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## **Understanding the Foundation of Singapore's National Resilience**

*By Ong Weichong*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*How a nation responds in times of crisis and disruption is critical for the survival and success of vulnerable small states such as Singapore. It is important to focus on foundational strategies that enhance Singapore's national capacity to not only weather disruption but to recover and emerge stronger.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Singapore recently emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic – an epochal crisis that defined a generation. How we collectively overcame adversity during the crisis and emerged stronger is a useful learning point on sustaining institutional trust and strengthening national resilience.

Scientists warn that the COVID-19 pandemic will not be the last one of the century and that we can expect more global shocks resulting from climate change.

Global geopolitics is heating up as well, as armed conflict continues to intensify in the Russia-Ukraine war and the Middle East. This is, as Sino-US tensions continue to simmer, sharpened by the pressures of the upcoming presidential elections in the United States.

Against this backdrop, small states like Singapore will be increasingly subjected to various forms of pressure to take sides.

### **National Resilience**

How a nation responds in times of crisis and disruption is critical for the survival and success of vulnerable small states such as Singapore.

The use of information campaigns via local proxies to influence outcomes without the use of direct coercion is not new. However, such indirect strategies are tricky to counter as they seek to exploit perceived vulnerabilities and fault lines in politics and society as well as the cognitive domain of individuals which are difficult to protect.

As such, it is important to focus on strategies that enhance Singapore's national capacity to not only weather disruption but to recover and emerge stronger – that is, strategies that focus on national resilience. Singapore has been building national resilience most prominently through Total Defence (TD), which was introduced in 1984.

The reference points for Singapore's TD concept were the Swedish and Swiss models, based on the central premise that national defence requires an integrated comprehensive whole-of-society response. Other small states such as Finland have also integrated TD into their national security frameworks.

### **Why Foundational Values Matter**

In the case of Finland, national resilience is embodied by the Finnish concept of "Sisu". This distinct Finnish national value of innate resilience and perseverance forged in adversity since 1917 was central to Finland's ability to collectively resist a much larger and militarily more powerful Soviet Union in the Winter War of 1939-40.

To this day, Sisu remains a core value of Finnish national identity and enables Finland to adopt a robust national defence strategy and to maintain its credible military deterrent despite spending only 6.1 billion euros (US\$6.7 billion) on defence in 2023.

Is there a distinct Singaporean equivalent of Sisu that brings citizens together in times of adversity?

The roots and values of Singapore's national resilience can be traced to the fledgling years of independence in the 1950s-70s when Singapore's founding generation envisioned and forged a "new Singapore spirit" based on the foundational values of multiculturalism and openness. This "new spirit" created the space for the roots of Singapore's national resilience to take hold.

The challenges that defined Singapore's founding generation may have been of a different and distinct historical milieu, but their foundational values of multiculturalism and openness are still highly relevant today as they still define what Singaporeans stand for – particularly in an epoch where disruptions from crises are more likely to take place.

Singapore's long-term posture of openness and commitment to a rules-based trading system was crucial in enabling the supply-chain resilience that allowed the Republic to avoid the worst of supply-chain disruptions and cost-of-living crises encountered by other countries during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This openness extends to the multicultural diversity that Singaporeans have built over the decades. Singapore's multiculturalism is a unique strength and fundamental

organising principle that is protected in our Constitution and enshrined in our national pledge.

## **Standing the Tests of Today and Beyond**

The commitment of Singaporeans to our foundational values of openness and multiculturalism can be tested from time to time.

On 2 February 2024, Philip Chan, a naturalised Singapore citizen, became the first person to be served notice as a politically significant person under the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act (Fica).

In as much as laws such as Fica allow Home Team security agencies to prevent and disrupt hostile information campaigns that threaten our way of life, it is also crucial to refresh existing structures that enable a collective and comprehensive whole-of-society response such as TD.

The inaugural *Exercise SG Ready* held from 15 to 29 February 2024 simulated disruptions to power, water, food supplies, and digital connectivity, with the aim of getting individuals, communities and businesses to think and put into action their own contingency plans for disruptions. Initiatives such as these are examples of how TD can be refreshed and adapted to meet the changing security challenges of today.

The decade ahead could be a stormy one where extreme weather patterns, disease outbreaks, protracted armed conflict and intensified great power competition converge to induce global shocks and disruptions of increased frequency and magnitude. Singapore's national resilience rooted in the collective strength of our multicultural diversity has put us in a better position to weather these storms.

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