



# IDSS COMMENTARIES (95/2006)

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## **Youtube Fiasco Undermines SAF Credibility**

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There has been a series of amateur videos involving personnel from the Singapore Armed Forces, apparently shot within military facilities using mobile phones with video camera functions. The videos, posted on a popular web-based site called [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com), portray a variety of scenes, from an apparent incident of military ragging, to other staged events, including a sentry apparently shooting an intruder, a mock National Day Parade ceremony, and a ghost sighting by duty personnel.

At one level, it is possible to see this as the essential harmless playfulness of men in their late teens or early twenties. Unfortunately, this incident – the posting of amateur videos from within military facilities on a web-based service – has potentially serious ramifications for the credibility of the Singapore Armed Forces.

### **Undermining Military Security**

Mobile phones are an everyday, utterly ubiquitous fact of life in Singapore. This is something that is beyond the control of the Singapore Armed Forces. Mobile phones with camera or video functions, which is the real concern in terms of military security, are also becoming increasingly ubiquitous. However, military security considerations dictate that such mobile phones are not permitted within military facilities – whether those facilities are barrack rooms, military offices, or training areas – precisely because these phones may capture images of sensitive or classified materials.

The fact that these videos were posted on the youtube website therefore represents a potentially serious breach of military security. It appears that these videos have not captured images of anything sensitive or classified, but the fact that military security was breached in this way creates the possibility that such images of classified or sensitive information or material could have been captured and shared with literally the entire world. Done innocuously, it merely represents an act of silliness on the part of the military personnel. Done maliciously, however, it represents an act of sabotage or even espionage.

### **Undermining Organisational Credibility**

Furthermore, the acts portrayed in these videos potentially undermine the credibility and reputation of the Singapore Armed Forces as a well-equipped, well-trained and therefore credible military organisation. The Singapore Armed Forces is almost universally recognised as the most modern, well-equipped and well-trained military organisation in Southeast Asia.

The analyst Robert Kaplan, in his recent book *Imperial Grunts*, mentions the Singapore Armed Forces in a very positive light.

This reputation did not come overnight, but is the result of many years of careful development of the Singapore Armed Forces' capabilities. It is also the result of many years of hard work and training – sheer blood, sweat and tears that all national servicemen have given. The breach of military security that these videos represent already goes some way towards undermining the credibility of the Singapore Armed Forces. What is worse, however, is the playfulness – even silliness – of the actions captured in these videos. What it portrays may be open to debate. What it does not portray, however, is an armed forces whose personnel are serious, well-trained, capable. And in the final analysis, it does not matter how well-equipped an armed forces is; if its personnel do not take their jobs seriously, its modern equipment count for nothing. Strategists throughout time have always argued that morale is as important – even more – than the equipment a soldier uses. A poorly-equipped armed forces, with highly motivated, dedicated and serious personnel, can still defeat a better-equipped adversary. That was the lesson of the Vietnam War.

### **Other Strategic Considerations**

Finally, there have been many instances where military operations have been seriously undermined by the public sharing of unauthorised video or camera images. The memory of Abu Graib and Guantanamo Bay are still relatively fresh in our minds, especially the impact the unsavoury incidents had on the public perception of the justness and moral position of the United States-led coalition war efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. The public outcry against human rights abuses is a potentially powerful weapon against the morale and motivation of an armed forces engaged in a military conflict. No matter how just the cause of any military operation, its very existence can be undermined by such incidents of human rights abuses.

Granted, these videos were captured within the confines of military facilities in Singapore. Nevertheless, the Singapore Armed Forces is facing increasing demands to be engaged in a wide variety of international operations and missions – all essentially benign in nature, running from peace operations to humanitarian and disaster relief operations. Its personnel deployed to such missions have to behave according to the highest standards possible – anything other than this damages the reputation of the organisation.

### **Approaches to the Problem**

The fact, however, is that just about everyone in Singapore has a mobile telephone, from primary school children to retirees. Furthermore, it is increasingly difficult to obtain a new mobile telephone that does not have camera or video functions attached. In any case, who wants to buy a simple mobile telephone without all these fancy accessories? Try attempting to purchase a mobile telephone that does not have these accessories, and observe the reaction of the sales staff attending to you – chances are, the reaction will be one of incredulity.

The bottom line here is that the Singapore Armed Forces will eventually have to come to terms with cameras on mobile phones. The problem is not so serious right now, because the numbers of such mobile phones is still relatively small. Nevertheless, what this incident demonstrates is that the information environment is rapidly changing. Just a few years ago, photographic images in print format has to be scanned before they could be posted on the Internet. Digital cameras remove the necessity of a scanner as an intermediary. Mobile

camera-phones make such digital imagery ubiquitous.

How should an institution as the armed forces, an organisation especially concerned with security of information, approach this issue? Surrendering such phones when entering a military facility still does not represent a huge logistical effort. However, as such mobile phones become increasingly ubiquitous, the logistical effort to properly store surrendered mobile phones will increase dramatically. Imagine a Guard Room with extra storage space, because virtually all the personnel in the unit have camera phones and have to surrender these phones whenever they return to their unit. While it is no doubt possible for the Singapore Armed Forces to enforce this regulation, the logistical effort needed to effectively execute this regulation may not be cost-effective.

Ultimately, what the Singapore Armed Forces needs is to educate its personnel on the wider security and political ramifications of unauthorised publication of camera images in a public forum. Soldiers may indeed capture photographic or video images of themselves in their military facilities, but to share them universally, without the proper authorisation and clearance, poses potential security and political problems that may serve to undermine the credibility of the military organisation. This incident may well have been innocuous, the perpetrators merely silly rather than malicious, and its negative implications minimal. Without proper education of its personnel, however, the potential for another incident in the future with more serious consequences cannot be ruled out.

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