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Singapore's Citizen Army: Bridging the Civil-Military Praxis

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Running against the grain of contemporary all-volunteer militaries, the Singapore Armed Forces remains predominately a national service conscript force. The citizen-soldier model must be retained to bind Singapore's military and its society.

SINGAPORE'S CITIZEN-BASED armed forces has served the nation's security needs well. More importantly, it has become a social cohesive that has bonded Singaporeans from all walks of life and bridged the civil-military divide that is seen in certain nations with all-volunteer militaries. It would be prudent for the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) to resist any move to establish the all-volunteer professional force structure adopted by virtually all of the West's militaries, including those that are smaller than the SAF.

As Singaporeans are encouraged to 'live our dreams and fly our flag' this coming National Day, they should also take the opportunity to reflect upon possible cleavages which, left unchecked, might develop into fault lines that undermine the security, integrity and existence of Singapore as a nation state. One such potential threat is the development of a rift between the values of a nation's military and its society – a danger that could be magnified in a small city state such as Singapore.

Military at War and Nation at Mall

The disconnect between a nation's military and its citizens is seen in the United States, where the abandonment of America's citizen army tradition after the Vietnam War created an all-volunteer force "tenuously linked to American society", according to Andrew Bacevich, a retired US Army Colonel and Professor of History and International Relations at Boston University. As a consequence, Bacevich said, the Pentagon's 'Long War' was no longer America's war but belonged "exclusively to the troops" – the soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines serving in Afghanistan, summed up by the one-liner: "The Marine Corps is at war, America is at the mall."

Lending his weight to the issue, Paul Yingling, a Colonel in the US Army, called for a return to a conscript military and popular participation in national security decisions. Yingling reasoned that “moral exhortations for citizens to care more deeply about national defence are insufficient. Unless the public...have some personal stake in decisions of war and peace, they cannot and will not provide adequate oversight in these profound choices”. Like Bacevich, Yingling believes that the absence of citizen soldiers and conscripts from the US military system has severely undermined American civil-military relations and imperilled US national security.

SAF Operations Abroad

As part of the multinational effort to restore stability to Iraq, 998 SAF personnel were deployed in Operation Blue Orchid in and around the Iraqi theatre from 2003 to 2008. The SAF presence in Afghanistan to date has included provincial reconstruction teams, medical teams, a weapon-locating radar team, an unmanned aerial vehicle task group, aerial refuelling aircraft team and artillery trainers. The technicality that Singapore is not at war does not disguise the fact that SAF personnel are essentially operating in a war zone.

Given the increasing participation of the SAF in overseas missions (including NSmen reservist volunteers), a similar divide on the lines of ‘SAF is at war, Singapore is at Orchard Road malls’ could develop if Singaporeans fail to understand the rationale of these missions and their importance to Singapore’s national security. It therefore behoves every Singaporean father, brother and son to be socialised into the shared experience of citizen military service to ensure and preserve the link between the citizen and the SAF.

Even as the SAF continues to train, network and operate abroad, it is the perceived relevance of SAF to the lives of Singaporeans that must be highlighted. Without the umbilical cord that binds the SAF and its citizen soldier sons, the relationship between the SAF and Singapore society could become as parlous as the state of contemporary American civil-military relations.

Every Citizen Soldier Matters

The Advisory Council on Community Relations in Defence (ACCORD) has done much in recognising the important role of Singapore’s citizen soldiers particularly in the form of monetary rewards and welfare provisions. Nonetheless, more can be done in using the skills of NSmen to greater operational effect. Recent military history suggests that public opinion is crucial to the success of any overseas or even localised mission. Hence, NSmen with significant experience in the media industry should be identified and posted to units that deal with media operations (MO), information operations (IO), Psychological Operations (Psyops) and civil-military relations.

Socialised in the military for two years of their lives, these NSmen would be attuned to the nuanced needs of the SAF. In-camp trainings would provide the opportunity for these media operators to share best practices in the civilian world with their professional military counterparts and operationalise those best practices. More importantly, in giving them a greater role in waging battles of perception, the SAF will be sending a clear message that it recognises the individual skills of every citizen soldier.

There are other non-combat skill sets of our citizen soldiers that are pertinent to the contemporary security environment. To accord them greater recognition not just in monetary terms but greater operational responsibility is to tell our citizen soldiers that they really matter. In so doing, the nation will maintain the sinews that bind our citizen soldiers, the SAF and society.

Singapore can ill-afford to allow a rift to develop between the values of the SAF and the society it protects. To ensure the continued connection between the military and society, our citizen soldiers

must always be the heart and soul of the SAF. Come this National Day, when Singaporeans think about what it means to be Singaporean, National Service will inevitably be there with Chicken Rice and Singlish. Nonetheless, we must be ever watchful for any telltale signs of the divide that ‘SAF is at war, Singapore is at the Orchard Road malls’ developing.

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