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Assessing the Structure of the New National Security Strategy

Bernard Loo*

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The new national security strategy that the Singapore government has adopted reflects experiences from a number of quite disparate sources. The incorporation of a number of security-related agencies – principally the Ministries of Defence, Home Affairs and Information and the Arts, as well as the Customs and Immigration Department, reflects the larger United States experience of incorporating different military services into a joint system, although this reflection is likely neither intentional nor totally accurate. Nevertheless, several key critiques immediately spring to mind.

Restructuring National Security

A Security Policy Review Committee (SPRC) remains, comprising the Ministers for Defence, Foreign Affairs, and Home Affairs. The Coordinating Minister for Security and Defence, Deputy Prime Minister Dr. Tony Tan, chairs this Committee. A National Security Coordination Secretariat (NSCS) has been created, situated in the Prime Minister's Office, headed by a Permanent Secretary for National Security and Intelligence Coordination. The Secretariat will comprise of two agencies, the National Security Coordination Centre (NSCC) and the Joint Counter Terrorism Centre (JCTC).

The NSCS will be the hub of this new national security architecture. It will be responsible for national security planning, as well as the coordination of policy and intelligence issues. The NSCC will be responsible for supporting the policy work of the NSCS, by dealing with policy planning, risk assessments and horizon scanning. The JCTC supports the intelligence work of the NSCS by providing intelligence assessments of known terrorist organisations and activities.

Assessing the New National Security Architecture

At first glance, it would appear that this new security architecture makes sense. It taps into a history of inter-agency work dealing with a wide spectrum of contingencies and crises, ranging from the collapse of the Hotel New World in 1986, the hijacking of SQ 117 in 1991, and the recent SARS crisis. The ability of the inter-agency approach to effectively deal with these past contingencies ought to augur well for the ability of the new national security architecture to work together successfully. Certainly, there are advantages in adopting this networked, inter-agency approach in dealing with national security.

If something positive can be derived from the World Trade Centre, Bali, Jakarta Marriot and

Madrid terrorist attacks, it is that policy-makers have become painfully aware that national security can no longer be seen purely in terms of the military. Rather, national security is necessarily multi-faceted, incorporating both internal and external facets. It is not to say that national security has become multi-faceted as a result of these terrible acts of terrorism; rather these acts have highlighted what was always the multi-faceted nature of national security. And, as national security is multi-faceted by nature, the responses states adopt to ensure national security ought also to be necessarily multi-faceted, incorporating the work of separate but related agencies such as the Ministries of Home Affairs, Finance, Foreign Affairs and Defence. An inter-agency network, being coordinated by a central authority, clearly makes sense.

Potential Pitfalls

That is not to say, however, that there are no potential pitfalls that will have to be negotiated successfully by this new national security architecture. Three main potential problems come readily to mind.

Turf battles, especially in the initial period of re-organisation, will almost be inevitable. This phenomenon has been virtually ever-present in any state when existing agencies and organisations were re-organised into an inter-agency network. The incorporation of internal and external security mechanisms, for instance, will bring together two organisations that have directed their attention traditionally towards very different types of targets, operating in very different types of environments. However, the lines between the two are not always clear and distinct. It is plausible that problems may arise, in the tracking of a particular target, where the lines between internal and external security become blurred. How both organisations handle the baton change will be crucial, and there is no guarantee that this baton change will be necessarily smooth and seamless.

To some extent, this speaks to a more fundamental problem, that is, the bringing together of disparate organisations with very different cultures and modes of operation. Internal and external security agencies, for instance, adopt very different methodologies in their respective work. How one agency assesses the intelligence from another agency then becomes potentially problematic. This then complicates the integration of intelligence from external and internal security agencies, and can complicate the process of generating an accurate composite picture of the security environment. Furthermore, different organisations have traditionally evolved very different organisational cultures, and getting personnel from disparate agencies to work together can be problematic.

Both potential pitfalls highlight an even more fundamental problem, that of strategic mindsets. It may make sense to incorporate defence and home affairs teams into the NSCS and its subordinate agencies, but this brings together people who have been trained to think very differently. Military personnel, especially coming from an armed forces that has been trained and configured towards conventional military operations, typically think in terms of decisive action, of seeking or drawing out the enemy and defeating this enemy in decisive battle. Military personnel are trained, in other words, to seek decisive victory. Strategy, the matching of political objectives with the instruments of national power, therefore seeks the defeat of the enemy.

Strategy for internal security, however, focuses not on decisive victory, on defeating the enemy, but preventing the enemy from attaining operational or strategic success. Police

work, for instance, focuses on the prevention of crime. Where it is possible to target organised crime, for instance, police agencies may launch offensive actions designed to locate and destroy criminal organisations. Nevertheless, this is only one small aspect of police work, and the larger aspect of police work remains the prevention of crime rather than the destruction and defeat of crime. The NSCS will bring together personnel from the Defence and Home Affairs ministries, and the challenge will be to change the modes of thinking for the personnel seconded from the Defence Ministry.

Negotiating These Pitfalls

The key will be the ability of the NSCS to impose its agenda on its subordinate agencies, and more precisely on the people who will staff these agencies. Strong leadership is the obvious answer to these potential pitfalls. The manner in which the United States military has undertaken its current defence transformation is instructive. There remains a great deal of resistance and scepticism towards the transformation agenda that the United States military has adopted, but that this agenda has got underway can be attributed largely to the overpowering influence of the current Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, who has almost literally bulldozed his transformation agenda through the defence establishment. Given the idiosyncracies of institutional cultures, a firm guiding hand will be required to make the new national security architecture work optimally.

* Bernard Loo is Assistant Professor at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is concurrently the Coordinator of the Institute's research programme on Revolutions in Military Affairs.