

Tommy Koh conferred the 2014 Great Negotiator Award at Harvard Law School

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Prof Koh (right) receiving the Award from Prof Sebenius (Photo: Tom Fitzsimmons)

Harvard Law School hosted a half-day public programme on 10 April to honour the recipient of this year's Great Negotiator Award, Professor Tommy Koh, Ambassador-at-Large at Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Rector of Tembusu College at NUS. Prof Koh is also Chairman of NUS' Centre for International Law, and Special Adviser at the Institute of Policy Studies within the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at NUS.

The highly interactive programme featured a conversation with Prof Koh and panel discussions with faculty members from the Program on Negotiation (PON) at Harvard Law School and the Future of Diplomacy Project (FDP) at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard Kennedy School (HKS). The PON and FDP are the two entities that conferred the Award.

“In honouring Ambassador Koh, we have the unique opportunity to learn from one of the world's leaders in the practice of large-scale, multiparty conference diplomacy—a complex form of negotiation that will be increasingly needed to forge effective collective responses to a range of global problems in areas such as the environment, trade, public health, finance, development, national security and terrorism,” said PON Vice Chair and Harvard Business School Professor

James K Sebenius, in a joint statement with Professor Nicholas Burns, The Sultan of Oman Professor of the Practice of International Relations at HKS and Faculty Director of FDP.

Prof Koh is the eleventh recipient of the Award, which recognises his work as chief negotiator for the United States-Singapore Free Trade Agreement; for chairing the negotiations that produced the ASEAN Charter; for key actions that resolved territorial and humanitarian disputes in the Baltics and Asia; and for successfully leading two unprecedented global mega-conferences: the Third United Nations (UN) Conference on the Law of the Sea, and the UN Conference on the Environment and Development, also known as the “Rio” Earth Summit.

Prof Koh became the youngest ambassador ever appointed to the UN, serving until 1971 before accepting a position at age 33 as Dean of the Faculty of Law at NUS’ predecessor institution, the University of Singapore. In 1974, he returned to the UN, resuming his role as Singapore’s Permanent Representative. In 1984, Koh became Singapore’s Ambassador to the United States, where he served until 1990. Back home, he also lends his support to honourable causes—he was the founding Chairman of the Singapore National Arts Council (1991-96) and the National Heritage Board (2002-11).

Passing on a legacy

Great Negotiator Award recipients are recognised for their ability to negotiate against great odds in different settings to accomplish worthy purposes. By discussing the successes and failures of this distinguished group of men and women from varied backgrounds, the events associated with the Great Negotiator Award seek to uncover broader lessons and generalisations about effective negotiation and dispute resolution in public and private settings.

“The Great Negotiator Award programme generates valuable research and teaching materials that can be used by other negotiators throughout their careers,” said Ms Susan Hackley, Managing Director of PON.

The PON is an interuniversity consortium of Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Tufts University, which is based at the Harvard Law School. The consortium is dedicated to developing the theory and practice of negotiation and dispute resolution, while the FDP is dedicated to promoting the study and understanding of diplomacy, negotiation and statecraft in international politics today.

“Hundreds of Harvard, MIT, and Tufts graduate students and executive programme participants benefit each year from this process. The programme’s reach extends to many universities around the world that have also adopted these materials,” she added.

Past Great Negotiator Award honourees include former US Senator George Mitchell; Nobel Prize recipient and former President of Finland Martti Ahtisaari; Special Representative of the UN Secretary General Lakhdar Brahimi; American diplomat Richard Holbrooke; former UN High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata; and former US Secretary of State James A Baker, III.



Prof Koh (middle) during the panel discussion at Harvard (Photo: Tom Fitzsimmons)