

## ASIAN VIEWPOINT

## Ducking the questions

BLOOMBERG

BY DERWIN PEREIRA



**A**m I watching reality TV? This thought surfaced in my mind when I came across a video of US Senator Tammy Duckworth haranguing Dr Anjani Sinha, President Donald Trump's Ambassador-designate to Singapore. Duckworth's insistent attack on the orthopaedic surgeon has harmed American diplomacy and the global image of America's political system.

Also, her comments on Singapore playing a military role, in America's confrontation with People's Republic of China (PRC) in the Indo-Pacific, are uncalled for. This Democratic Senator should understand that the city-state is a sovereign country that takes its own strategic decisions within the global arc of power. Singapore will never be held hostage by the military choices that either Washington or Beijing makes.

First, let me look at the reality TV show. Duckworth shot off to Sinha: "This is not a role you can just pick up on a whim, or because you think it will be glamorous, or because Singapore is a great place to live." She drove the dagger in: "Frankly, I don't think you are particularly qualified for this role, and I'm concerned about how your lack of understanding may even inadvertently cause friction in our critical relationship. Will you even be able to effectively lead our mission in Singapore? I have my doubts."

Now, the tone and timbre of those words would not have mattered in the routine cut-and-thrust of adversarial American politics. Politicians there have made a fetish of running down the other side to prove how good they are, and their opponents have parried in a similar spirit. That political bloodletting is normal in the aisles of electoral power, and Americans have learned to take it in their stride. They simply step over the metaphorical dead bodies that lie on the floor after a debate between political mortals.

But the Senate confirmation hearing was different. It was meant to examine the intrinsic qualities of a non-political person who would represent the whole of the US in Singapore. It was not, or at least was not meant to be, a gladiatorial contest. Yet, Senator Duckworth turned her exchanges with Sinha exactly into that.

Sinha's replies to her pointed questions were admittedly tame — he did not seem to have been briefed



US Senator Tammy Duckworth grilled Dr Anjani Sinha, President Donald Trump's Ambassador-designate to Singapore, on issues surrounding the city-state

sufficiently well on the details of the US-Singapore relationship — and so he could not counter Duckworth dramatically, drama being what viewers expect on reality TV. He said what he knew, and then kept his peace. She made a trophy out of her dissatisfaction with his replies, and left the stage triumphant. There clearly was cognitive dissonance between the two. One behaved like a politician who was not up for the next American ambassadorship to Singapore; the other behaved like a surgeon who was.

#### Tariffs, the US Navy

Duckworth came out a little better when she queried Sinha on Trump's decision to impose 10% tariffs on Singapore in spite of the fact that America actually enjoys a trade surplus with the city-state. Sinha answered: "I believe in the President's decision of a free trade with any nations in the world, and he's resetting the trade numbers with each country, and he's open for discussion and dialogue with each country."

Given that the US has enjoyed free trade with Singapore since 2004, Duckworth's subsequent question was valid: "So do you support the 10% tariff increase?" Sinha: "The dialogue is not yet closed, the door is not closed..."

Now, this is what might be called a diplomatic answer: You support your home government (the US) in a tight situation, buying time in which it can do the right thing by your preferred host government (Singapore). Sinha would make the cut as a diplomat. He needs time, just as Duckworth needed time to become a Senator. She was not born a politician any more than Sinha was born a diplomat. Yet, the dissonance between them was in full view on the American reality TV show.

The strategic jugular came in the form of a question about how the US Navy works with Singapore.

Here, Sinha replied accurately that the armed forces of the two countries conduct joint exercises regularly and that Singapore's troops train in the US. Factually correct, but not good enough for Senator Duckworth. She said: "Can you name a specific thing? Please, I'm trying to help you here, but you've not even done your homework, sir. You want to be ambassador to Singapore, one of the most important alliances, friends we have in the Indo-Pacific, a key place where we're going to be fighting against our greatest adversary in the region, the PRC."

Summing up her tutorial, she declared imperiously: "You are not currently prepared for this posting, period. And you need to shape up and do some homework."

