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No. 011/2023 dated 25 January 2023

## ***Operation Inherent Resolve: Understanding Singapore's Participation in Multilateral Overseas Operations***

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### **SYNOPSIS**

*The Singapore Armed Forces' involvement in Operation Inherent Resolve, a US-led multinational coalition to combat Islamist extremism, back in 2014 represented a significant commitment for a small state like Singapore. **IAN LI** and **THOMAS LIM** observe that despite the potential risks of involvement and questions over its relevance to Singapore's interests, participation in the coalition was ultimately motivated by three overarching considerations — a greater appreciation of the impact of transnational threats, the importance of the rules-based international order to Singapore, and the potential operational benefits for its armed forces.*

### **COMMENTARY**

In November 2014, Singapore announced that it would be joining 33 other nations in Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), a US-led multinational coalition formed to combat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, popularly known as ISIS. It was the first Southeast Asian nation to join the coalition, and also the only Asian country to contribute both military personnel and assets, even if [no combat troops were deployed](#). Coming on the back of a six-year deployment to Afghanistan that had concluded only the year before, Singapore's participation in OIR highlighted its continued commitment to the international effort against transnational terrorism.

However, the decision to deploy military assets overseas is not an easy one, given the high costs and potential safety risks involved. This is especially true for Singapore, which, as a small state, has relatively more resource constraints compared to middle and regional powers. Also, as a predominantly conscript force, the main focus of the

Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) has [traditionally been on local defence](#), rather than distant foreign ventures. The expeditionary role of the SAF is often accompanied by caveats such as the limited use of its citizen soldiers in such operations. Indeed, in 2003, when SAF personnel were sent to join the multinational effort to assist in the task of rebuilding and restoring peace and stability in Iraq, the government had to address [concerns](#) expressed in parliament regarding the potential risks involved in such a deployment and its relevance to Singapore's own interests.

While the deployment for OIR might seem to raise similar questions, a closer inspection of the reasons behind it displays a continued alignment with the SAF's mission and Singapore's broader interests, but with an eye on the main security issues confronting Singapore today. Specifically, the deployment for OIR addresses the immediate threat posed by transnational terrorism while upholding Singapore's commitment to the rules-based international order. It also allows the SAF to extract tangible operational benefits from its involvement, contributing back to its primary role of guaranteeing Singapore's security.

### **An Expanded Threat Assessment**

The SAF's [main purpose](#) is to guarantee Singapore's peace and security. To do this, the SAF has, over the years, consistently enhanced its capability to respond to conventional threats to Singapore's territorial integrity. However, the increasingly transnational nature of terrorism has transformed it into an explicit and direct threat to Singapore's peace and security. Increasingly, terrorist groups in the region have been incorporated into larger international terrorist networks, allowing them to tap into a wider pool of resources and expertise.



The 2017 siege of Marawi raised intelligence assessments that a terrorist attack on Singapore is imminent. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

At the same time, the spread of extremist ideology originating from foreign sources has increased the risk of radicalisation within sections of the local community. To date, there have been several cases of Singaporeans [being radicalised](#), with some even travelling overseas to fight for ISIS. The 2017 siege of Marawi in the Philippines also [brought the threat of transnational terrorism closer to home](#), showing how the return of foreign fighters could galvanise regional terrorist movements. Therefore, given that geographical distance no longer provides a natural defence against distant terrorist threats, Singapore's threat assessment has expanded to consider terrorist actors both near and far as [one interconnected entity](#) that poses an immediate threat to Singapore.

Furthermore, Singapore's reputation as a renowned global business hub makes it [an attractive target for terrorists](#), as the prestige gained from a successful attack, and the ripple effect on regional markets, would be great. Indeed, Singapore has featured prominently in terrorist [propaganda](#). It is no surprise then that when asked about the SAF's potential participation in OIR in 2014, Singapore's Minister for Defence Dr Ng Eng Hen characterised ISIS as a [direct security threat](#) to Singapore and contended that the SAF's participation in OIR would directly contribute to Singapore's national security by tackling the threat of terrorism at its source.

