

# Full Spectrum Operations - A Viable Strategic Posture for the SAF?

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## Abstract:

In the modern world today, countries would have a defence force to deter opposing threats and to help other countries with operations, such as peacekeeping and humanitarian aid, which enables the country to be full-spectrum capable. In this essay, the author defines what full-spectrum capability is with reference to Singapore, which is inclusive of conventional warfighting skills, participation in Operations Other than War and the security of Singapore's land. The author also explains the need for the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) to have full-spectrum capability and he points out the challenges that the SAF may face in sustaining a full-spectrum capability posture for the different operations, for example, limited manpower and resources.

*Keywords: Peacekeeping; Conventional; Full-Spectrum Capability; Humanitarian Aid; Challenges*

## INTRODUCTION

### Definition of Full Spectrum Capability

The United States (US) Army's Field Manual 3-0 defines full-spectrum operations as the ability *"to combine offensive, defensive and stability or civil support operations simultaneously as part of an interdependent joint force... to achieve decisive results."*<sup>1</sup> Full-spectrum capability for the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) comprises capabilities in the fields of conventional war-fighting, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions, peace support operations, homeland security, maritime security and counter-terrorism. In broad terms, these can be categorised as Joint Operations (the SAF's conventional warfighting capability), Coalition Operations (practising interoperability with foreign partners) and Operations Other than War (inclusive of United Nations (UN)

Peacekeeping Operations, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief).

Maintaining such a broad spectrum of capabilities raises a number of challenges, particularly for a small country with limited manpower.

## THE NECESSITY OF FULL SPECTRUM CAPABILITY

For a military organisation, mission success is the paramount consideration. Clausewitz propounded that *"War is simply a continuation of Politik by other means."* By extension, the military force acts as an instrument of policy, whether in peace or war. The SAF's mission reflects this idea: *"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."*<sup>2</sup> The various aspects of the full spectrum posture each contribute to fulfilling a specific part of the mission.



At Exercise Trident, troops from the SAF and the Australian Defence Force attend a briefing before embarking on a joint urban training mission.

Conventional warfighting skills, which for the SAF comprises Joint Operations for the SAF, fulfil the intent of a swift and decisive victory. The high level of training, constantly benchmarked and improved through overseas training and peace support operations, as well as high-technology equipping also serves as a strong deterrent to a potential aggressor. Conventional warfighting capability thus forms the bedrock of Singapore's defence policy. A strong conventional capability *"allows [Singapore] to chart its own course as an independent sovereign nation, without having to buckle under pressure from larger states, or to become subservient to their strategic imperatives."*<sup>3</sup> This is a lesson learnt from Singapore's own history, when it was a colony and a keystone of British Imperial defence in the Far East. During World War Two (WWII), competing imperial defence needs led to a neglect

of Singapore's defence and resulted in a successful Japanese invasion within a month of commencement of hostilities.<sup>4</sup> This impressed deeply into Singapore's psyche the need to rely upon itself as the ultimate guarantor of its safety and independence.

That does not however relegate the importance of foreign partnerships. Coalition operations seek to make Singapore a valued (and hopefully indispensable) friend to our international partners, in particular, the United States (US). The continued presence of US military forces contributes to regional stability and thus, to Singapore's own peace, security and economic well-being.<sup>5</sup> The knowledge that Singapore has the support of external partners with large force projection capabilities further adds to the deterrent message. Partnerships also allow Singapore access



to advanced military technologies such as the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) programme, further sharpening its conventional edge.<sup>6</sup> Neglecting to maintain coalition operations capability would imply that Singapore is willing to take its defence into its own hands, without reliance on outside partners. This may seem viable at present, with Singapore considered the best-equipped and trained force in the region.<sup>7</sup> However, the SAF can never take for granted that access to advanced military technology is given, nor that powerful friends will always be able and willing to come to our aid.

