

METHODS

Efficiency vs. inefficiency in operations management: The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) vs. the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) in Southeast Asia?[†]

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Why is the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) considered as highly efficient by foreign experts from Europe, the Middle East, Russia, and China, whereas the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF), its larger and former neighbor, considered as significantly inefficient? What is it about the SAF that makes it vastly more well-organized and competent as compared to its northern neighbor in terms of the MAF? Are there specific reasons for these wide differences between the two states? This paper analyses the vagaries involved in military operations' management in training and peacetime as well as during war and overseas deployments.

Keywords: modern military, Singapore Armed Forces, Malaysian Armed Forces, logistics and supply chain

Introduction

The and armed forces are designed for heavy day-to-day operations at the tri-service level. This means that for a military force to be operationally efficient, it has to have its air, naval, and land troops well-organized to work as independent units as well as interdependent ones. Each and every air, sea, and land branch and department must function efficiently and with as little need for coordination as possible on a day-to-day basis. Doubtlessly, the variegated functions of these air, sea, and land units must always conform to clear standard operations procedures (SOPs) as part of their essential quotidian duties. Teamwork is the key to success in tri-service military operations. Indeed, there are in the SAF and the MAF, for example, specialized Joint Operations departments to ensure that the modern expectations of Joint Operations are attained from the get-go, from the onset,

and from the very start. Military joint operations consist of military “activities, operations, and organizations in which elements of two or more Military Departments participate” (Joint Publication 1–0, Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States).¹

In 1991, during Operation Desert Storm, the U.S. military in Iraq developed the concept of “Global Reach = Global Power” for air and ground combined operations. During Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003), military operations were conducted in accordance with what was an extension of the “Global Reach = Global Power” that came to be known as the Single Perspective 2020 strategy.

“Global Reach = Global Power” increases the chances of a defeated enemy in the shortest possible time even after an(y) enemy counterstrike. The United States Armed Forces combined tactics use principles involving highly mobile, quick-reaction, globally deployable forces. In Persia as well as across Afghanistan and even in Libya, No-Fly Zones (NFZ) were created to ensure that economic blockades would cripple any enemy's ability to pose further and deeper combined arms and to mount Joint Operations against

[†]This paper does not represent the official views of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) or the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF), the RSAF and the RMAF in any capacity. All views presented in this work are the author's own analyses of the historical and current military defence arrangements and power distribution based on existing scholarly resources from JSTOR and from ASEAN as well as SAF and MAF official sources.

¹ See also, Holmes (26), Perry et al. (27).

NATO and its Allies. By 2022, clearer joint operations and missions were developed out of all the wars that had emerged since the 1991 Operation Desert Storm, led by General “Storming” Norman Schwarzkopf and evoked the new Military Operations Management Procedures (MOMP), that were adopted by the USAF.

Military operations management procedures (MOMP)-i.e., the decision-making level of the military units transforms specific strategies into daily SOPs that are needed to keep their military processes running smoothly within organizations as per tactics. For example, at the Air Force Base, each aircraft that goes on a sortie must be a product of a single-mission-oriented team of engineers, crewmen, navigators (if any, since most of the navigational aspects of short and long-haul flights have been taken over by computer programs), and fighter, helicopter, or bomber pilots. Even the air traffic control (ATC) aspect of the air force and hence that of the armed forces cannot be neglected. Split-second contingencies must be followed seamlessly and to a tee. ATC personnel themselves have to maintain a clear mind and must keep track of every single flying object into and out of their airspace. The ATC personnel monitors things like weather, flight movements, ground, and air communications.²

There are five main steps in military operations management as follows: (1) planning, (2) finance and QC, and (3) SCM.

Operational planning: Malaysia vs. Singapore

How well do military and operational planners in the SAF and MAF know their enemy? This aspect requires the MOMP team to make use of all possible information from intelligence sources as well as past and current conflict issues and other touchstone points. Knowledge of these flashpoints enables military planners to anticipate the most likely enemy courses of action (COA) and enables the former to allocate resources in the most efficient manner. It should also be noted that a state of war between Singapore and Malaysia has never been declared nor has it ever existed. The enemy orbats used for situational assessments and disaster preparedness for both the SAF and the MAF are based on fictional armies inasmuch as the fictional army for the Australian armed forces (AAF) is based on an inverted map of Indonesia (since 1960) and that the MAF and SAF’s fictional enemies are known as the aggressor armed forces (also, AAF). This leads us to another dimension needed and used for operational planning, which is known as the enemy course of action (COA).

