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Keeping Singapore Safe: The Story of the Internal Security Department

By Kumar Ramakrishna

SYNOPSIS

This week marks the 75th anniversary of the founding of Singapore's Internal Security Department, the government agency responsible for keeping the nation safe against both internal and external threats. The celebrated history of the department is outlined in this commentary to demonstrate its success from the time of its establishment, doing so with reference to the national and wider geopolitical context.

COMMENTARY

Formative Influences: The Postwar Years to the End of the Cold War

The Singapore Internal Security Department (ISD) began life as the Singapore Police Special Branch (SSB), formed in August 1948 with the dissolution of the wartime Malayan Security Service. The British colonial authorities at the time assessed that separate Police Special Branch organisations for Singapore and Malaya were needed to deal more effectively with the outbreak of the violent insurgency started by its erstwhile ally, the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM).

The CPM operated on two principles. First, the Communists always regarded Singapore and Malaya as a single strategic entity. Second, the CPM flexibly toggled between armed struggle and subversion as the key pathway to power, based on its strategic appreciation of the situation. Hence, from 1948 to around 1954, the CPM waged an armed struggle in Malaya to oust the British and set up a Communist Republic of Malaya, ultimately to include Singapore.

When that strategy fizzled out by the mid-1950s, thanks to strong British/Malayan counterinsurgency efforts, the CPM switched to a strategy of urban subversion in Singapore itself, hoping to eventually capture power in Malaya using Singapore as a

base. This Singapore strategy involved CPM agents employing so-called “united front” tactics, surreptitiously infiltrating leftwing political parties, student associations, labour unions and rural associations, agitating over communal and economic issues, and capturing their respective leaderships from within.

From the mid-1950s to 1963, SSB worked closely with, first, the British, and after the 1959 elections, the fledgling People’s Action Party (PAP) government, to painstakingly root out secret CPM agents deeply entrenched in various open civil organisations.

SSB stuck to its task, often amidst criticisms from a public ignorant of the CPM’s schemes. Due largely to the diligence of the SSB, which worked in co-operation with its British and Malayan counterparts, the Communist threat was quelled by 1963 following a dragnet operation known as Operation Coldstore. This set the stage for the non-Communist PAP government to consolidate its political power in Singapore, and thereafter guide the young nation-state into an unexpected independence by August 1965, just two years after joining the newly inaugurated Federation of Malaysia.

Following Singapore’s separation from Malaysia, the CPM threat evolved, and moving ahead of the threat, SSB evolved into ISD, coming under, first, the Ministry of Defence and the Interior in February 1966, and later, under the newly formed Ministry of Home Affairs in August 1970.

The CPM threat sparked back to life a second time, from the late 1960s till the end of the 1980s. While there were isolated instances of armed violence waged by CPM splinter groups in both Singapore (and Malaysia) in the 1970s, the following decade witnessed urban subversion by a new clandestine group, which used united front tactics targeting student and religious bodies. This was a politically sensitive and complex challenge that ISD had to cope with.

September 11 and the Jemaah Islamiyah Threat

The collapse of the Soviet Union by the early 1990s heralded the demise of global Communism and ushered in a new threat: extremist religion in the form of violent Islamism.

While the September 11, 2001, attacks in New York and Washington demonstrated the danger of globalised terror networks like Al Qaeda, Singaporeans were caught off guard by the discovery of the joint plot by Al Qaeda and a regional affiliate, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), to attack Western diplomatic and commercial, as well as Singaporean government targets, just a few months later. ISD worked with the government and international partners to thwart the plot, which would have included suicide bomb attacks to cause casualties in Singapore itself.

Throughout the early decades of the 2000s, a new generation of ISD officers had to retool their skills to deal with the new threat of Islamist extremism – a virulent mutation of peaceful Southeast Asian Islam – and they quickly realised that they needed help. Thus began their collaboration with broad-minded Singaporean Muslim scholars who later formed the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG). While ISD dealt with the physical threat of violent Islamism, volunteer RRG counsellors dealt with the ideological challenge of de-radicalising JI detainees, even as they worked with other

Muslim civil society groups in catering to the social, economic and educational needs of families whose breadwinners had been detained for their JI links.

