

New Roles of the Military

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NEW ROLES OF THE MILITARY

Good morning fellow Heads of Defence Universities/Colleges/
Institutions, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am pleased to be given the opportunity to share my views on a subject that all armed forces in our region are concerned about. Given the evolving strategic landscape, the trends of globalisation and the increasing diversity of security problems, how will the roles of the military profession evolve to meet these challenges? I will attempt to address this issue from the Singapore perspective.

Recent Trends

I shall first outline recent trends which impact on the role of military establishments. One such trend is globalisation caused by the forces of liberal trade and technological advancement. These forces have shrunk the world to an unprecedented extent and have resulted in a high degree of interconnectedness and interdependence between states. This can be illustrated by the recent Asian financial crisis which affected most of the Asia-Pacific economies. At the same time, those forces that draw us closer in the market place have fostered diverse security threats such as environmental threats, transnational crime and terrorist acts. Many countries are finding it difficult to handle these security challenges on their own as such threats transcend borders. Security challenges have, thus, become more diverse and multifaceted in an interconnected world – political, economic and even environmental factors have an impact on the security of the nations. These new strategic realities dictate that closer cross-border cooperation and multi-

dimensional responses are increasingly needed to ensure national and regional security.

Internationally, the strategic landscape was altered with the end of the Cold War. Instead of bringing about an end to conflicts, this event brought about new uncertainties as countries continue to adjust to the strategic realities of a post-Cold War world. The economic, military and political relations among major powers in the Asia-Pacific continue to shift and the potential for conflicts arising from the various unresolved disputes in the region remain. While the possibility of inter-state conflict cannot be ruled out, what is more worrisome is the increase in intra-state conflicts. Today, fragile states face secessionist, ethnic and various other intra-state tensions caused by myriad of factors, such as the erosion of bureaucracy. This has impact on both the state itself and its neighbours.

The strategic trends which I have just highlighted make it imperative for regional defence establishments to re-think their security roles. However, the traditional role of the military as guardian of national sovereignty and territorial integrity will remain unchanged in view of the strategic uncertainties in our region. This role has to be complemented with a new role – that of promoting regional security. With greater security interdependence between states, regional militaries should see themselves playing a bigger role in contributing to regional peace and stability. In this new role, the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) has contributed to regional peacekeeping missions, the provision of humanitarian and disaster relief, enhancing navigational safety and security, and promotion of defence diplomacy.

New Roles for the Military

Peacekeeping in the 21st century is a challenge for the military as such missions no longer deal with conventional inter-state conflicts where the role

of peacekeepers is largely confined to monitoring the demilitarised zones. Peacekeeping today does not simply involve just military or police actions. Instead, peacekeeping have evolved to be multi-dimensional where peacekeepers, amongst their traditional roles, help to strengthen the rule of law and to monitor human rights violations. Peacekeepers also tackle issues related to disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) in particular of child soldiers; and repatriation and resettlement of refugees and displaced persons. Increasingly, peacekeepers are also working with NGOs in the peace-building process.

These are non-traditional roles of the military, but necessary ones assisting the devastated country to return to a state of normalcy. The challenge for armed forces in the region is therefore how to prepare our peacekeeping troops for these demanding and daunting roles. UN peacekeeping in East Timor is a case in point. SAF troops sent there are Singapore's first armed peacekeepers on a UN mission. The troops are armed with live bullets as their duties include patrolling an area close to the border where militiamen from West Timor have been reported to operate. They are also involved in peace support operations such as manning checkpoints, escorting humanitarian convoys and protecting vital installations.

Humanitarian relief is an important area of concern for regional militaries in view of the many large-scale disasters that have occurred in the Asia-Pacific countries. These major disasters, man-made or natural, do not respect political boundaries, and have the potential to inflict damage on local and regional economies, as well as the social stability and security of states. Partnership and cooperation among states will make a significant difference to our ability to deal with disasters. National armed forces can play an important role in a co-ordinated response to humanitarian and disaster relief contingencies, especially in large-scale and acute disasters, as they are disciplined, operationally ready and can contribute valuable assets.

