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Singapore's Total Defence: Shaping The Pillars

By Ong Weichong

Synopsis

The pillars of Total Defence should be shaped in tandem with the evolution of Singapore as a nation state and global city. Its foundations, however, must be firmly grounded in a local Singaporean core.

Commentary

'HOME – Keeping it Together' is the theme for Total Defence 2011. This year's Total Defence (TD) campaign seeks to remind all Singaporeans that Singapore is worth defending -- simply because it is home. Introduced in 1984, the concept of TD was adapted from the comprehensive defence strategies of Switzerland and Sweden. In the Singapore context, TD is set within a framework of five distinct but interdependent pillars - Military Defence, Civil Defence, Economic Defence, Social Defence and Psychological Defence. Conceptually, these five pillars constitute the key sectors of society and the bedrock of national security.

Evolving Total Defence

Since 1984, the tools and means of citizen engagement have evolved to keep up with the ever increasing technological savviness of its young citizens. For example, as part of the Republic of Singapore Navy's (RSN) online recruitment drive, Singaporeans are encouraged to fill a tag cloud containing 'gadgets and stuff that you [Singaporeans] can't live without'. At the end of the online competition, laptops and iPhones were declared as the top two items that Singaporeans 'cannot live without'. At the TD level, Macbooks, Sony Vaios, iPads and high-end digital cameras are awarded for the 'most popular' or the 'most creative' webcasts and animations on each year's TD theme. In short, the tools and means of citizen engagement have evolved in tandem with societal embracement of networking technology. Nonetheless, the evolution of TD in relation with other aspects of societal change is less clear cut.

Pillars of TD in a Global City

Robust economic growth and prudent fiscal policy have ensured the strength of the Military, Civil and Economic pillars of TD. A consistent defence budget pegged at five to six percent of Singapore's GDP (US\$ 9.5 billion billion in 2011) has transformed the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) into Southeast Asia's most advanced military. Likewise, significant investment in Singapore's Home Team crisis management agencies and task forces guarantee a prompt response in the event of a civil emergency. Both the Military Defence and Civil Defence pillars are in turn buttressed by an Economic Defence pillar of strong economic growth. In sum,

technologically and economically, TD has continued to evolve and remained robust in the last two decades. The same, however, is less certain for the Social Defence and Psychological Defence pillars.

In the TD context, Social Defence is the 'resin' that binds society, whereas Psychological Defence is the 'hardener' which gives it resilience. Both Social Defence and Psychological Defence combine to form an epoxy glue that holds Singapore society together in times of crisis. For the global city that is Singapore, there is a danger that both social and psychological resilience will be diluted by the effects of globalisation. Therefore the challenge is for TD planners to reconcile internal cohesion with the effects of free movement and competition associated with globalisation.

The evolution of TD can never be divorced from global forces that shape Singapore. Indeed, the robustness and sustainability of TD's Military, Civil and Economic pillars depend upon Singapore's continued relevance as a global hub. Nonetheless, in the environs of a global city state where individuals live as citizens of the world, steps must be taken to mitigate the dilution of social and national cohesion amongst its local citizens.

Local Bedrock of TD

An examination of Singapore's recent past demonstrates that the highly connected patterns of migration and trade have pushed and pulled distant regions together into the Lion City and shaped its character. Indeed, the convergence of this push-pull effect has not homogenised Singapore into some staid downtown hotel chain, but nurtured the development of a distinct local identity. In the ubiquity of an ever interconnected and globalised world, it is this unique identity that Singapore must build upon to strengthen its social and psychological resilience.

In 'Keeping it Together', Singapore must have a citizenry that believes in the continued existence of Singapore not merely as a global city, but as a sovereign nation state. As this year's TD theme suggests, in order for TD to transcend the theoretical, Singaporeans must believe that Singapore is a home that is worth defending on all fronts. Such a belief can only arise through the organic growth of a common national identity and culture rooted in shared experiences and memories.

In 46 years of nation-building, Singaporeans have forged a unique local eco-system that fosters the natural growth of such a common identity, culture, community and norms. So much so that it is now possible to define the rubric of an emergent Singaporean identity and culture. It is upon this bedrock of a shared Singaporean identity and culture that the Social and Psychological pillars of TD must be continuously shaped and if necessary – recast.

Decades from now, what it means to be a Singaporean or Singaporeanness will require a slightly different answer. It is inevitable that Singapore will continue to transform and redefine itself in accordance with the global winds of change. Likewise, TD can never be divorced from the global forces that shape Singapore and its society. However, Singapore's local core, exemplified by the shared values of multiculturalism; meritocracy; and commitment to nation-building provides the firm foundation on which the Social and Psychological pillars of TD will continue to evolve upon.

To unplug itself from the global network would be detrimental to Singapore's prosperity and national security. Therefore, the pillars of TD must develop in tandem with the evolution of Singapore as a nation state and global city. Nonetheless, without a deeply rooted self-belief in Singapore as a distinct national, cultural, and social entity, the continued sovereignty of Singapore as a nation state will be in peril.

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