



# IDSS COMMENTARIES (05/2005)

*IDSS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of IDSS.*

---

## **SAF: A FLEXIBLE FORCE TO DEAL WITH THE UNEXPECTED**

Bernard Loo and Joshua Ho\*

31 January 2005

THE Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) completed its emergency relief mission after three weeks in Aceh as rescue and relief work in the tsunami-affected areas moved into a new phase. In this next phase -- of recovery, reconstruction and rehabilitation -- the bulk of Singapore's contribution will be undertaken by civilian volunteer groups, like the Singapore Red Cross and Mercy Relief. The volunteers have been helping to set up centres for internally-displaced persons, providing them with basic necessities and delivering school kits for children. This is to help restore some semblance of normalcy to the lives of the affected persons until they can be more permanently rehoused. At least 24 centres are being built to rehouse the more than 400,000 internally-displaced persons who have lost their homes. As the soldiers from the SAF humanitarian assistance support group hand over their duties to their Indonesian counterparts and return home, they and other Singaporeans should be proud of what the SAF has achieved over such a short space of time.

### **The non-traditional military**

Since the 1990s, an increasingly fashionable argument suggests that the roles of military organisations in future will revolve less around the traditional – military defence – and more around the non-traditional such as humanitarian relief, peace-keeping, peace enforcement, policing, to name but three. The argument further asserts that training for traditional military defence roles has ill-prepared military personnel in assuming the new functions and missions. The argument then concludes that more and more, military training ought to focus on these new, so-called non-traditional roles and less on the traditional concerns of military defence. More importantly, decisions on force structures ought to focus on the capabilities needed to support these new non-military missions. In other words, conventional military operations, basically, ought to be seen as a thing of the past. Indeed, this is increasingly becoming the case for the armed forces of some European states, which now devote more time to training for non-traditional roles than for traditional military defence missions.

### **The SAF model**

The manner in which the SAF responded to the tsunami disaster, however, highlights the limits of the above argument. The SAF responded swiftly by planning and putting together a combination of forces, supplies, and equipment over the traditional holiday period. Within two days of the disaster, the first sorties of C-130 aircraft had ferried tents, groundsheets, blankets, as well as medical and food supplies to Medan. Over the past few weeks, SAF Chinook and Super Puma helicopters, C-130 and Fokker 50 aircraft had flown some 250

missions carrying more than 1,000,000 pounds of cargo and 4,000 people. Three Republic of Singapore Navy Helicopter Landing Ships and Fast Craft ferried relief supplies, NGO personnel and volunteers. But more critically, they brought engineer equipment like bulldozers, excavators and cranes to establish beach landing points and cleared supply routes from the coast to the devastated city of Meulaboh. The SAF medical teams treated 4000 people in Banda Aceh and Meulaboh.

The rescue and relief effort of the SAF was the largest operational deployment that has been undertaken to date. More than 1,200 personnel were deployed -- to Phuket in Thailand and to Medan, Banda Aceh, and Meulaboh in Indonesia. Republic of Singapore Air Force aircraft flew supply and support missions between Jakarta, Singapore and Aceh, and around the Indian Ocean rim to Phuket, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Mauritius. Besides those directly deployed on the ground in the disaster-stricken areas, there were many more SAF personnel who supported the men and women in the field. They worked very hard to get the aircraft, ships, equipment and men ready to go at short notice. The assets that the SAF has been able to deploy in support of its humanitarian efforts – the C-130 aircraft, Chinook and Super Puma helicopters as well as the helicopter landing ships – are conventional military assets, and are the result of the SAF's continuing focus on conventional military defence.

### **Why the SAF could do it**

The ability of the SAF to respond so swiftly, effectively and sensitively is a result of the prudent development of a diverse and flexible set of capabilities to deal with a spectrum of contingencies. It was also the result of the high quality of training put in to enable its soldiers to respond to unexpected contingencies. The training has enabled the soldiers to perform their tasks professionally and sensitively by allowing them to be attuned to the manner in which the population had been affected by the disaster. Furthermore, the SAF was able to provide useful and effective relief assistance to Indonesia as it was able to coordinate its work closely with its Indonesian counterparts. This close relationship is the result of many years of extensive interaction and cooperation, in exercises, personnel exchanges, and attending each other's training courses, which has resulted in the development of mutual respect, understanding as well as trust on the ground.

Such is the level of trust that has been developed that the SAF was given freedom to deploy troops for relief work in and around Meulaboh without having to be escorted by TNI (Indonesian) soldiers. An especially critical group of soldiers were the liaison and civil-military relations officers who were able to communicate and connect with the Indonesians due to their proficiency in Bahasa Indonesia. The SAF was able to play an intermediary role by building bridges between the Indonesians and the 30 NGOs from other assisting nations.

Close relations were also not limited to people at the ground level. At the political and senior command level, close ties enabled Singapore to understand the needs of the Indonesians and for the SAF to tailor assistance to specifically address those needs. Such was the level of comfort with their counterparts that senior officials were able to communicate directly via personal meetings and through phone calls.

### **SAF as a flexible force**

In the coming years, the SAF will develop into a more capable and flexible force. The SAF will leverage on information technology, precision capabilities and networks to transform

itself into the 3G SAF. The 3G SAF is expected to be able to respond to a wider spectrum of threats and challenges and to deal even more swiftly and capably with the unexpected. However, success in such a transformation is not dependent on the application of technology alone. The human factor is just as crucial to the success of transformation. This is because expert commentators on military transformation have mentioned that advances in technology would not matter or would not translate to combat effectiveness without well-trained and truly professional men and women. The ability to adapt and be flexible in order to deal with the unexpected is also seen to be crucial to battlefield success.

In her book, *World Class*, Rosabeth Moss Kanter mentions that people, organisations, or cities that succeed in the new era of globalisation possess what she calls the 3Cs – concepts, competence, and connections. ‘Concepts’ means possessing the best and latest knowledge and ideas; ‘competence’ means the ability to operate at the highest standards anywhere; and ‘connections’ means the best relationships which provide access to the resources of other people and organisations around the world. As events have proven in the past three weeks, the SAF, and indeed Singapore as a whole, have the 3Cs to not only succeed, but thrive as part of the global community.

---

\* Bernard Loo is an Assistant Professor and Joshua Ho is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University.