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Relevance of the Singapore Armed Forces: A Journey into Singaporeanness

Ong Weichong

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The continued relevance of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) to the nation-state guarantees its existence as a national institution. In addition to traditional security considerations, this must take into account an increasingly globalised Singaporean society.

THE END OF the Cold War has led to a paradigm shift in the global security eco-system – not least the role of armed forces in their respective societies. A refrain from a popular military cadence of the 1980s went: ‘down by the river, took a little walk, ran into some communists, had a little talk’. A post-September 11 SAF Serviceman would be familiar with the tune – except that terrorists rather than communists are now the featured enemies of the state.

Communist subversion and acts of terrorism are highly visible security concerns that justify the existence of the SAF. In short, since its inception more than 40 years ago, the SAF has always been the principal guarantor of Singapore’s security, strategic interests and sovereignty. Other than the defence of Singapore, the SAF plays another less swash-buckling but no less important role – moulding and holding the social fabric of Singaporean society. As a globalised city-state open to the world, Singapore is prone to rapid shifts in its societal make-up and notions of ‘Singaporeanness’. This in turn requires new approaches when justifying the relevance and existence of the SAF.

A Relevant SAF for the Singaporean Generation Y

Part of the Singapore Army’s vision statement acknowledges the fact that it has to be ‘Ready, Relevant and Decisive’. Like all things Singaporean, the SAF is not spared from the rigours of justifying its relevance. Military National Service (NS) plays the twin role of ensuring an operationally-ready SAF as well as nation-building. Thus NS and the attitudes towards military service is a microcosm of Singapore and Singaporeanness. A recent article in POINTER, the journal of the SAF, *Generation Why – So What?* highlighted the significant generational differences in attitudes and values between the Generation Y Singaporean servicemen (young adults who grew up in the 1990s/2000s) and their predecessors.

As hinted in the article's title, Generation Y servicemen are intuitively prone to asking why and seeking the rationale behind decisions. The intrepid article also noted that the idea of contractual obligation to the state in the form of long-term bonds is an anathema to many a Generation Y regular serviceman. What the article did not sufficiently address is - has the definition of traditional military core values such as honour, pride, duty and loyalty to country - and most importantly notions of Singaporeanness evolved into vastly different creatures for Generation Y servicemen? If so, should SAF policy in recruitment and career management reflect those changes in core values?

The SAF must be able to convince its Generation Y servicemen -- both professional and citizen -- of the relevance of military service. In the market for talent, the SAF faces tough competition not only from the private sector but also prestigious overseas universities that offer bond-free scholarships. The guarantee of an 'iron rice bowl' is no longer sufficient to induce the best and brightest Singaporeans into a professional military career. The danger here is that to a Generation Y Singaporean with more flexible options for self-advancement, a SAF career might be dismissed as an 'irrelevant' consideration.

A Reflection of Singaporean Identity

Jean-Jacques Rousseau once asked: "How can they love it, if their native land means no more to them than it does to foreigners, and if what it does for them is only what cannot be refused to anyone?" Perceptions of 'NS for Singaporeans, jobs for foreigners' is a well-articulated concern of Generation Y Singaporeans on youtube, online blogs and social networking sites. Unlike their predecessors, many Generation Y Singaporeans have the ability to vote with their feet. Hence, the *raison d'être* of the SAF and NS cannot be taken for granted. Will young Singaporeans of today and beyond continue to perceive the SAF and NS as relevant national and social institutions?

This question is further compounded by the dwindling pool of citizens fit for military service. Citizens currently account for 65% of Singapore's resident population and the low replacement rate of its citizens (1.08 in 2008 – the third lowest in the world) is a strategic reality that will impact the make-up of the SAF. The conscription of female citizens alongside their male counterparts and the recruitment of non-citizens as career soldiers are issues that cannot be dismissed lightly in the near future.

The United Kingdom, the United States, Israel, Spain and France are well-known examples of countries that actively recruit non-citizens as professional soldiers. Despite advances in military automation technologies, militaries do need a certain level of critical mass to sustain their operational readiness. This, coupled with the need to integrate recent immigrants into the fabric of Singaporean society, favours the consideration of embracing non-citizen career soldiers into the SAF's ranks.

Citizenship and Identity

The attainment of citizenship is not the same as acquisition of an identity. The identification of recent citizens with their new domicile is very much a product of social interaction. At Singapore Day London 2009, the crew of the *Mr Brown* show presented a comedy skit in which a mainland Chinese-accented NS recruit failed to grasp the local Singaporean lingo. The 'us' and 'them' perceptions are there, but bonds forged in a foxhole can transcend those differences. Thus, military service provides a platform from which the socialisation of recent citizens and building of national cohesion can take place.

In order for the SAF to remain relevant and attract the very best, it must adopt a policy that appeals to the aspirations of its future leaders. Demographic and value shifts in Singaporean society are issues that cannot be ignored. That said, a nation's security is a matter of national survival and soldiering is more than just a job. Of all the SAF's seven core values, 'loyalty to country' must continue to be of

sacrosanct resonance to servicemen all through the generations. The day that no longer rings true, the SAF would have ceased to be relevant.

Ong Weichong is Associate Research Fellow with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is attached to the Military Transformations Programme at the school's constituent unit, the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies. He is also a Doctoral Candidate with the Centre for the Study of War, State and Society, University of Exeter, UK.