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The Youth Olympic Games: Finessing the SAF's 'Whole of Nation' Expertise

By Ong Weichong

Synopsis

International events such as the Youth Olympic Games provide invaluable opportunities for the SAF to test and finesse its Whole of Nation, Whole of Government and Civil-Military Relations expertise.

Commentary

AS THE inaugural Youth Olympic Games (YOG) in Singapore drew to close, very little publicity had gone to highlight the invaluable role of 6 Division, Singapore Army in the planning, support and coordination of the event. The 7000-odd men and women of 6 Division under the command of Brigadier General (BG) Ishak Ismail were instrumental in providing the overall coordination of both the YOG opening and closing ceremonies and other logistical support for the event.

Indeed, the YOG would have been a poorer show without the organisational and logistical expertise of the men and women of 6 Division. Likewise the YOG provided a timely and invaluable opportunity for the unit to hone its Whole of Government experience as well as exercise its Civil-Military Relations (CMR) expertise at the Divisional level.

International Events and the SAF

The involvement of 6 Division in the planning and coordination of international events is not new to the unit. In 2006, 6 Division then under the command of BG Ravinder Singh played a similar role in support of the IMF-World Bank Meeting in Singapore. Both the YOG and IMF-World Bank Meeting 2006 drew on the transferrable planning and organisational skills of not only the senior commanders but also the subject matter expertise of the enlisted servicemen (NSFs) in an environment where inter-agency cooperation was key to mission success.

Both events put 6 Division in direct working contact with personnel from the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and other governmental agencies – an operational experience that is likely to be replicated in an internal or external conflict situation. The complexity of today's security threats is such that no single government agency has the expertise or capability to go it alone. Hence, the Whole of Government Approach must be viewed not simply as a statement of intent but a working strategic instrument in the identification, management and tackling of security threats.

At the operational and tactical level, the 6 Division's participation in the YOG and IMF-World Bank Meeting

2006 involved exercises with the various MHA agencies in which best practices were often exchanged. For example, during joint mass casualty evacuation exercises with the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF), medical orderlies from 6 Division were able to pick up tips from their SCDF counterparts. More importantly, such exchanges and interaction with civilian government agencies and management of a sizable civilian population in a real-time operational environment are invaluable in building up the unit's CMR experience and expertise. In addition, the networks and relationships fostered provide a repository of shared knowledge and goodwill upon which inter-agency cooperation across all levels can be further enhanced.

When a young National Service (NS) junior officer applies to the relevant government agencies to obtain the necessary permits for certain YOG events, he is being in fact being trained for a deployment scenario whereby he will be working with several civil agencies in capacity building and reconstruction of a conflict or disaster zone. When the same NS officer is put in charge of a committee that has to manage the interests and resolve potential conflicts of various agencies and service providers, it is also training for the very same real-time scenario. In short, the application of tactical and operational expertise in planning, logistics and command and control in a peacetime operational environment dominated by civilians constitutes a real-time exercise in CMR.

Whole of Nation Approach

Concerns on the financial expenditure and merits of hosting the inaugural YOG in Singapore have cropped up on various new media spaces -- largely from a small but inordinately vocal minority. Nonetheless, as a demonstration of their commitment, several of 6 Division's NSFs involved in the YOG opted for the Voluntary Extension of Service Scheme -- which essentially meant extending their enlistment beyond the statutory requirement of two years. For the NSF volunteers, this spirit of wanting to do more to showcase Singapore as a nation is part of the perceived 'one in a lifetime NS experience' narrative. It is a representation of a citizen-soldier's belief and commitment to the nation building project. This spirit is the embodiment of a Whole of Nation Approach.

The ability of 6 Division's young NSFs to view the YOG in a positive light rather than with cynicism suggests that in addition to a Whole of Government Approach, the SAF has evolved into a key building block and enabler of a Whole of Nation Approach. The ability to sustain the momentum of the Whole of Nation Approach however cannot be premised on government policy alone -- it requires the participation of a population as individual citizens. Here the ability of a leader to motivate individuals towards such a response is key.

The participation of 6 Division in recent international events provided a rigorous test of the unit's CMR and Whole of Government capabilities. More importantly, the spirit of its 'volunteer' NSFs hints that the Whole of Nation approach is an achievable ideal given the right leadership and motivations. Indeed, the SAF should take advantage of Singapore's position as a global events hub to hone its CMR, Whole of Government and Whole of Nation expertise.

Ong Weichong is Associate Research Fellow with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. He is attached to the Military Transformations Programme at the school's constituent unit, the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies. He is also a doctoral candidate with the Centre for the Study of War, State and Society, University of Exeter, UK.