



**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.

25 Years of Total Defence in Singapore: Revisiting the Assumptions

Adrian W. J. Kuah

6 February 2009

As Singapore marks the 25th anniversary of Total Defence, it is an opportune time to not only reflect on why its message has been so effective, but also consider how to adapt Total Defence to a world that is drastically different from 1984.

THIS YEAR marks the 25th anniversary of the concept of Total Defence in Singapore. Introduced in 1984, Total Defence was adapted from the experiences of countries like Sweden and Switzerland – countries with relatively small populations and some form of national military service.

By framing the security of Singapore in terms of five separate yet interdependent dimensions – military, civil, economic, social and psychological – Total Defence captures the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of defence. By and large, the idea of Total Defence has been highly effective in Singapore: this simple yet powerful idea resonates well with Singaporeans and is in fact deeply embedded in the public consciousness, while Total Defence is inextricably intertwined with the broad range of government policies.

Despite the success of the message of Total Defence, it is important to note that the concept itself rests uneasily on assumptions that have fortuitously held for Singapore. It is perhaps timely to examine the assumptions that underpin Total Defence to see where the cracks, if any, may show. More than this, it is vital to critically re-evaluate the viability of Total Defence as Singapore's national security doctrine, and to examine how Total Defence must evolve to reflect changes in the world since 1984.

Symbiotic or Conflictual?

As illustrated by the Ministry of Defence Total Defence website, when Singaporeans and Permanent Residents commit to National Service, volunteer in civil defence exercises, help build a strong economy, strengthen community ties across racial and religious lines, and are psychologically resilient in the face of adversity, such actions collectively result in Singapore's Total Defence. Total Defence assumes that the five components work symbiotically and simultaneously. There is however no guarantee that they do. Indeed, the five components of Total Defence may be in conflict with one

another, where enhancing one dimension could result in diminishing another, thereby lowering the level of Total Defence.

Take military defence and economic defence for example. The choice of these two is deliberate: military defence, by virtue of the size of the defence budget, the pervasiveness of National Service and the tangibility of military hardware, makes it the most visible aspect of Total Defence, while the economy more than anything else marks Singapore's place and reputation in the world. As formulated, military defence and economic defence go hand-in-hand. In Singapore's experience, an effective and credible Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) has provided the secure and stable platform necessary for economic growth, while economic prosperity has enabled the continuous development and improvement of the SAF. However, there are circumstances under which such a symbiosis might not hold.

Spending on one, or the other, or both?

One classic example is the guns-versus-butter debate, where if the economy is operating at full capacity, spending more on the military necessarily means spending less on things like health and education. Taken more broadly, the military and civilian sectors could also be in competition for other resources such as funding, human resources, research and development capabilities and so forth. Such a trade-off becomes particularly salient especially in the throes of a global economic crisis, where sustained, high military expenditures meant to maintain military defence could result in less spending on economic stimulus programmes, thereby eroding economic security. Maintaining high levels of military spending while government finances are under strain could also affect social policies such as health, education and social safety nets, thereby eroding social defence.

On the other hand, pegging military spending to the vagaries of the economic cycle would also introduce instability into military defence, thereby compromising the SAF's current and long-term effectiveness. That Singapore has been able to sustain its military budget in the face of past recessions, and indeed the current one, does not preclude the existence of such a trade-off, nor lessen the importance of analysing what the potential trade-off could be.

Re-conceptualising Total Defence in the global age

Beyond examining how components of Total Defence can conflict with, and even nullify, each other, it is important to understand how the very concept of Total Defence is put together. The key to understanding Total Defence is the *simultaneous* interaction of the five components. The practice, however, appears to depart substantively from the theory: given the size of the military budget, and its apparent resilience in the face of recessions past and present, military defence appears to be the centrepiece of Total Defence with the other components functioning as auxiliary ones.

With the emergence of non-traditional, transnational security threats, it is important to bring the other components of the Total Defence mechanism up to par with military defence in order to better deal with a spectrum of traditional military-based threats along with non-traditional ones. The challenge therefore is to fully realise the five components of Total Defence as working in simultaneity, rather than the military component buttressing the others.

Finally, Total Defence must evolve to reflect Singapore's role in a globalising world. While a powerful idea and policy tool, Total Defence has remained largely unevolved since 1984. As shown in the example given above, the conduct of Total Defence has an almost exclusive domestic and inward focus. Given Singapore's growing role in regional and global affairs, Total Defence's inward focus is outdated and rooted in a less complex era.

Having embraced economic globalisation, Singapore is intimately plugged into the global economy.

Singapore's economy has a strong external focus, through substantial international trade and foreign direct investment as well as global investments by the government and Singaporean companies. Also, with substantial interests in a wide range of businesses worldwide, Singapore's economy has become de-territorialised. Total Defence, in addition to its traditional concerns with military defence, territorial and border integrity, political sovereignty, social and economic resilience, must also take into account the protection of Singapore's economic interests overseas. Hence, Total Defence itself must become globalised in order to reflect Singapore's increasing stature in global political and economic affairs.

A policy triumph?

The concept of Total Defence has been a policy triumph chiefly because its simple yet powerful message has gained great traction with generations of Singaporeans and Permanent Residents since being introduced in 1984. That it has been successful and effective thus far, both as a policy guide and a locus of identity and social responsibility should not lull Singaporeans into assuming that Total Defence will continue to be so. Indeed, not only do the constituent components of Total Defence also possess inherent incompatibilities, the concept of Total Defence itself needs to evolve in order to reflect Singapore's role and interests in a complex and globalising world.

Adrian W.J. Kuah is a doctoral candidate at the UK Defence Academy, Cranfield University and an Associate Research Fellow specialising in defence economics. He works at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University and is attached to its constituent unit, the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies.