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## **Singapore's Total Defence: Overcoming Complacency**

*By Neo Loo Seng*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The absence of terror attacks in Singapore has led many Singaporeans to become complacent about the threat landscape. This could in turn, undermine national crisis preparedness. How can Singaporeans avoid this complacency mindset?*

### **COMMENTARY**

THE FREQUENCY of terrorist attacks may have decreased in the region, but the periodic occurrence of new attacks such as the Jolo Cathedral bombings in the Philippines, the Christchurch mosque shootings in New Zealand, and the persistent spread of radical online propaganda, serve as a grim reminder: the threat from terrorism has not disappeared. The recent arrests of two Singaporeans in January 2019 under the Internal Security Act (ISA) further attest to the threat of terrorism to Singapore.

The detection and disruption of these threats by local security agencies can be attributed to the prevailing security approach as well as assistance from the community at large. Recognising that active community involvement is vital in responding to the terrorist threat, a spate of initiatives has also been rolled out by the Singapore Government to sensitise, train, and mobilise Singaporeans to deal with terror attacks and their aftermath. However, according to the Ministry of Home Affairs's 2019 Threat Assessment Report, a survey conducted in 2018 revealed that "fewer Singaporeans saw the threat [from terrorism] as imminent, even though more recognise[d] Singapore as a target for terrorists".

### **Understand the 'Human' Dimension: Complacency**

This mindset is problematic as it adversely affects Singapore's 'Psychological

Defence' by lulling the community at large into a false sense of security. As Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam shared, "... given that we are and have been a very safe place, the first and most difficult task is getting people to understand that this is real and this is serious".

If left unaddressed, this complacency can undermine Singapore's Total Defence and in particular her national crisis preparedness efforts. The complacent mindset arises from human beings' cognitive biases that serve as mental shortcuts to help people make sense of their surroundings, and make faster decisions in their lives. In the context of terrorism, for example, the absence of attacks in Singapore has been interpreted that Singapore will not be targeted by terrorists.

This perception may lead many to dismiss the slew of security-related messaging from the government as irrelevant. Some may even feel overwhelmed by existing announcements and initiatives, which not only result in messaging fatigue but also impair their ability to learn, actively engage in preparedness efforts, as well as be adequately prepared.

Complacency may also arise from the view that many believe the role of securing Singapore is primarily the job of the government. While the government has taken necessary measures and precautions to mitigate the threat of terrorism, it is important to be cognisant that there are no foolproof approaches that can insulate any country completely from the threat today. This seeming over-reliance on the government therefore raises concerns of unrealistic expectations and dependency.

### **Overcoming Complacency through Virtual Reality**

The inherent complacency suggests that efforts to raise awareness of 'good preparatory practices' through education might not be persuasive to individuals who see no value in doing so. Nor would scholastic arguments alone do the job.

Rather, overcoming complacency involves creating a realistic representation of the physical and psychological sensations associated with an attack. Currently, simulated terror attacks organised by the government at the community level, such as Exercise Northstar, seek to physically reproduce actual attack scenarios to help familiarise Singaporeans on what to do in the event of an attack.

The participants' experience can be further enhanced by actually immersing them in the 'real' conditions of an attack. At present, they are merely playing the role of 'spectators' without any real or relatable means of experiencing how an attack may unfold and the resulting devastation.

It is suggested that Virtual Reality (VR) technology can be deployed for this purpose. VR simulations basically imbue users with a sense of presence by allowing them to experience a virtual representation, where they can receive instantaneous feedback on the sensations and emotions induced by the phenomenon.

### **Run, Hide, Tell**

For example, VR simulations can be used during training to expose the participants to

a realistic situation that they may potentially face during an actual attack. In fact, studies have shown that people generally benefited more from training simulations that are realistic.

VR simulations therefore serve as an opportunity for participants to understand the rationale behind government advisories such as 'run, hide, tell'. More importantly, this approach has the potential to get 'buy-in' and encourage cooperation from the community in the event of an attack as they would be more aware of why and what they should do in such situations.

That said, it is important to recognise that such simulation trainings may induce trauma for the participants. There is therefore the need to strike a balance between the realism of the attack with the potential harm that the participants may be exposed to.

What does all this mean for the future? Put simply, it is difficult to say for certain how Singaporeans will react to an attack, particularly when we have not exactly experienced one yet. The proposed use of VR simulations can help overcome this issue and help Singaporeans better appreciate the rationale of getting prepared for an attack. This can increase the resilience of the country as there will be a greater pool of people who are mentally prepared and contribute to national crisis preparedness efforts.

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