Participation in Operations Other Than War (OOTW), such as UN Peace Support Operations (PSO), humanitarian assistance and enforcing international

maritime security, strengthens Singapore's diplomatic efforts as a responsible member of the international community, thus enhancing the government's wider 'diplomacy' approach to ensuring peace and security. A number of PSOs, such as Timor Leste, United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) and the Gulf of Aden maritime security deployment, contribute directly to regional stability—a matter of importance to a small country that relies on free and unhindered sea trade. Singapore's participation in UN operations marks it as a responsible member of the global community and provides a moral high ground for Singapore to achieve its diplomatic goals. It also reinforces Singapore's support for *"a world based on the principles of co-operation and consultation,"* through the processes



A member of the SAF's medical team, ME2 Brian Benitez, providing treatment for an Afghan civilian during Operation Blue Ridge, a Peacekeeping Operation.

of the UN.<sup>8</sup> Relinquishing peacekeeping participation would effectively signal that Singapore does not have faith in the UN's legitimacy and the principle of consensus between nations. In addition, the SAF would lose opportunities of benchmarking and learning from more experienced forces and the opportunity of operational experience for deployed forces.<sup>9</sup>

## THE CHALLENGES OF SUSTAINING A FULL SPECTRUM CAPABILITY POSTURE

However, maintaining the full set of capabilities across a broad spectrum imposes specific challenges on any military. Skill sets and equipment requirements naturally vary for different military scenarios. In terms of training, General Charles Krulak's vision of the 'Three Block War' propounds that a lengthy—indeed lifelong—learning and development process is necessary for Marine Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) leadership to be empowered to fight in the three-block war, a microcosm of the full

spectrum operation.<sup>10</sup> The SAF does not have this luxury of lengthy training for the bulk of its conscript force. Different attitudes are also needed for different operations in the spectrum. Strategic analyst Thomas Barnett expounded the difficulties the US military faces when deploying young, aggressive soldiers into peacekeeping scenarios where patience and restraint are needed.<sup>11</sup> This implies a significant difference in the training needed for warfighting, as against PSO type operations. Equipment needs for the different operation types also vary. Joint Operations equipment is naturally heavy on firepower—in the SAF's case, it is

represented by the acquisitions of main battle tanks, fighter aircraft and stealth frigates. These are, of course useful for coalition operations in a warfighting scenario, but less so in OOTW situations. As an example, the SAF's deployment in Timor Leste was supported by light transport helicopter and light patrol vehicles, while the humanitarian assistance mission in the aftermath of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami required sealift, airlift and engineer construction assets. Purchasing a wide variety of assets to address aspects across the spectrum and operating those assets, presents a challenge on a limited budget as well as on possible manpower constraints.

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### The Challenges of Maintaining the Joint Edge

The SAF's Joint Ops capabilities are developed on the basis of achieving strategic deterrence. This is however partly dependent on the SAF continuing to be able to spend on advanced

weapons and technology, since it cannot compete with regional neighbours on sheer manpower.<sup>12</sup> In Fiscal Year 2010, the SAF's defence budget recorded its smallest rise in several years, a reflection of global economic difficulties and financial crises.<sup>13</sup> While the government remains strongly committed to maintaining current levels of defence spending, this episode proved that Singapore and the SAF are not immune to economic factors.<sup>14</sup> A situation may in future arise whereby the Singapore Government is forced to freeze or reduce the defence budget. At the same time, Indonesia's economy is rapidly growing, having outperformed

