

Seeing Singapore through the Eyes of its Friends

By Siti Nadzirah Samsudin
IPS Research Assistant

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) launched the third volume of *The Little Red Dot* series on 30 October 2014 at the National Library. Ninety-three guests, including former heads of missions from foreign countries such as Sri Lanka and Pakistan, attended the event where Minister for Foreign Affairs and Law K Shanmugam was the guest of honour.

The Little Red Dot: Reflections of Foreign Ambassadors on Singapore is co-edited by IPS Special Adviser Professor Tommy Koh and Ms Li Lin Chang, Press Secretary to Prime Minister and former IPS Deputy Director (Public Affairs), with IPS Executive Ms Joanna Koh. This volume contains perspectives on Singapore and its bilateral relations by 61 foreign diplomats. They represent 43 countries, including the other nine countries that make up ASEAN. Earlier volumes of *The Little Red Dot* series featured essays by Singapore's first-, second- and third-generation ambassadors and senior office holders.

Professor Koh opened the event by thanking the diplomats who contributed to the book. He described the collection of essays as a "good harvest" and said that two contributors would be reading their essays to the audience that evening.

Dean of the Diplomatic Corps and Spanish Ambassador Federico Palomera Guez, who also wrote the foreword, was invited to give remarks. He mentioned that Singapore had circumstances that could be interpreted as disadvantageous: size and its limited natural resources. But with a "combination of ingenuity, wisdom, imagination and a tenacious adherence to a set of principles, these unfavourable circumstances have been put to Singapore's advantage".

Next, Mr Sajjad Ashraf, the former High Commissioner of Pakistan to Singapore and a former Dean of the Diplomatic Corps (2008) read his essay titled "Manicured and Choreographed: The Story of Effervescent Singapore". He gave kudos to Singapore leaders' "good choreography", which took the country to its "manicured" levels. He was also struck by how Singapore had converted its hinterland into a boundless opportunity for expansion and development, and has never looked back. "Size is not a disadvantage if a country chooses correct growth strategies," he said.

Mr Frank Lavin, a former US Ambassador, then read his essay "Singapore Diplomacy – A View from the Other Side". He said that Singapore has benefited from the "power of ideas,

the ability to advance those ideas, and the wisdom to avoid common mistakes of diplomacy". He outlined eight rules of diplomacy that Singapore observes, including having a goal and a view, bringing additional value and never serving as a supplicant. However, there are gaps in the system. He indicated two: the high degree of centralisation that can sometimes lead to "insularity or rigidity" and that in balancing control, stability and an open society, Singapore tilts "towards control".

A common theme of the night was on Singapore's ability to turn the tables on the phrase, "Little Red Dot". Mr Shanmugam mentioned that the term was first used by former Indonesia President B. J. Habibie, as a derisory term indicating Singapore's size and that we should know our place in life. Now, the phrase has come to symbolise the opposite of what he intended to convey and is instead used with pride.

Singapore's ability to overcome challenges with creative and working solutions was also lauded by the speakers. Mr Lavin praised Singapore's proactive diplomats who used every opportunity to push their agenda forward. Mr Ashraf linked the success of Singapore to the resolution and courage of its leaders and their business-like approach in articulating vision, mission statement and setting of goals. Paired with an emphasis on meritocracy, multiracialism and leadership renewal, this has allowed Singapore to maintain a cohesive and vibrant society.

The transient nature of the work of diplomats also allows them a unique perspective. Mr Ashraf, particularly, said he was able to view Singapore as "an outsider" and now "as an ordinary insider", as his term in Singapore marked the end of his diplomatic career. He is currently an Adjunct Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. Mr Lavin felt fortunate that his tenure saw a high degree of convergence between Singapore and the US, as it gave him the opportunity to "see the Singapore system perform through bad weather and good".

"With the third volume of *The Little Red Dot*, we have taken the storyline of Singapore and brought it to a circle," said Mr Shanmugam, adding that without the series of books, few apart from senior foreign affairs officials would know the inner workings of diplomacy and the challenges Singapore faced as a newly-independent country.

Mr Shanmugam concluded by saying that diplomatic relations were never straightforward and diplomats would have to strive tirelessly to working towards common ground. In Singapore's case, "our friends have shown us where we have done well, but also where there is more to be done," he said. As Singapore embarks on the next 50 years, he highlighted the importance of this book as a way for Singaporeans to "pause and look back at our diplomatic history and reflect on the words of our foreign friends".

The Little Red Dot: Reflections of Foreign Ambassadors on Singapore, Volume III (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Ltd, 2014) is now retailing for \$39.60 (including GST) at all major bookstores.

Siti Nadzirah Samsudin is a Research Assistant with the Arts, Culture and Media cluster at IPS.

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