

What Are We Defending? A Commentary on Dreams, Identity, and Total Defense in Singapore

by Camille Ong

Dreams are often dismissed as indulgent—soft distractions in a hard world of power, threats, and trade-offs. Yet for a small, globalised city-state like Singapore, dreams have never been optional. They have been operational. They shape what a society chooses to defend, what it tolerates, and what it hopes to become.

I grew up in a Singapore shaped by other people's dreams before I was old enough to name my own. My parents, like many of their peers, came not to raise a family but to work—to find stability, opportunity, and a better life than the one they had left behind. What drew them here was not sentimentality. It was order, progress, and a government that appeared to plan not merely for tomorrow, but for decades ahead. Singapore felt like a place that demanded much from its people precisely because it intended to give something back.

They stayed not because Singapore was easy, but because it was purposeful. Over time, it was the people—the culture, the rhythms of daily life, the quiet expectations embedded in everyday interactions—that convinced them this was a place worth building a future in.

Today, Singapore faces a quieter but no less serious national security challenge: the erosion of a shared sense of what it means to be Singaporean. This loss is not confined to any single generation. It is visible among senior leadership, working adults, and schoolchildren alike. While Singaporeans remain capable, connected, and competitive, many struggle to articulate a collective dream beyond individual success or personal comfort – and even then, sometimes they hesitate to do that.

This matters because Singapore's security has never rested on military strength alone. As a small city-state dependent on the constant flow of people, ideas, and capital across its borders, Singapore's resilience depends on unity, adaptability, and shared purpose. These are not sentimental ideals, but strategic necessities. Without them, Total Defence—particularly its social, psychological, and digital dimensions—becomes fragile.

I argue that Singapore's most pressing security challenge today is not the absence of capability, but the thinning of shared meaning. In forgetting how to dream together, Singapore risks hollowing out the very qualitative foundations that once made its defence credible, resilient, and enduring.

I. Dreams Are My Reality: Dreams of Survival

Singapore's earliest national dream was not of prosperity – it was about surviving with dignity. Independence in 1965 did not produce optimism, instead it produced urgency. Surrounded by uncertainty and constrained by geography, Singapore's leaders understood instinctively what Total Defence would later formalise: that security was holistic, and that no single pillar could stand alone.

Long before the language of “six pillars” entered official doctrine, Singapore was already practising them. Military defence was built on deterrence and credibility. Economic defence focused on relevance and openness, ensuring Singapore could not be ignored or bypassed. Civil and social defence emphasised cohesion across race, religion, and class—because internal fracture would be fatal. Psychological defence was embedded in a shared narrative of vulnerability and responsibility. Even early information control reflected an intuitive understanding of what we would today call digital defence.

At the heart of this approach was a unifying dream: that Singaporeans, despite their differences, would see themselves as part of a single collective project. Being Singaporean was not a lifestyle choice; it was a responsibility. The *kampung* mindset—of mutual reliance, shared fate, and quiet resilience—was not nostalgic rhetoric, but a lived necessity.

This dream shaped not just institutions, but identity as well. It taught Singaporeans to think long-term, to accept trade-offs, and to prioritise collective survival over individual preference. Crucially, it also provided a stable core around which newcomers could integrate. Diversity was never the problem – disunity was. Integration worked because there was something coherent to integrate into.

I know this not solely as a policy principle, but as lived experience. Growing up as a first-generation Singaporean, my siblings and I were often reminded—sometimes gently, sometimes not—that we were different. We did not always speak the same way, behave the same way, or intuit the same unspoken rules. Fitting in was not automatic.

Yet what stayed with me was not exclusion, but instruction. There were teachers, classmates, and neighbours who took the time—once again sometimes gently, sometimes not—to show us what being Singaporean meant. We were taught that there was no single way to be Singaporean, but that there were shared expectations: responsibility, respect, and an understanding that this society only worked if people held each other accountable. These lessons were not abstract, rather they were reinforced through schooling and everyday correction. We learned what it meant to belong not by being identical, but by being invested.

The success of this original dream transformed Singapore. But success has consequences. As existential threats faded from daily consciousness, so too did the urgency of collective dreaming. What began as a shared national project gradually fragmented into individual pursuits—setting the stage for the challenge of today.

