

# Is the SAF's Defence Posture Still Relevant as the Nature of Warfare Continues to Evolve?

by MAJ Bernard Tay

## Abstract:

In the years following her independence, Singapore has had to build up a credible military force to deter and defend threats to its security, territorial integrity and sovereignty. The author explains the various changes of our deterrence measures and the evolutionary stages of our SAF—from a 1<sup>st</sup> generation army to the highly sophisticated 3<sup>rd</sup> generation fighting force we know today. The essay also aims to evaluate how the SAF's defence policies have transformed over the years to better adapt to the recent unconventional threats our nation faces such as cyber-attacks and transnational terrorist attacks. Finally, this essay suggests how the SAF can better collaborate with Homefront agencies, government ministries and international bodies to be more effective in deterring such threats, as well as sustaining a stronger and more credible deterrence force.

*Keywords: Deterrence; Unconventional Warfare; National Security; Terrorism; Capability*

## INTRODUCTION

*"...since you know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."*

*– An extract from the Melian Dialogue<sup>1</sup>*

The past five decades have seen the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) rapidly transforming itself into one of the region's most technologically advanced and potent fighting forces.<sup>2</sup> As a small nation, the SAF plays an important role to "deter threats to Singapore's security, territorial integrity and sovereignty and, should deterrence fail, to secure a swift and decisive victory."<sup>3</sup> Since independence, the strategy of deterrence has remained a key component in Singapore's defence policy.

In the immediate years following her independence, Singapore had to quickly build up a credible military force to deal with a hostile regional environment. During that period, the 1<sup>st</sup> Generation SAF provided Singapore's basic defence with a deterrence posture analogous to that of a 'poisonous shrimp'—small, vulnerable, yet deadly to the aggressor when attacked.<sup>4</sup> By the early 1980s, with a better-equipped and more capable 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation SAF, the deterrence posture morphed into that of a 'porcupine', shredding the previous image of a 'poisonous shrimp' which was "essentially defeatist in nature."<sup>5</sup> The current 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation (3<sup>rd</sup> Gen) SAF transformation started in 2004 and aims to "upgrade its capabilities into an advanced networked force."<sup>6</sup> Some military analysts have likened the 3<sup>rd</sup> Gen SAF's posture to that of a 'dolphin'—agile, intelligent, quick and capable of killing more ferocious sharks with its razor sharp teeth when provoked.<sup>7</sup>

While there have been distinct enhancements to the SAF's warfighting capabilities and its attendant deterrence posture, the nature of warfare has also shifted significantly since the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s.<sup>8</sup> This essay will attempt to discuss the viability of the SAF's deterrence posture against the backdrop of an evolving security landscape. It will argue that while the SAF continues to be effective in deterring the breakout of conventional war against nation-states, its capabilities alone project limited deterrence against emerging unconventional threats involving non-state actors. This essay will explore means to strengthen this deterrence posture through collaborations with other national and international stakeholders. Finally, this essay will highlight key challenges that Singapore will need to address in order to sustain a deterrence posture that is both credible and effective in the years ahead.

## ELEMENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE DETERRENCE POSTURE

An effective military deterrence posture is one that is able to dissuade potential adversaries from undertaking actions intended to jeopardise national sovereignty. Deterrence may either come from imposing a high cost of action through the guarantee of retaliation, or by threatening to limit the outcome of the actions, or both. This translates to the two subsets of deterrence theory: (1) deterrence by retaliation/punishment; and (2) deterrence by denial.

For the strategy of deterrence to be effective, the adversary has to believe that the defending nation is able to 'walk the talk'. Credibility is influenced by the defending nation's underlying capabilities to retaliate and/or to deny success and its resolve to act on the deterrent threats. The following section will



Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, together with Minister for Defence, Dr Ng Eng Hen (far right), then-Chief of Defence Force LG Ng Chee Meng (far left), and former Chiefs of Defence Force, cutting a cake to commemorate 50 years of SAF defence.

examine how the SAF has projected its deterrence posture from independence until today.

