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Singapore's New Ground for Overseas Military Training: The Case for Timor-Leste

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22 February 2010

Considering Singapore's space constraints, the city-state must continue to identify cost-effective overseas training areas to maintain and further develop the SAF's capabilities as a full-spectrum force. One such possibility is Timor-Leste.

IN RECENT years, the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) has steadily expanded its overseas training areas to include those in India, Germany and South Africa. The scale and scope of the SAF's military training in the more familiar overseas training territories of Australia, New Zealand and the United States have also been enlarged. Most of the SAF's military training in its main overseas training areas in Australia, Thailand, Taiwan, South Africa and the US tends to be unilateral conventional large-scale exercises of an integrated nature that involves various arms and units of the SAF.

While the current infrastructure of Timor-Leste does not afford the level of logistical support that the SAF is used to for large-scale combined-arms military training, the unique variance of Timorese geography and physical proximity to Singapore provide an opportunity for the SAF to cost-effectively train in niche areas such as special operations, littoral operations, Undersea Warfare (USW) and Search and Rescue (SAR).

Timorese Topography

The coastal mountains surrounding the Timorese capital Dili and mountain-forests further inland replicate challenging topographical conditions found in some of the SAF's current overseas training areas in high-cost developed countries. Notwithstanding the lack of infrastructure to support large-scale conventional military training, the rugged landscape of Timor Leste presents viable alternative training grounds in which detachments of Special Operations Forces (SOF), Rapid Deployment Forces (RDF) and specialist units such as reconnaissance teams and air support elements can train realistically.

Timor-Leste could potentially offer the SAF military training opportunities in all medium of

operations -- land, sea and air. With a coastline of 873 kilometres and two coasts, the country would be ideal for the Republic of Singapore Navy's (RSN) training activities -- including live-firing exercises. While Dili's basic port facilities could pose some limitations, this in itself does not prevent a naval force from using Timor-Leste as a training base. In late 2009, the US Marines conducted a series of exercises in the country including landings, SAR and heliborne operations. The fact that the world's foremost expeditionary force was able to conduct a four-day exercise demonstrates that despite its infrastructure problems, the territory is quite suitable for military training.

New Opportunities

The deep waters surrounding the island of Timor including various troughs of up to some 3,000 metres provide excellent areas for the RSN to train and test its USW and submarine support and rescue capabilities. These exercises could be conducted with other friendly navies that visit Timorese waters on a regular basis such as the United States Navy (USN) and Royal Australian Navy (RAN). By sailing into Timorese waters via international waters on a regular basis, the RSN would increase its ability to conduct long range operations at sea and enhance certain skills such as resupply on the high seas and long distance communications.

In the city of Baucau is located the longest runway in Timor-Leste which is currently under-used due to the fact that the government has given priority to the airport in Dili. In a recent conversation with the authors, one of the highest Timorese government officials indicated that Timor-Leste could consider making Baucau Airport available to the SAF for a period of five to ten years -- free of charge. Timor-Leste would benefit from the infrastructure upgrades brought in with the Singaporean presence. Baucau Airport could then be used as the hub for the SAF's training activities. The airport has the capacity to accommodate the world's largest aircraft as was shown during the Australian-led intervention in 1999 that witnessed various types of heavy transports landing at Baucau.

Challenges

The lack of infrastructure may pose some challenges. A challenge can on occasions, however, be turned into an opportunity. Timor-Leste's infrastructure limitations could be an advantage for the SAF in preparing its forces for scenarios and environments where little or no local infrastructure support is present. Such scenarios and environments are likely to be the norm for the SAF now and in the near future as Singapore is increasingly called upon to contribute to various contingencies in the region and beyond. Such regional operations are likely to be in places where basic infrastructure is lacking such as Aceh during the 2004 tsunami.

Despite the Timor-Leste Defence Force's (FDTL) many difficulties, its infantrymen are stalwarts of an illustrious warrior heritage that is very much kept alive. When it comes to rural insurgency, there is much that the SOF of the SAF can learn from the tactical and operational experiences of the seasoned guerrillas turned professional soldiers of the FDTL. It is worth remembering that the Indonesian military lost an estimated 12,000 men in Timor in its efforts to neutralise the then FALINTIL guerrillas.

Establishing an overseas training presence in Timor-Leste is not completely leaping into the unknown for the SAF. Since UNMISSET in 2002, Singaporean peacekeepers and observers have continued to maintain a presence in Timor-Leste. The local knowledge, goodwill and networks built from these missions can be used to cost-effectively further the SAF's operational readiness and military diplomacy in Timor-Leste. The challenges posed in Timor-Leste are therefore potential opportunities for better security cooperation between Singapore and Timor Leste at the local and regional levels.

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