



NEWS RELEASE

Visit <http://www.mindef.gov.sg> for more news and information about MINDEF and the SAF

Lunch Talk on "Defending Singapore: Strategies for a Small State" by Minister for Defence Teo Chee Hean

21 Apr 2005



Mr Teo Chee Hean, Minister for Defence

DEFENDING SINGAPORE: STRATEGIES FOR A SMALL STATE

When I received this invitation, the first thing that came to my mind was something which my old teachers who used to teach me when I was in school and that is that the pen was mightier than the sword. So it was with a certain amount of trepidation that I decided to come and speak with you today. Thank you for inviting me and it is a pleasure to be able to address members of the Singapore Press Club. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for inviting me to join you. It is indeed a pleasure for me to address the members of the Singapore Press Club.

Sir Shridath Ramphal, a former Secretary General of the Commonwealth, once likened small states to "small boats pushed out into a turbulent sea, free in one sense to traverse it; but without oars or provisions, without compass or sails, free also to perish. Or perhaps to be rescued and taken aboard a larger vessel."

Well, he could have been describing Singapore at the point of our independence 40 years ago. The circumstances of our birth were not exactly salubrious, and the regional environment was not exactly benign. There were pundits - including some esteemed members of the fourth estate - predicting that Singapore would either perish or eventually be taken on board the larger vessel, at that time, a larger Malaysian vessel. In truth, there was little reason for them to have any optimism about Singapore's future given our geo-strategic limitations and the circumstances of our birth.

Geo-strategic Realities

At the time of our independence in 1965, there were large global forces in motion: de-colonisation and the clash between great powers as they manoeuvred for power and influence in the world. Southeast Asia was one such junction where the global forces met and the Cold War played out.

Like huge tectonic plates, the geo-strategic environment of the world is on the move again. The end of the Cold War has opened up new opportunities for competition and cooperation, with growing European integration, the rise of China and India, new additions to the list of nuclear capable states, and the emergence of global terrorism on a potentially catastrophic scale.

National Archives of Singapore

As it was during the Cold War, Southeast Asia lies along the fault lines of these global shifts.

Southeast Asia and the larger Asia-Pacific region have been thriving economically and generally stable politically. But there are immediate security challenges facing us all - notably the threat of terrorism and the need to enhance maritime security. And cleavages of ethnicity and religion criss-cross the region. Continued peace and stability in this region is not something we can take for granted.

Singapore faces certain geo-strategic realities. This was true in 1965, and the geography has not and cannot change. In the negotiations for the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea in

the 1970s, Singapore was grouped as a "geographically disadvantaged State" - put in the same category as land-locked states, a very peculiar place for an island nation to be. We are a state with no resources and our geography does not allow us to claim much of an exclusive economic zone.

With only 699 sq kms, we are heavily urbanised and one of the most densely populated countries. There is no natural buffer between the core of our activities and critical infrastructure, and the external environment. Without a hinterland, without strategic depth, we do not have the option of falling back and regrouping to come back from an attack.

The fact that Singapore is geographically a lightweight also means that we are not naturally in a position to shape the regional environment. On the other hand, the regional environment could determine whether we have the peace and stability that is so vital for our survival and development.

Need for a Strong Defence

The need for a strong defence to protect our independence and sovereignty and to provide us with the political space and the freedom to act in the best interests of our people is the basic foundation upon which everything else is built. And these are the first principles of our defence policy.

The second set of underlying principles in our defence policy is that as citizens of a sovereign nation, Singaporeans are the first and last stakeholders in the survival of Singapore and no one can underwrite our security except ourselves. Hence, we have always put the highest priority on national defence, both in terms of the human resources as well as the money that we commit to it.

In order that no larger vessel gets too tempted to take this small boat on board, to use Sonny Ramphal's analogy, deterrence is one pillar of our defence policy. And the mission of the Singapore Armed Forces is to deter aggression, and should deterrence fail, to defeat the aggressor.

Deterrence is complemented by diplomacy, which is the other pillar of our defence policy. Pursuing cooperative, mutually beneficial relationships with friendly countries and playing a

constructive role in regional and world affairs help to enhance our security and our strategic weight.

