



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS 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 the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

The Inter-National Serviceman of the SAF: Citizen Soldiers in Overseas Missions

Ong Weichong

12 October 2009

For the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) to effectively deal with the complexity and often borderless nature of today's security eco-system, its heart and soul -- its citizen soldiers -- must be more than a home guard. They must be Inter-National Servicemen of global reach.

THE ARCHETYPICAL image of a Singaporean National Serviceman (NSman) is that of a citizen soldier who dutifully answers the call-up to mobilisation and yearly in-camp-training (ICT). Less conspicuous however are the contributions of SAF NSmen in overseas missions. In the SAF, professional servicemen are known as regulars, conscripts as Full-Time National Servicemen (NSFs) and reservists as Operationally-Ready NSmen. According to the Army Museum of Singapore, the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) medical relief mission to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1970 witnessed the first deployment of NSmen (then known as reservists) in an overseas mission. Since then, NSmen of diverse vocations have participated in various overseas missions – including the recently concluded deployment of the RSS Persistence and her 296-men task force in the Gulf of Aden. The 54-strong SAF medical team dispatched on 3 October 2009 to the quake-devastated regency of Padang Pariaman, Indonesia is an all regular force. In this case, the necessity for rapid deployment precluded the deployment of NSmen – who must first volunteer their services in order to be deployed overseas.

Indeed, the role of the NSmen has evolved from 'Rising to the Defence of Singapore' in the 1960s to a more 'Global, More Capable and Ready' one in the 1990s. At the policy-level, the notion of an 'Always Ready' NSman capable of overseas deployment has been embraced, but the readiness of Singaporean society to accept and risk the frequent and extended deployment of its citizen soldiers to foreign shores is another matter.

Reticence to Norm

The Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) only started training NSF Air Crew Specialists (ACS) in August 1994. Similarly, it was as recent as 1995 that the RSAF took in its first NSF aircraft technicians. In light of Singapore's dwindling birth rate and reduced manpower availability, it was a

necessary step. The involvement of Pilot Captain (NS) David Goh Siau Hiong and Flight Engineer, Staff Sergeant (NS) Tan Tiaw Koon in the mission to evacuate Singaporeans from Cambodia in 1997 underscored the integral role played by Singapore's citizen airmen and the blurring of Regular/NSmen lines. Since then more NS Aircrew have been deployed in overseas missions – including those who have volunteered to serve beyond their 40 days of In-Camp Training (the maximum duration under Enlistment Act). Indeed, the transitional years of the 1990s (from the Second to the Third Generation SAF) were fundamental in the shaping of a 'Positive NS Experience' policy -- whereby every soldier, sailor, airman, NSF or NSmen mattered.

The same however cannot be said of societal attitudes – particularly when it comes to the deployment of Singapore's citizen soldiers overseas. The Confucian adage 'just as one would not use good iron to make a nail, one does not use a good man to make a soldier' which held sway in many a Singaporean Chinese family in the 1960s and 1970s no longer persists today. After more than 40 years of nation-building, the role and acceptance of NS has become embedded in the national psyche and social fabric of Singapore's HDB heartlands. This acceptance however is premised on the defence of Singapore within its physical limits and grounded in the implicit trust that the state will not risk the lives and well-being of its citizen soldiers unnecessarily.

For the majority of Singaporean families, the challenges of globalisation manifest themselves tangibly in lost employment opportunities -- not transnational security threats that seem a world away. In short, it is difficult to convince most Singaporean parents of the legitimacy and rationale of sending their sons to solve the problems of others. As such, when the SAF does deploy for overseas missions, the overwhelming majority tend to be regulars rather than NSFs or NSmen – and rightly so. This however should not preclude the deployment of Singapore's citizen soldiers particularly if they bring expertise that is lacking or absent in the SAF.

Civilian Expertise in an Informatised Battlefield

One such area in which civilian expertise can be tapped is Media Operations (MO) -- the vital link between ground operations and public opinion crucial to the success of any overseas mission.

In the British Army, MO in all theatres of operations are run by a specialist Territorial Army (TA) unit, the Media Operations Group MOG (V). All MOG (V) members are volunteer reservists drawn from a broad spectrum of media specialists that include public relations, photography, marketing, broadcasting, and journalism. The unique difference between MOG (V) and most other TA units is that the media operators of MOG (V) are essentially subject matter experts who actually use their civilian skills in direct assistance of military forces. The 15 (UK) PSYOPS Group plays a similar role in the realm of Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) and Information Operations (IO), although its members are equally split between regulars and reservists. The complete withdrawal of regular personnel from MO might not be practicable or desirable within the SAF context, but MO, PSYOPS and IO are fields where civilian expertise can be used to supplement or plug gaps in capabilities.

In the near future, the SAF will find itself increasingly deployed in Security, Stability, Transition and Reconstruction (SSTR), Humanitarian and Disaster Relief (HADR) and a multitude of Other Than War (OTW) missions overseas. These are scenarios where civilian expertise in MO, international law, medicine, veterinary medicine, civil engineering and a host of other disciplines are crucial to mission success. The deployment of NSmen who are subject matter experts in such overseas missions thus go a long way in boosting the capabilities of the task force and getting the job done.

The NSmen of the SAF have come a long way from the 'home guard' of the 1960s. The citizen soldiers of the 3rd Generation SAF are now a 'Global, More Capable and Always Ready' aegis some 300,000-strong. Not to utilise SAF NSmen to advance defence diplomacy efforts is to ignore the invaluable contributions of Singapore's citizen soldiers in the SAF's transformational journey. It also

ignores the immense strides made over the past 40-odd years in blurring the regular-citizen soldier divide.

Ong Weichong is Associate Research Fellow with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is attached to the Military Transformations Programme at the school's constituent unit, the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies. He is also a Doctoral Candidate with the Centre for the Study of War, State and Society, University of Exeter, UK.