It could be said that this phase taught ISD officers two important lessons. First, the unexpected escape from detention of Singapore JI operational leader Mas Selamat Kastari (MSK) in 2008 showed that one could not underestimate determined extremists skilled in detecting and exploiting weaknesses in protective systems. Second, international intelligence cooperation remained vital in dealing with the cross-border nature of the JI threat as MSK was finally recaptured and returned to ISD custody by 2010 with the support of Malaysia's Special Branch.

Social Media and the Rise of ISIS

The explosive growth of social media platforms by the 2010s further augmented the transnational terrorist threat. Extremist ideology was more easily disseminated worldwide through a combination of increasingly cheap smartphones and internet broadband access. This coincided with the rise of the highly virulent Al Qaeda offshoot, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) from the mid-2010s onward, and a spike in extremist exploitation of social media platforms to spread propaganda, fostering the self-radicalisation of vulnerable individuals.

ISD tracking showed that self-radicalised individuals became the most significant terrorist threat in Singapore, and since 2015, youth radicalisation in particular has become more of a concern. ISIS propaganda has promoted the idea of low-tech terrorism, encouraging self-radicalised lone actors to use everyday objects such as knives to carry out terror attacks.

In recent years, the need to educate the public on the early warning signs of self-radicalisation has prompted another shift in the ISD mindset. It has had to come out from the shadows, so to speak, to reach out to religious groups, academia, think tanks, social media companies, businesses and civil society organisations to build a genuinely whole-of-society coalition against the violent extremism that fuels terrorism. For instance, since December 2020, ISD has explicitly identified itself as the source of official press releases on internal security issues rather than to use the generic moniker, "Ministry of Home Affairs".

Additionally, there has been a notable uptick in media articles on the rehabilitation efforts performed by RRG, ISD psychologists as well as the Inter-Agency Aftercare Group. ISD's social media postings on security threats to Singapore reflect an acknowledgement that information consumption patterns have changed, and that social media is a key aspect of the public communications strategy of any organisation having responsibility for internal security, and cooperation and collaboration with intelligence services in other countries.

The Future: Ever-Evolving Challenges

The 2020s have already presented Singapore with a host of complex security challenges. Islamist extremism no longer seems to be the only challenge, as violent Far-Right extremism has also become significant, threatening Muslims, Hispanics, African-Americans, Asians and other non-White minority groups in the West.

Startlingly, a young boy was arrested in Singapore for plotting an attack on two local mosques on the second anniversary of the February 2019 attacks on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, by a Far-Right lone actor. Other varieties of Far-Right extremism associated with other faiths, capable of generating violence against Muslim minorities in particular, have also emerged in Asia.

Moreover, rapidly developing technologies remain a concern. AI-generated deepfake videoclips on YouTube for instance can be exploited by both terrorist networks and hostile state actors for the purposes of disinformation and influence operations. Meanwhile, the spread of 3-D printed guns based on readily available online designs, as well as the potential for commercially available unmanned automated vehicles (UAVs) to be weaponised, are just some current issues occupying law enforcement attention.

The need for ISD to keep abreast of rapid developments demands more engagement with the wider community of academia, think tanks, industry and other relevant stakeholders. Additionally, ISD seems to have recognised that it also needs to recruit suitable talent to help it keep abreast of the evolving operational environment. It has established its presence on Facebook and LinkedIn and even advertises its job opportunities on Careers@Gov. This represents a departure from its long-standing preference for avoiding public attention.

Going Forward

In summary, ISD's historical trajectory very much mirrors Singapore's own journey through the decades in dealing with a series of constantly mutating internal security challenges, often related to shifting global security trends. Every generation of ISD officers has had to adapt, learn from mistakes, strengthen collaborative networks with friendly security agencies abroad and stay ahead of the game.

Most significantly, the institution has had to emerge from the shadows to engage with the wider Singaporean community, building the trust needed to do its job more effectively. If the price of peace is indeed eternal vigilance, ISD has been a key agency tasked with paying that price continually on behalf of the nation. ISD's historic contributions to social resilience and nation-building should be more widely understood and acknowledged. The use of digital platforms, especially social media, will facilitate a better appreciation of ISD among members of the public going forward.

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