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Fall of Singapore 70 Years On: Continuity and Change in Security Environment

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Synopsis

The Fall of Singapore has become the template of a useable past, but its lessons must take into account contextual change at home and abroad.

Commentary

ON THE 70th anniversary of the fall of Singapore to the Japanese on 15 February 1942, it is timely to review the premises for the defence of the island nation. Two key lessons were drawn from the traumatic experience of the shattering of the impregnable fortress myth and the subsequent occupation years: Singapore's lack of strategic depth requires a 'forward defence' posture; and it must have a robust self-reliant military that is capable of independent deterrence.

Do these lessons still hold water 70 years on? This is a fundamental question that needs to be addressed to ensure the continued legitimacy of both the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and National Service.

Geostrategic and Structural Continuities

Singapore's inherent sense of insecurity stems primarily from its geographical location, small size and near-complete reliance on overseas sources for basic needs - food, fuel and a significant portion of its water supply. In short, even in the absence of a clearly defined threat, the strategic vulnerabilities inherent in Singapore's geostrategic position and structural limits provide the main basis for strategic planning, defence doctrine and strategic posture. In addition, any disruption or denial of access to the high seas on which Singapore depends for most of its trade and import of its existential needs threatens not just Singapore's economic wellbeing – but its very survival.

Singapore's dependence on the high seas and the consequences when its maritime lifelines are disrupted was demonstrated 70 years ago. The sinking of the only two Allied capital ships in the Southwest Pacific - the battleship HMS Prince of Wales and the battlecruiser HMS Repulse - essentially sunk all hopes of any possible reinforcement and resupply to the island of Singapore. Military historians have debated the 'What ifs' of that episode: What if the aircraft carrier, HMS Indomitable had joined Force Z, the Royal Navy force, and added its vital aircraft to the picture? What if more Hurricane fighter aircraft had arrived via tropical waters instead of being diverted to the arctic convoys bound for Russia? These questions have generated various conclusions, but all demonstrate the importance of seapower and the consequences when Singapore's maritime lifelines are imperiled.

Today, 70 years on, Singapore is as ever dependent on the high seas for its survival. In the current context, any on-shore conflicts that menace the global sea-based system will directly threaten Singapore's security and position as a global trading hub. When viewed in such light, the capabilities that the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) have developed and honed in coalition Maritime Security Operations (MSO) in the North Arabian Gulf and Gulf of Aden for close to a decade must be maintained. In short, be they near or far, Singapore's lack of strategic depth in every sense of the word demands an extra-territorial appreciation of any potential security challenges.

What has Changed

The fall of Singapore and Malaya 70 years ago led to the surrender and capture of 55,000 soldiers of the British Indian III Corps. When the Indian National Army (INA) was inaugurated in Singapore in September 1942, an estimated 40,000 III Corps prisoners-of-war elected to join it to fight against their former British employers for Indian independence. Prior to the fall of Singapore, discriminatory service conditions in the British Indian army had set the scene for many Indian soldiers to question their loyalty to the British Empire. Seventy years on, the all important question of 'Why am I defending this island' is being asked - albeit in a post-colonial context.

In the 2010 NTU Ministerial Dialogue, a 23-year-old undergraduate and National Serviceman remarked to then Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong: "When I was younger, I was very proud of being a Singaporean. But that was about five, ten years ago. Five years later, with all the changes in policies and the influx of foreign talent, I really don't know what I'm defending any more." This all important 'What am I defending' question that had hitherto remained in the back of their minds is now finding expression in a new generation of citizen soldiers who openly question their social contract with the state.

Seventy years ago, the perceived injustices of discrimination led thousands of British Indian Army POWs in Singapore to question their personal commitment to the British Empire. Seventy years after the fall of British-held Singapore, the 'What am I defending' question is still being played in the minds of soldiers guarding Singapore island - albeit in a distinctly different socio-political context.

In a recent Institute of Policy Studies report *Social Markers of Integration: What Matters Most to Singaporeans?* by Leong Chan Hoong, a thousand local-born and a thousand foreign-born Singapore citizens were polled on their perceptions of successful integration. Both the 'His/Her male child completes National Service' and 'Completes National Service himself' social integration markers were perceived to be important by 69 percent and 64 percent of the local-born Singaporean sample. Hence, perceptions on burden-sharing have an impact not only on social integration, but also the continued legitimacy of National Service as a Singaporean institution.

Untested fundamental assumption

Singapore does need a self-reliant military that is capable of protecting its vital national interests. Capabilities wise, the SAF have come a long way. The Singapore Army has grown from just two infantry battalions with no armour to an integrated combined arms force boasting an armoured corps of both locally-designed and customised armoured fighting vehicles such as the Bionix and Leopard 2SG. Nevertheless, a fundamental assumption that has yet to be tested is: when the chips are down, will the man in the Leopard 2SG defend SG?

Defence policy makers cannot take for granted that both the SAF and National Service will continue to be perceived as legitimate institutions through the eyes of its citizen soldiers. Seventy years ago, the failure to challenge the flawed assumptions of Britain's Far East strategy led to the fall of Singapore. Having the courage to challenge fundamental assumptions before they become entrenched ideologies will ensure progress for Singapore.

Majulah Singapura - Progress Singapore - is more than just an ideal - it is a strategic compass for the continued existence of Singapore as a nation-state.

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