



## **THE TAO OF SPIDER-MAN: LESSONS FOR SINGAPORE DEFENCE AND DIPLOMACY**

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*SINGAPORE HAS* made tremendous progress in its defence and diplomacy since independence. Still, numerous challenges, both longstanding and emerging, confront our nation's security, prosperity and well-being. Postures that have served us well may however be neither sufficient nor suitable today as newer and more complex challenges arise. In that respect, the "Spider-Man" movie franchise — you heard it right — offers at least four broad lessons for Singapore's foreign and security policy.

### **With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility**

If anything, the first Spider-Man movie is best known for the above adage. Therein Peter Parker (a.k.a. Spider-Man) learns, not without significant personal cost, that the possession and exercise of power — and great power at that — constitute a grave responsibility. Singapore has come a long way since our founding in 1965. There exists no greater paragon today of a nation-state and economy that has implausibly transformed, within a single generation of its founding, from a tiny regional backwater to a financial powerhouse with a per capita income rivalling that of the world's top economies. With unparalleled economic success has come also the development of a modern armed force far more sophisticated than any regional neighbour's. Singapore's influence on the global diplomatic and economic arenas far exceeds its size, such that pundits have described it as "punching above its weight".

Yet it has also been said that Singapore's phenomenal success has been attained through an aggrandizing, highly calculative pursuit of power purely for self-centred purposes. The teachings of Machiavelli, Hobbes, and modern day political realists, for whom the egotistical pursuit and consolidation of power and security are accepted as a moral necessity if not virtue, register fairly well with Singapore's leaders. Included in the mix is a firm belief in the Social Darwinist dictum of "survival of the fittest". But all of this has a downside, not least the perennial fear that one's accomplishments are merely temporary, while the power which one has assiduously accumulated could just as easily be lost — as our arachnid protagonist discovers in the second Spider-Man movie. And as the late Professor Michael Leifer acutely observed in his study of Singapore's foreign policy, despite our achievements and successes, Singapore continues to assume a siege mentality in coping with perceived vulnerabilities, real or imagined. Further, the calculated and prudent manner in which we exercise our foreign policy, even when offering financial assistance, has invited the occasional allegation that Singapore is insincere and overbearing.

However, of late Singapore has amply and aptly demonstrated a laudable sense of responsibility and accountability to the region. Nowhere is this better reflected than in the remarkable way Singaporeans have responded to humanitarian crises in the region wrought

by the 2004 tsunamis, earthquakes, and the civil conflicts that called for peacekeeping commitments. That these events also serve as opportunities to test the operational readiness of the Singapore Armed Forces takes nothing away from Singapore's welcomed willingness to assume greater regional responsibility commensurate with the resources and capabilities we possess. There is nothing inherently wrong with being rationally calculative. Nor am I advocating extravagant chequebook diplomacy. But if and when prudence translates into a seeming miserliness that does not reflect well of Singapore — especially a rich powerful Singapore — then we would have failed miserably as a regional stakeholder.

### **Overdependence on Technology**

A second lesson the Spider-Man movies teach us has to do with the danger of an overdependence on technology. Nowhere is this more evident than Spider-Man's nemeses, the "Green Goblin" and Dr. Otto Octavius (a.k.a. "Doc Ock"), both scientists whose overdependence on technology leads to nefarious ends. This idea of course is nothing new; recall Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Asimov's *I Robot*, or the Wachowski Brothers' Matrix series — all graphic statements about technology gone amok. History, at times tragic and farcical (so Marx reminds us), teaches us that untold misery and destruction all too often come about as a result of the potent mixture of an excessive dependence on technology as the panacea for the world's problems, on the one hand, and sincere but injudicious intentions, on the other.

The Americans, in their 2002 *National Security Strategy*, are no doubt right about the serious threat posed by the potent union of technology and radicalism. This said, overemphasis of the strategic transformation — in SAF parlance, the revolution in military affairs (RMA) — of defence capabilities at the expense of more pedestrian considerations may prove inimical to Singapore's vital interests. Technology may bring countless "killer applications" (no pun intended) to modern warfare, and "network-centric warfare" clearly has its place. But as ground conditions in Afghanistan and Iraq today suggest, techno-warfare may have shocked America's foes in the short run, but not necessarily awed them in the long. The fog of war still intrudes, while the force of caprice continues to confound efforts, no matter how sophisticated, to control and manage it. The RMA is no magic bullet, and we will do well to avoid radical overstatements of technology in our efforts to establish a "3G" SAF.

### **Humility Not Hubris**

It has been said that moviegoers tend to identify more with Spider-Man than any other superhero because the former best exemplifies the "everyman's hero". For all his superhero status, Peter Parker is no different than others when it comes to everyday human struggles. In the third movie, Spider-Man, lured by public adulation and personal arrogance, almost succumbs to megalomania. The lesson I wish to draw here is one of humility rather than hubris. The unfortunate impression some in the region have of us is that Singapore is egotistical, conceited and cares little for its neighbours. We are seen as always desiring to "leapfrog" and transcend the region. Of course, it helps little when at times we trumpet the image of Singapore as a piece of First World real estate in a dilapidated Third World neighbourhood. Whether Singapore's destiny is to drive or suffer the Southeast Asian region, or both, it would doubtless serve our interests better if our approach is characterized less by hubris.

### **Chose to Do the Right Thing**

Finally, in the third movie Aunt May, the Spider-Man movies' moral compass, reminds Parker that life is ultimately about the choices we make. In a mere four decades, Singapore

has evolved from a revolutionary nascent political community into an influential global player. Today, with capabilities, resources and a status once unimaginable a mere generation ago, crass individualism, unbridled egotism and overweening pride will likely not do for Singapore. Admittedly, finding the right balance between power and principle is no easy task. How we navigate and negotiate the regional terrain — importantly, in ways that advance our interests and those of the region without causing undue concern among our neighbours — will be a crucial test of our political maturity as a nation and a valued member of the international community.

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