

# Should the SAF Maintain its Existing Focus on Full-Spectrum Dominance or, Should the Organisation Return to its Core Deterrence and War-Fighting Mission?

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## Abstract:

Singapore's geographical and population limitations have seen the Singapore Armed Forces develop its military into an all-encompassing, multi-faceted defence force capable of fulfilling Singapore's defence policy of *diplomacy and deterrence*. While this policy has indeed presided over a successful period of peace and harmony within and beyond Singapore, the constant evolution of threats, both conventional and unconventional, has led to a debate on whether Singapore should continue to diversify her military to arm it with capabilities to counter a multitude of threats, such as cyberwars and terrorism, or to return to its roots of core deterrence and war-fighting mission. Certainly, major conflicts like the latest Arab-Israeli conflict and the conflict between Russia and Ukraine have reminded countries around the world of the need to have a robust and resilient military that is well-equipped in war-fighting missions to protect their sovereignty. In the light of both conventional and unconventional threats that have occurred in recent years, this article discusses whether, for the SAF, building a diversified and multi-dimensional military is a more feasible and logical choice or, it should focus on its core deterrence and war-fighting mission.

*Keywords: Full-Spectrum, Diplomacy and Deterrence, Unconventional Threats, Terrorism*

## INTRODUCTION

*"Singapore has to take the world as it is; it is too small to change it. But we can try to maximise the space we have to manoeuvre among the big 'trees' in the region."*

*Former Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew<sup>1</sup>*

The security landscape today is constantly evolving and increasingly shaped by emerging challenges from non-traditional sources. Where the world was once bestrode by two superpowers and militaries largely configured for conventional war-fighting, the role for modern military forces has widened to include fighting transnational security challenges and delivering

humanitarian assistance. To meet these post-millennial expectations, the SAF has responded by commencing transformation into a third generation force capable of full-spectrum operations. In the light of successful contributions in Aceh, Afghanistan, Iraq and the Gulf of Aden, the SAF's focus on full-spectrum dominance has earned Singapore accolades and delivered early returns.

However, building a full-spectrum force requires significant resources in terms of money, people, time and space. In a resource-constrained environment like Singapore's, stretching the SAF to operate in non-traditional roles has diluted focus on its core

function of defending Singapore. This shift therefore begs the question: is a full-spectrum SAF necessary? To justify the SAF's existing focus, it is essential to establish the value of full-spectrum dominance. As such, this essay aims to discover the following: firstly, examining the rationale and security reasons for full-spectrum dominance; secondly, identifying potential pitfalls; lastly, calibrating the focus on full-spectrum dominance.

### WHY FULL SPECTRUM DOMINANCE?

Before examining the reasons for developing full-spectrum dominance, tracing the three generations of military change in the SAF unveils important developments in its strategic thought and principles. Prior to its current third generation incarnation, the SAF has already undergone one generation of change, from the first generation 'poisonous shrimp' policy to the second generation 'porcupine' policy.<sup>2</sup> At that time, then-Brigadier General (BG) (NS) Lee Hsien Loong stated that the rationale for change was to shift away from a defensive deterrence policy to a more active deterrence posture as the 'poisonous shrimp' policy was essentially defeatist in nature.<sup>3</sup> Gleaning experiences from the Japanese invasion in World War II (WWII), the 'porcupine' policy overcomes Singapore's natural lack of strategic depth by enabling the SAF to strike first and establish the frontline in the enemies' territory.<sup>4</sup> By building up a SAF capable of pre-emptive strikes, Huxley argues that the move provided a stronger deterrent to Singapore's neighbours, particularly Malaysia, which tended to use the former as a convenient political scapegoat for domestic problems, endangering Singapore's economic and social stability.<sup>5</sup> For a fledging country heavily dependent on external trade for development, such sources of instability and tension were deemed unnecessary and unwelcomed distractions. The second generation shift towards a more offensive posture

thus heralded the drive for full-spectrum dominance as the SAF essentially embraced transformation into a modern and conventional fighting force focused on fighting beyond its own shores.

