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Reflections on the 40th SAF Day and Beyond

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The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) is recognised as the ultimate guarantor of Singapore's peace, security, prosperity, strategic interests and sovereignty. However, the character, if not the nature of this role must be constantly (re)defined by strategic realities for the SAF to remain relevant.

COME 1 JULY each year, on SAF day, Regulars and National Servicemen of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) reaffirm their commitment to the defence of Singapore and the SAF's mission: 'to enhance Singapore's peace and security through deterrence and diplomacy, and should these fail, to secure a swift and decisive victory over the aggressor'.

How many of us wearing the uniform, be it as professional or citizen soldiers, truly contemplate the nature and character of the above mission that we are expected to undertake? More importantly, in this day and age when 'non-traditional' security issues such as global-warming and influenza pandemics seem to be the norm, does the SAF's 'deterrence' role bear any salience? For the SAF to remain relevant in the decades to come, these two fundamental questions must be constantly revisited.

Tradition is Dead, Long-Live Non-Tradition?

With the 'real-time' Contemporary Operational Environment (COE) dominated by the American-led Counterinsurgency (COIN) efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is perhaps inevitable that present military transformation is largely driven by the experience of the paradigm power in those theatres. Indeed, the designate British Chief of the General Staff, General Sir David Richards, recently remarked at the recent RUSI Land Warfare Conference, 23-25 June, 2009 that:

The British armed forces are adapting to the challenges of war in Afghanistan. Self critically however, this transformation in contact is still localised and small in scale. US forces are doing better in my judgement. Having only six years ago abjured nation-building and [COIN] as things real armies did not stoop to do, they now give stabilisation operations the same doctrinal weighting as those related to conventional offensive and defensive operations. The pace of technological change is bewildering. It has left every nation's mainstream procurement process struggling to deliver equipment that will remain relevant against more agile opponents satisfied with cheap and ever-evolving eighty per cent

solutions.

What Gen Richards is suggesting is that big-ticket combat systems such as submarines, stealth-fighters and major surface combatants simply do not perform well against opponents that fight asymmetrically with sophisticated off-the-shelf technology. In short, the strategic realities of today and the future is reflected in Afghanistan -- the Army taking the lead in 'clear, hold and build' operations supported by the Navy and Air Force.

Gen Richards' comments might be made in an Anglo-American context but the issues raised do resonate with the SAF's own transformation journey. The SAF is currently in the process of transforming itself into a 'Third Generation' force able to respond to the amorphous and unpredictable battlespace of the 21st Century. That may and can include warfighting, Security, Stability, Transition and Reconstruction (SSTR) and Humanitarian and Disaster Relief (HADR) scenarios. However, considering Singapore's resource constraints – particularly limited manpower and the need to channel ever more resources to social development, the SAF cannot expect to perform equally well across the entire spectrum of operations. It must prioritise the investment of its resources and defence dollars in accordance with strategic realities.

Role of SAF Today and Beyond

The interpretation of strategic realities very much depends on how we answer the following two questions:

-- Are conflicts with transnational violent non-state actors a historical aberration or long-term strategic trend?

-- Do we believe that, despite globalisation, interstate war remains a possibility, and if so, has it manifested itself differently?

If the increased participation of the SAF in international SSTR and HADR operations in recent years is anything to go by, it indicates that the security challenges confronting Singapore today and in the near future will be primarily transnational and 'non-traditional' in nature. Moreover, September 11 and the protracted insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan do suggest that conventional combat power does not deter highly-determined non-state violent actors that fight asymmetrically.

In light of such developments, is the SAF's recent acquisition of technologically-advanced combat platforms such as the *Archer* class submarines, *Formidable* Class stealth-frigates, G550 Conformal Airborne Early Warning (CAEW) aircraft and F-15SG fighters a waste of public funds? Are these costly legacy systems built for yesterday's wars but ill-suited for the security needs of 21st Century Singapore?

Tempting as it might be to answer with a resounding yes, the uncertainty of the post-Cold War security environment precludes such a response. As we are constantly reminded of the salience of the 'non-state' and the 'non-traditional', we must also remember that the international community largely operates within the traditional system of sovereign states. This system of sovereign states, however increasingly interdependent, is not without a finite risk of conflict.

Sir Michael Howard who played an instrumental role in the establishment of both the Department of War Studies at King's College, London and the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) observed in 1970:

Peace is only possible when there is freedom from all fear of coercion; and in the absence of any supranational authority enforcing a universal rule of law, such freedom from fear still depends at least

partly on independent or collective military capability...At present, unfortunately, such coercion is by no means unthinkable even within the most stable of communities and the most powerful of sovereign states.

Does Sir Michael's statement reflect the strategic reality of today? Or does it resemble the archetypical conservative pessimist who stands against the possibilities of wider supranational loyalties that transcend the 'traditional war' system?

The fact is, despite the economic downturn, global military spending reached a record US\$1.46 trillion in 2008 – a four percent increase from 2007. This increase might not represent any hostile intent from any particular state, but lamentable as it might seem, the vast majority of sovereign states do prepare for the possibility of interstate war. Despite the end of the Cold War, the strategic reality remains that 'freedom from all fear of coercion', be it from states or violent non-state actors, is still very much elusive.

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