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Strategic Opportunities, Big Rewards: Singapore's Defence Diplomacy through APPSMO

By Daniel Chua Wei Boon

Synopsis

Singapore plays a significant role in defence diplomacy through the Asia-Pacific Programme for Senior Military Officers (APPSMO) organised by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS). Through the programme, senior officers from militaries within and outside the Asia-Pacific region engage each other and build networks for closer defence relations.

Commentary

EVERY AUGUST, while Singaporeans celebrate and reflect on their National Day, a group of senior military officers from the Asia-Pacific region and beyond gather in the island-state for a week-long conference hosted by RSIS. These men and women represent the best and brightest from their country's defence forces, and they meet in Singapore to contribute in a small but significant way to regional and global stability.

The aim of this gathering, known as the Asia-Pacific Programme for Senior Military Officers (APPSMO), is singularly focused: to build mutual understanding and establish networks among participating countries through lectures and seminars by eminent thinkers of strategic studies, interspersed with social activities to forge networking.

Defence Diplomacy Enhances Regional Stability

Defence diplomacy is the diplomatic function played by militaries in an effort to enhance understanding and cooperation among countries. Examples of such activities include joint military exercises, training and dialogues. Although military

exercises often attract the most public attention, joint training and dialogues remain critically essential as channels for diplomacy. Though a small Southeast Asian state, Singapore plays an active part in the conduct of such diplomatic engagements that promote regional stability.

By providing a platform for senior officers to network and learn, and without having to deploy military assets for joint exercises, RSIS makes a modest but meaningful effort that it hopes can contribute significantly to a more stable and peaceful Asia-Pacific. But this is not the result of one country's efforts.

Through the years, APPSMO has enjoyed the support of nations that send their most promising defence professionals to Singapore. This international effort to confer among peers and counterparts annually reflects a shared desire for more dialogues and less disputes, foreshadowing a brighter future for regional and global peace.

Humble Beginnings, Robust Programme

RSIS has been organising APPSMO since 1999. Under the initiative of Mr S. R. Nathan, the former President of Singapore who was then Director of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies - the foundational core of RSIS - APPSMO has since hosted more than a thousand senior military officers from the Asia-Pacific, Europe and the Middle East to exchange ideas through a week-long workshop convened in Singapore.

Through a series of presentations and lectures conducted by an international assemblage of defence scholars, practitioners and policy-makers, APPSMO participants are given opportunities to engage in deep discussions on the most topical issues on security such as hybrid warfare, revolutions in military affairs, cyber-security and civil-military relations.

Given that most APPSMO participants hold key appointments in their country's armed forces, the insights that they bring to the debates and dialogue significantly enhance the appreciation of each country's strategic culture.

Important and Distinct Diplomatic Event

By providing opportunities for senior military officers from across the globe to share knowledge and build friendships, APPSMO performs a critical function in defence diplomacy. First, its intentionally informal setting allows participants to share and listen candidly without intense media attention.

Second, the building of bonds among APPSMO participants is highly valued throughout the formal and informal parts of the programme. Third, APPSMO participants arrive with the chief aim of learning, not simply to present their country's point of view.

No other event in the region possesses a track record of successfully bringing together senior military officers from more than 25 countries to engage each other through intellectual discussions and social events. Many APPSMO alumni go on to

hold the highest appointments in their respective militaries and governments, and more importantly, also continue to stay in touch with each other.

Among Singapore's APPSMO alumni, Mr Chan Chun Sing and Mr Tan Chuan Jin stand out as members of the Cabinet, holding key ministerial portfolios. Such a distinctive programme, therefore, enjoys the support of past and present ministers of defence of Singapore, who launch the proceedings with their keynote speeches. For APPSMO 2016, Acting Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) and Senior Minister of State for Defence, Mr Ong Ye Kung, will deliver the keynote address.

Regional Uncertainties Call for Deeper Engagement

Currently in its 18th year, APPSMO revisits its military roots by ironically breaking from the past. Sited on Sentosa island since its inception, this year's APPSMO will immerse participants in the rich historical setting of Singapore's wartime past and strong military flavour of Changi. With street names and sites that hint at Singapore's oft untold war and military history, participants for APPSMO 2016, especially non-Singaporeans, will acquaint themselves with this less familiar aspect of Singapore.

In the post-Cold War era, where geopolitical shifts create great uncertainties in international relations, these soldier-diplomats settle into an environment that accommodates differences in opinions and encourages intellectual discourse. For one week, these defence and security practitioners perform the important role of diplomats, presenting their countries' views, while listening to and appreciating the nuanced differences of others' perspectives on military affairs.

By taking advantage of the common and neutral space designed to put their ideas across, APPSMO participants come to understand the reasons behind positions held by their counterparts over issues of national interests while getting to know one another as fellow military practitioners.

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