Let me elaborate on these strategies.

National Service

One of the Government's top priorities at Independence was to build a defence force. We had to do this from scratch.

We concluded early that a conscript system is the only way in which Singapore can have a capable defence force within the limitations of our small population. We could never afford the manpower required to maintain a standing military force of a size adequate for a credible deterrence. Nor, given the generally peaceful environment, is a standing military of such a size necessary during normal times. So we needed a military that can be called upon in times of national emergency, manned by operationally ready national servicemen who could be rapidly mobilised, and who in normal times would carry on their daily lives and work in their civilian jobs.

We are now into the 38th year of National Service and we owe the peace we have enjoyed, in no small part to the young men who are conscripted, their older brothers who continue in the reserves, their fathers who were the first generation of NSmen, and of course to their mothers, wives, sisters and girlfriends who provide the moral support.

National Archives of Singapore

Given our small population, National Service will always be the backbone of the SAF. Our National Servicemen know that they will be in the frontline should the SAF ever have to go into battle. We train them seriously and they take their training seriously too. In the words of Dr Goh Keng Swee, the man who laid the foundation of the SAF - no one should underestimate the potential of a "small, vigorous, well educated and highly motivated population" to fight for their country.

Building Friendships

Besides the hard edge of the SAF, we have put equal emphasis on building friendships and defence relations as the other important means of enhancing Singapore's security - defence diplomacy as the other pillar of our defence policy. Besides fostering understanding and building confidence, there are also payoffs from the professional interactions in terms of benchmarking and inter-operability.

Over the years, the SAF has established strong and friendly ties with armed forces around the world. One good example is the Five Power Defence Arrangements that we entered into in 1971 with Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand and the UK. We have good defence relations and extensive interactions and cooperation with a number of other countries. We conduct exercises - both bilateral and multilateral - with armed forces from over 20 countries every year. Last year there were 70 such exercises with foreign forces - that is on average between 1 and 2 exercises every week. So on average, there's always an exercise going on at any time of the year.

Through these interactions we get to know one another better and we learn to work together. With more peace support operations and humanitarian relief missions ahead, better understanding and inter-operability are key to effective cooperation in times of need. We saw the payoffs when the SAF was deployed in East Timor and in the Gulf where we worked with many other countries. And most recently, when the SAF was carrying out the post-tsunami relief mission in Aceh - especially when working with the Indonesian Armed Forces, but also with other armed forces which had gone in to help.

Our friendship and good relations with various countries have also helped us to secure training facilities that are so valuable to the SAF. Training overseas allows us to overcome the limitations of land and airspace in Singapore. It also allows the SAF to lift itself to a higher level by training in unfamiliar and challenging environments, and by training with experienced and capable armed forces. Today, the SAF trains in about a dozen countries all over the world. Our Air Force conducts about half its flying training in foreign countries.

Cooperation among defence agencies and armed forces has taken on greater urgency since 9-11 as we all recognise that the security of nations is intertwined. The terrorists have no regard for national boundaries and theirs is a multinational enterprise. In fact, they exploit the interstitials between national boundaries to operate and carry out their attacks. Countries have to work together if we want to deal with the threat effectively. This is an area which Singapore has focused on, including working with like-minded countries on initiatives to enhance the fight against terrorism, proliferation and threats to maritime security.

Small states can survive only in a world where sovereignty is sacrosanct and the rule of law prevails. These are important guiding principles as we navigate through the geo-strategic changes taking place in the world today.

Singapore has always been an active member of the United Nations, as well as regional groupings like ASEAN, APEC and the ARF. We play our part as a responsible member of the international community, and make our contributions to enhance the international order that is so critical for the survival of a small state like Singapore.

Total Defence

Total Defence is another key component in Singapore's defence strategy. Essentially, the point of Total Defence is that we need more than the military for a strong defence. And every Singaporean has a part to play to make us more resilient and strengthen the country's ability to protect itself from threats, whatever form they may take, and to overcome them. They can make a contribution in some or all of the five elements of Total Defence. Besides military defence, the other elements are civil, economic, social and psychological defence. The last two, social and psychological defence, involve building strong community ties and enhancing social harmony in our multi-racial society, and maintaining our psychological resolve and resilience.

