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Leadership Changes in SAF: Exodus or Renewal?

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Synopsis

Many new faces will have assumed key appointments within the SAF in the last two months. This does not constitute an exodus of talent and will not impact the SAF's readiness due to the systems and structures in place.

Commentary

IN RECENT weeks the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) has witnessed personnel changeovers in key army appointments. While periodic renewal in leadership is healthy, the volume and timing of recent movements raises two pertinent questions. First, is there an exodus of 'talent' from the SAF's highest echelons? Second, what are the implications on the operational readiness of the SAF?

Four 'Chief' appointments stand at the apex of the SAF's uniformed structure – the Chief of Defence Force (CDF) and three service (army, navy, and air force) chiefs. Singapore's top soldier and much respected CDF Lieutenant-General Neo Kian Hong helmed the SAF since 31 March 2010. Major-General (MG) Ng Chee Meng is the most senior among the service chiefs having led the air force since 10 December 2009.

Musical Chairs

The Chiefs of Army (COA) and Navy (CNV) assumed their posts less than a month ago. Brigadier-General (BG) Ravinder Singh replaced MG Chan Chun Sing as COA on 25 March. For the navy, Rear-Admiral (RADM) Ng Chee Peng succeeded RADM Chew Men Leong on 29 March. RADM Chew completes the three-year tenure normally associated with such appointments and returns to the Administrative Service.

The talented MG Chan's retirement from the SAF a day short of a year as COA is thus somewhat surprising to outsiders and defence watchers. He joins a team contesting the seat of Buona Vista in Singapore's 2011 General Election (2011 GE). BG Singh is the first minority race officer appointed COA and affirms the practice of meritocracy within the SAF. It is also the first time a former career officer who transitioned to civilian life has been recalled to active service to head the army.

Another big name exit from the SAF's top echelon and once front-runner as COA is BG Tan Chuan-Jin. The face of the SAF's 2004 tsunami relief mission in Indonesia is succeeded by BG Lim Hock Yu at the army's Training and Doctrine Command. BG Tan retires and is a team candidate contesting the GE 2011 in the seat of

Marine Parade. The grapevine tips Colonel (COL) Chia Choon Hoong to succeed BG Lim as Commander 9th Division / Chief Infantry Officer.

Had BG Tan remained in the SAF his next posting would likely have been Chief of Staff (COS) – Joint Staff, previously held by RADM Ng. The responsibility for SAF joint operations goes instead to BG Hoo Cher Mou, former COS – Air Staff (air force No. 2). Another possible posting, COS – General Staff (army No. 2), is assigned to BG Tung Yui Fai. BG Tung leaves the role of Assistant Chief of the General Staff (Operations), the head of army operations, in the hands of BG Chan Wing Kai. BG Chan relinquished his appointment as Commander 21st Division / Chief Guards Officer to COL Nelson Yau on 18 March.

Other Changes

Another widely publicised retirement is BG Lim Teck Yin, former Commandant of SAFTI Military Institute, and since 1 April the Singapore Sports Council's Chief Executive Officer. BG Mark Tan assumes this responsibility for all formal military education courses conducted for officers in Singapore. The grapevine places COL Perry Lim as a candidate to assume command of 3rd Division from BG Tan.

Other changes of general-grade army officers include BG Ishak bin Ismail who turned over command of 6th Division to COL Yeo See Peng on 18 February, and BG Teo Jing Siong who handed over the reins of the 2nd People's Defence Force to COL Lam Shiu Tong on 25 February. Both BGs assumed senior civilian positions with ST Electronics from 1 April. Their successors are both commando officers with COL Lam recently handing over his role as Chief Commando Officer / Commander Special Operations Task Force to COL Chiang Hock Woon, former Commander of Officer Cadet School, on 4 March.

Implications for the SAF

The resultant 'box score' of such personnel movements among the army's top echelon seems ostensibly haphazard. The army, which has to deal with the most changes amongst the services, has a new Chief, new heads of operations, doctrine, infantry, guards, and commandos. Furthermore, five of the six division-level army units have officers in command for two-months or less. Indeed COL Benedict Lim, Commander, 25th Division / Chief Armour Officer, is the most senior division commander having held his post since 9 July 2009.

There is, however, no need for alarm. The early retirement of two of the army's brightest officers at the pinnacle of their careers does not constitute an 'exodus'. The senior leadership has depth and if pragmatism requires will make a 'reserve-to-active' recall to service. This feature is not unique to Singapore as both American and Israeli militaries have demonstrated. Vacant key appointments have been filled without any leadership gaps. A greater concern, if one existed, would be an exodus of the officer corps' middle tier ('senior' Captains to Lieutenant Colonels) which will affect the senior leadership of tomorrow.

As for the SAF's operational readiness one must be cognizant of two points. First, systems and structures are in place and well-oiled headquarters staffed by active and reserve personnel stand ready to assist their respective commanders. Second, the army does not operate alone and the SAF is attuned to high-tempo integrated and joint operations. The first lines of armed external defence – the mostly professionally-manned navy and air force – have not witnessed any mass changes in key appointments.

Such a leadership renewal exercise is allowed to take place regularly and systematically only because the geopolitical milieu is benign. With the probability of inter-state conflict requiring large-scale manoeuvres negligible, this system of leadership renewal in the military is set to persist.

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