Following lessons from Operation Thunderstorm in 1990, the SAF recognised the need for joint operations and invested heavily in advanced military technologies to achieve 'dominant battle-field awareness'.<sup>6</sup> Post 9/11, the security landscape was drastically altered by non-conventional threats, such as terrorism and piracy, which gained prominence and disrupted stability.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the increasing social and international expectation of military involvement in delivering humanitarian assistance signified that the SAF could no longer be solely dedicated towards conventional war-fighting missions. To satisfy these new roles, the SAF needed to become more flexible in doctrinal and strategic thought. In this way, the 'porcupine' policy had to shift towards the 'dolphin' policy, which emphasised "agility and adaptability, while retaining the ability to administer a swift and decisive victory when threatened."<sup>8</sup> Without an endless supply chain of equipment and manpower, full-spectrum dominance appears the only satisfactory way the SAF can balance between its growing roles and responsibilities in a resource-constrained environment. Ironically, producing a full-spectrum force may be the most financially prudent measure for Singapore to derive maximum utility from lean manning. Taking into consideration these new demands on the military and the doctrinal shift towards an integrated force, the SAF's impetus for developing full-spectrum dominance is therefore both practical and rational.

### CONFRONTING UNCONVENTIONAL THREATS

Singapore, intricately linked to the world economy, is 'highly sensitive' to fluctuations in the open market.<sup>9</sup> Singh classified Singapore as a 'deficit territory'—a



*A RSN S-70B Seahawk taking off for a surveillance sortie while in the Gulf of Aden.*

country lacking natural resources and a 'hinterland' to support its own people.<sup>10</sup> Despite these deficiencies, Singapore has managed to thrive by interweaving its economy into the existing international system. Being a part of this globalised system, Lee argued that Singapore is therefore "firmly committed to its preservation"—a commitment which encompasses the "institutions and norms reinforcing the mechanisms of global trade."<sup>11</sup> While the evolving geopolitical environment has made it near impossible to discuss unconventional threats in isolation, the immediate threats which threaten Singapore's economic viability can be broadly identified as Maritime Security and Terrorism. Furthermore, as a developed country, Singapore is increasingly looked upon to fulfil its responsibilities towards global security. Deviating from the traditional sources of security challenges, the SAF's ability to confront these unconventional threats, both at home and abroad, will be examined and discussed.

Being a maritime nation, secure sea lines of communication are vital to Singapore's economy. As part of realising full-spectrum dominance, interoperability and joint operations between the services have strengthened and grown in capacity. One important instance is the establishment of the Maritime Security Task Force (MSTF), which signalled the advent of a Whole-of-Government approach in executing maritime operations. Capable of co-opting assets from various national agencies for a unified response, MSTF acts as the central agency to coordinate national efforts toward maritime security operations. Such integration and close cooperation enables MSTF and the SAF to capitalise on a wider spectrum of capabilities in meeting maritime security challenges at home. While MSTF has had recent success in fighting regional piracy and trafficking, troubled waters remain abroad in the Gulf of Aden, one of the world's major shipping lanes. In his 2010 address at the Committee

of Supply Debate, Deputy Prime Minister, Teo Chee Hean said that, “[Singapore] recognise[s] that it is not possible for any one country to protect its own shipping in all the world's key sea lanes.”<sup>12</sup> Leveraging on the increased interoperability between services, the SAF has since taken on anti-piracy duties and contributed regularly to the US-led Combined Task Force (CTF) 151 with assets ranging from the Landing Ship Tank and Super Puma Helicopters to Fokker-50 Maritime Patrol Aircraft.<sup>13</sup> Full-spectrum dominance, in this case, is a key enabler for the SAF to undertake a range of responsibilities across the maritime threat environment.