What homework should Sinha do? Talk surreptitiously to US Navy personnel on their experiences of the oceans and the seas, including the waves that lap up on Singapore? To be fair to both sides, should he place a call to Chinese Navy personnel on what they think of the global waters that bring them close to Singapore? Should he divulge a few American state secrets on the geography of possible naval confrontation with China and how Singapore might or might not feature in it? Should he be bold enough to travel to China disguised as a Russian woman sailor and steal a few well-guarded Chinese secrets on a naval confrontation with the US? I mean, what would it take to appease Senator Duckworth? Dive deep into the naval imbroglio of great-power conversation and come up with a watery quagmire?

How else would Sinha counter the *grosso modo* of Ms Duckworth's questioning? *Grosso modo* is a Latin phrase indicating a statement that is approximate or general and not precise. She challenged him to be precise, but her own specific questions were so far-ranging that

it would have taken a roving sparrow to have answered them. Sinha is not an ornithologist.

#### Singapore, the US and China

Second, Senator Duckworth's characterisation of Singapore's place in American grand strategy is deeply unsettling. Look at those lines again: "You want to be ambassador to Singapore, one of the most important alliances, friends we have in the Indo-Pacific, a key place that we're going to be fighting against our greatest adversary in the region, the PRC." She switched from "alliances" to "friends" immediately because she realised that Singapore is not a treaty ally of the US. It is a friend, certainly.

Friends have their uses in war, as they do in peace. But friendship is a two-way street. The uses to which friends can be put depends on the uses that they wish to be put to. Take that freedom away, and the friendship ends. Friends are not allies whose treaty obligations foreclose many options in wartime.

The Senator gave critics of Singapore's strategic closeness to America ammunition with which to attack the city-state when she essentially called it a staging post for an armed American conflict with China. To the best of my knowledge, Singapore has no desire to be America's bridgehead to China in war because, even in peacetime, Singapore is not a rentier state. Since any American war with China will most probably be centred on Taiwan, the particular circumstances of that conflict will make Singapore (like other countries) decide on how to react. No choices are impossible. International relations are not a promissory note, and certainly not a blank cheque, at least in Singapore's case, which has flourished because of its strategic, as much as its fiscal, prudence over six decades.

There is also the question of the One-China policy. Although differ-

ent countries interpret it variously, Singapore's position is solid. During his meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing in June this year, Singapore Prime Minister Lawrence Wong reiterated that his country has a clear and consistent policy and is opposed to Taiwan independence. Senator Duckworth is free to think what she likes, but Singapore is not pro-America or anti-China, or the other way around: It is pro-Singapore.

What is therefore also true is that Singapore dislikes war. Memories of the collapse of the European global order in World War II, which was marked by the horrendous Japanese invasion and occupation of Singapore, are a living memory among many older Singaporeans. Younger people learn about those years in school. The violent collapse of an existing order in war is bad news for most countries. For Singapore, it is an existential threat because Singapore is a trading state, indeed, a globalised city-state whose economic hinterland is nothing less than the rest of the world itself. It does not fancy itself as being a part of "a key place" where "we're going to be fighting against our greatest adversary in the region, the PRC", or where the PRC would be fighting against its greatest adversary in the region, America.

Certainly, Singapore is too small to tilt the balance of power in either direction, but it is sovereign, which means that it has the desire and the ability to position itself realistically in the power transition underway in the Indo-Pacific. Senator Duckworth would do well to respect the sovereign sensitivities of the nations that she might have cause to mention in her abrasive interrogation of any prospective American envoys.

The bottom line is that Sinha would make a very good American envoy to Singapore. He is close to Trump, which would give Singapore a direct line to the White House, bypassing the Byzantine American bureaucracy if necessary. A career diplomat in the envoy's post would not possess that advantage.

As for Sinha, Singapore would be a charmingly comfortable posting no doubt, but for the right reasons. He would not be interested in making Singapore a part of an Indo-Pacific theatre where America and China are locked in mortal combat.

What is the point of being posted anywhere to a region in war?

Questions, Senator Duckworth? **E**

*The writer is the founder and CEO of Pereira International, a Singapore-based strategic advisory firm. An award-winning journalist and a graduate alumnus of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, he is also a member of the Board of International Councillors at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC. This article reflects the writer's personal views*