every other Asian economy except China in 2012.<sup>15</sup> In 2011 and 2012 for the Indonesian military, that is, the Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI), procurement reached US\$ 2.8 billion, with a defence budget projected to reach US\$ 11.5 billion by 2016.<sup>16</sup> It has reiterated a desire to purchase new and better platforms, such as main battle tanks and infantry fighting vehicles, in a bid to modernise its military.<sup>17</sup> Malaysia is expected to increase defence expenditure by 44% between 2012 and 2016.<sup>18</sup> While such expenditure is probably not directed at taking on any particular armed forces, it will provide the basis for more powerful neighbouring militaries in future. This would force the SAF to keep itself ahead of the 'competition' in the expensive realm of conventional warfighting assets. For example, the next viable option for upgrading Singapore's airpower is the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF). A one-for-one replacement of Singapore's current airpower platforms with JSF fighters would cost US\$ 11 billion—exceeding the entire annual defence budget in 2010.<sup>19</sup> Another aspect of maintaining the SAF's edge in Joint Operations is manpower to sustain the fighting forces. Projections indicate that the citizen pool will shrink significantly around 2025.<sup>20</sup> This has implications for staffing of the SAF's conscript-manned manoeuvre forces and potential solutions such as increased immigration are proving unpopular with the voting public.<sup>21</sup> If the size of the SAF decreases further, the need for a technological edge, as force multipliers, will become increasingly pronounced.

### The Challenges of Coalition Operations

The necessity of retaining strategic partnership for security and regional stability requires the SAF to maintain interoperability of equipment and training with selected foreign partners, particularly the US.<sup>22</sup> Australia, for example, is a close partner of the US. Its 2009 White Paper on defence clearly defines the need for interoperability with US forces,

despite the increasing expense of keeping up with the technologically advanced forces of the US.<sup>23</sup> This somewhat limits procurement options and dictates training methodologies. In Singapore's case, the SAF has, to date, only purchased one piece of Russian equipment; on the other hand, US equipment has made up 60% of Singapore's past purchases.<sup>24</sup> The SAF's procurement processes are respected for long-term rationality and cost effectiveness in Singapore's context and with limited resources, it must continue to choose what would be best for the SAF's own needs. This may not always offer the best interoperability with a specific strategic partner. Furthermore, the benefits of strategic partnership must be reviewed periodically.

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### The Challenges of OOTW and Peacekeeping

The conduct of OOTW has often been cited as having a detrimental effect in the short term. A study conducted on the American experience in Somalia indicated such issues as exhaustion from a high operational tempo, manpower and equipment degradation, and a reduction or cancellation of training.<sup>25</sup> A separate report detailed eroded combat skills, loss of unit integrity and reduced training for units that had deployed to Bosnia.<sup>26</sup> These would impact force readiness. For the larger US forces, reduced readiness in a brigade sized force is not a critical threat; however, the SAF has a much smaller force structure and the effects of reduced readiness in



a single brigade, would be proportionally more serious. Furthermore, the bulk of the SAF's forces is comprised of active duty conscripts (NSFs) and reservists (NSmen).<sup>27</sup> Their training time is limited and must be highly focused. A survey of the US Army officers in 1997 showed that 37% of respondents felt that at least one 'critical' OOTW tasking was beyond their unit's standard Mission Essential Task List, thus indicating the need for specific OOTW training and equipping.<sup>28</sup> However, time spent training for OOTW is time that could be spent sharpening the SAF's Joint Operations edge, a critical consideration for conscript NSFs on a two-year training cycle. An additional consideration is whether to deploy NSFs and NSmen, essentially citizen soldiers, on overseas operations where they will face the possibility of casualties. Since the 2011 General Elections, the Singapore electorate has become increasingly critical of government policy.<sup>29</sup> This may eventually affect the SAF's mandate to deploy forces for UN operations, or even to sustain ongoing operations in the event of media-publicised casualties. This limits the type of UN operations the SAF can participate in, with a bias towards Peace Keeping in relatively benign environments.<sup>30</sup> Currently, the SAF generally deploys regular forces to participate in UN peacekeeping and other OOTW operations, with very small voluntary NSmen participation. As the regular pool of the SAF is small, the size and type of the SAF's contribution is necessarily limited.