Knowledge of the enemy COA is needed in every aspect of a military organization. For example, if a military project

manager wants to hire new pilots for new aircraft, then the cost-benefit analysis or CBA of each part of that purchase must be taken into consideration from the cost and training of new flight crews to the overseas and local training in the new aircraft. This would include the costs involved in deploying experienced flight instructors and ground instructors to train the new crewmen and crewwomen. This is also seen and demonstrated in the work of Shultz, Medby, and Gattuso. According to a Special Forces officer in the SAF, Major Ivan TS Tan, the nature of anticipating the enemy’s courses of action is dependent on three critical factors, namely, the importance of local knowledge, the intensity of enemy conviction and prowess as well as the experience level of the enemy formation commanders at the division level and above. This sentiment ought to be in concert with recent comments made by the current SAF Army Commander Brigadier General David Neo as well as the Chief of Defense forces, General Melvin Ng; unfortunately, both SAF commanders were not available for interviews as they were reported to be traveling. The existing MAF CDF as well as the JFHQ commander of the MAF, Major General Dato’ Allatif Mohd Noor were similarly unavailable for comment even at their Petaling Jaya HQ due to certain events involving former three Malaysian prime ministers’ directions and orders. It should be noted that Singapore and Malaysian armies report directly to civilian/political masters. The military serves the people, the crown (in Malaysia), and the republic (in Singapore). The military and civilian governments in both states have been separated as entities since 1955 and 1959, respectively. No state of war between Malaysia and Singapore has ever existed in modernity. Both states make use of fictional armies to conduct their wars. During the Exercise Malindo Darsasa series of operational readiness exercises, joint operations were conducted between Indonesia and Malaysia and held on 9 August, which is Singapore’s national day. This is similar to the kind of actual wars that existed between Israel and the Arab states, mainly Syria and Egypt in which larger Muslim states went to war against wealthier, but small states. The similarity between the Darsasa series or airborne and land operations on Singapore’s national day ran too close to a historical parallel with the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973. For such reasons, Lee Kuan Yew had advised that certain politicians from the north (known widely by SAF commanders as Greenland) could never be trusted (Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First*, 1965–2000).

In Malaysia, commanders preparing for MAF operations planning mainly use a largely jungle-based scenario. MAF small unit operations that usually consist of non-bumiputra units are considered by foreign and Thai as well as Australian observers as being far superior to that of the SAF. The former was also highly capable and known to be highly maneuverable in jungle environments, while the SAF is much less capable. However, the SAF’s strength lies primarily in its Air Force or RSAF that far outranks the Malaysia’s own

² See, for example, Machol (28); and, Hilburn (29).

outdated and poorly maintained RMAF or Royal Malay Air Force. This is because of the extremely high levels of Unfortunately his son, Najib Tun Razak accepted a 1-billion-dollar bribe from an unknown Saudi prince from one of the former's royal houses. This entire situation has significantly weakened the RMAF and RMAF in terms of its operational planning capabilities. This has also strained the MAF general HQ in PJ's Military Operations Management Procedures (MOMP)-i.e., the decision-making level of the military units to transform specific strategies into daily SOPs-at a significant level.³

There are at least five more considerations of operational planning (or sub-planning) within any state's operational planning strategy or Ops Strategy. This includes all-weather and climate considerations; terrain and artificial changes made to the theater of operations as well as intelligence and other operational updates.

As it stands, the SAF comes out superior in terms of air to ground support; air strike capabilities; controlling the skies, and superiority technical proficiency in the RSAF and its three main land divisions. At the operational planning at the divisional level, the SAF is significantly superior to its Malaysian cousin. While the MAF remains steadfast at the tactical level and below especially in jungle terrain and forested areas. The SAF is, however, gaining supremacy at the urban warfare and counter-terrorism levels. There are exceptions to these deductions as seen in the Tawau case when the MAF was able to mobilize an entire infantry division in less than 4 days, as well as seen in the tactical abilities of the SAF's special operations force (SOF) in the SQ117 episode.

