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SAF in Cyberspace: The Image of Defence and the Internet

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18 August 2010

The Singapore defence establishment has effectively harnessed the strength of the Internet as part of its “diplomacy and deterrence” efforts. There is, however, ample room for improvement if it seeks to fully reap the intangible benefits associated with a presence on virtual space.

THE UBIQUITY of the Internet in the developed world is an undeniable fact. It has progressed beyond a mere tool to access information to become a *sine quo non* of daily life for many. Technological advancements have eliminated accessibility issues and advance gadgets such as the Apple iPhone epitomise the age-old Yellow Pages tagline to “let your fingers do the walking (surfing)”.

Harnessing the Net

The Ministry of Defence (Mindef) has been quick to capitalise on the advantages of presence on the Internet. General news reports on the Mindef web-portal are often “*faux pas* free,” rapid, and cogent thanks to a dedicated team of reporters and webmasters. This is supported by an easily accessible spread of sources such as speeches, facts, photographs, and videos for netizens with a general interest. The three individual services of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), the army, navy, and air force, also carry the latest newsletters and showcase their respective capabilities, organisation, and assets on their individual sites. Mindef’s reach is further extended through the use of popular sites such as *Flickr*, *Blogspot*, and *Facebook* to publicise certain public events.

Beyond the proliferation of information, Mindef has also taken the environmentally and far-sighted route by placing popular publications online. *Pioneer* magazine – the one-stop portal for defence news in Singapore – appears on the web as *Cyberpioneer* in both English and Malay. The power of the Internet is further harnessed through video clips on *Cyberpioneer TV* hosted by *Youtube* which is impossible in print form. For the academically-inclined, *Pointer: Journal of the Singapore Armed*

Forces, carries editorial-reviewed essays from defence personnel and academics, both local and foreign, and is accessible free of charge online. Back copies of both *Pioneer* and *Pointer* are available on their respective domains.

Other important aspects of Mindef's presence on the Internet include three intangible benefits. First, information transparency forms part of the subliminal aspect of deterrence. This does not translate into the absence of aggressors but serves as a warning of the SAF's operational capabilities. Second, it serves to bolster the confidence of domestic audiences in the state's ability to defend itself and hold its own during international operations. Finally, it serves as a tool for national education, especially to the younger and tech-savvy generations that enlist for national service annually.

Room for Improvement?

However, there are various short-comings that tarnish the image of the defence establishment on the Internet. The net can amplify positive upsides and in an equal manner make negative shortcomings appear glaring. Two shortcomings are currently evident. The first is the absence of biographies of the uniformed leadership and the second is the number of outdated and derelict websites.

Listing the biographies of the top brass in the SAF is essential for two reasons. The most obvious is that people need to know who is leading the organisation, especially parents who entrust their sons and daughters in service to the country. Even states with threats to national security, such as Israel and South Korea, provide insights into the "who's who" of their conscript-based militaries while retaining the quintessential requirement of operational security. The possibility of forming "personality cults" around popular officers is also eradicated with the SAF's periodic, perhaps rapid, renewal in key uniformed leadership positions.

The second and equally compelling reason is predicated on "leadership by example," a core value of the SAF. The experiences of general-grade officers and senior warrant officers embody service excellence and selflessness – a yardstick for service personnel, both active and reserve, to emulate. Undoubtedly, some pundits will be quick with the "scholar" remark but a cursory survey often showcases the "soldier" before the "scholar". The list includes, but is not restricted to, Lieutenant-General Neo Kian Hong (East Timor, 2000), current Chief of Defence Force; Brigadier-General (BG) Tan Chuan Jin (Tsunami Relief Operations, 2004), Commander of the army's Training and Doctrine Command, and; BG (Dr) Benjamin Seet (Congo, 2004-6), Chief of the SAF's Medical Corps (SAF MC).

The top brass aside, the image of SAF will be enhanced by addressing outdated and derelict websites. This is not so much a matter of operational readiness as it is about "professionalism," another core value of the SAF. If one thinks of first impressions and the intangible benefits listed earlier, it is not hard to reason why this must be addressed. Websites maintained by the Singapore Command and Staff College (SCSC), the Singapore Advanced Schools (SAS), the SAF Music and Drama Company, and the SAF Band deserve kudos for keeping current.

Those that will benefit from an update include the SAF MC website where the 'latest' overseas operation of the medical corps listed is "Operations Bengkulu 2000;" the SAF Peacekeepers Website has not been updated since 2003 even though Singapore has continually contributed to "the service of peace;" Officer Cadet School (last updated 14 Jan 2009), and; the Specialist and Warrant Officer Institute (28 May 2009).

As the defence establishment continues to harness the Internet as part of its effort to meet the objectives of diplomacy and deterrence, it will undoubtedly improve. While by no means perfect, the speed of information proliferation obliges its information tsars to "do it well the first time and do it once". For Mindef and the SAF the bottom line is to remember that someone is always watching.

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