

Call to strengthen US-Asia trade ties

**Time is right for Washington to review feasibility of FTA negotiations with Asean:
Tommy Koh**

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THE US and Asia need each other, Singapore's Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh said yesterday, suggesting a positive agenda for economic engagement between the two.

Asia will remain open and outward looking and the 'American people should not view Asian prosperity as a threat to American prosperity', Professor Koh said during a panel discussion following the launch of *Economic Diplomacy: Essays and Reflections* by Singapore's Negotiators. The book, edited by Lim Chin Leng and Margaret Liang, puts together 16 essays by Singaporeans involved in negotiating trade deals over the years.

Prof Koh worries about 'the mood of the American people, it's very sour' and about the 'disjuncture between reality and perception' in public opinion there. But he retains optimism that anti-trade sentiment may fade when the US economy and jobs outlook improve.

Now that the authorities in Myanmar have freed Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest, Prof Koh thinks 'the time is right' for the US to review the feasibility of launching FTA negotiations with Asean. 'This is a logical progression from the existing US-Asean Trade and Investment Framework Agreement,' he said.

He also spoke about the potential with US as chair of Apec next year to conclude negotiations over the nine-member Trans-Pacific Partnership, which 'should be viewed as a paving stone towards the ambitious goal of a Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific'.

The US and Asia should 'seize the critical window of opportunity next year' and 'commit themselves' to closer cooperation to help bring the Doha Development Agenda to a successful close, too.

The Doha Round is also where Singapore can make its next contribution to the economic diplomacy recorded in the book launched yesterday, Prof Koh and the book's co-editor Ms Liang said in response to questions from the floor. It can do so by offering creative solutions and finding compromises for the parties involved, Ms Liang said.

Singapore can also play an active part in pushing forward a US-Asean FTA, and play 'some modest role' in harmonising environmental and trade agreements, Prof Koh said.

The book launch was attended by Foreign Minister George Yeo, senior adviser to the Foreign Ministry See Chak Mun and former diplomat and current dean of the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies Barry Desker, among others.