## OVERCOMING EXTERNAL THREATS IN THE EARLY YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE

At the time of Singapore's independence, the SAF comprised merely of two infantry battalions with about 1,000 men, two naval patrol crafts, and no Airforce.<sup>9</sup> With the imminent withdrawal of all British troops from Singapore by December 1971, Singapore had to be self-reliant and could no longer rely on her past colonial master for her security.<sup>10</sup> As a 'Little Red Dot' that lacked strategic depth and a hinterland, Singapore had to project a deterrent image to make it undesirable for larger nations to exploit her vulnerability.<sup>11</sup> Being a majority-Chinese nation situated in a Malay Archipelago also added racial elements to an already tensed security landscape.<sup>12</sup>

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Not surprisingly, the main external threats in the early years of Singapore's independence came from her neighbours. To express firm opposition to the creation of the Malaysian Federation, Indonesia engaged in a hostile policy of *Konfrontasi*.<sup>13</sup> Singapore became a target of sabotage, bombings and was even considered as a location for a full-fledged military invasion. This offensive policy inevitably left Singapore wary of Indonesia's political intentions years after *Konfrontasi* had ended.<sup>15</sup>

Singapore's relationship with Malaysia did not fare any better. A difference in political ideology and bitter rivalry resulted in the separation of Singapore from

Malaysia on 9<sup>th</sup> August, 1965. Even after separation, the Singapore government was concerned over the urgent priority of building up its own defence capability from scratch.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the ongoing war in Vietnam added uncertainty and tension to regional security.

During the tumultuous period following independence, both 1 and 2 Singapore Infantry Regiment (SIR), together with the Singapore Volunteer Corps and the Vigilante Corps, played an instrumental role to "protect strategically important sites."<sup>17</sup> In addition, the military also contributed to the "maintenance of peace and order" by "performing guard duties and conducting section patrols."<sup>18</sup> While the strategy of deterrence was still effective, the inevitable withdrawal of the British forces would severely cripple its credibility.

As result, these driving forces catalysed the build-up of the SAF through the implementation of conscription in 1967 and a steady investment of up to 6% GDP in military defence.<sup>19</sup> By the early 1980s, the SAF had acquired new platforms such as 155mm artillery howitzers, landing crafts, air-lift assets and had trained up a sizeable force to beef up its land, air defence and naval capabilities.<sup>20</sup> With a more capable military force, the SAF was thus able to credibly communicate its true deterrence posture—a military that not only assured a swift and decisive retaliation on its aggressor, but also capable of denying the success of an offensive attack.<sup>21</sup>

## STRENGTHENING THE 'PORCUPINE'

After publicly announcing the shredding of the 'poisonous shrimp' image, the SAF continued to recruit and train quality people, develop its warfighting concepts and upgrade its military hardware. In 1991, the Army formed its first Combined Arms Division



*President Tony Tan receiving a briefing from Lieutenant Colonel Ooi Tjin Kai, Commanding Officer of RSS Steadfast, on how the Republic of Singapore Navy has developed to build itself up with new equipment, with better capabilities.*

that integrated infantry units with mobile Armour platforms, combat support and combat service support elements to "achieve a synergy of mobility, protection and firepower in operations."<sup>22</sup> The Air Force upgraded its fighter aircrafts to the A-4SU Super Skyhawk and strengthened its Ground-Based Air Defence (GBAD) assets while the Navy added missile corvettes and submarines to its fighting arsenal.<sup>23</sup> By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the SAF had transformed into a formidable deterrent force with a strong Army, Air Force and Navy.

Over this period, the SAF was successful in projecting deterrence to avert any armed conflict, while creating greater policy space for Singapore. The presence of a strong SAF also played a key role

in enabling Singapore to stand firm on her sovereign rights while resolving disputes with Malaysia arising from the water agreement, the 1990 Points-of-Agreement (POA) and the sovereignty of Pedra Branca.<sup>24</sup>

### THE 3<sup>RD</sup> GENERATION SAF TRANSFORMATION

Singapore has done well on the defence diplomacy front to forge stronger relationships with our regional neighbours through bilateral exercises and multilateral platforms such as the Five Power Defence Arrangement, the Shangri-La Dialogue and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM)-Plus. That said, the security challenges in the region continue to be uncertain and precipitous. The ongoing tension over territorial claims of the South China Sea between