Military finance and budgets and QC

Military finance officers provide financial advice and recommendations for units looking to purchase services and supplies for their missions. You will also supervise finance non-commissioned officers and soldiers in charge of military pay, services with vendors, auditing, and accounting, which are the backbone of the financial aspects of the military. If an army, as they say, runs on its stomach, then that stomach depends on military finances and budgets. Without proper and accurate financial and budgetary planning and finance, the ability to maintain military equipment, pay for salaries of personnel, logistics, and all other branches of any tri-service military force will be severely compromised.

This is the case for all large and small military budgets. China, for example, spends around US\$300 billion annually

while constituting about 15% of all global military spending; making it about half of what is spent by the United States of America. Indeed, the former Russian Federation, now known as Russia, spent about US\$66 billion in 2022. On average, most sophisticated military states require that at least 5% or more of their annual economic budgets are spent on the military.

Singapore spends around US\$11 billion per annum on its military budget every year. Considering that this is a very small state and that the amount constitutes around 3% of its annual economic pie; it is a relatively large amount. Indeed, the SAF's budget has steadily increased over the past 10 years from less than 2.3% of its annual economic budget to over 3% projected for FY2023/2024. This is especially true when compared to its much larger northern cousin, Malaysia.

For the SAF and the MAF, military-type quality control (QC) differs significantly. In the SAF, QC is taken very seriously and remains a significant aspect of preventing unnecessary waste in the MOMP in the SAF's strategy and tactics. This also means that there are significant audits, audit trails, and financial value-premises embedded within the SAF's military, finance, and budget sequences. This makes the SAF vastly more efficient than the MAF in terms of their respective financial and budgetary processes.

Supply chain management and corruption in Malaysia

Supply chain management (SCM) refers to the kinds of supplies that are required to maintain equipment and personnel at an operationally ready level. These SCM processes or chains include medicines, uniforms, food, weapons, jet engines, armor vehicles, landmines, ammunitions, and a whole host of all things related to military preparedness, readiness, and deployment.

Supply chain management is a daily target for corruption in many states because money can be gleaned from the sale of stolen military equipment such as uniforms, weapons, engine parts, ammunition, food, and medicine as well as medical products like bandages, swabs, pins, needles, and catheters. While the SCM of the MAF is often under heavy stress from such corrupt acts, the case is quite different in Singapore's SAF.

The level of corruption in the SAF is low and hence the SCM is hardly disrupted, and if or when it is disrupted, it will be fixed rapidly usually within a 24–48-h period.

Because the level of corruption among Malaysian royalty and Malaysian politicians is high, there is a similar level of corruption within the military itself since many royal titles are bestowed on Malay generals, and many high-ranking MAF officers are indeed from one of the several competing Royal Houses.

For example, when Mahathir Mohamad himself was prime minister of Malaysia from July 1981 to October 2003 and later

³ Military experts on both sides of the causeway have raised questions for several decades over the notion of an arms race within Southeast Asian militaries; and especially between Singapore and Malaysia or the SAF and the MAF. Many foreign experts claim that there has been one among ASEAN states since the end of the Cold War.

from May 2018 to March 2020; he continuously noted the levels of corruption among the Malay Royal Houses as well as the various politicians from all the Malaysian elites including the Chinese elite in Penang and the Indian elite in Selangor. This led to an unwarranted level of corruption within the Malaysian supply chains, which the Tun tried to stop using the Malaysian bureaucracy. But because the Malaysian bureaucracy was corrupt, it became virtually impossible to forestall the level of corruption using the administrative, and governmental branches as well as personnel as they had low pay and would always be on the look-out to make some quick cash based on, for example, license approvals and tender applications. In fact, the Rakyat or Malaysian polity have begun rejecting their own king, in this most recent case, referring to Sultan Mohammed V.⁴ In Malaysia, these royal facts have become so politically threatening and real that even the current Raja Permaisuri Agong revealed that she and the king, their majesties themselves, had not asked the police to arrest anyone questioning the royals or asking them to resign and step down. This has in fact prompted thousands of Malaysians to support the Queen, the Raja Permaisuri Agong a.k.a. Tunku Azizah Aminah Maimunah Iskandariah Sultan Iskandar who is the current wife of Malaysia's head of state. Her royal pleas were a result of the arrest of one Khalid Ismath from the *Partai Socialis Malaysia* (PSM) who was arrested for allegedly claiming that there was corruption in the police, army, air force, navy, and the Selangor Royal House; as a result, he was promptly arrested under a 1948 sedition law. Nevertheless, the ordinary rakyat maintains their criticism of the royals through all forms of media including cartoons. For example, Fahmi Reza was arrested over *Powerpuff Girls* artwork that poke fun at the royals; depicting the royals as evil villains who are dressed in royal clothes.