Total Defence is not an abstract concept. We can see its relevance and importance at a time when terrorism brings the threat to our doorsteps and into our daily lives - especially as the threat is not just to our lives and property but also to the social fabric of our nation.

National Archives of Singapore

Technology as a Force Multiplier

The fourth key element in our defence strategy is the importance of technology for the Singapore Armed Forces. From the start, we recognised that technology would be crucial for overcoming the limitations of our small population. Technology would be our force multiplier. Research and experimentation to develop a technological edge began as early as 1971 even though our armed forces then had only rudimentary capabilities. The effort started off with a 3-man team. Today MINDEF is one of the largest employers of engineers and scientists in Singapore. We continue to devote considerable resources to defence R&D and experimentation - 5% and 1% of the defence budget, respectively.

Our servicemen are expert users of the SAF's technologically sophisticated platforms and systems. We have leveraged on the grounding which our education system has given to all the servicemen who come through, both regulars and National Servicemen.

Transformation

Singapore's security in the future will depend on the SAF's ability to sustain a credible deterrence. To do so, we will have to transform the SAF into a leaner and yet more potent force with the help of technology. This will allow us to maximise our limited resources - to make sure that we get the best defence for every defence dollar spent and that we make the best use of our limited manpower.

We are now in the 2nd Generation of the SAF - the first being the very early days of rudimentary capabilities, and the second being an SAF capable of performing the full range of missions required for our defence in the 2000 time-frame. Transformation will take us to the 3rd Generation or 3G SAF. It is not enough only to buy modern weapons and systems off the shelf. We need to be able to exploit the technology, add value to it, and exploit new operating concepts as well. We are fortunate that our people - not only the techies but more importantly our soldiers, down to the trooper level - can absorb and exploit the technology.

Warfare has become more technologically demanding and complex, and that is fortunate for small states like Singapore with a well educated and techno-savvy population. Battles are fortunately no longer fought with swords and spears, or bows and arrows. It is now possible for surveillance and strike systems and manoeuvre units to be networked together to provide comprehensive awareness and precision strike, and to enable units to manoeuvre rapidly to best advantage.

In the 2G SAF, we fielded systems that gave us better capabilities with fewer men. For instance in the artillery, our FH-88 and FH-2000 155mm artillery guns are more lethal and need fewer soldiers to man them than the guns that they replaced.

But in the 3G SAF, we are looking for more than incremental improvements. We are looking for a quantum transformation in capability. For example, an artillery unit equipped with our latest gun, the 155mm self-propelled Primus, will not operate in isolation. It will form part of a network with other strike systems such as fighter aircraft and attack helicopters. They will be linked to manoeuvre forces, and to surveillance systems such as target acquisition radars,

unmanned air vehicles and special forces. A command and control system will provide decision support and target allocation, so that targets can be detected early and engaged with minimum latency by the most appropriate available means. Transformation is, ultimately, a powerful force multiplier.

Conclusion

There are many different strategies and approaches a country can take to meet its defence needs and provide for its security. What it decides to do has to be in the context of its particular security environment, taking into account its unique geography, history and demography.

Some countries are lucky enough to be located in a peaceful and benign environment, and have not faced any threat or conflict for decades, others live in constant fear of invasion; some have mountains or large tracts of land to buffer them, others have little or no strategic depth; some believe in being self-sufficient and providing their own defence, others have decided to place their defence and, hence, the fate of their countries in the hands of others.

We have decided that we must ourselves provide for our own defence, for if we are not prepared to defend ourselves, we cannot expect anyone else to do so on our behalf. This is a bitter lesson that our fathers and grandfathers learned in the past. Providing for our own defence allows us to chart our own course as an independent sovereign nation, without having to buckle under pressure from larger states, or to become subservient to their strategic imperatives.

Singapore's defence strategies have been shaped by these factors and convictions. And by our belief that, being a small state in a sometimes turbulent region, security is imperative for our very survival.

Thank you very much.