China and the four claimant ASEAN countries—namely the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Vietnam—could disrupt regional stability and undermine the regional security architecture.<sup>25</sup> Against this backdrop, Asian countries have increased efforts to modernise their militaries in the last decade, with Southeast Asia seeing a near doubling of conventional arms transfer between 2005 to 2009.<sup>26</sup> As a globalised country with inherent strategic vulnerabilities, it is in Singapore's interest to continue to invest in a strong SAF to serve as the "ultimate guarantor of Singapore's security and sovereignty."<sup>27</sup>

In 2004, the SAF embarked on its 3<sup>rd</sup> Gen transformation to harness the advancement in technology, optimise the use of resources and better position the SAF in defending against a widened spectrum of threats.<sup>28</sup> It draws from the concepts of the Revolutions in Military Affairs (RMA) which leverages on advanced technology as a 'force-multiplier' on the battlefield. As demonstrated in Exercise Forging Sabre 2011, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Gen SAF relies on a networked and integrated system-of-systems to acquire timely and accurate information in order to deliver swift and precise fires on the key enemy targets.<sup>29</sup> The 3<sup>rd</sup> Gen SAF will see greater synergy between the three Services based on the concept of Integrated-Knowledge Command and Control (IKC2) to aid in the decision-making process and the delivery of precise effects.<sup>30</sup>

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The steady investment in defence capabilities has enabled the SAF to strengthen its deterrence posture with the acquisition of new platforms such as the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS), Leopard 2A4 Main Battle Tank (MBT), Terrex Infantry Carrier Vehicles, Formidable-Class Stealth Frigates with their S-70B Naval Helicopters, F-15SG Fighter Jets, G550 Airborne Early Warning Aircraft, as well the potential acquisition of the F-35 multi-role fighter aircraft and the replacement of the Challenger-class submarine.<sup>31</sup> In addition, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Gen SAF continues to invest in the training, nurturing and professional development of its soldiers, airmen and sailors, ensuring that they possess both the necessary competencies as well as the will to fight.

## THE EVOLVING NATURE OF WARFARE

While the strategy of deterrence has proven to be effective thus far when dealing with nation-states, it is less so against non-state actors such as terrorists and insurgents. The attack of a Shell oil-refinery by four armed terrorists in 1974 and the hijack of SQ117 by four terrorists from the Pakistan Peoples Party in 1991 lend evidence to this. One prominent theory of the future of warfare is the notion of Fourth-Generation Warfare (4GW). According to William Lind, 4GW is characterised by the return to a decentralised state of warfare waged by violent non-state actors on the nation-state.<sup>32</sup> Their intent is to impose their will on the state government by inflicting maximum damage using low-cost means of aggression such as suicide bombers and guerrilla warfare.<sup>33</sup> Rupert Smith coins this as the "war amongst the people," which is marked by protracted low-intensity conflict.<sup>34</sup> The killing of innocent hostages by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) demonstrates this type of warfare waged by terrorist groups using unlawful means of fear and coercion to achieve its political agenda.

## PLUGGING INTO A LARGER NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL DETERRENCE FRAMEWORK

Albeit a major instrument of national security, the SAF is not and should not be the sole stakeholder responsible for the full-spectrum of unconventional threats which looms over Singapore. The SAF has to remain focused on its primary mission of defending the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Singapore, while working where possible, with other national and international stakeholders to tackle unconventional threats.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the deterrence posture in dealing with unconventional threats should come from a joint effort between multiple local and overseas agencies, and not just from the SAF itself.

Acknowledging the challenge of deterring unconventional threats such as terrorism, piracy and cyber attacks with a largely conventional force,

the SAF was reorganised, as part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Gen transformation, to be flexible and highly responsive across a full-spectrum of operations. Integrated Task Forces such as the Island Defence Task Force (IDTF), Special Operations Task Force (SOTF), Joint Task Force (JTF) and Maritime Security Task Force (MSTF) were formed to answer to peacetime security threats.<sup>36</sup> The SAF has also recently formed a Cyber Defence Ops Hub to deal with emerging cyber threats.<sup>37</sup> Each of the Task Forces brings together relevant entities from existing SAF-wide resources and works closely with partners from other ministries and Homefront agencies, including the Singapore Police Force and the Singapore Civil Defence Force. The IDTF, for example, works closely with the Homefront agencies when it conducts peacetime security operations such as the protection of key installations, while the MSTF works closely with the Police Coast Guard.<sup>38</sup>



*The 3rd Gen SAF - more technologically equipped to deal with emerging cyber threats.*

