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IDSS At 25: Pondering the Improbable

By Bernard F.W. Loo

SYNOPSIS

IDSS was established in 1996 to provide MINDEF with an additional source of geopolitical analysis, to help Singapore navigate the uncertainties of the post-Cold War era. On its 25th anniversary, IDSS seeks to reinforce its core competencies, develop new areas of expertise, and new channels for its geopolitical analysis to be disseminated to its stakeholders.

COMMENTARY

IN 1995, Dr Tony Tan returned to the Cabinet and assumed the positions of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence. He assumed the posts at a time of apparent great strategic changes in the world. The Soviet Union had collapsed leading to the end of the Cold War. There were proclamations, particularly in Europe but elsewhere too, that a “peace dividend” would come about, and military organisations in North America and western Europe began the process of downsizing.

There were questions as to whether the United States would remain engaged and committed to the security and stability of the Asia Pacific region. At the same time, so-called small wars were breaking out in many parts of the world. Furthermore, the aforementioned downsizing of US and western European military organisations resulted in the global arms market being flooded with modern military technologies and weapons systems, due to over-supply and excess production capacity. For a small state like Singapore, it seemed the end of the Cold War did not bring with it a peace dividend; instead, it had ushered in a period of great uncertainty in the Asia Pacific region.

IDSS: How It All Started

It was in this context that Dr Tan concluded that the Ministry of Defence would benefit from having an additional source of geopolitical analysis that would help refine Singapore's defence and foreign policies, as the country sought to navigate its way through the "political uncertainty in the Asia Pacific region arising from the post-Cold War era and the possible implications of this uncertainty on Singapore's security and defence".

Dr Tan subsequently established the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS) in 1996 as a think tank that would conduct research on the geopolitical and geostrategic developments in the Asia Pacific, and ask the difficult — even inconvenient — questions that could have a deleterious impact on Singapore's national security.

Mr S R Nathan, then Singapore's ambassador to the US, was tapped to be the founding director of IDSS. He was considered an ideal choice for this role, given his prior experiences in heading the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as his former leadership of MINDEF's Security and Intelligence Division (SID).

After 25 years, IDSS is now a constituent part of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), a graduate school and think-tank. IDSS has planned a series of events to mark its 25th anniversary, leading with a series of three webinars, all involving eminent thinkers of strategy and security.

Thought Series on Strategic Studies

The first was a webinar by Professor Eliot Cohen, the Robert E. Osgood Professor of Strategic Studies and former dean of the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, held on 5 May 2021. It centred on the subject of "Shakespeare for Strategists", a topic that connects the study of literature to the study of strategy and policy making.

A second webinar, planned for October this year, will feature Sir Lawrence Freedman, Emeritus Professor of War Studies in King's College London, who will examine the challenges of strategy and command in an age of extreme uncertainty. In between both webinars, there will be a debate between Professor Heng Yee-Kuang from the Graduate School of Public Policy in the University of Tokyo and RSIS Professor Pascal Vennesson.

They will examine how the related subjects of Security Studies and Strategic Studies can illuminate and explain the strategic problems of the 21st Century facing states. All three events are united by a common theme — how the strategic problems of the 21st Century can be understood and addressed by concepts old and new.

In addition, IDSS will be launching a new commentary series, called IDSS Paper. This commentary series will reinforce the *raison d'être* of IDSS, that is producing geopolitical and geostrategic analysis that is academically and intellectually rigorous, while seeking to push the boundaries, ask inconvenient questions, and challenge received wisdoms.

The first IDSS Paper, written by RSIS Research Adviser, Dr See Seng Tan, will

examine the ramifications of the failure of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to meet virtually with the ASEAN foreign ministers on 25 May 2021 — whether or not this apparent US faux pas reflects the decreasing salience of ASEAN in the US' geopolitical calculus, or if this incident undermines the centrality of ASEAN to the geopolitical landscape.

The commemorative events and the IDSS Paper together reflect the traits that Mr Nathan had sought to inject into the DNA of IDSS, and of Mr S Rajaratnam, Singapore's first foreign minister, whose name graces the graduate school.

Ethos and Spirit of IDSS

IDSS was intended to function both as a think tank as well as a graduate school — from its inception, in other words, IDSS was going to be something different. Mr Nathan, cognisant of the challenge of building this “hybrid” institute, therefore sought the advice of strategic thinkers who were not only at the top of the academic game, they also had considerable experience in the policy making world.

Two of them, Professor Cohen and Professor Freedman, were instrumental in helping Mr Nathan shape the ethos and spirit of IDSS.

Mr Nathan envisioned an IDSS that would have three functions. Its research output would form the intellectual basis for IDSS as a think tank that could provide alternative thinking into Singapore's national security and foreign policy making. Its education function would, over time, grow a community of scholars and practitioners that would be underpinned by the rigorous academic education programmes IDSS would offer.

The third function of IDSS, given its emphasis on policy-relevant research, was to test new ideas and concepts in the “marketplace” of ideas, through networking with other strategic and security-focused research institutes and think tanks. Very early on in its existence, IDSS created a number of forums that served as platforms for strategic thinkers and policy makers to present their arguments about strategic issues facing the Asia Pacific.

The Strategic Challenges in the Asia Pacific Distinguished Lecture series featured policy makers such as the US secretary of defence as well as the minister of defence of the People's Republic of China. A Summer School for senior military officers — subsequently renamed as the Asia Pacific Programme for Senior Military Officers (APPSMO) — was created.

This is a platform through which senior military officers from the Asia Pacific region and beyond could come together for an intensive week-long programme of talks and exchanges by leading academic thinkers and policy makers. IDSS also became the Singapore National Committee of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), a network of security-focused think tanks and institutions that advises their respective government representatives in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

Going Forward

IDSS, like all think tanks, cannot and has not remained static. As new areas that can impinge on Singapore's national security emerged, IDSS has had to adapt and enlarge, where necessary. With the emergence of a new terrorist threat to Singapore — bookmarked by the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, and further accentuated since then by other terrorist attacks in Bali, London and Paris, amongst others — the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) was formally inaugurated on 20 February 2004.

Subsequently, new research programmes were added — the Maritime Security Programme and the Military Transformations Programme. At the same time, older research programmes have continued to refine and adjust their respective areas of focus, in step with the ever-evolving strategic landscape that Singapore finds itself in.

In which direction will IDSS evolve in the future? Clearly, this is a rhetorical question, and impossible to answer. Nevertheless, it will have to remain true to its motto, and ensure that "Ponder the Improbable" continues to be a necessary foundation upon which Singapore can negotiate its path into the future.

Bernard F.W. Loo is a Senior Fellow with the Military Studies Programme, and Coordinator of the M.Sc. (Strategic Studies) degree programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. This is an amended version.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg