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The Need for Engagement in Singapore's Defence Policies

By Ong Weichong

Synopsis

As Singapore's citizen soldiers become ever more politically conscious, policymakers must be ready to widen the scope and level of engagement in the formulation of defence policies.

Commentary

IN RECENT weeks, there have been calls for cuts to Singapore's defence budget and a review of the necessity of conscription. Such propositions have been subject to much media attention and debate. Proponents of the calls for cuts to the defence budget and the professionalisation of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) argue that the security needs of Singapore can be adequately served by a small regular military at a fraction of the current manning levels and defence budget.

Implications

As a corollary, government spending hitherto dedicated to defence can then be directed to other areas such as social welfare. Such a move may make sense from a socio-economic perspective, but any arbitrary cuts to defence spending, however popular with the electorate, will endanger the security and continued prosperity of Singapore for three main reasons:

1. It sends a negative signal to Singapore's key regional and international security partners that Singapore is no longer taking its security commitments seriously;
2. The geostrategic situation of Singapore is very different from other states that have recently slashed their defence budgets and abolished conscription – which tend to be predominantly in Western Europe;
3. In the local context, National Service (NS) plays an important role as a social-leveller and an integral pillar of nation-building that ensures that the SAF remains connected with the citizens that it defends.

In an age whereby a plethora of alternative opinions are readily accessible within minutes of a Google search, there is much that policymakers can do to better explain the *raison d'être* of Singapore's defence policies. They need to engage the Generation Y citizen soldiers who will pose difficult "Why" questions when called to sacrifice their time, careers, personal aspirations and possibly lives in defence of Singapore.

Arbitrary Defence Cuts?

In recent deployments to Afghanistan and the Gulf of Aden, the SAF has acquitted itself well in operations with its coalition partners. In so doing, the SAF has built up a reputation as a small but effective and reliable contributor to international security. At the present level, Singapore's defence spending is adequate to meet the requirements of the SAF's limited but carefully considered overseas deployments in security building. However, arbitrary cuts in defence spending will undermine the SAF's ability to sustain its present level of commitment to coalition operations. They also send a negative signal that Singapore is and can no longer be an active contributor to regional and international security.

Such perceptions of Singapore as a 'free rider' rather than a net contributor in security affairs will seriously damage Singapore's relations with its key regional and international security partners. Thus, the implementation of any proposed populist defence cuts that present an arbitrary figure without due consideration of Singapore's unique geo-strategic vulnerabilities and security needs will erode Singapore's ability to deal with potential security challenges in an increasingly complex and globalised threat environment.

Why NS Matters

Taken at face value, the recent abolition of conscription in various Western European countries and Taiwan in favour of all-professional militaries might seem like a plausible option for Singapore. What might work in other countries, however, does not guarantee success when transplanted into Singapore.

Unlike Taiwan, Singapore does not have a substantial population base in the tens of millions from which to build a sizable regular force. Unlike the smaller states in Western Europe, Singapore sits in a region where territorial disputes, border skirmishes, insurgencies, piracy and other violent challenges to state power are very much active. In short, Singapore does not have the requisite manpower resources to build a sizable regular force, nor can it adequately guarantee its national security and protect its sovereign interests with a small regular force. NS is therefore a strategic necessity for Singapore's continued survival as a viable nation state.

Moreover, NS is more than a guarantor of Singapore's national security. In Singapore's social context, NS is a shared rite of passage that binds young men from different creeds, race and socio-economic backgrounds. From "new citizens" to second and fourth generation Singaporeans, NS unifies Singaporeans like no other tool of social integration can. In sum, NS is the ultimate social leveller and an invaluable pillar of nation-building.

Why Citizens Must be Engaged

On the growing gulf between the all-volunteer US military drawn from just one percent of the population and the broader American public, Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff remarked: "America doesn't know its military and the United States military doesn't know America." Admiral Mullen's comment highlights the dangerous disconnect that can develop if a military is disengaged from the citizenry that it protects. Hence, a largely citizen-based rather than an all-volunteer SAF ensures that by and large, the SAF remains connected to the society that it serves.

To maintain the connection between the SAF's Generation Y citizen soldiers and the military institution, there must be an honest dialogue on the "Why We Serve" question. In an age where Singapore's networked Generation Yers are mobile individuals in every sense of the word (including access to information), policymakers cannot assume that Generation Yers will simply leave defence issues to the experts.

The lively discussion on defence policies in recent weeks aptly reflects a more questioning generation of citizen soldiers whose instinct is ask the reason why. Hence, a more inclusive engagement of Singapore's citizen soldiers in the formulation of defence policies will go a long way in ensuring their commitment -- and protect our common long-term investment in nation-building this lap and the next.

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