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Reviewing Military Education in SAF

By Bernard Fook Weng Loo

Synopsis

With the emergence of the so-called 'strategic corporal', the demands for military education in the SAF must surely heighten. All soldiers – across the entire organisation, need to be educated about the potential strategic impact of their smallest actions.

Commentary

THE SINGAPORE Armed Forces has made great strides in recent months in the realm of officer education. Using a Continuing Education framework as the cornerstone of officer education, the SAF has created a structure around which the organisation can begin to rationalise the education needs of its officer corps from junior to senior officer ranks -- a cradle-to-grave approach to officer education needs.

This, however, is not enough. The strategic environment today that military organisations like the SAF operate in is increasingly complex, very different from that just one decade ago. Such education is absolutely necessary for the entire military organisation, so that every member of the SAF can begin to comprehend the increasing complexity of this strategic environment. The failure to comprehend the nature of this complexity, and its implications for military operations, can have potentially disastrous consequences for Singapore. This complexity manifests itself in three distinct areas.

Increasing Complexity

The military organisation remains the instrument par excellence for securing the interests of the state. Traditionally those interests that required the employment of the military organisation were typically geographical in nature. It might have been that the state was facing the threat of military intervention or invasion from another state. This access to resources was, as the then-popular geopolitical theory of Klaus Haushofer postulated, absolutely essential to what Japan had envisaged as its long-term survival and prosperity. It might have been that certain vital non-territorial national interests were at stake. Japan invaded China in 1937 because the former wanted to gain access to resources on the Chinese mainland.

Increasingly, however, new military operations are starting to emerge, which do not have the same geographical nature. Humanitarian intervention, for instance, in weak or failing states may be driven less by geopolitical or geostrategic considerations, more by concerns of universal humanity. Peace operations in states embroiled in internal conflicts – driven by ethnic, religious or any other concerns – are increasingly moving from peace support to peace enforcement.

These operations are also increasingly complex, tending away from traditional political and territorial imperatives that underpinned conventional military operations in war. More importantly, these are operations that have a largely undefined metric of success.

Increasing Ubiquity of Technologies

This is more than the so-called CNN effect. The CNN effect remains, but it has been reinforced by such platforms as Youtube and other forms of video-sharing, allied to the increasing availability of broadband access. This means that any person with a cell phone, video camera and Internet access is now a potential news reporter. News organisations around the world have recognised this phenomenon, and actively encourage members of the public to send in video images of news stories.

The viral nature of these video and image-sharing platforms wedded to a world wide web connects just about every corner of the globe at almost the speed of light. It means these videos and images captured and posted on such platforms can have a potentially worldwide audience. Images of an event happening in one part of the world can spread very quickly to another other part of the world.

In relation to the increasing complexity of military operations, the ubiquity of information and communications technologies also manifests itself in the increasing number of non-military actors that can impinge and impact upon military operations. It is not just news organisations like the BBC or the CNN, it is also other non-governmental actors – aid relief agencies, human rights groups, amongst others. These actors are an increasingly ubiquitous presence in the contemporary battlespace, and in conjunction with information and communications technologies, often exist to monitor the actions and behaviours of military personnel deployed in an operation.

Network-Enabled Operations

At the same time, military organisations are increasingly seized by the apparent promises of network-enabled operations. This is the idea that by leveraging on information and communications technologies that network entire military organisations from the lowest private to the highest general, this will create a system of systems. It will generate net strategic effects far greater than the mere sum of the component parts. These technologies are allied to concepts such as the 'Strategic Corporal' – the idea that military actions at the level of the individual soldier can have strategic implications.

The SAF has, of course, enthusiastically embraced these technologies, attracted by the promise of these significantly enhanced strategic effects. Through networking, soldiers can draw upon supporting systems that were once upon a time far beyond their physical and organisational reach. Soldiers across the entire organisation will be able to see a single common picture of the battlespace, and should therefore be able to calibrate their individual actions in conjunction with the overall strategic objectives.

Implications for the SAF

What this means is that every soldier will eventually be able to exercise a significant strategic impact on military operations, at least in theory. For these soldiers, therefore, it is imperative that they understand the complexities of the contemporary strategic environment and its impact on military operations, in the same manner that their officers are required to make sense of this increasing complexity.

The current emphasis on enhancing the education of the SAF officer corps is driven by the organisational awareness that the context in which military operations are conducted has become increasingly complex, and that these officers will need to comprehend this complexity and how it will impact on military operations.

This awareness needs to be extended to the entire military organisation. Every soldier in the SAF will increasingly have the ability to impact military operations at the highest levels. The failure of the individual soldier to properly calibrate his actions with the overall strategic objective can therefore create a situation where the soldier's actions can have a potentially negative effect on the strategic intent. This failure can, and will likely be, disastrous for Singapore.

Bernard Fook Weng Loo is Associate Professor of War and Strategy at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.