Punching above its weight

Retired senior minister S. Jayakumar’s new book, Diplomacy – A Singapore Experience (left), hit the stores yesterday. Insight spoke to him about what motivated him to write a book about the development of Singapore’s foreign policy and how a small nation has become a respected voice on the international stage.

I N TAKING stock of a career that has spanned more than three decades, much of it involved in helping shape foreign policy, Professor S. Jayakumar has distilled a key lesson about Singapore’s place in the world.

Settled comfortably in his chair at a fifth-floor reception room at the Foreign Affairs Ministry earlier this week, he acknowledged to Insight that in the real world, the big players call the shots.

But the recently-retired senior minister and law and foreign policy veteran added quickly: “This does not mean small countries have no role at all.”

What is clearly underscored in his new book, a narrative on Singapore’s foreign policy, is that by operating skillfully and having good people, “there is room for a small country to play a relevant role in regional and international affairs.”

He demonstrates in the book – which began as “Prof Jaya’s Writing Project” in the ministry some three years ago – that Singapore is one country able to do that.

“How that role is carried out depends on so many factors,” he said.

“You can have brilliant ideas, but at the end of the day, you must have good people, the country has to be respected, and everybody in Singapore has to pull together as a team.

“As I recalled all these events in the course of researching, I became more convinced than ever that these factors underpin the success of our foreign policy and will continue to be critical factors for us.

“I mean if we are a failed country, then nobody is going to give you the time of day. So I strongly believe that all the attributes of Singapore’s success story have to be maintained. Then countries look to you as a model, they respect you. And when you speak, whether as an ambassador or as a minister, countries will take note.”

The early versions of “Prof Jaya’s Writing Project” were used by the ministry as material for new foreign service officers to get acquainted with what foreign policy is all about.

The Civil Service College also used the writings, in which he recalled events he had been involved in, as case studies.

But others read it, too, and as one-

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Keeping fit with his new passion

ALREADY a keen golfer and an occasional skater, Professor S. Jayakumar has now found another new passion.

He has taken up the Japanese martial art kendo, he told Insight, and indicated that age has not doused his enthusiasm for keeping fit.

“I try to keep fit through gym work and occasionally rollerblading with my daughter,” he said.

Kendo, meaning the “way of the sword”, is a modern Japanese martial art of swordfighting based on traditional samurai swordsmanship.

Its practitioners usually wear thick cotton protective armour known as bogu or kendogu, while using a bamboo stick to prod their opponents.

“So that’s my newfound activity which I find useful for balance and improving my reflexes,” he said.

His interest in the sport was first aroused last year when he caught a television documentary: “I watched a National Geographic documentary on kendo where a 76-year-old man was very adept in kendo practice with younger people. I told myself that, well, that seems to be good for balance and reflexes. Maybe I should try it.”

He is now a patron of the Singapore Kendo Club. The number of kendo enthusiasts here is small, with fewer than 500 known members.

Prof Jayakumar’s friends, like Japan’s Ambassador to Singapore Yoichi Suzuki, also played a role in cultivating his interest.

“One thing led to another and the Japanese Ambassador put me on to somebody, who put me to an instructor,” he said.

Prof Jayakumar trains weekly with three instructors, one of whom is Ms Daphne Wong, 29, who won an Asean tournament featuring the sport last October.

“When I first met him, he was keen to explain why he was interested in the sport,” said the design engineer.

Her initial concerns about whether he could cope with the rigours of the sport were assuaged by Prof Jayakumar’s “perfectionist” streak.

“He does not give up easily and is willing to practise until he gets it right.”

While he trains on his own for now, Ms Wong said he is keen to spar with other kendo practitioners soon.

And not surprisingly, he also relates kendo to his other passion – golf.

Said Ms Wong: “He uses golf sometimes to help understand the training, mentioning that it will help to improve his coordination and reflexes.”

AMRESH GUNASINGHAM