Stakeholders	Type of Deterrence
Military	<p>Deter by Retaliation: Applying necessary force based on Rules of Engagement (ROE) on aggressors.</p> <p>Deter by Denial: IDTF protection of key installations; Cyber defence Hub to deny cyber-attacks; Conduct of coastal patrols by MSTF; JTF to react to Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) contingencies; Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Explosive (CBRE) units to respond to bio-chemical threats and contain the spread.</p>
Law Enforcement	<p>Deter by Retaliation: Bringing perpetrators to justice; Imposing travel restriction on family members.</p> <p>Deter by Denial: Internal Security Act to enforce preventive detention and prevent subversion.</p>
Civil Defence	Deter by Denial: Quick response to limit damage.
Racial and Religious Groups	Deter by Denial: Promoting racial and religious harmony; Rehabilitation of radicalised Muslims.
Media	Deter by Denial: Limiting media coverage of terrorist attacks to prevent spread of terrorists ideology and demands; Block out websites which promote radicalisation; Spread messages of moderate religion and social harmony.
Financial Regulatory	<p>Deter by Retaliation: Impose huge penalty on organisations, nations that finance insurgents, terrorist activities, spread of on Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD).</p> <p>Deter by Denial: Economic resilience to recover quickly; To deny financing of Terrorism and WMD proliferation.</p>
Public	Deter by Denial: Physical and psychological resilience to recover from shock quickly; Being vigilant and alert to possible threats; Knowing how to react during contingencies to mitigate ill-effects.

*Table 1: National Deterrence Framework against Non-Conventional Threats.*

At the international front, the SAF's overseas contribution to the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, as well as in a Multi-National Counter-Piracy Task Force, Combined Task Force (CTF) 151, contributed to the international efforts in deterring transnational terrorism and piracy. After the Indian Ocean tsunami struck neighbouring countries

on Boxing Day 2004, the SAF's professionalism and quick response to provide aid to disaster-hit cities in Indonesia added credibility to its deterrence posture.<sup>39</sup>

Taking a leaf from the Total Defence framework of Military, Social, Civil, Economic and Psychological Defence, *Table 1* proposes a national deterrence

framework which highlights how each key stakeholder can contribute to strengthen Singapore's deterrent posture against such threats. Although the strategy of deterrence may be limited, the ability to deter some threats makes it still a relevant strategy for Singapore. Ultimately when deterrence fails, the SAF, together with the Homefront Agencies, have to work closely to deal with the threats swiftly and decisively.

### **SUSTAINING A STRONG AND CREDIBLE DETERRENT FORCE**

Thus far, this essay has addressed the SAF's deterrent posture from a capability perspective. As a conscript force, the people's will to fight and defend the nation also play a large factor in the SAF's credibility. A recent survey conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies found strong support for National Service (NS), with 98.5% of respondents agreeing that "NS is necessary for the defence of Singapore."<sup>40</sup> The Committee to Strengthen NS (CSNS) was set up in early 2013 to explore means to maintain strong public support for NS. Going forward, it is important for MINDEF/SAF to strengthen the defence narrative so that future generations will continue to believe in the purpose of NS. With a greater competition for the national budget to fund other commitments such as social welfare benefits, education and public transport, the SAF has to continue to be prudent in its defence spending, and may need to justify harder for a consistent share of the budget. Hence, there will be a need for policymakers to increase the level of engagement with the public on defence policies to achieve greater buy-in.<sup>41</sup>

The media plays an important role in shaping perception as well as winning hearts and minds. In the information age, the SAF has to be innovative and

adaptable in communicating, using a broad range of media platforms to reach out to its audience. Having strong strategic communication capabilities will aid in the projection of SAF's deterrent posture into the mindshare of potential aggressors.

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### **CONCLUSION**

The SAF has served its mission in ensuring Singapore's peace and security through her rapid development from a Third to First World Country. This is a result of astute defence policies put in place by the first generation of political leaders, notably the late Dr Goh Keng Swee. The evolving threats in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will require the SAF be adaptive and to work in collaboration with other Homefront Agencies, government ministries and international bodies in order to be more effective in deterring and dealing with such threats. Most importantly, to ensure Singapore's survival, the current and future generations of Singaporeans must continue to place a premium on defence, and be willing to pay the price for peace and security. 🌐

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