

Mini-state with maxi-military: Why Singapore joined fight against al-Kaida and Islamic State

Interview with Dr Ong Weichong for natoaktual.cz, conducted in Prague, November 2014.
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Singapore military: modern and expensive

Natoaktual.cz: Singapore is described as having one of the best equipped militaries in the region. It is large, it is modern – it also must be expensive. You give well over 3 % of your GDP to defence, more than 30 % of the national budget¹ goes to “security and external relations”. These are very big numbers both in the region and in the world. How is it justified?

Ong Weichong: Singapore has 5,5 million people who are crammed on a small island, smaller than a lot of European capitals. Defense is for us something which guarantees economic prosperity, especially with the global links it has – owing to trade, transportation etc. So securing the country is understood as a necessary expenditure to safeguard not only our sovereignty, but also what is seen as our way of life. So economy is closely linked to international security. But that's just one pillar, the other pillar is of course defence diplomacy, the military forces, the fighters, the ships that you see, it is part of the conventional deterrence side of the spectrum.

It can be argued that many countries, also in Europe, are linked to global economy and spend nowhere near as much on their defence and acquisitions of modern weaponry.

Historically the percentage of GDP that goes to defence in Singapore has decreased in the last few years, it used to be in the upper end of the 4-6% GDP cap of defence spending, which is the approved government limit on defence expenditures, now we are at 3.5 %. Also, I would say that lot of the acquisitions that you see is not exactly introducing new capabilities into the region, but up-grading current ones. Also, I think when looking at Europe you can see it's really difficult to actually rebuild your capabilities when you have given them up. For example all of the Baltic states have given up their air defense capabilities, in terms of fixed wing aircraft. This is something which you wouldn't see in Singapore armed forces, giving up something that is seen as a core capability.

Is this only the view of the government, or does the public support this line of thinking as well?

This debate about defense expenditure is there but it has not matured to the level you see here in Europe. There is very little public debate about “oh, do we need that many aircraft?”.

Conscription as a bedrock of the military

So what is a public topic in terms of security and defence?

If you see critics of the military, it's more connected with the question of conscription. The conscription pretty much underpins the citizen soldier model that Singapore has. Which is another difference, in Europe, just about every country have given up its conscription model. So if you see any informed debate about the military, it's more connected with the question of conscription.

Let's take a closer look at the issue: Singapore has conscription, two years of mandatory national service for all men aged 18 and conscripts now form about 80 % (including reservists) of the active man power, which totals at around 72 000 people. For a military of a small nation that came to existence only in mid-1960s, that is a big number, effectively affecting every family. What is the public perception of this?

If you look at the 1960's when Singapore was introducing national service, obviously there were a lot of reservations and the government set out to change that perception that soldiering is not a good experience. Singapore has a Chinese majority and there is a traditional Chinese saying – good iron doesn't make nails; good men don't make soldiers (‘好铁不打钉, 好汉不当兵’). So now you have a 3rd generation of national service men and national service is indeed seen as a rite of passage that every guy has to go through. And it's not just about the guys, it's naturally about entire family as well.

¹ http://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/budget_2014/AboutTheBudgetProcess.aspx

So there is public support for conscription?

There has been a survey recently and apparently, more than 80% of respondents approved of the national service as a national institution. That is a big number. And that was not just among national service men, they interviewed people who didn't serve at national service as well.

That is a big number. Even if it was 50 %, that would be still a fairly big number.

This was a government commissioned survey and the arguments in the main stream media might be quite different from some of the blogs out there. Nevertheless, in the last commissioned survey, yes, more than 80% said national service is important for us.

How active is the SAF's public affairs in this regard?

A lot. I wouldn't say 365 days a year, but you see a lot more activity than you see in Europe.

In what sense?

For example all branches of the military would have new recruitment [to attract professional soldiers] ads just about every single year, which is not what you will find in European countries... And so there is lot of effort and resources being pumped into outreach and the military are really good at it. Every year they have Army Open House, Navy Open House, Air Force Open house. It may seem scary, but if you look at their FB webpage, you can find even pictures of toddlers in front of a heavy machine gun, that is also seen as outreach which here starts very early on in life, as you can see.

Open houses are common in Europe too, social media are also on the rise in the military...

The difference in Singapore is that this type of education is embedded. For example we have this organization called Nexus focuses on national education. Every year they would have the competition of "N.E.mation!", National education Animation, where school kids are encouraged to do animation project on national defence etc., so it is very much embedded. Every kid in Singapore when they go to school learns about importance of national defense. Because there is this notion of total defence and military defence is just one of the pillars. Again, it's very different from what you find in Europe.

Nation-building

So I gather you do not see conscription going away?

No, it's not on the table. In fact I would say, you would need a paradigm shift for the conscription to end. And also, I don't really see conscription going away because it has a dual function. One is that of conventional deterrence and the other I would say is nation building. Whether you like it or not, I don't think that the state has found another better tool for nation building.

So there is this notion that serving in the military makes you a good soldier and a better citizen?

Singapore is a global city which is trying to do nation building at the same time – and this might be increasingly more important. And when you look at demographics curve, you have increasing numbers of immigrants who flow into the population but who are not citizens. This is very much a challenge of how to sort of maintain this sense of nation where you increasingly have a large percentage of population who aren't citizens. So there can be tensions between the global city and nation building and this is something which is not going to change any time soon. Having said that, Second Generation Permanent Residents are required to serve National Service. That common experience forged in the rigors of military training can play a key role in fostering cohesion between new arrivals and citizens.

International engagements

When we look at the global links of Singapore that we already talked about and focus more on the military now – Singapore seems to be incredibly global country: not only in terms of economy and transportation, but also in terms of military. It is very difficult find a continent where you have no military relations. What is behind this global military drive of a country of your size?

