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Importance of 'soft' power

Ambassador-At-Large Tommy Koh highlights its role at dialogue session



Good example... Prof Koh outlined three important sources of Singapore's soft power at the dialogue. PHOTO: YSA

EVEN though Asia, as a region, is on the rise in its hard power, particularly economically, it is already successful in its projection of soft power, Professor Tommy Koh, Ambassador-At-Large, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said in a dialogue with young Singaporeans.

Citing well-known soft power indices and rankings, Prof Koh, who is also special adviser at the Institute of Policy Studies and chairman of the Centre for International Law at the National University of Singapore, said he was surprised that Asian countries did not feature more prominently in these indices and rankings.

He also said he did not agree with these conclusions.

Japan and South Korea, he said, were examples of Asian countries where the ascendancy of soft power had matched their economic rise.

Singapore's success

In his address at the Eighth Khwaish Lecture on April 30 on Does Asia Have Soft Power?, organised by Young Sikh Association (Singapore), Prof Koh pointed out Singapore's success in building its soft power, which allowed her to maintain its influence and power within the region and globally.

He specified three important sources of Singapore's soft power:

- Having one of the world's most diverse populations, both religiously and racially.
- Having good governance and being one of the least corrupt countries in the world.
- Having a well-planned out city and infrastructure.

Due to these strengths, Singapore has impressed many politicians who send their people to study the Singapore model and how they could implement the same system, which Prof Koh said was an example of the city-state's soft power.

When it comes to exerting influence on the global scale, despite not being a permanent member of any of the three large international groupings — the UN Security Council, the G7 and the G20 — Singapore still wields great clout due to its representation and chairing of the Forum of Small States and the Global Governance Group.

During facilitated dialogue sessions before the dialogue segment of the lecture, 91 per cent of the 100 participants indicated through a poll that Singapore has soft power, while 87 per cent believed that Singapore is effective in its management of international relations.

About 95 per cent of participants felt that soft power is important for Singapore.

Prof Koh revealed that Singapore has started to use history and culture as elements of its soft power projection.

For example, Singapore embassies and high commissions around the world make an effort to showcase the Singapore culture.

The lecture series is part of YSA's mission of creating world-ready young Singaporeans, enhancing mutual understanding of issues of common concern and fostering friendships across ethnic groups so that young Singaporeans continue to remain engaged with the rest of Singapore society and the global community.

The eighth lecture was organised in partnership with SINDA Youth Club and Sikh Sewaks Singapore.

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