II. Dream A Little Dream of Me: From We to Me

If the founding generation's dream was survival through unity, the dreams that followed were shaped by success. As Singapore stabilised and prospered, national aspiration gradually shifted from collective endurance to individual attainment. This transition was neither accidental nor entirely undesirable. It was, in many ways, the fulfilment of the original social contract.

The old "5Cs"—cash, car, credit card, condominium, and country club—were once shorthand for having "made it" in Singapore. Often caricatured today as shallow materialism, they were in fact symbols of reassurance. They signalled safety after scarcity, predictability after uncertainty, and dignity earned through effort. These dreams remained compatible with Singapore's broader security posture because they still rested on shared assumptions: discipline, sacrifice, and trust in institutions.

Over time, however, material security became the norm rather than the exception. As existential threats receded from everyday consciousness, aspirations evolved again. Contemporary reinterpretations of the 5Cs—career, comfort, connection, contribution, and choice—reflect a society searching for meaning beyond possessions. On the surface, this appears to be progress. Singaporeans today are more self-aware, more emotionally literate, and more attentive to mental health, fulfilment, and work-life balance than previous generations.

Yet beneath this evolution lies a more consequential shift. Many of today's dreams are intensely personal, inward-looking, and loosely tethered to any shared national narrative. Contribution is frequently framed as optional rather than expected. Connection is often confined to small, self-selected circles. Choice is celebrated, but responsibility is rarely articulated as its counterpart. In this landscape, being Singaporean risks becoming an administrative status rather than a lived identity.

This is no mere cultural or moral concern. It is a strategic concern that Total Defence is dependent on, even more so than compliance. Social defence weakens when citizens struggle to articulate what binds them together. Psychological defence erodes when individuals see themselves primarily as consumers of stability rather than stakeholders in resilience. Even digital defence becomes

fragile when narratives imported from elsewhere circulate without being anchored in local history, context, or shared meaning.

Crucially, this erosion is not the product of apathy alone. The modern world moves too quickly for sustained reflection. Digital platforms compress attention spans, accelerate comparison, and reward outrage over nuance. Global cultural currents arrive faster than societies can interpret them. In such an environment, values are not rejected outright; they are simply left unapplied to new contexts. Singaporeans are not abandoning their identity—they are losing the habit of consciously renewing it.

This challenge is further compounded by Singapore's structural openness. As a global city dependent on the constant inflow and outflow of people, Singapore has rightly pursued integration rather than assimilation. Diversity is a necessity, not a threat. But integration requires a clear centre. Without a shared sense of "who we are," the burden of adaptation falls unevenly—onto institutions rather than individuals, policies rather than people.

The result is a paradox. Singapore is more connected than ever, yet less certain of itself. More successful, yet less sure of what success is for. More secure in quantitative terms, yet increasingly vulnerable in the social and psychological domains that Total Defence depends upon most.

This is the quiet cost of a society that has forgotten how to dream together.

III. Dream on: The Drift and Procedural Identity

The absence of a shared national dream does not announce itself dramatically. It does not arrive as crisis or collapse. Instead, it manifests quietly—in routines, policies, and everyday interactions that continue to function, but with diminishing meaning. Singapore today is not failing. It is drifting.

This drift is visible in subtle but consequential ways. National narratives are often reduced to commemorative dates, policy slogans, or functional reminders of past hardship. In schools, students may learn about Total Defence as a framework, yet struggle to connect its pillars to their own lives. Military, civil, and economic defence are understood conceptually, while social and psychological defence are treated as abstract or secondary—important in principle, distant in practice.

Public discourse reflects a similar pattern. Conversations about cohesion tend to surface most clearly when something goes wrong—online controversies, social tensions, or moments of perceived cultural friction. The response is often procedural: clarifications issued, boundaries restated, calm restored. What is less

visible is a sustained effort to articulate what Singapore is becoming, and why that future is worth collective investment.

The workplace offers another revealing example. Singapore remains efficient, meritocratic, and globally competitive. Yet many professional interactions are transactional rather than relational. Competence is prioritised, but emotional distance is normalised. It is common to hear Singapore described as “safe but cold”—functional, but lacking warmth. This is not a cultural failure, but it raises a strategic question: can a society that struggles with everyday trust and warmth mobilise deep reserves of solidarity during moments of stress?

Digital spaces amplify these vulnerabilities. Online, Singaporeans encounter global narratives about identity, justice, freedom, and belonging at unprecedented speed. These ideas are not inherently destabilising. The risk lies in their uncritical adoption, detached from local history and context. Without a strong internal compass, digital defence becomes reactive—focused on damage control rather than resilience.

None of this suggests malice or neglect. Rather, it reflects a society moving faster than it can reflect. Policies update, technologies advance, and norms shift—often before existing values are consciously reinterpreted and reapplied. In such conditions, ‘Singaporean-ness’ risks becoming procedural: something one complies with, rather than something one believes in.

For a small city-state, this is not a neutral condition. Adaptability without identity leads to imitation rather than innovation. Openness without rootedness leads to fragmentation. Total Defence, stripped of shared meaning, becomes a checklist rather than a conviction.

The discomfort lies here: Singapore has become exceptionally good at functioning, but increasingly hesitant to imagine. And without imagination, even the most robust systems eventually lose coherence.

IV. Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This): Reclaiming Singapore

I do not dream of Singapore becoming the next Japan, nor the next Hong Kong, and definitely not the “Switzerland of Asia”. Not because those societies have failed, but because imitation is not destiny. Singapore’s strength has never lain in replication, but in differentiation—in becoming something distinct, shaped by constraint, vulnerability, and deliberate choice.

My hope is for a Singapore that remains open to many kinds of people, yet unmistakably Singaporean in its values, interactions, and shared expectations.

Integration, after all, is not about flattening difference. It is about anchoring diversity to a common centre that cannot be economic productivity alone. It must also encompass how we treat one another, how we respond to vulnerability, and how we imagine life beyond metrics and rankings.

This is where the *kampung* mindset matters—not as nostalgia, but as strategy. A society that values relationship, mutual care, and everyday warmth builds reserves of trust that cannot be legislated into existence during crises. These are the invisible assets of Total Defence. When trust is high, misinformation struggles to take root. When people feel seen, social fracture becomes harder to engineer. When belonging is meaningful, resilience follows.

Dreaming forward does not require abandoning realism. On the contrary, it demands confronting hard truths: that Singapore will remain exposed to external shocks; that demographic, technological, and geopolitical pressures will intensify; and that adaptability will remain non-negotiable. But adaptability without identity becomes mimicry. Identity without adaptability becomes stagnation. Security demands both.

To dream again, Singaporeans must relearn how to see themselves not only as beneficiaries of stability, but as its custodians. This requires leadership that speaks not just in policy language, but in moral imagination. It requires schools that treat Total Defence not as a syllabus topic, but as a lived ethic. And it requires citizens willing to invest emotionally—not only economically—in the place they call home.

Dreams do not eliminate threats. But they shape how societies respond to them—and, in doing so, determine which futures become possible.

You Make My Dreams (Come True): Dreams as Defence

Singapore's history shows that dreams are not abstract ideals. They are organising forces. The founders' dream of survival forged unity and resilience in the face of existential uncertainty. Later dreams of success reflected the fulfilment of that promise—but also introduced new vulnerabilities. Today, as Singapore navigates a disrupted age, the most pressing question is no longer whether we can function, but whether we can imagine together again.

Total Defence was never meant to be a static framework. It was a reminder that security begins in the mind, lives in relationships, and endures through shared purpose. In forgetting how to dream collectively, Singapore risks hollowing out the very qualitative foundations that once made its defence credible, resilient, and adaptive.

This is not a call for nostalgia, nor for the abandonment of realism. It is a recognition that for a small, globalised city-state, imagination is not a luxury. It is preparation. Systems can be built quickly; trust cannot. Capabilities can be procured; conviction must be cultivated. In an age of uncertainty, it is the latter that determines whether the former will hold.

Dreams shape how societies understand belonging, responsibility, and hope. They determine what people are willing to defend—and why. For Singapore, whose survival has always depended on more than size or strength, dreaming has never been separated from defence.

It is defence by other means.