It is interconnected. Because of the country's position as a global financial and shipping hub, the military is seen as an ultimate guarantor of security and of its current position as a global hub. And the military is very much tied to this, that is why you have the Singapore Navy present in the Gulf of Aden protecting shipping as part of a wider coalition. In terms of regional cooperation the setting up of a regional HADR Center² in Singapore alongside the existing Information Fusion Center³ which shares maritime information in the region about piracy,

2 Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief

3 Information Fusion Center (http://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/press_room/official_releases/nr/2014/apr/04apr14_nr/04apr14_fs.html)

about shipping patterns etc. sends a strong signal in this regard – you need regional and international security for security at home. And whatever happens in the region, whatever happens at the global stage, it will definitely have an impact and you can't ignore that.

In terms of economy, this is understandable. But what if we look more at the many military foreign missions that SAF participated in, be in part of ISAF in Afghanistan or now you are in the coalition against ISIS. What is the major reason or reasons for involvement of Singapore military to these operations – helping the allies? Gaining operational experience? Pursuing your own security goals?

It's pretty much everything you mentioned. If I'm not wrong, they found plans of al-Kaida attacks on Singapore in Afghanistan. The plans were there. And they actually had foreign fighters from Southeast Asia training in Afghanistan. Even right now the discovery of Indonesians, Malaysians and Singaporeans fighting in Syria, is also very much a concern for Singapore. At the same time, I think the operational experience does play a big role, because our armed forces since independence have not been involved in a war. So this is very much the only possibility of actually gaining some sort of new time operation experience.

This argument is used internally in many countries – having your troops rotate through a military conflict enhances their abilities.

Sure, but we need to stress that in case of Singapore we are not talking about combat units. If you look at our deployments in Afghanistan, they were actually "combat service support" rather than boots on the ground. It was ISR⁴ UAV missions, weapon locating radars, PRT's etc. And for example, if you go to any military academy, you find that you have names of the fallen on the walls, but if you go to the Ceremonial Hall in the military academy in Singapore, you have similar panels, but without the names of a single fallen soldier. So I think that says a lot about the actual need of new time operation experience and whether you talk about Gulf of Aden, whether you talk about Afghanistan that is incredibly useful for Singapore armed forces to benchmark itself and test itself with other armed forces.

How difficult it is for the government to justify these deployments to the public, especially with army of mostly conscripts?

No, these soldiers sent to missions are mostly professionals, they are not citizen soldiers like me. So the guys like me are by and large trained for traditional homeland defence and if, for example I would want to be deployed, I would have to volunteer. Most of the guys that you see in Afghanistan and the Gulf of Aden, they are actually professionals. In any case yes, the government has to justify those overseas deployments and therefore it's in very much niche areas like I mentioned. The bulk of the military, especially in army, is still very much trained for defense for protecting homeland, rather than expeditionary missions.

Threat perceptions vs. the size of the military

When you look at the global security environment and when you have debates about where your military should be heading – what are major threats or dangers you perceive in your plans or strategic outlooks?

Threat perceptions as well as strategic ambiguity are very much a problem and I think this is very much representing the Asia-Pacific as a whole. And when you talk about threat perceptions, official threat perceptions, the Singapore armed forces or simply the ministry of defense does not really go about identifying any particular threats in a defense white paper like you do in Europe. However, if you were to analyse the official discourse in the media, it is clear the AQ, JI, ISIS and their affiliates are identified as clear and present threats to the national security of Singapore.

For the public both home and abroad, this makes it difficult to know where your military is heading.

If you look carefully at the missions where Singapore military has been deployed, it sends a rather clear signal of what we see as a threat. And I would include, for lack of better word, the global insurgency, whether you're talking about ISIS or al-Káida, as well as regional wars. And also we're seeing our military as being a partner in helping with humanitarian disaster, humanitarian assistance. But as I have said, the primary mission of the SAF is still very much conventional deterrence.

So you are saying that you do not have to deal with arguments saying that such a small country does not need its expensive military at all?

I think the neighborhood is really different, because when you look at the South China Sea, it's pretty hard. In the case of Singapore, the military is seen as a kind of the ultimate insurance policy and lot of it stems back from war time memories. In the Second World War, the supposedly impregnable fortress of Singapore, billed at that time by the British as the "Gibraltar of the East" fell to the Japanese in a single week - and those memories

4 Intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance

have not gone away. So I think this notion of a necessary robust military is not going away anytime soon as the military forces are still seen as the ultimate guarantor of the security. So you will not see reduction of the conventional capability of SAF.

That seems like a very strong public backing for the military, no matter how small the country is...

Yes, but obviously there are also some Singaporean academics who question whether it is necessary to have this mindset. Increasingly there are those who are actually questioning this grand narrative of being small and vulnerable and therefore we need a powerful military to safeguard our sovereignty and national borders. I think in the next few years you might see an impact of that creeping into the public discourse of defense policy in Singapore. But just not now.

Okay, so you may end up with a military of couple of thousands people and smaller air force, just like the Baltic states.

If I were a betting man, I'd say no. The debate is happening right now, but mostly within academic circles.

Right, but you can hear the voices.

Okay, let's say like five years ago, this line of argument wasn't explicitly present, but any informed debate on this is mostly within academic circles rather than in the public sphere taken up by civil society. Like I said, much of the debate about defence in the public sphere still largely revolves around the commitment to National Service rather than downsizing the military like you do in Europe.

Editor's note: Opinions expressed in this interview are of the interviewee and do not represent official views of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies or the Ministry of Defence of Singapore.



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(<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/profile/Ong-Wei-Chong/>)