

By Invitation

China on my mind

Tommy Koh For The Straits Times

PUBLISHED NOV 7, 2015, 5:00 AM SGT

I join Singaporeans of all races in warmly welcoming President Xi Jinping and Madam Peng Liyuan to Singapore.

Their state visit reciprocates the successful visit by President and Mrs Tony Tan Keng Yam to China in July this year.

The exchange of visits by the two Presidents is part of our celebration of 25 years of diplomatic relations between China and Singapore.

HONOURING DENG XIAOPING

I last met President Xi in November 2010 in Singapore. He was then Vice-President of China.

The National Heritage Board, of which I was the then chairman, had put up a marker to and a bust of Mr Deng Xiaoping in front of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

We invited our founding Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, a friend and admirer of Mr Deng, and Mr Xi to unveil the marker and the bust at a simple ceremony. We were overjoyed that both Mr Lee and Mr Xi accepted our invitations. I will always treasure the memory of that happy occasion.

CONTACT WITH CHINA

China's seat at the United Nations had been occupied by the Republic of China (Taiwan) from 1945 to 1971.

In 1971, the People's Republic of China (PRC) defeated the Republic of China in a vote at the UN General Assembly.

Following that vote, the PRC took over the seat at the UN. The first PRC ambassador to the UN was an outstanding diplomat called Huang Hua.

In 1974, I was appointed, for the second time, as Singapore's Permanent Representative to the UN. I was instructed to begin a dialogue with Ambassador Huang on our bilateral relations.

On Oct 7, 1974, I organised a dinner, hosted by our Foreign Minister, Mr S. Rajaratnam, in honour of the leader of the Chinese delegation to the UN General Assembly, Mr Qiao Guanhua, the Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs.

The dinner was very successful and Minister Qiao invited Mr Rajaratnam to lead a goodwill delegation to China.

VISITS BY RAJA AND LEE

With the help of Ambassador Huang, I was able to organise the visit of Mr Rajaratnam to China, from March 13 to 22, 1975. The high point of the visit was a call on the Chinese Premier, Zhou Enlai.

In the following year, Ambassador Huang and I organised the first visit by then Prime Minister Lee to China.

The visit took place from May 10 to 24, 1976. The highlight of the visit was a call by Mr Lee on an ailing Chairman Mao.

LEE KUAN YEW AND CHINA

Between 1976 and 2015, Mr Lee visited China over 30 times. He spent time in cultivating five generations of China's leaders.

He helped Mr Deng in his revolutionary policy of economic reform and the opening of the Chinese economy to the world by encouraging Singapore's public and private sectors to invest in China.

He personally took charge of the Suzhou Industrial Park project.

He was willing to act as an interlocutor between China and the United States and between the mainland and Taiwan. As a result, China regarded Mr Lee as an old friend and held him in high esteem.

My message to China is that, although Mr Lee is no longer with us, his friendship and goodwill for China are shared by his successors, Mr Goh Chok Tong and Mr Lee Hsien Loong.

1990 NEGOTIATIONS WITH CHINA

Although our relations with China grew steadily after 1976, we did not want to establish formal diplomatic relations until after Indonesia had normalised its relations with China.

In August 1990, I was appointed the leader of the Singapore delegation to negotiate an agreement with China for the establishment of diplomatic relations between us.

After three rounds of negotiations, the two sides agreed on the text of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to establish formal diplomatic relations on the evening of Sept 18 on the premises of a state guest house called Diaoyutai.

The MOU was signed by Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen and Singapore Foreign Minister Wong Kan Seng at the UN on Oct 3, 1990.

The Chinese chief negotiator, Minister Xu Dunxin, and I had a happy reunion at dinner in Beijing last month.

25 YEARS OF FRIENDSHIP AND PROGRESS

The past 25 years have been a remarkable period for China, for Singapore and for our bilateral relations.

No one could have foreseen 25 years ago that China would become Singapore's largest trading partner or that Singapore would become China's largest foreign investor. No one could have foreseen that the two governments would have implemented two iconic projects in Suzhou and Tianjin and are about to embark on a third project in western China.

No one could have foreseen that the two countries would have concluded a free trade agreement which would soon be upgraded to a higher level of ambition.

The current relationship between China and Singapore is warm, comprehensive and substantive and rests on a firm foundation of mutual

trust. I am confident that President Xi and his Singapore counterparts will agree to raise our relationship to an even higher peak.

ASEAN-CHINA RELATIONS

In 2005, I was appointed to represent Singapore in the Asean-China Eminent Persons Group. The group was co-chaired by Tun Musa Hitam, a former Malaysian deputy prime minister, and Mr Qian (China).

I believe in the importance of the Asean-China relationship, both economically and politically. I am happy that Singapore is the country coordinator for Asean-China Dialogue Relations for the next three years.

China can have confidence that Singapore will do its utmost to unite the Asean side and will keep the relationship on a positive trajectory.

However, in order to achieve this objective, China will have to play its part in growing our positive agenda and in managing our differences, with wisdom and self-restraint.

The writer is ambassador-at-large at Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Straits Times on November 07, 2015, with the headline 'China on my mind'. [Print Edition](#) | [Subscribe](#)