Mahathir had been Malaysian PM for many decades, the longest serving one, and the Malay Royals have always proved to be a stinging bee in his bumiputra bonnet. For example, Mahathir Mohamad administration accused the Johor royalty many times of "land-grab" cases as well as tax evasion on the part of an already tainted Johor ruler. In fact, Malaysian political insiders informed the Singapore *Straits Times* that this was not the first time such accusations have been levied against the Johor monarch whose ancestor was forgiven for murdering his Eurasian golf coach who had poked fun at the Sultan's golf swing. But the Sultan was back then considered above the law and hence received his own royal pardon.

Political journalist James Fallows is worth quoting at length. Fallows wrote in the popular American magazine, the *Atlantic*, that "the country's King, a flamboyant and short-tempered character in his fifties named Mahmood Iskandar ibni al-Marhum Sultan Ismail, had beaten a caddie to death

with a golf club after the caddie had giggled at one of the King's muffed shots. . . . When I asked an official back in Kuala Lumpur about this, he began whispering too. "The sultan, you see..." He explained that the sultan of the state of Pahang had a nearly limitless right to claim the state's forest land as his own and to sell the logging rights to foreign timber companies. . . . A typical day's issue of the *New Straits Times*, the main English-language paper, carried a dozen or more stories on the greed, dishonesty, vulgarity, and outright criminality of the country's royal families. The tensions created by this system might have remained beneath the surface for a long time were it not for one man: the golfing King, Iskandar. Iskandar is from the royal family of Johore, Malaysia's southernmost state, which sits across the Straits of Johore from Singapore. In the early 1970s, when Iskandar's father was the sultan of Johore and Iskandar was the crown prince, Iskandar was tried and convicted of "causing hurt" to a fellow Malaysian named Narendran. (Only sultans themselves, not their children, are completely exempt from prosecution.) The "hurt" was in fact Narendran's death. Apparently, Iskandar had been taking potshots while flying in his helicopter, and one of his bullets killed Narendran. The judge who presided at Iskandar's trial was scathing in his condemnation of the prince, who was then in his early forties. He said, "The keynote of this whole case can be epitomized by two words—sadistic brutality—(in) every corner of this case from beginning to end, devoid of relief and palliation."⁵ Fallows arguments support larger claims of royal involvement in bribery, brutality, and corruption and it follows that such acts of immorality and unethical action surely exist in the RMAF and the MAF itself since the British quit in 1955.

Many Malaysians see their own monarchy as one resembling Malay supremacy. The Rakyat argue that when they get rid of the Malay monarchy, it would finally serve justice and then make all Malaysians genuinely equal.

Conclusion

This paper has been a comparison of the efficiency of the SAF and MAF in terms of operational readiness and combat effectiveness. It proved that the main problem in the MAF is that of social and political corruption even among Malay royalty as seen in the cases brought up by the erstwhile Malay Indian-bumiputra PM Mahathir Mohamad; as well as the American writer James Fallows; and now extended by the conviction of PM Najib's wife and a fine of RM303 million; Najib's receipt of 1 billion ringgit from a Saudi Royal family member as well as his involvement in the 1MDB scandal that involved the US Department of Justice (DOJ).

⁴ <https://www.insider.com/malaysia-threatens-prison-insult-royal-family-2019-1>

⁵ See <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1993/06/malaysia-rotten-royals/669329/>

Malaysian money politics cultivate corruption and bribery; and is mediated by an unIslamic desire for material wealth, profit to living beyond their means while trampling on the poor Rakyat and those who can only afford to live in kampongs and live off the land next to wealthy military datuks, Malay bumiputra, and royal palaces.

It is fortunate for the SAF and for Singaporeans that the MAF and large parts of Malaysia are highly corrupt and involve daily bribery cases in a corrupt police force, the Royal Malaysian Police (RMP) itself cannot handle or reconcile. Perhaps Singapore's economic and material success is due to Malaysia's systemic corruption.

Acknowledgments

For my sons, George and Quentin, for being with me All the Way.

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