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The Singapore Armed Forces and Domestic Security

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The Context

MINISTER OF Defence Mr. Teo Chee Hean recently tabled in Parliament for a second time the Singapore Armed Forces (Amendment) Bill. The Bill seeks to amend the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) Act to give the military legal powers when conducting domestic security operations. The revisions to the Act will put in place “a proper legal framework to ensure everything in the conduct of security operations is properly specified, and to lay out clearly what servicemen can and cannot do”.

As Mr. Teo noted in his parliamentary address on May 21, the context of national security has changed dramatically since the terrorist attacks of September 11. Singapore, like other countries, “faces security threats that operate across jurisdictions for external defence and internal security”. In order to fulfil the mission of national defence, militaries around the world must undertake “homeland, air and maritime security operations in a non-war environment”.

Why the SAF?

There are sound reasons to expand the SAF’s operational ambit. Firstly, the SAF is an extremely effective organisation. It is the largest and best-funded public institution. The SAF has highly competent personnel and possesses sophisticated hardware and reconnaissance capabilities not available to other civilian agencies. The SAF is also used to contingency planning and the speedy deployment of forces. It has expertise in establishing control of an area quickly and monitoring movements of people and equipment. All these facets make the SAF an important asset for national emergencies.

Secondly, there is already a precedent for the SAF’s role in domestic operations. The SAF has been called upon to support civilian authorities in operations requiring specialised capabilities, such as *Chemical, Biological Radiological and Explosive* operations. SAF personnel are deployed on a long-term basis to protect key installations, such as Jurong Island, Sembawang Wharves and Changi Airport. SAF troops have also been mobilized to assist the Singapore Police Force to provide security during major events like the International Olympic Committee Session, the S2006-IMF-World Bank Meetings and National Day parades.

Moreover, the SAF has played an effective role in humanitarian operations, both domestically and internationally. For example, the SAF provided medical and logistical assistance during the March 1986 Hotel New World collapse. Beyond our borders, the SAF has made significant contributions to disaster relief missions in recent years. Most visible of these missions was the medical and logistical support to Indonesia following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

Drawbacks

Institutionalising a major domestic role for the SAF is thus a necessary step in view of the multifaceted nature of security threats. However, there are three reasons why caution should be exercised.

Firstly, expanding the SAF's role may harm its readiness to perform external security operations. Any expansion in operations would likely lead to the diversion of personnel and equipment away from external security to these new security tasks. Chains of command, doctrine and training, and rules of engagement for military personnel would also have to be designed, established and monitored. Also, the SAF is in the midst of a fundamental transformation — the move towards a 3rd Generation military. Adding domestic concerns could potentially detract the armed forces from their main combat endeavour. Indeed, the SAF's transformation is onerous — the military already has to contend with the integration of new weapon platforms with modern command, control and communication platforms and also manage command structure changes.

Secondly, military and police work require fundamentally different mindsets. These skills are not easily interchangeable. Police are trained to de-escalate situations. They are obliged to use minimum force at all times and draw their weapons only as a last resort. Military personnel, on the other hand, are trained to be decisive with the use of force. In war, it is not customary to ask for explanations of individual deaths or woundings. But in constabulary work, it is. This is why policemen are equipped and trained in the use of non-lethal means of crowd control. Soldiers hardly ever are.

Thirdly, there may be problems related to inter-operability. The police and armed forces are different organisations with non-parallel operating procedures and equipment. As the police spend almost all their time training and operating in urban settings, as individuals or groups of individuals, they are likely to be familiar with the domestic milieu and also the public's attitudes and reactions. Military personnel, on the other hand, spend the bulk of their time training in non-urban terrain, normally as a component of larger units and for large scale combat operations.

The differing organisational mindsets is best illustrated with a potentially devastating incident during the 1992 Los Angeles riots when military personnel were brought in to help restore order in the aftermath of the Rodney King verdict. During the riots, officers from the Los Angeles Police Department, accompanied by US Marines, were asked to respond to a domestic dispute. When they arrived at the scene shots were fired. One police officer reportedly yelled "cover me" to the Marines. With that command, the police officer was directing the Marines to point their weapons and be prepared to shoot if necessary. The Marines responded as they had been trained to react to that phrase — over 200 rounds were fired.

What Should Be Done?

A role for the military in domestic security is arguably appropriate and desirable, especially with the increasing global focus on homeland security. But a number of steps must be taken to clearly define that role.

Firstly, we need legislation to clearly define how the armed forces will be used domestically. The SAF (Amendment) Bill is a step in the right direction as it delineates what activities are permissible and appropriate in supporting domestic security. Secondly, the new Bill must be based on the premise that the military's participation in domestic security is a last resort. We should not attempt to institutionalise any regular role for the armed forces in domestic concerns. The military must be an emergency force, not a daily protector.

Thirdly, when military personnel are called upon for domestic concerns, it must be done with plans for integrating their units into a civilian-led command structure. Clear lines of authority and spheres of responsibility must be delineated and maintained. Otherwise, during crises, military authority and activity will coexist awkwardly with civilian law enforcement functions. Further inter-agency work is thus needed to enhance inter-operability between the SAF and the Home Team. It is essential that a ‘whole of government’ approach is adopted. This requires an emphasis on ‘the need to share’ information rather than the traditional ‘need to know’ doctrine so that a silo mentality can be avoided by government agencies.

Fourthly, we must expand the capacity of the Home Team so that they can develop competence in dealing with national contingencies. If Singapore relies on the armed forces to handle domestic security emergencies, we run the risk of retarding the development of the Home Ministry’s agencies, whose training, mission and function are better tailored to domestic concerns. If considerable resources will be spent on developing training programmes to teach soldiers how to behave like policemen, why not train policemen to be ready to deal with evolving security threats?

The military is more important to Singapore than ever before in this changing security environment. It will face new tests in the decades ahead. It is thus imperative that our security agencies — the SAF and the Home Team — be in constant conversation about how and what their roles are in this evolving national security context.

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