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Total Defence in Action – Singapore's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Sarah Soh

SYNOPSIS

Singapore's Total Defence framework has helped to rally the country and facilitated a whole-of-country response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The wide-ranging and multi-sectoral effects brought about by the pandemic underscores Singapore's need for a coordinated, cross-domain response to national security threats. Total Defence remains salient and critical to Singapore's national defence posture.

COMMENTARY

Singapore adopted Total Defence as its whole-of-country defence framework in 1984. Adapted from the comprehensive defence strategies of countries like Switzerland and Sweden, Singapore's Total Defence comprised five distinct but interrelated pillars – Military Defence, Civil Defence, Economic Defence, Social Defence, and Psychological Defence. [Digital Defence](#) was added in 2019 to reflect the expansion of Singapore's national security domains to include cyberspace.

Whilst the international and domestic threat environments have undergone tremendous changes since its inception, Total Defence has remained a viable national defence doctrine. The application of Total Defence has enabled Singapore to coordinate an effective whole-of-country response to the most recent non-conventional security threat to have confronted the nation, the COVID-19 pandemic.

Military Defence

The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) defended the nation against an "invisible enemy" by providing critical support to various agencies tasked with managing pandemic-related exigencies. SAF personnel assisted the Ministry of Health with call centre operations and contact tracing, and the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA)

with Stay-Home Notice (SHN) enforcement efforts. SAF officers also led some of the [inter-agency support teams](#) deployed to migrant worker dormitories as part of the Ministry of Manpower's containment measures. Additionally, [six SAF camps were repurposed](#) into temporary community recovery facilities for migrant workers as part of a broader strategy to augment healthcare capacity, marking the first time that SAF infrastructures were utilised as part of Singapore's national contingency response.

Civil Defence

Alongside medical and healthcare workers, Singapore's Home Team assumed frontline duties in Singapore's COVID-19 pandemic response. Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) personnel assisted ICA colleagues with temperature screening at border checkpoints and carried out swab tests at Government Quarantine Facilities. SCDF first responders attended to the rise in demand for COVID-19 related emergency medical services, working continually to convey patients to hospitals whilst still attending to day-to-day medical emergencies. Officers from the ICA, Singapore Prison Service, Central Narcotics Bureau, and the Singapore Police Force joined the inter-agency support teams deployed to migrant worker dormitories to oversee the daily needs of workers.

Economic Defence

The government and various public agencies undertook measures to promote economic resilience during the pandemic. As the pandemic upended global supply chains and disrupted the supply of food and necessities, the Food Emergency Authority collaborated with the Singapore Food Agency and industry partners to find ways to [diversify Singapore's food sources](#). To ensure that businesses remained resilient and adaptive to changes brought about by the pandemic, several initiatives such as the Productivity Solutions Grant and the Singapore E-Commerce Programme were implemented to help companies (particularly SMEs) make the transition to digitalisation. Despite the gloomy economic outlook, the COVID-19 pandemic brought out the best in some corporate entities. Some companies stayed resilient by pivoting to new ventures. Other companies demonstrated support for others by opting to either return or donate their [Jobs Support Scheme \(JSS\) government payouts](#), with some even pledging to decline future JSS payments.

Social Defence

Singaporeans demonstrated solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic by complying with government regulations and banding together to extend help to those in need. In adhering to mask-wearing and safe-distancing guidelines, Singaporeans undertook socially responsible actions to help limit the spread of COVID-19. There were also numerous examples of ground-up initiatives organised by individuals and social groups to help different segments of the population cope with the pandemic's adverse effects. Such spontaneous acts of support addressed some of the gaps in care for communities in need. More importantly, they helped strengthen social cohesion and resilience during a time of crisis.

Psychological Defence

Singapore's psychological defence was demonstrated on three levels. First, at the political leadership level, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's addresses to the nation and regular press conferences held by the Multi-Ministry Task Force, particularly during the initial phase of the pandemic, provided assurance and direction for the public at a time when fears and uncertainties were compounded by competing media discourses. Second, at the whole-of-government level, ministries and public agencies worked collaboratively to tackle issues brought about by the pandemic, fostering a sense of collective unity. Third, collective unity was further reinforced at the societal level as Singaporeans came together to offer care and assistance to vulnerable communities through various grassroots initiatives.

Digital Defence

Singapore adopted a two-pronged approach to curb the spread of falsehoods and misinformation during the pandemic. Under the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), [correction orders](#) were issued to individuals and websites who had propagated erroneous information online. At the same time, efforts were made to ensure that information pertaining to the pandemic and vaccines were [communicated to the public](#) in an efficient and timely manner. The government regularly published articles, resources, and policy updates on its Gov.sg website. Official accounts were set up on social media platforms such as Telegram, Twitter, and WhatsApp so that subscribers could easily access information on-the-go. Public-private collaboration could also be observed as the government enlisted the help of internet service providers like Singtel and Starhub to disseminate and reinforce critical COVID-19 messages to the public.

Policy Implications

First, Total Defence retains salience in Singapore's contemporary security context and is vital to its national defence. Singapore's COVID-19 pandemic experience has shown that Total Defence is a viable framework for facilitating a coordinated, multi-domain response to a non-conventional security threat. In fact, the persistence of non-conventional security threats (in the form of pandemics, amongst others) and the advent of hybrid wars mean that Singapore must continue to adopt a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach to defence and national security, which is encapsulated by Total Defence.

Second, coordination and collaboration are key to the effective application of Total Defence. The forging and strengthening of collaborative partnerships (i.e., government-to-government, public-to-private, private-to-private) for crisis management are integral to Total Defence capacity-building and should be developed in times of normalcy. This will help bolster Singapore's national preparedness and responsiveness to future crises.

Third, the application of Total Defence to a current national crisis provides an avenue for the Total Defence narrative to be recontextualised for young Singaporeans. The challenge of maintaining Total Defence's relevance for a younger generation is a perennial one. The immediacy of the on-going COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity for young Singaporeans to understand Total Defence as "lived" experience rather than a set of ideals or principles imposed from top-down. Amplifying the role of

Total Defence in Singapore's fight against COVID-19 and incorporating it into the larger Total Defence narrative will help to generate greater mindshare and heartshare for the concept among young Singaporeans.

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