The reality is that in an increasingly interconnected world, geographical distance cannot be the sole measure for determining a threat's relevance to Singapore. Instead, threats must be understood on their ability to impact Singapore's security — by contributing to the international effort against a transnational threat like ISIS, Singapore is in fact addressing a direct threat to its own security.

### **The Rules-Based International Order**

Singapore's decision to participate in OIR can also be seen as a means of upholding the rules-based international order. First, OIR was only the latest effort in the "war on terror" and could arguably claim legal basis from [earlier United Nations resolutions](#) introduced in response to the 9/11 attacks. These had established the criminal nature of transnational terrorism and the threat it posed to international peace and security. Furthermore, OIR had been formed in response to a [formal request](#) made by the Iraqi government for collective action against ISIS.

Second, given the legitimacy behind the international response to ISIS, Singapore's participation was a way of fulfilling its role as a responsible member of the international community. While small states are unable to exert much influence on global proceedings due to power differentials, their [participation in the international system alone](#) creates and reinforces the conditions essential for the survival of the rules-based international order.

This is necessary for Singapore's own security and survival because the lack of any international regime governing state-to-state interactions would result in [a Darwinian ecosystem](#), where weak states would be preyed upon by the stronger ones. The dangers of an unregulated international ecosystem were reiterated in Singapore's recent [condemnation](#) of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, especially considering the relative vulnerability of small states in an anarchical international system. Singapore's

participation in OIR therefore does not just address the specific threat, but also represents a multi-layered approach towards ensuring its overall security.

## **Practical Gains**

Finally, the deployment of the SAF for overseas missions affords it the opportunity to [gain valuable operational experience](#). As a military lacking combat experience, the SAF's skillsets are honed in a controlled environment. While such training still retains value, there can be no substitute for on-the-ground experience. The SAF's involvement in OIR provided it an opportunity to understand different operating conditions and to appreciate how the SAF's assets would function in other operational theatres. For example, the SAF's deployment of a medical team allowed its personnel to gain first-hand experience in handling combat trauma. Such experiences could thereafter be used to optimise existing training regimes and operational doctrine(s).

Furthermore, Singapore's [decision to extend the existing deployment](#) of SAF assets and personnel to OIR in 2017 was accompanied by a reaffirmation of the strong and mutually beneficial trade and investment linkages between Singapore and the United States, as well as greater cooperation between the two in the economic, defence and security spheres. Its contributions to OIR were particularly appreciated by the United States and built upon a strong history of [mutual security cooperation](#) between both countries. Training opportunities with the US military and access to American military hardware have greatly contributed to the SAF's warfighting capabilities. The SAF's deployment to OIR therefore ultimately served to enhance its overall operational effectiveness and readiness, allowing it to better fulfil its primary purpose.

## **Why Multilateral Overseas Operations?**

Revisiting the SAF's participation in OIR highlights the increasing need for Singapore to deploy the SAF overseas in response to transnational threats, even if it is to locations that are far from Singapore's shores. In assessing the value of Singapore's participation in OIR, one must look past a superficial cost-benefit analysis towards one that goes beyond the mission parameters, taking into account the realities of the evolving security environment and the need for a more holistic approach to enhancing Singapore's peace and security.

In this respect, the SAF plays a key role in Singapore's multi-layered strategy, serving as a tool of statecraft to address immediate security concerns while also upholding the existing rules-based international order. Finally, involvement in distant overseas operations provides practical gains that allow the SAF to better fulfil its role as the [ultimate guarantor](#) of Singapore's security. OIR therefore provides a point of reference to better understand Singapore's decision-making calculus behind the SAF's deployment for multilateral overseas operations, and it is likely that the SAF will continue to be utilised for such missions if, and when, there is a significant threat to Singapore's security.

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