While Singapore is fortunate to be free of natural disasters, the SAF has played a role in assisting humanitarian and disaster relief efforts in many parts of the world, including distant countries like Turkey. Our participation in such relief missions often includes the sending of medical teams to provide medical assistance to the victims in disaster hit areas. For instance, the SAF sent a 20-man medical team to Bengkulu, Indonesia last year, and a 17-man medical team to Xinshe, Taiwan in 1999, to help earthquake victims. In addition, the SAF has placed its military medical officers for rapid deployment under the UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) teams.

Besides disaster relief, armed forces in our region can contribute to regional security by engaging in navigational safety and security cooperation. This form of cooperation is crucial for our region as piracy is a major problem in Southeast Asian waters. It is important to ensure maritime safety so that trade between the Asia-Pacific and the rest of the world can continue to grow. There is also the danger of a major ecological disaster involving oil spills if oil tankers are attacked and left unmanned. Hence, since 1992, the Indonesian and Singapore navies have conducted co-ordinated patrols and surveillance which have been successful in reducing piracy acts in our regional waters. These two navies have established direct radio communications means and conducted coordinated patrol exercises. More recently, just two months ago, Singapore hosted the largest multilateral mine-clearing exercise in the Singapore Straits, the 1st Western Pacific Mine Countermeasure Exercise and Diving Exercise. This 12-day exercise saw 15 ships and 1,500 sailors from 16 navies engaged in realistic drills to clear practice mines in one of the world's busiest shipping routes.

The new strategic trends in the 21st century have also meant that the military needs to take on the added responsibility as a defence diplomat, a task usually performed by foreign affairs officers. Military officers can help to

build the foundations for regional cooperation which is based on mutual trust and confidence. They can do so by forging close defence ties and promoting military exchanges and exercises. Defence dialogue and interactions will serve as additional channels for countries to resolve differences and misunderstandings. Such defence diplomacy and networking can help to reduce miscalculations, and promote a culture of peaceful resolution of disputes in the region. Defence diplomacy can be conducted through various means such as student exchanges, joint exercises and seminars.

Exchanges of military students serve as an excellent means for officers to understand and learn from their foreign counterparts. This is why the SAF sends its officers to attend military courses in many foreign countries and SAFTI Military Institute, where I come from, has trained foreign students from 22 countries. Joint military exercises with foreign countries is one way in which the SAF can benchmark itself against highly professional counterparts and at the same time this serves to promote transparency and bilateral defence ties. Hence, the SAF conducts annual exercises with a number of armed forces in our region. Thirdly, seminars can facilitate interaction among regional militaries and serve as non-political forums for senior military officers to meet and discuss professional military subjects on a non-attribution basis. Such seminars would include this very meeting we are attending and the annual Summer Camp organised by Singapore's Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies.

An important aspect of defence diplomacy is the development of multilateral programmes designed to promote understanding and trust among regional forces. The SAF has been playing an active role in the development of such programmes. Hence, all three Services of the SAF have supported and participated in activities directed at raising multilateral cooperation at the professional level. For instance, the Republic of Singapore Navy has been an active participant of the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) and

hosted its 8th Workshop two years ago. The RSN also participated regularly in multilateral exercises with the navies of the Asia-Pacific countries. The Republic of Singapore Army, jointly with the US Army, co-hosted the inaugural Pacific Armies Chiefs Conference in Singapore in 1999 as well as the 23rd Pacific Armies Management Seminar. Last year, the Republic of Singapore Air Force hosted the Millennium Air Power Conference which provided a forum for air force chiefs around the world to discuss developments in air power concepts and technology.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that with the emerging trends at hand, the traditional war-fighting role of the military has to be integrated with the new important roles of ensuring regional and international peace and security. The SAF recognizes the importance of these new roles and has actively participated in defence interactions, navigational safety cooperation, humanitarian relief operations, multilateral conferences, and UN peace support duties, amongst others.

Thank you.
