

Learning to be undiplomatic

He may be one of the world's most influential thinkers but these days, former diplomat Kishore Mahbubani is preoccupied with matters closer to home.

Denyse Yeo

November 18, 2014, Tuesday

The Business Times Singapore

SECTION: HUB; DBS Asian Leaders Insights

LENGTH: 1264 words

He's spent more than 30 years in the foreign service, rising to the top of the diplomatic food chain to become president of the United Nations Security Council. He's widely published, writing not one but four well-received books, including on Asia's role in the new global order, and many more articles for journals and newspapers.

And he's been lauded as one of the world's top public intellectuals, by publications such as Foreign Policy, Financial Times and Prospect.

Yet, for a man known for his thought leadership on global affairs, Kishore Mahbubani is spending most of his time thinking of Singapore and its future instead.

Now dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP) at the National University of Singapore, Prof Mahbubani is happy to explain his current state of mind.

In person, the former diplomat and top civil servant is open and forthcoming. Even though sheets of rain pour down against his large glass-panelled office and thunder reverbs around, he continues speaking quietly and confidently.

"I used to write of the world and the rise of Asia. Now, I'm more concerned about the future of Singapore. I see a golden opportunity coming our way because the Asian century is emerging. Just like London serviced the European century and New York serviced the American century, Singapore can be the city serving the Asian century.

"We are the only city in Asia where all four major civilisations - Chinese, Indian, Islamic and Western - can interact comfortably. This gives Singapore a unique competitive advantage."

Yet, at the same time, Singapore faces greater uncertainty. "It is normal for a society after 50 years of peace and prosperity to see more turbulence. Internal debate is good, but you mustn't miss out on the opportunities that are coming your way."

His point is that the Republic can have another "great 50 years" but to do so, "we must be as bold as our founding fathers".

For example, as one of the world's most densely populated countries, Singapore needs to get rid of its "irrational addiction" to cars and find alternative modes of transport, something which is "politically difficult" and better for ordinary Singaporeans to talk about.

He hopes his monthly "Big Idea" column for The Straits Times, where he proposes ideas to help Singapore succeed in the next 50 years, goes some way to address the need. "We can't go on autopilot. We cannot assume that the formulas that worked well for the first 50 years will work well for the next 50 years."

Another instance: Singaporeans remaining detached about South-east Asia even though we "live in one of the most exciting regions of the world".

"There's a lot more that Singapore can do to engage South-east Asia in greater depth. It hasn't happened."

Why not make those regional ties tighter, he suggests. Primary and secondary schools here could have sister schools in the region, so that the younger generation gets to know the neighbourhood better.

One way to resolve this is for Singaporeans to learn Malay, since Singapore is "in a Malay sea" and the country's GNP (gross national product) growth is tied more closely to Indonesia than any other country in the world. Indeed, he hopes to write a book on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations for 2017, to mark 50 years of the regional grouping. As for businesses, he believes that local small and medium enterprises (SMEs) should get a larger slice of the pie.

He says: "In the next phase of Singapore's development, it is important that we have an Economic Development Board that pays equal attention to developing Singapore companies that are regionally and locally competitive. We give incentives for MNCS, we should give incentives to local companies also.

"We have many globally strong companies like Keppel and CapitaLand. We can use our existing strengths to help other Singapore companies grow and develop. So, create an ecosystem that creates competitive Singapore companies."

Although existing policies are in place to help SMEs, Prof Mahbubani believes that "we can do more" to help local companies.

"Singaporeans should feel confident and optimistic looking ahead to the future. We have a great opportunity to be the capital city in the Asian renaissance and we should seize that advantage."

For proof of his influence, look no further than his local newspaper columns. In October, he suggested that a S\$10 million endowment fund be set up at his school to develop long-term studies on how to future-proof Singapore over the next 50 years.

Just a week after he had written of the proposed project, Indonesian businessman Stephen Riady, executive chairman of property firm OUE, gave a S\$500,000 donation. The fund has raised S\$1.5 million in all, so far. He needs to raise \$8.5 million more.

But just as he has his supporters, he has his fair share of detractors too. He says: "I like debates. I'm not afraid of debating anybody who puts his name forward and I've had some very strong debates overseas.

"But what I find strange is the anonymous critics in social media who write these scathing things about you and hide behind anonymity. That's just cowardice.

"Water finds its own level. If what I wrote was stupid, ignorant or irrelevant, the world would ignore it. The reality is that almost every week I get invited to speak somewhere around the world."

His recent speaking engagements include the World Economic Forum at Davos, the Mexico Business Summit, and a talk at Bhutan's Royal Institute for Governance and Strategic Studies.

You could say his willingness to take on detractors was learned by working with "towering figures" - Lee Kuan Yew, S Rajaratnam and Goh Keng Swee.

Mr Lee, Singapore's first prime minister, taught him not to be afraid of debates. "His willingness to debate anyone, anywhere, any place, is amazing."

He learned to develop fearless thinking from then foreign affairs minister and later deputy prime minister Mr Rajaratnam. "He always told me, 'Kishore, never ever tell me what you think I want to hear. Always tell me what you think I should hear'."

And from Mr Goh, the second deputy prime minister, he learned how to be "brutal and ruthless" in his analysis. "He could cut through the rubbish and get straight to the point."

He adds: "If ever I write my memoirs, I will talk of how these three influenced me."

A prolific writer, Prof Mahbubani can write 3,000 to 5,000 words on a good weekend. To focus on the task at hand, he has a strict regimen: laying down for 15 minutes in a dark room and listening to the music of Mohammed Rafi.

Indeed, writing skills - or the lack of - continues to be a bugbear and he chats about it for a few more minutes. He is puzzled, for instance, that school has not been able to find enough local staff who write well.

A voracious reader, his current favourite book is the late South American writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez's classic, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which he picked up during a recent trip to the Galapagos Islands and Peru.

He says: "I wish more Singaporeans would read things like that and read more. We need to be more imaginative and more creative, and we should certainly learn to write better.

"It's shocking. Singaporeans do too much homework and don't read enough. We should reduce the school curriculum and give children more time to read."

He confesses later that his only slight regret is not leaving diplomacy earlier. Then, he could have written a lot more. He says: "I realise I've been thriving as dean of the school. I've done well liberated from the constraints of diplomacy. I spent 33 years being diplomatic. Now I'm learning how to be undiplomatic."