NATIONAL BRANDING AND THE MILITARY

In the 21st century security landscape, there is increasing clarity that military coercion and war are not the only means to fulfill policy objectives. For example, Nye describes power as “one’s ability to affect the behaviour of others to get what one wants.” He goes on to describe three types of power: First, hard power which employs threats and economic rewards as its modus operandi; Second, soft power which uses the allurement of a country to solicit preferred outcomes; Finally, smart power which is a strategic combination of hard and soft power to fulfill policy objectives. Here, soft power is frequently associated with planned national branding and many authors like Anholt have written about the tools and strategies that determine how a country’s image is being projected outwards. In the context of smart power, planned national branding is clearly one of those endeavours that require multi-agency collaboration. Whilst it is presumptuous to assume that the military should lead such an effort, the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) which runs the country’s most extensive nation building effort of National Service (NS) is clearly one of the leads in the whole-of-government approach to national branding.

IMAGINING COUNTRIES

Our discussion first begins with an understanding of what the image of a country is. For example, ask a F1 fan what he thinks of Singapore and the image of the Marina Bay street circuit may come to his mind. The feelings he attaches to it will probably depend on the performance of his favourite team. In another example, many Japanese describe Singapore as an exciting destination especially in the last two years. This has been attributed to the Apple iPhone commercial starring Japanese boy band SMAP at the giant infinity pool straddling the 57th floor of the three towers of the Marina Bay Sands resort. In both examples, people have formed a vivid image of Singapore without once visiting the place. In general, people construct images of
countries simply because they are necessary social schemas. Schemas are “cognitive structure[s] that represents knowledge about a concept or type of stimulus, including its attributes and the relationship amongst those attributes.” A country’s national image or brand is a schema since it “comprises the outside world’s ideas about a particular country.” The images of countries serve as an important social function because when they are juxtaposed with representations of the self, they enable people to identify themselves versus others thereby creating feelings of belonging or opposition.

National Day provides an opportunity for Singaporeans to come together and celebrate our nation’s achievements. Here, the state flag is seen flying past, against the backdrop of the financial district during the National Anthem at NDP ’10.

For example, the image of a country to its people creates “confidence in their own status in the world,” whereas to foreigners it increases its prestige. Here, national branding as described by Anholt is the flow that enables elements of national identity to be projected as national image in the eyes of people in another country. Using this frame, this discussion will illustrate how the SAF’s efforts in strengthening the national identity of Singaporeans contribute to a whole-of-government approach to shaping the image of Singapore.

NATIONAL IDENTITY VERSUS NATIONAL IMAGE

This discussion will be based on the framework of national identity as a collective self-schema versus national image as the social schema people project onto another country. The terms national identity and national image is important because the inward and outward views of a country are different. For example, when 93% of Singaporeans say they get upset when they...
see the Singapore flag being burnt, they have activated similar social schemas with regards to Singapore. National identity is therefore a legitimate collective type of self-schema because many individuals do adopt similar schemas with regards to their country and this facilitates group identification (see Figure 1 above). Here, research by authors like Frosh and Wolfsfeld has shown that national identity is strengthened through the mediated discourse about the country. In other words, a constructive discourse about Singapore can help Singaporeans with a lower sense of identification to the country become clearer about what it means to be a Singaporean and thus strengthens their sense of belonging. Hence, the SAF as a nation building institution should continuously exploit the opportunities presented by our NS system of compulsory conscription to sustain a positive discourse about Singapore amongst its people. This is because a strong sense of national identity has more elements that can be communicated overseas as part of a positive national image.

NATIONAL IMAGE

Although national image is the social schema of a country, it is not a stereotype because whilst “stereotypes tend to be rigid, a schema is dynamic and subject to revision.” This also means that the way people think about Singapore changes with time and circumstances. In terms of shaping national image, Anholt has identified the following six national branding activities: government policy; interaction with the people; solicitation of inward investments; sports or cultural events; tourism promotion; and exports or services. With a better co-ordination of messages through these six activities, the reputation of a country improves. There is empirical evidence to support this as schemas can be developed from exposure to new information. For example, the recent information about Singapore’s political activism has improved perceptions about its people and culture. As such, a country’s national image as a social schema is an evolving constellation of forms.
across a globalised world as different peoples respond differently to new information about it. States and its militaries would therefore need to constantly be engaged in national branding to ensure that the country has a positive image.