Terrorism continues to persist as a security concern for all nations. In conjunction with other Homefront agencies, the establishment of the Island Defence Task

Force (IDTF) provided wider options for protecting key installations islandwide.<sup>14</sup> Much like MSTF, the IDTF has stretched the (its) spectrum of capabilities by co-opting various national agencies to execute one coherent national effort against increasingly sophisticated threats against Singapore. Abroad, the SAF has deployed construction engineering and medical teams to Afghanistan in support of the US-led operations. Cognisant that the situation in Afghanistan will have direct implications on regional terrorism, the SAF's assistance towards the reconstruction effort is significant and demonstrates a strong desire to stabilise the country. More importantly, Ong argues that this ability to operate in multi-national reconstruction efforts sends an “unequivocal signal to [Singapore's] security partners—particularly the United States, that [Singapore] supports allies not



*The Police Coast Guard and the RSN working together to intercept a small boat suspected to be a threat during Exercise Apex 2009.*





The SAF medical team unloading medical supplies at the mobile medical clinic at Koto Bangko.

just in words, but in deeds.”<sup>15</sup> Again, the versatility afforded by full-spectrum dominance has proven its worth for the SAF in handling internal and external threats.

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#### AN INSTRUMENT OF DETERRENCE AND DIPLOMACY

Looking beyond the emergence of unconventional threats, the SAF's focus on full-spectrum dominance serves important functions in deterrence and diplomacy. At present, relations between Southeast

Asian states remain cordial and possibilities of outbreaks in hostilities appear remote. In this period, selling the message of deterrence to potential adversaries has been more difficult. Ong, however, argued that participation in overseas Stability, Transition and Reconstruction (SSTR) and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations provides opportunities for the SAF to “gain operational experience, test its capabilities and benchmark itself against more experienced armed forces in real-time but low-risk conditions.”<sup>16</sup> By participating in these operations, the SAF's presence provides a 'showcase' of the force's expeditionary capabilities in a “low-profile manner.”<sup>17</sup> This, Ong stated, enabled the SAF to act as a “visible guardian” of Singapore's commitment to the international system and a “visible big stick” should Singapore's interests be threatened.<sup>18</sup> A pertinent case in point was the SAF's swift deployment around

the region in the aftermath of the December 2004 tsunami disaster. The ability of the SAF to deploy so quickly, as Loo and Ho observed, was due to the force's "prudent development" of an array of capabilities to handle a "spectrum of contingencies."<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the assistance rendered to the disaster-stricken areas emphasised the SAF personnel's high quality of training which contributed to their rapid response in dealing with unexpected emergencies.<sup>20</sup> In times of peace and stability, the SAF's ability to deploy for non-conventional military operations at short notice becomes even more significant in reminding potential adversaries of its capabilities. As such, the focus on full-spectrum dominance will continue to provide deterrence in a different capacity, but with no less intensity.

*For a start, the SAF has established a strong lead over regional militaries and the transformation towards full-spectrum dominance will continue this positive trajectory.*

The broader role for the SAF as an active instrument of diplomacy is stated by DPM Teo, who declared, "without being able to contribute to the security architecture and having a capable SAF, Singapore would play a much more diminished role and we would not have the same voice at the table."<sup>21</sup> For a small state like Singapore, securing this 'voice' at the table is critical in expanding its international influence and asserting its own speaking rights among the "big boys."<sup>22</sup> To achieve this, Singapore must continue to shoulder responsibilities within the international community and participate in multi-lateral operations that contribute to global security. One prominent example would be the SAF taking command of CTF 151 for three months annually since 2010. Besides

maintaining Singapore's voice, a SAF capable of multi-faceted operations is an invaluable source of soft power. Nye briefly defined 'soft power' as the power of attraction and persuasion.<sup>23</sup> A full-spectrum SAF is therefore capable of accruing this source of power by extending varied military assistance to its neighbours in times of crisis as well as peacetime exchanges to generate goodwill and cultivate friendship.

### MINDING THE BLIND SPOTS

The attraction and potential rewards of full-spectrum dominance promises much for the SAF. However, amid the strong motivation to do more with less, it is sensible to discuss blind spots within a full-spectrum, 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation (3G) SAF. To begin with, maintenance of operational readiness must remain an immutable principle as the SAF is primarily a conscript army whose core function is to hone war-fighting skills and defend Singapore against aggressors. While full-spectrum dominance indicates developing capabilities beyond the traditional war-fighting roles, the citizen force is essentially geared towards the "local defence" of Singapore rather than "a force of true global citizens."<sup>24</sup> The unspoken social contract between the Singapore population and MINDEF remains that the SAF is built for homeland security rather than international operations. Despite the SAF's recent successes in international operations, the focus on honing traditional war-fighting skills cannot be neglected. Moreover, with Singapore's fertility level hitting a record low of 1.16, the challenges of lean manpower will only increase and steadily reduce the size of today's standing force.<sup>25</sup> As a caution against rising expectations, Ong argued that, "the current type and level of Singapore's contributions in overseas mission is an apt reflection of what can be done with a largely citizen-based military on a peacetime footing."<sup>26</sup> While shifting away from the focus on core



