

Friendship among Diplomats

The nature of their work dictates that diplomats lead a nomadic existence. They meet many people but do they form any real friendships on their tours of duty?

Tommy Koh

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Diplomats lead a nomadic life.

They represent their countries at their embassies and consulates all over the world. After several years in a foreign country, they would either return to work for a while at their capitals or go to another foreign country. In the course of a diplomat's career, it is not unusual for him or her to have served in five or six countries.

In view of this, one may ask whether it is possible for diplomats to form deep friendships, or only transactional ones? In any case, isn't diplomacy about promoting and protecting a country's national interests? What is the relevance of friendship to successful diplomacy?

I want to address these questions by telling three stories.

Brajesh Mishra

THE first story is about my friendship with an Indian friend called Brajesh Mishra. In 1968, when I was young and inexperienced, I was appointed as Singapore's Ambassador (Permanent Representative) to the United Nations in New York. I was very fortunate in having many mentors at the UN.

The Indian delegation was led by the distinguished Ambassador G. P. Parthasarathy and his two able lieutenants, Brajesh Mishra and Alfred Gonsalves. All three helped me to understand how the UN worked and how to be an effective representative of a small and new country.

About 10 years later, both Brajesh Mishra and I were back at the UN as our country's ambassadors. This was during the Cold War and India was close to the Soviet Union. In 1978, Vietnam invaded and occupied Cambodia. The Asean countries opposed Vietnam's actions and took the diplomatic battle to the UN. Vietnam had the support of the Soviet Union and its allies, India, Cuba and the pro-Soviet wing of the Non-Aligned Movement.

Because of his ability and eloquence, Brajesh Mishra was a formidable opponent. My colleagues in the Asean delegations disliked him. They could not understand why I was so respectful of him, referring to him as my older brother and my guru. My agenda was to rebut his arguments but not to repudiate our friendship or to forget my intellectual debt to him.

I am glad that our friendship survived because some years later, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee appointed him as his principal secretary and national security adviser. In 1998, India invited me to deliver the Seventh India-Asean Lecture in New Delhi. My old friend, Brajesh Mishra, graciously accepted my request to chair the lecture. Our friendship had served as a bridge between India and Singapore.

Senators and Congressmen

IT IS the custom for the US delegation to the UN General Assembly to include a senator and two members of the House of Representatives (one Democrat and one Republican). Each year, the US mission to the UN would ask me whether I was willing to host a meal for the senator and congressmen. I agreed and, as a result, made many friends in the US Congress.

In 1984, I was transferred from the UN to the Embassy in Washington. I was happily surprised that the senators and congressmen whom I had befriended in New York remembered me and warmly welcomed me to Washington. I had access to them and, through them, got to know other members of the US Congress, who were of interest to Singapore. One day, I received a call from Congressman Dante Fascell of Florida. He was the chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives. He told me that the University of Miami was located within his constituency. He asked me whether I would be willing to do him a favour and speak at the commencement of that university's law school. I told him that I would be happy to do so although I knew from bitter experience that commencement addresses were extremely challenging to deliver, as neither the graduands nor their parents were in the mood to listen to a lecture.

On two other occasions, I was approached by Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana (former chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee) and Senator Max Baucus of Montana (the current US Ambassador to China) to do lecture tours of their states.

I accepted their requests and enjoyed getting to know their respective states and their constituents. I, of course, put in a good word for them with their constituents.

In 1985, I decided to campaign for the Senate and the House to invite our then Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, to address a joint session of the US Congress.

To succeed, I needed the goodwill and support of all the friends I had made in the two Chambers. Fortunately, the campaign was successful. On Oct 9, 1985, Mr Lee was accorded the honour of addressing a joint session of the US Congress. It was a proud day for Singapore.

Ahmad Fuzi Abdul Razak

RELATIONS between Malaysia and Singapore are very important to both countries. Because of our proximity, history, inter-dependence and affinities, we share many convergent interests. At the same time, there are bound to be areas in which our interests and perspectives diverge. We need wisdom and maturity in managing our differences.

Since the two countries have to communicate and negotiate through human agents, we need Malaysians who understand Singapore and can work with Singaporeans, and Singaporeans who understand Malaysia and can work with Malaysians.

I have many friends in Malaysia. I studied at the University of Malaya (in Singapore) at a time when half of the students came from Malaysia.

I also had the privilege of teaching many students at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Law School from Malaysia, who have gone on to become ministers, chief justices, judges, senior legal officers, leading practitioners and political leaders. I have also made some good friends from Malaysia during my postings to the UN and in Washington.

One of them is Tan Sri Ahmad Fuzi Abdul Razak. We were colleagues at the UN. He rose through the ranks and became the secretary-general of the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

We were on opposite sides in the land reclamation case (2002-2005) when Malaysia objected to Singapore's reclamation works at Pulau Tekong and Tuas View Extension and sought arbitration at the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea. He was the leader of the Malaysian delegation and I was the agent of Singapore. On April 20, 2005, we signed an agreement settling the dispute between our two countries, witnessed by our foreign ministers. Our friendship was not impaired by the fact that we were on opposite sides. Two years later, in 2007, we were members of the High-Level Task Force (HLTF), appointed by the Asean leaders, to draft the historic Asean Charter.

As chairman of the HLTF, I was able to count on Fuzi for support when we were looking for compromises. Ours is a friendship which has been tested by time and circumstance.

It is a truism that in diplomacy, one has no permanent friends, only permanent interests.

But among diplomats as human beings, the bond of friendship can persist through countries' ups and downs in relations. It has been my privilege to count many colleagues in diplomatic circles, in and out of Singapore, as friends.

The writer is Special Adviser at the Institute of Policy Studies, NUS.