**CONVEYING POWER THROUGH NATIONAL BRANDING FLOWS**

Whilst Anholt’s model has described the means of shaping a national image, he is vague on what branding should be conveyed. The author argues that national branding should convey power. Power in this sense refers to the relational capacity that enables a social actor to influence asymmetrically the decisions of other social actors in ways that favour the empowered actor’s will, interests and values. It is not about power in the traditional sense of military domination; this is power which is “smart” because it involves state and non-state actors using soft power or attraction to achieve national aims whilst reserving coercion to when it is required.

Many countries like Estonia and Poland have been using soft power to improve their image through their economic attractiveness. Serbia, on the other hand, has been using traditional folk music to soften the harsh social-political image it acquired from being the centre of a long period of violence. Clearly, countries do communicate using power and it does so in many ways through many channels.

As such, a country’s national image as a social schema is an evolving constellation of forms across a globalised world as different peoples respond differently to new information about it.

Mann identified ideological, economic, military and political power as the four sources of social powers: Ideological power fulfills the need for meaning, norms and rituals; Economic power is concerned with
production; Military power involves the deployment of force against threats; and Political power comes from the legislation of state services. These four sources of social power are experienced by global publics in different weightages across Anholt’s national branding activities. The communication network for power is Castell’s space of flow, which is a global social order, organised around flows or expressions of processes dominating our economic, political and symbolic life. As a result, Mann’s ideological, economic, military and political power which are embedded in Anholt’s national branding activities becomes national branding flows that “radiates” across Castell’s global space of flows. As flows of national branding conveying social power reach a foreign audience, they provide information that enables the development of social schemas and thereby allow the shaping of a country’s national image (see Figure 2).

For example, last year the Mail Online carried a report about a British man who faced jail term and caning for pinching a woman’s buttocks at a night spot in Singapore. The best-rated comment on this news with 1348 positive ratings came from an anonymous Canadian who wrote, “He knew the rules going in. It’s refreshing to see there are still countries who value decency ... give him ALL he deserves.” In this case, the online readers experienced Singapore’s ideological power as a country that has a very strict legal system. The national branding activity is exposure to Singapore’s policy of corporal punishment whilst the national branding flow was carried on global Internet penetration of the Mail Online. As this flow reaches the public, it provides new information for people to adjust their schema about Singapore. In this case, the resulting national image of Singapore for some people is a country “valuing decency.”

The SAF’s role in public diplomacy is enshrined in its mission which is “to enhance Singapore's peace and security through deterrence and diplomacy, and should these fail, to secure a swift and decisive victory over the aggressor.”

There are two important points to be raised about this example. First, national branding as shown is a form of schema development and it takes place even without state intervention. Thus, every Singaporean citizen becomes an agent for national branding; much less SAF servicemen who carry the country’s name on their uniforms. Second, this example represents only one national branding flow. In reality, a country’s national image in another country is a schema derived from an aggregated experience of its social power via numerous national branding flows. State efforts at national branding such as through tourism promotion videos are only some of the possible national branding flows. A foreign public’s image of Singapore is the aggregate of their experience of Singapore from various touch points including face-to-face interactions with Singaporeans. As such, the national branding efforts by state actors such as the SAF can be easily and very quickly negated by the actions of non-state actors such as news about individual Singaporeans, especially those who are seen to be representatives of the state. Therefore, given this context the actions of all SAF personnel; both the regulars and even the lowest ranking National Servicemen (NSmen), can unintentionally become a negative national branding flow and counteract the effects of the positive portrayal of Singapore and the SAF.

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND THE MILITARY

This is why state efforts to increase positive national branding isn’t merely an advertising campaign, it is a reconfiguration of the country. In a world defined by Castell’s space of flows, branding by governments is “a shift in political paradigms, a move... to the postmodern world of images and influence.” As a state coordinated effort, public
diplomacy is the “work aiming to inform and engage individuals and organisations overseas, in order to improve understanding of and influence for [a country] in a manner consistent with governmental medium and long term goals.”30 The SAF working under the Ministry of Defence and in collaboration with other national institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other ministries is an important part of public diplomacy.

