WHEN NEUTRALITY IS A PLUS

S’pore has become the venue for many high-profile events

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SINGAPORE’S hosting of several high-profile events—such as the 12th International Olympic Committee Session and the IMF/World Bank Annual Meetings—in recent years, has boosted its aspiration to become the Exchange Capital of the World.

Yet, the choice of the tiny city-state as the venue for the recent United States-North Korea talks would have surprised some, given the complexity of the issue.

In the short span of 30 hours that he was in town earlier this week, Mr Christopher Hill, the US’ top nuclear negotiator, had twice described Singapore as being “very gracious” to host the talks between him and his North Korean counterpart.

On why Singapore was chosen as the venue, Mr Hill merely said: “There were some logistics, and it worked out very well for us.”

While it is unclear whether Singapore had offered—or was invited—to host the event that was the focus of the world’s attention on Tuesday, it certainly boosted the city-state’s international profile in the political sphere.

It was not the first time the world’s attention was centred on Singapore in that respect.

In April 1993, a landmark meeting between the chiefs of two semigovernment bodies which handled bilateral affairs across the Taiwan Strait was held here. Its neutral stand and communications facilities were cited as two key factors in the choice of Singapore as the venue for that meeting between the late Mr Wang Douchan of China’s Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait and the late Mr Koo Chenfai of the Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF).

Then, the SEF said “a fair and balanced reporting of the event by the media can best be achieved in a third and neutral area such as Singapore”.

It is this sense of neutrality that could have made Singapore the location for the US-North Korea talks, said Mr Eugene Tan, an assistant professor of law at the Singapore Management University.

“We have over the years developed a rigorous blue-chip reputation for being steadfast to a principled approach in resolving bilateral and multilateral disputes, one that accords with international legal principles and is beneficial for regional and international peace and stability,” Mr Tan told Weekend Today.

“It is an endorsement of our standing and reputation that North Korea was agreeable to Singapore being the venue for a small segment of the six-party talks.”

But beyond the political neutrality and infrastructure that we can offer, what about the possibility of Singapore having acted as an “indirect” mediator in these political disputes?

In his maiden National Day Rally speech in 2004, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong dismissed reports he had earlier visited Taiwan with the objective of playing a mediator’s role between Beijing and Taipei.

Instead of being a mediator, he said, Singapore will do its best if it can help in some way to prevent miscalculations by some key players. “We are small... but, we can provide some input to help the key players avoid mistakes and misjudgments.”

Singapore’s leaders are known to have gained respect worldwide for their in-depth understanding of the various issues in the region. Why then are we shy to acknowledge that we could, and possibly should, serve as a mediator or “broker” in some of the thorny issues Asia faces today?

That Singapore’s input is much valued is evident when it was included in the three high-level missions—to the US, Japan and South-east Asia—dispatched by China to put across its views on cross-strait developments in January 1999.

It is also wellknown that Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew discussed cross-strait issues with Chinese leaders on several occasions. In fact, MM Lee said in his memoirs: “Because I had acted as a channel for messages between the two sides, the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan chose Singapore as the venue for their first-ever talks in April 1993.”

It does not take much to figure out why Mr Ma Ying-jeou and Mr Frank Hsieh—both presidential candidates then—met PM Lee and MM Lee during their private visits here last year.

As Mr George Yeo, then Minister for Information and the Arts, noted in 1993: “If we are not a bridge between East and West, our value to China would not be as great. Conversely, if we are completely Western, without links to other parts of Asia, our value to the West would also be much reduced.”

A tiny red dot Singapore may be but, the country certainly has the potential to adopt a more active role in the key problems Asia is grappling with today.

The question is: Are we prepared to?”