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Networked Cooperation and Diversity for the Future

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SEVERAL national security issues have become clearer in the five years since 9/11. Singapore, and other small or medium-sized developed states, face a complex and uncertain international environment. Most of the new and emerging threats to the state are now asymmetric in nature. Knowledge, not raw power, is the only weapon that can prevail in the face of an asymmetric threat. It is also clear that it will be impossible to predict the future with respect to discrete events and leaders will have to deal with uncertainty on a regular basis.

Tackling an Uncertain Future

Is Singapore well-positioned to tackle this uncertain future? Both positive and negative signals exist, while some questions remain unanswered. Novel methods of collaboration have been found and new government bodies such as the National Security Coordination Secretariat are functioning. The population at large appears to be well informed about potential threats without being unduly alarmed or fearful. National security issues need to be in the public eye, and not buried away out of view.

Greater networking between government agencies is a necessity to build the knowledge needed to prevail in an uncertain threat environment. An ever-increasing need exists to integrate intelligence and operational information as close to the frontlines of government as possible. Without this frontline process in place, the “fine grains” of intelligence that are needed for pattern detection and success are frequently missed. On the positive side again, it can be seen that Singapore is fortunate as networking is almost a natural skill for most Singaporeans. There is a relatively small and young civil service which is linked to the local and global private sector. It is also a cosmopolitan state with global connections. As such, as the necessity increases for greater networking, less resistance will be felt in Singapore than in other states.

Singapore also has great diversity. In order to understand a complex environment and respond effectively, any government will need multiple individuals who have a “big picture” view of the world. The more diverse the individuals working on the problems, the more likely it is that actionable intelligence will be available for national security decision makers. Singapore’s natural diversity leaves it poised to capitalize on this new reality.

Education for the future remains a question mark. Future leaders and decision makers need to be able to work in the realm of uncertainty. This means more people in government who can deal with abstraction. It also means having generalists who can integrate information

across a wide range of knowledge boundaries. One of the unfortunate side-effects of a highly specialized education system is that artificial knowledge boundaries are built between the specialties, complicating the transfer and growth of knowledge. At the same time, specialists tend to be reductionists as well. They frequently believe that problems can be broken down into their component parts, and that each part can be dealt with separately. In manufacturing, this might work, but with a complex field such as international relations, the “pieces” of the problem are all interrelated and cannot be broken down without losing the essence of the problem at hand. Specialization will be a handicap, not an advantage, for those who have to deal with abstract and uncertain problems in the future.

The Downside

On the negative side, many forces in government seem to be pre-occupied with seeking out greater “efficiencies” in government and they appear to have been infected with the “business model” method. Government is not a business, and it should not try to emulate the latest methodology that falls out of the business world. Businesses, it should be noted, regularly go out of business despite their supposed efficiencies. Citizens, who might be considered the “shareholders” of the government, cannot afford to have their governments collapse under pressure the ways businesses do on a regular basis. It should be remembered that an “efficient” system is one in which the redundancies have been removed and no excess capability exists. This “business model” might be of value in a production line type of business which operates in a stable business environment where the variables are constant. Unfortunately, government does not operate in such an environment and should not try to convince itself that it does. The “key performance indicator” for a government is how well it survives a crisis or sudden turn of events. Government should not set itself up to have key success indicators which measure successes against stated missions and goals that bear little resemblance to the real world of crisis and change.

Overall, Singapore is in a positive position compared to many other small and medium- sized developed states. Singapore is used to change and does it well, but the challenges are mounting as the speed of change required increases. At the same time, it is clear that economic prosperity is tied to national security, but business models cannot be allowed to infringe on effective government.

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