains relevant in the world... to our partners, and in the region'. Singapore can do that by 'being what we are, by speaking frankly, objectively, honestly, and by thinking through strategic issues'.

In the Asia-Pacific region where 'we have rising powers... and transitions', Singapore's views and advice that are aimed at creating stabilising situations have led her to believe that 'more than ever, we have a job to do'.

On a personal note, she said she would miss the 'tone and quality' of conversations on politics and policy she has had with Americans over the past 16 years.

Asked if she would leave a letter for her successor, in the tradition of outgoing US presidents, Prof Chan quipped: 'I'm going to leave him a tome!'

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