The SAF’s role in public diplomacy is enshrined in its mission which is “to enhance Singapore’s peace and security through deterrence and diplomacy, and should these fail, to secure a swift and decisive victory over the aggressor.”31 Deterrence in this case is contingent on the national image of Singapore from the perspective of the global public. A positive image of Singapore as an economically, socially, psychologically and militarily strong country with civil preparedness along the five pillars of total defence will create deterrence and support diplomacy.32 As such, the image of Singapore is no longer just the mission of the Singapore Tourism Promotion Board. A strong and credible SAF greatly enhances Singapore’s national image. As it stands, SAF has 350,000 Active and NSmen.33 This becomes Singapore’s unique edge over many countries because through NS, approximately 10% of the country’s national population could be developed to be ambassadors of national branding regardless of whether they are in or out of their uniforms.

**NATIONAL IMAGE OF SINGAPORE**

For the SAF, the three activities of the six described by Anholt that contribute to Singapore’s national image are: organising national events such as the National Day Parade (NDP), experience of the SAF’s services especially in overseas missions and interaction with SAF servicemen. With the aim of projecting a positive image of Singapore as an economically, socially, psychologically and militarily strong country with civil preparedness, the national branding flows originating from the SAF cannot just focus on a sense of security originating from military power. The SAF has to communicate other aspects of social power as identified by Mann such as ideological, economic and political power in its national branding effort. This means that the national image being conveyed by the SAF needs to consider Singapore holistically as a country. For example, the SAF’s NSmen need to rise up and be the spokesmen for NS, describing how it epitomises the ideological power of Singaporean manifestos like the national pledge by coming together “regardless of race, language or religion” in the service of the country.

*The sight of a unit that learns with servicemen and service women that thinks is a powerful portrayal of a psychologically and militarily strong country.*

**STRATEGIC LEVEL OF LEADERSHIP**

At the strategic level, SAF leaders are already working directly with the political and civilian leadership of the Singapore government in many areas. Of the many national branding activities described by Anholt, the organisation of international and national level events has seen the most active participation from the SAF in the whole-of-government efforts to brand Singapore. This has extended beyond security tasks to activities that directly shape the image of Singapore being communicated. For example, in the Singapore Inaugural Youth Olympic Games (YOG) 2010, senior SAF commanders like then Brigadier General (BG) Ishak Ismail were in charge of staging the show for the Opening and Closing ceremonies.34 These strategic leaders’ vision of a socially and economically strong Singapore as it materialised during the show at the ceremonies is the very same image being imprinted in the minds of the public around the world.
THE ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL OF LEADERSHIP

Although the leaders at the organisational level such as Unit Commanding Officers (CO) enable events like the YOG to happen, they are the executives and arguably less involved in visualisation and directing national level events. Of the six national branding activities described by Anholt, the one that is most pertinent to leaders at this level involves branding Singapore through the “services and exports” from the SAF. Realistically, the SAF does not generate any production but its participation in international missions with other armed forces arguably provides other countries with a touchpoint with the SAF. For example, just as Singapore is branded by the service on Singapore Airlines, to the other militaries in the Gulf of Aden, Singapore is also represented by the performance, experiences and learning attitudes of our sailors, soldiers and airman operating in Combined Task Force (CTF) 151 to combat piracy. Therefore, unit commanders at this level are leaders who need to manage their servicemen’s and service women’s Experience and Learning to maximise the Performance of their unit using Gallwey’s Performance-Experience-Learning (PEL) Triangle as a principle. The sight of a unit that learns with servicemen and service women that thinks is a powerful portrayal of a psychologically and militarily strong country.

THE DIRECT LEVEL OF LEADERSHIP

Here, at the direct level of leadership, SAF Leaders are not devolved from the national branding activities mentioned earlier. However, like the leaders at the organisational level of leadership they are only the executives in major national branding events and contributing feedback at best but not influencing the visioning of such activities. These leaders are important actors when we consider the Performance-Experience-Learning triangle of the unit but the art of maintaining a positive unit climate is a command function and it resides with the Unit Commanding Officer (CO). As leaders at this level engage most frequently in the face-to-face manner of leadership,
they become the catalyst of the experiences of their soldier, sailor and airmen which in turn shape others’ perception of Singapore when our people interact with foreigners. In the effort to brand Singapore through the SAF, these last mile leaders are the key terrain and they have three key contributions.