*Making sure the perimeter is clear of any threats, soldiers rush into the building to take down the remaining 'terrorists' at the Army Open House.*

deterrence has given more opportunities to develop capabilities, the SAF must balance the growing operational tempo with a strong emphasis on core deterrence, to continue producing citizen soldiers capable of defending Singapore in war.

Besides maintaining core deterrence, the training of citizen soldiers must be carefully managed. Although the SAF has, in the past, bridged differences between conventional military operations and unconventional threats, fundamental differences in the skill sets required for conducting Operations Other Than War (OOTW) and Counter-Terrorism (CT) operations still remain. Loo argued that, the principles of OOTW and CT operations are not “entirely consonant with the principles of conventional war,” and may run “against the graft of [the soldiers'] training.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, a

more pressing issue pertaining to the nature of the conscript system exists. As the term of active service runs for only two years, can the SAF afford to send its national servicemen for specialised OOTW or CT training? The short answer is no, as the return-on-investment is simply too low to justify the effort and expenditure. Yet, therein lies the potential problem, which Loo correctly identified as “dividing the armed forces into two entities—a ‘smart’ transformed active service and a ‘dumb’ version.”<sup>28</sup> As such, the idea of full-spectrum dominance, while promising much, may not be fully attainable or applicable to the entire SAF.

### A FINELY CALIBRATED FIGHTING FORCE

Taking into consideration the competing demands between conventional and non-conventional

operations, the existing focus on full-spectrum dominance is an ambitious target for the SAF. There are, however, compelling reasons driving the need to achieve this vision. For a start, the SAF has established a strong lead over regional militaries and the transformation towards full-spectrum dominance will continue this positive trajectory. While the transformation journey may initially focus on the active service, the compromise of having 'two entities' during the transition period is necessary in completing this transformation. Rather than return to the sole focus of core deterrence, the focus on full-spectrum dominance enables the SAF to calibrate existing capabilities and entrench its lead by reorienting efforts towards areas beyond traditional war-fighting aspects. Lee cautioned against the SAF slowing down transformation as a weak armed forces will likely "preclude Singapore from contributing meaningfully to multilateral engagements" and "reduce the incentive for larger powers to engage [Singapore] in the realm of defence cooperation."<sup>29</sup> In this context, the SAF risks eroding her established lead should it choose to return to the previous core deterrence and war-fighting mission.

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Besides consolidating her lead over potential adversaries, there are numerous factors favouring the existing focus. Blessed with a well-educated

population skilled in technological expertise and high IT literacy, the SAF is favourably disposed to make this transformation into a full-spectrum force amid regional stability and absence of rising tensions.<sup>30</sup> Given the time and space to experiment and calibrate the envisaged system, the SAF can develop niche areas and eliminate obsolete functions to refine what it deems is essential in achieving full-spectrum dominance.

## CONCLUSION

As the security landscape becomes increasingly complex and dominated by non-state actors, the SAF's focus on full-spectrum dominance appears essential and justified. Beyond the obvious military functions it serves in meeting terrorism and maritime security challenges, a full-spectrum SAF serves as an active symbol of deterrence and instrument of defence diplomacy. The growing recognition of a maturing SAF and its achievements from security partners and the global community has undoubtedly contributed greatly to Singapore's voice on the international scene. While the focus on full-spectrum dominance is important, the SAF must retain a strong emphasis on core deterrence and produce soldiers skilled in defending the homeland. Incorporating the full-spectrum transformation within the constraints of a conscription system will be particularly significant challenging for the SAF but it currently has favourable conditions aiding this process. To maintain the lead over potential adversaries, the SAF must maintain its focus on full-spectrum dominance and become the finely calibrated fighting force capable of flying the national flag in multi-lateral and international operations. 🌐



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