

Total Defence Day Roundtable on “Protecting the Singaporean Way of Life: Past, Present and Future”

Monday, 9 February 2015 | 3.00 pm to 4.30 pm | RSIS Lecture Theatre

Panelist 1

Associate Professor Bernard Fook Weng Loo
Coordinator of the Master of Science (Strategic Studies) Programme

Singapore at 50: Past, Present and Future Tenses of the Defence of Singapore

A/P Loo suggested it is now an opportune time to reflect on the contributions the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) has made to Singapore’s national security, and ponder its future. To his mind, the essential question that needs to be asked is: is Singapore today as, if not more, secure than it was in 1965 when independence came suddenly? A/P Loo noted this question is important as the idea of a vulnerable Singapore is apparently being challenged. As such, he opined, an examination of the contribution that the SAF has made towards the security of a sovereign Singapore would be valid, and timely. A/P Loo argued it is difficult to determine whether or not the SAF has actually contributed to the national security of Singapore. He, however, highlighted this is not a denigration of the SAF itself. Rather, he suggested, any assessment of its success, or not, is challenged by the basic and universal conundrum of its strategy of deterrence: deterrence cannot be shown to have worked; it can only be shown to have not worked. Complicating the assessment are adverse socio-political, economic and technological conditions which the SAF presently faces. A/P Loo concluded their impact on how the SAF is appraised in the present and future is unclear as the interplay of these conditions is dynamic.

Panelist 2

Dr. Shashi Jayakumar
Senior Fellow and Deputy Head, Centre for Excellence in National Security

Resilience, and Singaporean Youth

Dr. Jayakumar began by pointing out that the importance of national resilience is not new. Societal toughness had very much been a trait Singapore’s early leaders sought to inculcate, national ruggedness having been identified as being key to Singapore’s growth and survival. Singapore, he observed, has been able to survive and overcome a wide-range of challenges the country has faced thus-far. Dr. Jayakumar, however, wondered if Singapore’s resilience could always be assumed to be a given in the face of future threats, especially those witnessed elsewhere but not in Singapore yet.

While the government, he noted, has the systems to aid resilience, having them alone may be insufficient. Dr. Jayakumar suggested these systems have to be put through their paces regularly, and augmented by others built by other societal groups. He argued the government alone cannot, and should not, provide all the infrastructure for national resilience. Dr. Jayakumar then turned his attention to the concern that Singaporean youth may not be as resilient as the preceding generations. He argued that such an assessment is subjective because definitions of toughness are relative. Singaporean youth may appear to be less resilient simply because the context of national vulnerability resilience is presently understood in may not resonate with them. They may not demonstrate that brand of resilience and toughness because Singaporean youths may see themselves as invulnerable. Dr. Jayakumar pointed out there are many examples of youth being resilient and tough in their own way. He thus concluded that the debate about a soft youth has to be more balanced, with the cohort spoken about on their own terms. The best way forward, he suggested, is to see resilience as resourcefulness, a spirit of versatility and flexibility that exists independent of generational context.

Panelist 3

Dr. Daniel Chua

Research Fellow, Military Studies Programme

Beyond Deterrence: Diplomacy that Protects the Singaporean Way of Life

Dr. Chua's presentation examined Singapore's use of diplomacy as an instrument of statecraft to secure its national interest - the protection of the Singaporean way of life. He first outlined the history of Singapore's foreign policy approach since independence. Dr. Chua argued Singapore's approach was built on principles such as non-alignment, balance-of-power and regionalism to achieve its core interests. He then turned his attention to Singapore's defence diplomacy with major powers and regional states by examining three phases in Singapore's history - during the height of the Cold War (1965 to 1975), after the Vietnam War (1976 to 1990), and the post-Cold War period (1991 to present). Dr. Chua then offered an analysis of how diplomacy contributes to Singapore's security today. In his final analysis, he argued states deploy both deterrence and diplomacy not as ends in themselves. They are instead the methods a state can use in order to project power and influence. Dr. Chua observed Singapore has influenced the path towards peace and stability in the region through skillful diplomacy. He, however, pointed out it was only with a strong deterrent force that Singapore's diplomacy could continue to work in this fashion. Dr. Chua emphasized diplomacy without deterrence lacks credibility, and deterrence without diplomacy lacks maneuverability. He concluded Singapore needs to do both to survive.