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2011

Fook, B. W. L. (2011). Image matters : military effectiveness and SAF. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 067). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/94755>



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No. 67/2011 dated 3 May 2011

Image Matters: Military Effectiveness and SAF

By Bernard Fook Weng Loo

Synopsis

The recent incident of the NSF and his maid carrying his backpack generated amusement in some quarters. However, this incident, not managed properly, might eventually undermine national confidence in the SAF.

Commentary

THE RECENT furore regarding the full-time National Serviceman having his backpack carried by his domestic helper has died down. This event generated a range of emotional responses, from anger to amusement from the Singaporean and expatriate communities respectively. Perhaps it is timely to assess the lessons and the potential impact of this event.

The Central Question

For an armed forces that has a history of war, its performance in this history is evidence of its strategic effectiveness (or lack thereof, in cases of military defeat). The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) is notorious for the often slovenly appearance of its soldiers, but that does not matter, precisely because the IDF has more often than not performed very well in protecting the national interests of the country.

The SAF has no such luxury. It has never experienced war. True, the SAF has participated in operational missions under various international coalitions, and the performances of the soldiers deployed to such missions have generally been very positive. But as an armed forces, as a single military organisation waging war to protect Singapore's national interests, the SAF is ultimately untested. This begs the question of the strategic effectiveness of the SAF. It is a question thoroughly justified since the SAF has commanded a very significant proportion of public resources, and the Singapore public has a right to know that the defence dollar has been well spent.

(Potential) Fallacy of Deterrence

No doubt, the SAF can claim that inasmuch as Singapore has not experienced war, the SAF has fulfilled its mission of deterring aggression, and that only the second part of its mission – securing decisive victory when deterrence fails – remains untested. The problem with this claim is that the argument is circular: my deterrence works because no one entertains notions of attacking me; the fact that no one entertains such notions is precisely because of the fear of what my armed forces will do to that potential aggressor.

There are at least two problems with deterrence strategy. One, the absence of threat does not validate deterrence strategy; otherwise, the only conclusion one can reach is that Canada and the United States are at peace precisely because both countries succeed in deterring each other from potential aggression. Clearly, this is an absurd argument. The peaceful relationship between Canada and the United States has absolutely nothing to do with deterrence; rather there are other factors that underpin that peaceful relationship. The second problem with deterrence strategy, following from the first, is that we can never be certain that it works; we can only know when it fails.

What this therefore means is that the SAF cannot claim strategic effectiveness simply because Singapore has not faced war. The fact that Singapore has experienced peace throughout its existence as a sovereign country may be attributable to other factors potentially at work.

Question of Credibility

Nevertheless, its peaceful existence cannot preclude the possibility – however remote – that Singapore might in the future face conflict and war. Inasmuch as this is true, then Singapore needs the SAF. Importantly, Singapore needs an SAF that at least has the public's confidence that if war ever comes, the SAF can and will be able to defend Singapore's existence. Both the Singapore public and foreign businesses (upon which so much of the Singapore economy is based) need to believe that the SAF is indeed a credible fighting force.

Given that the SAF has no military history upon which to rest its claims of credibility, then the image of the SAF begins to matter fundamentally. The SAF therefore needs as much of the best accoutrements of war – the combat aircraft, tanks, warships, the weapons systems, in other words – that the country can afford. That, however, is merely one side of the equation.

The second necessary part of the equation is the credibility of the human fighter behind those weapons systems. Skill at arms is merely one half of this part of the equation. Skill at arms in peacetime training does not necessarily equate to skill at arms in combat. The military analyst SLA Marshall in his book *Men Under Fire* demonstrates that the majority of soldiers do not fire their weapons in the proper manner in which they were trained. What is necessary, therefore, is the image of the soldier. Simply put, the soldier has to look, well, like a soldier. In that regard, the image of a soldier having his family's female domestic helper carry his backpack is, well, not the image of a soldier that inspires confidence.

Revisiting Military Effectiveness

In that regard, this incident may undermine the public's confidence in the SAF. The SAF may well argue that this was an isolated incident, that it is by no means reflective of all soldiers in the SAF. The SAF may also argue, as do most modern armed forces, that strategic effectiveness is derived from the strategic system that the armed forces will fight under. Both arguments are fair enough.

However, the best systems in the world will always be undermined by the human operators of the system. The best combat aircraft in the world is useless if the pilot flying this aircraft is poorly trained. A soldier who does not carry his own backpack therefore conveys an image that cannot be comforting.

This one incident does not necessarily mean that public confidence in the SAF suffers, nor should it mean that business confidence will necessarily suffer as well. However, given that the SAF commands a significant proportion of the national budget – Singapore is after all, the second highest per capita defence spender in the world – the public response is justified.

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