



SPEECH

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Speech by Mr Teo Chee Hean, Minister for Defence, at 2nd Regional Special Forces Counter-Terrorism Conference

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Working Together in the Fight against Terrorism

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I am pleased to note the good turnout of the Special Forces fraternity and counter-terrorism experts here at this Second Regional Special Forces Counter-Terrorism Conference. This is a demonstration of the resolve of the countries you represent to work together in the fight against terrorism.

The Terrorism Threat

No one today can be in any doubt that it will be a long and arduous fight. The danger is extreme and immediate, and Southeast Asia is a key battleground. Many of our countries have suffered terrorist attacks, while many others – including Singapore – have uncovered terrorist networks and plots to carry out attacks. The victims of most of the terrorist attacks are overwhelmingly innocent civilians – whether in the United States, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, or here in Southeast Asia. Many of them have been innocent co-religionists, killed even at weddings and funerals.

Our fight against the terrorists will be a long haul, for this is a global ideological war waged by fanatics who have perverted Islam and claim to act in its name. Moreover, the terrorist

networks have shown a remarkable capacity to adapt and to change, and to re-organise themselves in a more dispersed and amorphous way to evade detection. But we have had some notable successes against them. Here in Singapore, we uncovered the Jemaah Islamiyah (or JI) network before they could carry out any attacks. Just this month, the Australian authorities arrested 17 suspected terrorists. And the Indonesian operation against the JI bomb-maker, Azahari Hussin, was a significant achievement, although there are still others on the run. We will all have to stay very vigilant, and we will need to work together – agencies within a country in a multi-dimensional approach, and countries together in multinational cooperation and collaboration mode. No country is immune, as the record of attacks from 9-11 onwards has shown us.

Singapore's Approach

In Singapore, we have put considerable thought and planning, and considerable resources into the fight against terrorism over the past four years. For us, the threat is not just to our lives and properties, but also to the harmony of our society as we are a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society with a significant Muslim minority. We never forget that the threat is ever-present, and that no matter how much we may have done to harden ourselves, we remain vulnerable to terrorist attacks so long as we are an open country and an open society.

Singapore's approach to the fight against terrorism is characterised by integration and co-ordination. We have a national security framework which links across the various agencies of government and also involves the community and private sector for a more effective counter-terrorism effort. We have activated multi-agency task forces to conduct comprehensive reviews of vulnerabilities. And a range of measures has been implemented across several sectors, such as aviation security, maritime security, cyber security and transport security.

Within this national security framework, the Singapore Armed Forces plays a key role in many areas, working closely with civilian agencies. The Air Force is at the frontline of aviation security. The Navy works hand in hand with the Police Coast Guard, the Maritime and Port Authority, and the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority, to enhance the security of our ports and waters. Our Navy also works closely with its Indonesian and Malaysian counterparts to safeguard the security of the Malacca and Singapore Straits. Our Army has developed new capabilities to deal with terrorist threats. One example is the Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Explosive (or CBRE) Defence Group, which has a suite of preventive measures and the expertise and equipment to respond to CBRE-type terrorist attacks.

The SAF also set up its Island Defence Headquarters (IDHQ) to command and coordinate all security and protection requirements of key industrial, transport and communications installations. This is organised to be part of the SAF's 'High Readiness Core' for national security operations and consequence management on a 24/7 basis, and works closely with the Ministry of Home Affairs to manage home-front security operations.

The SAF Commandos are an important element in our array of counter-terrorism capabilities. The Commandos demonstrated their readiness and proficiency when they responded in March 1991 to the hijacking of Singapore Airlines flight SQ 117. When the order came, they stormed the aircraft and rescued all the passengers after eliminating the hijackers. Our Commandos are constantly trying to improve their operational skills and doctrines by engaging with and exercising with leading counter-terrorism forces from all over the world. They have learned much from these exchanges, both in terms of tactics, techniques and procedures, as well as from the way in which these forces are organised. The SAF Commandos will continue to play a key role as the sharp edge of Singapore's counter-terrorism response.

Multilateral Cooperation

Governments have to make every effort to enhance their ability and their capabilities to fight terrorism, both in terms of security measures as well as socio-economic policies. But national efforts alone are not enough, for this enemy does not respect boundaries and his target is global in scale. The security of all our countries is inextricably linked. We must work closely together, for only then can we be effective in countering terrorism.

There are several levels at which we can and must work together. The exchange of intelligence is critical for uncovering cells and networks and preventing attacks. Exchanges among police forces, armed forces and other relevant agencies – both in terms of dealing with specific incidents and suspected terrorists, as well as in the sharing of experiences – are also important, and we have seen some fruitful outcomes from such exchanges. We have also had useful exchanges to better understand the ideology of the threat that confronts us, so that we can more effectively counter it.

This network of cooperative relationships has been built up over many years, in some cases predating the threat of transnational terrorism. Among the armed forces of the Asia-Pacific, in particular, we have in many cases nurtured our relationships over many years, thereby boosting trust and cooperative instincts. More can, and should, be done in multinational collaboration against terrorism. Moving forward, we can look at how to build on our ties and develop more areas of cooperation. For Special Forces in particular, it is vital to develop better understanding of one another, for we never know when we may need to work with each other in an operation to safeguard each other's national interest and nationals.

A mutual understanding of the threat and the political will to actively do something to deal with it can bring about concrete achievements in multilateral cooperation. Let me illustrate with the example of what we have achieved in the area of maritime security. In recent months, there has been a series of positive developments and concrete operational measures which demonstrated the resolve of the littoral states to enhance security in the Malacca Straits. Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore are now engaged in coordinated sea patrols and joint maritime air patrols of the Malacca Straits. Soon we hope to have an Information Sharing Centre established in Singapore under the ReCAAP initiative to further enhance the security

of the vital sea lanes in this area.

We should also continue to build up the regional capacity to address maritime security threats through multilateral exercises and training, such as what has been carried out under the auspices of the Five Power Defence Arrangements and the Western Pacific Naval Symposium. Such activities allow the operational agencies to build confidence and familiarity, and to enhance inter-operability. They can tighten their mechanisms for working together so that the capabilities that reside in various countries can respond more quickly and effectively and in a more coordinated way.

The ASEAN Regional Forum – which brings together 25 countries, including all the countries in the Asia-Pacific – is another important forum where we can forge concrete cooperation in our common fight against terrorism. The ARF already has an established defence track that brings regional defence agencies together for a dialogue on contemporary security challenges. The next step would be for the defence agencies of ARF member states to come together in more substantive cooperation in capacity building, such as in joint exercises, including counter-terrorism exercises. The range of capabilities, expertise and experience that various ARF countries can bring to such exercises would be most valuable for all the participants.

Conclusion

Collaboration and cooperation among countries is critical in the fight against terrorism. We cannot afford to take our time in forging such efforts for the threat is a clear and present one. There is much more that we can do together, such as enhancing intelligence exchanges, conducting capacity-building exercises, and sharing experiences in operational issues such as Special Forces operations. This conference offers a valuable opportunity for all of you here to share your wealth of knowledge and experiences, and to tap on one another's perspectives and expertise. By doing so, we enhance not only the security of our own countries but also the collective security of all our countries in our region.

It leaves me now to wish all of you a fruitful and enriching week ahead. Thank you.