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Invasion of Ukraine

'First TikTok War': Ukraine's Lessons for Singapore

By Ong Wei Chong

SYNOPSIS

Territorial defence and volunteerism when well organised and implemented, can be effective. Encouraging volunteerism is important to protect Singapore's way of life.

COMMENTARY

RUSSIA'S 2022 invasion of Ukraine has been characterised by some as the 'first TikTok war'. Vignettes of Ukrainian resistance are captured and made available almost in real time on social media platforms. On 24 February 2022, the Russian Black Sea fleet attempted a take-over of the strategically important Snake Island. The audio exchange between the Ukrainian border guards defending the island and the might of the Russian Black Sea fleet – the flag ship Moskva and a sister patrol ship – has taken on a 'David vs Goliath' [meme](#) and rallying call for resistance.

It is a storyline that is frequently used in both mainstream and social media reporting on the conflict. Beyond the memes, it is pertinent to ask who exactly is David and why has David consistently prevailed over Goliath? These two questions are not only important for those trying to comprehend the ongoing asymmetric war in Ukraine, but also hold relevance for Singapore.

Who is 'David'?

Ukraine has been engaged in a protracted hybrid war with Russia since 2014. Given the Ukrainian Armed Forces' attempts at reform and its performance in 2014, some

pundits have been sceptical about the capability and will of the Ukrainian Armed Forces to defend Ukrainian sovereignty.

Some have even predicted a rapid Russian take-over of the Ukrainian capital Kyiv within 72 hours. Such sceptics have overestimated the capabilities of the Russian Goliath and underestimated the will and capabilities of the Ukrainian David.

On paper, Russia's conventional and hybrid capabilities in land, air, sea, space and cyberspace outmatch those of Ukraine. However, as the 19th century strategist Clausewitz reminds us, there is a difference between war on paper or 'ideal war' and 'war in reality'. Real war is an unwieldy instrument where an opponent always has a vote.

Undeterred by the will and capability of the Ukrainian people to defend themselves, Putin has escalated the conflict. However, any predictions of a swift and decisive Russian military victory were dispelled by weeks of stiff Ukrainian resistance. So, who is the Ukrainian David slowing the Russian Goliath? Collectively, it is the Ukrainian people and citizens. At the operational level, this collective instrument has materialised into a coherent Territorial Defence Force.

How the Ukrainian 'David' Prevailed

The central tenet of a territorial defence force is one whereby civilian volunteers are trained to defend their local communities and homes. The effectiveness of the Ukrainian Territorial Defence Force in recent weeks, however, indicates that territorial defence when well organised and implemented, can significantly impede, and wear down an invader.

The Ukrainian Territorial Defence force is not designed to prevent a large-scale Russian invasion or destroy entire military convoys. That is a role of the Ukraine's professional conventional forces. What the Ukrainian Territorial Defence Force has demonstrated is its ability to deny Russia control of Ukraine's major cities including its capital Kyiv and largest port city of Odessa.

A successful amphibious assault on Odessa would require an element of surprise to establish an uncontested beach head which would not be easy in the face of stiff Ukrainian territorial defence resistance.

Bulwark Against Russia's Hybrid Warfare

Russia's early attempt to seize Kyiv by way of infiltration, subversion and sabotage of critical infrastructure were countered by the ability of the territorial defence force units to quickly arrest suspected saboteurs and sleeper agents.

Whilst popular resistance is no substitute for a professional regular standing force, the minimally trained volunteers of the Ukrainian Territorial Defence Force have used their superior ground knowledge, basic military training and civilian skills to good effect.

They have filled capabilities gap in protection of key installations, defence construction, security operations, transportation, and emergency services that the

under resourced Ukrainian defence ministry and professional armed forces cannot plug.

More importantly, their connection to the local population and their communities is a bulwark against the hallmark of Russian hybrid warfare – subversion, infiltration, sabotage, and disinformation.

Relevance for Singapore

Singapore is no stranger to the concepts of volunteerism and territorial defence. 2nd People's Defence Force (2 PDF) has its roots as a volunteer force that may be traced as far back as 1854. 2 PDF's main role is that of homeland security, counter-terrorism and protection of key civilian and military installations which are functions akin to territorial defence.

Though 2 PDF is today manned by both active service personnel and National Servicemen (NSmen), the spirit of volunteerism lives on in the form of the Singapore Volunteer Corps (SVC).

The experience of the Ukrainian Territorial Defence Force is instructive in the importance of territorial defence and volunteerism within the larger framework of Total Defence and national security. There is much potential in utilising man-unmanned teams to reduce the manpower burden in the protection of key installations.

However, there are limitations to what technology can do. In a hybrid warfare scenario, local territorial defence teams with superior ground knowledge may be the more effective counter measure in preventing a successful attack.

Where practicable, the role of the SVC can be expanded to augment that of 2 PDF in the protection of key installations in both peacetime and conflict. The value of a credible territorial defence capability in a hybrid warfare scenario cannot be overstated. It can make a vital difference in Singapore's homeland defence, particularly when the aim of a potential adversary is to undermine the will and cohesion of its target population.

ROVERS and Volunteerism as Key Factor

Volunteerism plays an important link between individual citizens and society. In defence, NSmen who have completed their statutory NS service can volunteer for the Reservist on the Voluntary Extended Reserve Service ([ROVERS](#)) scheme.

There is a well-established framework to encourage NSmen volunteerism. More can be done, however, to encourage volunteerism in defence and national security beyond NSmen. Expanding the role of the SVC to enhance existing territorial defence capabilities is a useful starting point.

Expanding volunteer schemes that allow individuals to play a part in Singapore's defence and national security without donning a uniform can also play a vital function in strengthening Singapore's capabilities against the spectrum of hybrid threats.

Harnessing the collective force of citizen volunteerism to protect Singapore's way of life in peacetime and conflict is too important to be ignored.

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