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*Global Health Security:
COVID-19 & Its Impacts*

Peacetime SAF: Its Evolving Defence Role

By Eddie Lim & Benjamin Ho

SYNOPSIS

The ongoing COVID-19 health pandemic has witnessed militaries worldwide activated to take part in national efforts. Both MINDEF and the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) have played a robust role in Singapore's fight against the disease. It is timely to examine their roles as part of the nation's repertoire of tools for crisis management and national resilience.

COMMENTARY

AS THE COVID-19 health pandemic continues to affect millions worldwide, governments have begun what is akin to an operational campaign to combat the disease; including locking down entire cities, enforcing social distancing measures and closing work places and schools.

This is further reinforced with the activation of civil resources and military forces to provide urgent support; from building community hospitals to providing medical services and law enforcement, where required.

Evolving Concept of the Military

Traditionally, a country's military is equipped with the skills for warfighting as the guardian of a country's defence and territorial sovereignty. Other elements of national security which does not impinge upon its external safety are viewed as the professional domains of other ministries and state institutions.

Hence Maslow's saying that "if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail" is sometimes used as a criticism of militaries worldwide, arguing that military practitioners are ill-adept (or ill-inclined) to respond to problems that fall outside their own specialised domains, and if activated, they tend to perceive solutions through a military lens.

Recent times have broadened this definition of the military's role in national and global issues, and they have been mobilised to operate in environments and circumstances where their special skill-sets and experience, as well as resources, have been instrumental to the eventual outcome.

SAF's Role in Peacetime Operations

Both the Ministry of Defence (MINDEF) and Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) have been called to the forefront of the battle against the disease. Although they have been involved in SARS, H1N1 and even the haze situation previously, there has been a number of 'firsts' during this fight against COVID-19.

One is the opening of military camps to support housing needs for the foreign workers. Access and accommodation are usually reserved for defence partners, usually at the military schools and academies. At the request of the Singapore government, all sectors of the public service, including the military, mobilised to make this happen, taking security precautions to locate the foreign workers in controlled areas of the military camps.

The other operations MINDEF and the SAF have been tasked in recent years include Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations in numerous countries, security operations for the Trump-Kim Summit in 2018 and current crisis-management efforts in response to COVID-19.

COVID-19 is not the first time Singapore's military has been activated for Whole-of-Government (WoG) operations. In fact, the SAF has gain society's trust in its capabilities through Singapore's most historic events; including the SAF's role in the Cable Car Disaster of 1983, the Hotel New World Collapse in 1986 or the annual celebration that is our National Day Parade, as well as complex international events like the organisation of the Southeast Asian Games in 2015.

During the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) pandemic in 2003, although Singapore clearly defined it as a national health issue and not as a national security issue, the SAF was also mobilised for multi-ministry efforts. At the height of the crisis, the SAF deployed more than 400 personnel to assist in operations including detection, contact tracing and quarantine management.

For example, SAF medical personnel were deployed at Changi International Airport to screen travellers. MINDEF-related organisations (MROs) were also mobilised; the Defence Science and Technology Agency (DSTA) and Defence Science Organisation (DSO) deployed the essential infrared temperature screening systems and other MROs like the SAFRA National Service Association and the National Service Resort and Country Club (NSRCC) assisted in developing community care facilities.

SAF and COVID-19

These capabilities were similarly deployed for COVID-19. The SAF sees these efforts as part of its *raison d'être* of defending Singapore, either as part of a WoG effort or a larger diplomatic narrative.

While the SAF has been activated by the Singapore government previously, there has been more media coverage of the SAF's role during COVID-19. This visibility has increased in recent years, perhaps due to a different perspective of news-consumers regarding the military.

While reporting on military affairs was construed as posturing for deterrence messaging previously, today's coverage of the SAF weaves a message of national resilience and national solidarity, as part of a larger tapestry of a cohesive response by Singapore's agencies.

MINDEF organised the national mask distribution efforts with the support of many other ministries and agencies; and various public sector staff and volunteers contributed to the implementation.

The Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) organised the mask supplies; SAF's Combat Service Support Command (CSSCOM) worked round the clock to pack and deliver them to the various distribution points; the Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI) provided the pamphlets for proper mask usage; Government Technology Agency of Singapore or GovTech created the maskowhere.sg app; and Call Centre@PA coordinated the ground distribution efforts, assisted by thousands of volunteers.

The mask distribution exercise covered over 5.5 million Singapore residents. These efforts reflect the capability of government agencies, each with their own complex organisations, to integrate for a national effort.

Post COVID-19 World: 'New Normal' in Military Operations

Although contemporary militaries have crossed the 'Rubicon' debate separating conventional and unconventional deployment numerous times in recent years, COVID-19 has pushed the envelope of understanding the role of a nation's armed forces.

When the pandemic is over, we are likely to witness among policymakers a recalibrated perspective on contemporary and future security challenges.

How would the lessons learnt from this episode transform how nations and governments train and deploy their militaries? With much at stake, it is crucial for this discussion to take place sooner than later.

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