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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Institution Versus Occupation: Path Ahead for Singapore's Military Profession**

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*Having matured in capability and grown dramatically in size over the past 40 years, the SAF should now look at the larger existential concern of how it can prevent the institution of the military profession in Singapore from becoming a mere occupation like any other.*

AS THE Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) celebrates SAF Day this year, it can look back upon more than four decades of immense achievement. It is by any account the most advanced in Southeast Asia. The SAF's third-generation transformation is well on its way and overseas deployments to internationally-sanctioned global causes are now happening at a tempo never before seen. Locally, its equipment is cutting-edge, and it has tweaked its personnel management schemes to meet the rising demands of this new technology.

Above all, the SAF has an enlightened approach towards modernisation, recognising that hardware alone does not make the SAF formidable. Personnel, or the organisation's "heartware," are of equal importance. Consequently, investments have been made in nurturing and grooming them, developing their "steel within" and ensuring they have opportunities to develop further through continuing education.

### **New Fundamental Challenge**

A critical challenge the SAF now faces, however, is ensuring its personnel still recognise the fundamental values and expectations of the institution they serve, as well as that of the military profession writ large. These values include, *inter alia*, self-sacrifice, higher moral accountability and dedication. Increasingly though, the military profession is being seen as a mere occupation. In the 1970s, military sociologist Charles C. Moskos forwarded the Institution/Occupation thesis of the military profession. He noted that within the US military, there was a palpable shift in the perception of the military profession as an institution of values which transcended the individual, to an occupation

of self-interested employees governed by market-place dynamics.

The military profession, however, is not just any other job. In times of conflict, there is no doubt that SAF soldiers will recognise this and commit fully to the defence of Singapore. Yet, this recognition may be glossed over during times of extended peace. With the region thankfully relatively free of inter-state conflict, there is the risk that the military profession in such an environment may now be seen like any other occupation where rights and remuneration are dictated by market-place norms and forces, and institutional values are paid less attention to.

The recent court-martial of a senior officer for inappropriate conduct at work and the fraud perpetrated within an SAF unit to increase its chances of winning an award, as well as the arrest of several SAF regulars for soliciting prostitutes overseas while on an overseas exercise, suggest institutional values no longer command as strong a hold over troops as does the occupational perspective of self-interested employee independence.

This shift is certainly not unique to Singapore. General Stanley A. McChrystal's indiscretion in his interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine is a recent example of the Occupation trumping the Institution. President Barack Obama's sacking of him was the administration's attempt to steer the military profession back to its true course.

### **Preventing the Occupation from becoming the Institution**

The military profession is arguably witnessing *occupation-creep*, where personnel are now missing the institutional forest for the occupational tree. Compounding this phenomenon is the creation of new "institutional" values which emphasise performance and efficiency. Such values include passion and commitment for one's occupation (as opposed to the profession), the importance of doing it exceedingly well and the need to meet predetermined Key Performance Indicators. While certainly admirable and positive, they may inadvertently displace older, more fundamental, values such as self-sacrifice, loyalty, camaraderie and the fulfilment of a "calling".

While these fundamental values are certainly still central to the SAF, as seen in its creeds and the SAF Act, they unfortunately may be backgrounded in light of the continual, daily occupational emphasis of performance and achievement. This is especially so when corporate best practices are introduced in the name of increasing productivity. The immediate and urgent therefore overshadows these supposedly omnipresent martial values. Consequently, there is a danger that these new "institutional" values of performance are enshrined in the SAF. As it stands, there already are expectations among new recruits that reflect a more occupation-centric understanding of the military profession. Typical concerns include salary, route-of-advancement and opportunities for personal development.

The Institution and Occupation, however, are not incompatible. In fact, they can mutually reinforce each other. Another military sociologist, Morris Janowitz, pointed out that soldiers doing well in, and being generously compensated for their occupation could result in a closer identity with the military institution. Given the importance of the military's ultimate role in defence, the institution, however, should always be the senior partner in this relationship.

### **Debating the Tension**

In the early 1990s, several SAF officers debated this tension in *Pointer*, the Journal of the SAF. Writing about an SAF still in its twenties and lacking a significant military tradition, one officer worried that the SAF would lose its martial character as it became staffed with pragmatic and corporatist citizens whose "instincts [were] more cosmopolitan than puritan." Another noted that "occupationalism" had become "more prevalent and obvious" in the SAF Officer Corps. Finally, a third warned of a perceived trend towards "careerism," the extreme manifestation of Moskos'

occupational model, which threatened the profession of arms in Singapore.

Twenty years on, more mature and confident, the SAF should revisit this institution/occupation debate. To begin with, it should ask its personnel why they signed on. Answers to that simple question may reveal the state of the military profession in Singapore, and shed light on how the SAF can satisfactorily, in the words of an SAF officer, achieve a “value system [which is] a cross between the pragmatism of the citizenry and the martial idealism of the military”.

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