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Singapore's Total Defence Day Remains Relevant More Than 40 Years On

By Ong Wei Chong

SYNOPSIS

A comprehensive whole-of-society approach to national security, such as Total Defence, is an imperative for small states. In the face of increasing AI-enabled threats, Total Defence remains ever more relevant to Singapore's collective response to crisis and disruption.

COMMENTARY

Singapore marked its 41st Total Defence Day on February 15, 2025. The concept of Total Defence has crossed the forty-year threshold into what can be regarded as the middle-age zone.

The forty-year mark is a milestone that warrants reflection in the life of a person or institution. It is important to ruminate about Total Defence when norms in global affairs are eroding, and the pace of disruptive change is increasing.

Total Defence, Singapore's national security strategy, comprises six pillars: military, civil, economic, social, psychological, and digital defence. The challenge for Total Defence in its middle-age years lies not in the soundness of its ideas but in capturing the attention of Singaporeans who may not connect it with their everyday lives.

In a January survey of [Singaporean voter sentiments](#) conducted by Blackbox Research, 35 per cent of respondents said that cost of living and inflation were their top concerns, while just 8 per cent cited defence and national security.

Indeed, the connection between everyday issues and national security – such as supply chain disruptions stemming from regional and global tensions – is not always intuitive.

AI-Enabled Threats

Artificial intelligence (AI) is another example of an everyday issue that impinges on defence matters.

On January 27, the Chinese startup [DeepSeek](#) shocked Wall Street with its latest AI model, which it said is more cost-efficient than those developed by American firms like OpenAI and Google. The intensifying competition in the AI space will change the way we work, live and fight.

Since the start of the Gaza War in October 2023, evidence has emerged that [AI systems](#) such as “Gospel”, “Lavender”, and “Where’s Daddy?” have been used by the Israeli Defense Forces to identify, track and target suspected Hamas militants and infrastructure. These tasks were once carried out by human soldiers.

Despite concerns raised by human rights organisations on the accuracy and reliability of such systems, it is unrealistic to expect militaries to abandon the development of AI weapon systems. Battlefields from the Middle East to Ukraine will continue to serve as the “classroom” of AI-enabled warfare.

AI-enabled warfare spans drone attacks capable of destroying mass armoured formations to cyber weapons that can learn, adapt, and evolve based on data collected from both military and civilian targets.

While a strong and capable Singapore Armed Forces continues to serve as a deterrent against conventional war, there is an urgent need to strengthen Singapore’s defences against the growing threat of AI-enabled cyberattacks that can cripple critical infrastructure, disrupt essential services, and undermine public trust.

In this post-truth era, messages that appeal to emotion hold more sway than fact-based ones. This phenomenon is not new. However, the ease and speed of information dissemination via cyberspace and social media amplifies the effect. As AI tools evolve, disinformation campaigns that undermine social cohesion will become more sophisticated.

Singapore has done well in maintaining social cohesion and trust in public institutions, which are key to national resilience. In addition to updating our digital defence tool kit in response to increasing sophistication in AI-enhanced disinformation, it should not ignore the importance of traditional means such as media literacy, maintaining public confidence in mainstream media, and fostering social cohesion via grassroots organisations.

Both Hardware and Heartware Matter

Strong trust in public institutions and social cohesion are the key enablers of Singapore’s national resilience in times of crisis and disruption. They impact its collective ability to recover and bounce back in the most trying times.

Singapore has returned to normalcy after the COVID-19 pandemic, which then Prime

Minister Lee Hsien Loong described as “the crisis of a generation”. Is Singapore prepared for the next crisis?

The country has the “hardware” in the form of sound policies, strong institutions, and plans to cope with disruption. Renewing the “heartware” to sustain public support and personal connection with Total Defence is the more demanding task.

Initiatives such as [YouthxHack 2024](#) and [Critical Infrastructure Defence Exercise 2024](#), organised by Cyber Youth Singapore and the Ministry of Defence, respectively, have helped cultivate leaders in cybersecurity by posing real-world challenges to the participants. They are positive signs that Total Defence can remain relevant in its middle age years and beyond.

Cyberweapons such as deepfakes and disinformation can be countered by technological means. However, over-reliance on technological tools can exacerbate inequalities between those with access to technology and those without access.

These include Singaporeans who lack the means to cope with online scams that are growing in number and evolving in severity. The [Protection from Scams Bill](#) was passed in January to protect potential scam victims better, but legislation often plays catch-up to AI-enabled threats.

Renewing the Total Defence heartware involves not only businesses and civil society but also vulnerable individuals who may not make the connection between Total Defence and their everyday lives. AI-driven disruption may seem overwhelming, but the “Little Red Dot” can emerge stronger by leveraging its social capital and resilience.

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