First, our last mile leaders, contribute to national branding by strengthening their men’s sense of national identity by inculcating and role modelling SAF’s Values; especially Loyalty to Country. Peterson defines values as “beliefs about desirable moral goals” and as schemas they represent cognitive structures that provide a guide on universal human principles.\(^36\) Values determine the attitudes people adopt and subsequently their choices and actions forming the Values-Attitudes-Behaviours Hierarchy.\(^37\) When all SAF leaders and their men are aligned to the SAF Core Values such as Loyalty to Country and Professionalism, we can then be confident that they will become sources of positive national branding as their speech and actions would reflect a national identity that is socially and psychologically strong.

Second, these leaders contribute to national branding by creating positive memories of NS as a uniquely Singaporean experience and through storytelling. Today, many authors such as Appadurai have come to the conclusion that in a world of globalised cultures, the nation is an imagined abstract construct which thrives on the discourse about it. Featherstone describes heroes, myths, events and memories as part of a country’s ethnic core and that processes such as storytelling are “an essential part of the nation-building process in which the nation-state actively encourages the cultivation and elaboration of the “ethnie” or ethnic core.”\(^38\) Therefore, if all last mile leaders could create defining moments for their men’s NS experience and be able to tell compelling stories about SAF Core Values, then the SAF could potentially uplift the entire ethnic core for Singapore. More importantly, when all our SAF servicemen who represent 10% of Singapore’s national population have positive memories and stories to share about our values or the NS experience then there will be an exponentially greater amount of positive national branding flows. These do not just occur during national branding events or SAF overseas missions, it happens in everyday life as our NSmen interact with foreigners they meet within and beyond our borders.

Third, these leaders also need to engage in storytelling in new media. Today, one of the unique features of social media sites is that the user is also the producer creating what Bruns describe as the produser.\(^39\) Hence, other than relying on the SAF’s official corporate communications foothold in new media sites, the SAF leaders at the direct level of leadership can be mobilised to exponentially increase the volume of positive narratives about Singapore in cyberspace through their social networks. Recent research conducted by Alexander has also demonstrated the potential for digital storytelling to positively influence elements like the sense of belonging for both the story teller and audience.\(^40\)

Therefore, encouraging and providing means for the SAF’s last mile leaders to be more active on SAF social media in order to engage and connect with their tribe, increases their commitment whilst increasing the positive image of Singapore online.

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, whether we consider Singapore’s image as a schema or an imagination, the fact remains that this image in the eyes of the foreign publics is being shaped daily by various national branding flows. Therefore, SAF’s strategic level leaders need to continuously check that their visions for the armed forces or a national event reflects a country that is socially, economically, psychologically and militarily strong to reinforce deterrence. SAF’s unit commanders at the organisational level of leadership needs to create units with a learning climate that can adapt to shifting perceptions about Singapore. At the broadest base of the SAF, our last mile leaders need to live our values and be ambassadors of the Singaporean national identity thereby adding
positive national branding flows to the public sphere and new media each day to offset the negative ones. Ultimately, national branding for Singapore is not an option. Not only has it been a key part of our success but in a globalised world saturated with moving images, branding Singapore is an integral part of nation building and of survival.41 As the nation building institution that could mobilise the most national branding ambassadors, the SAF plays a critical role in portraying the national image of Singapore.

ENDNOTES


8. Ibid.


14. Ibid.


17. Ibid.


19. Ibid.


23. Ibid.


25. Ibid.


29. Ibid.


LTC Psalm Lew is currently Head Plans, Army Information Centre with the responsibility to develop the Army’s information capabilities as well as assist in staffing the Army Communication Plans. An Infantry Officer by vocation, LTC Lew has held several concurrent NS appointments; he is currently the Commanding Officer of 802nd Battalion Singapore Infantry Regiment since 2009 and he was in charge of Information Management in the 3rd Singapore Division from 2004 to 2008. His past command appointments include Officer Commanding Support Company, 2nd Battalion Singapore Infantry Regiment and Platoon Commander, 5th Battalion Singapore Infantry Regiment. His past staff appointments include Head, School Leadership Development with the responsibility to review and develop the Leadership Curriculum in all SAF schools, Chief Researcher of the Army Museum of Singapore and Training Development Officer of the Officer Cadet School. LTC Lew holds a Masters of Art in International Communications from the University of Leeds, a Bachelor of Science (1st Class Honors) in Psychology from the University of Birmingham, U.K. and has published papers in several international conferences and journals.