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## SOLUTIONS FOR MAINTAINING A FULL SPECTRUM POSTURE

In summary, the SAF faces a number of challenges in maintaining a full spectrum posture: limited, conscript manpower; procurement with a budget that is high in absolute terms at present, but not guaranteed; limitations in time available for training; the need to balance between the requirements of strategic partnership with foreign powers, against what is best for the SAF; and the need to retain conventional warfighting ability while training for and conducting OOTW. There are a number of ways in which the SAF can mitigate these challenges.

### Leadership

The US military's Joint Publication on OOTW recognises that *"there will most likely be insufficient time to train for a specific operation ... a well-trained force can adapt to Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) under the leadership of officers and NCOs educated in the principles and types of MOOTW."*<sup>31</sup> In short, the ability of a force to adapt to various mission types is dependent on its leadership. The SAF has emphasised life-long learning and seeks to produce 'competent, adaptive' leaders who "appreciate the complex operating environment."<sup>32</sup> By enhancing the initiative, knowledge and professionalism of its leaders, the SAF is able to ensure the flexibility of its forces' training and necessary mindset for conducting the full spectrum of operations.

## LEVERAGING ON THE SINGAPORE POPULATION AND THE NETWORKED FORCE

Singapore's population is considered to be one of the best-educated in the region and the world.<sup>33</sup> As a result, the SAF is able to field high technology equipment in the hands of a technically literate conscript force.<sup>34</sup> The capability of Singapore's people



*Exercise Golden Sand involves support elements from the Air Force, Army, and Navy.*

is the basis of the SAF's ongoing '3G Transformation', the development of a network-centric warfare approach. This results in a greatly increased force multiplier effect, allowing the SAF to punch far above its weight in terms of soldier-for-soldier and platform-for-platform comparisons of conventional capability.<sup>35</sup> It ensures that with fewer expensive platforms and smaller manpower, the SAF's Joint Operations edge is sustained for the foreseeable future. The Military Domain Experts Scheme announced in 2009 also allows for the SAF to retain personnel with deep experience and knowledge in their fields of expertise.<sup>36</sup> This allows the SAF to retain organisational knowledge and enhance its development in the 3G Transformation.

### Outsourcing

The SAF has outsourced selected non-critical and administrative tasks, to free up combatant personnel to undertake more relevant roles. This is a key aspect of optimising the SAF's fighting force to its maximum potential in relation to its small size, while also being cost-effective for the SAF.<sup>37</sup>

### Building the Local Defence Industry

Foreign military hardware suppliers have lamented that technology transfers have become a prerequisite of doing business with the SAF.<sup>38</sup> Part of this aim is to develop the local defence industry in order to "allow the SAF to customise and develop weapon systems to meet its own unique operational requirements," as opposed to an over-reliance on our foreign partners and coalition capabilities.<sup>39</sup>

### Finding our Niche

Since the SAF is restricted to deploying only small scale forces in overseas operations, one solution is to send a force that can leverage Singapore's strengths, or provide an impact without a large footprint. This has been done, for example in the SAF's deployment to Afghanistan, where Unmanned Aerial Vehicles and Weapon Locating Radar Teams were sent in support of International Security Assistance Force operations.<sup>40</sup> These fulfil needs that are not easily filled by other nations and allow the SAF to contribute in a meaningful manner, without overtaxing budgetary considerations, or deploying its people overtly into harm's way.

### CONCLUSION

The full spectrum capability is a necessity for the defence of Singapore in the new, fluid and complex international environment. Maintaining this posture forms a vital part of Singapore's framework for maintaining regional stability and a basis of Singapore's deterrence and diplomacy efforts. It however presents a host of challenges for a small nation with a largely conscript and reservist armed forces. Nonetheless, with careful focusing of resources, enhanced leadership training and leveraging of Singapore's and the SAF's inherent strengths, the SAF will be able to sustain its full spectrum capabilities—and even strengthen them further—for the foreseeable future. 🌐

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