

Why S'pore Needs a Deterrent Military Force

NUS forum participants question quantum of military spending, size of armed forces

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SINGAPORE — Whether it was time for the role of defence in Singapore to evolve with the times and whether massive resources — both monetary and manpower — should continue to be devoted to defence were questions raised by audience members at the National University of Singapore (NUS) [U@live](#) forum with Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen yesterday.

In particular, they asked whether Singapore still needed its military capability at current levels, whether the Republic should scale back in case it appears aggressive and whether the defence budget of S\$12 billion a year was “misaligned” compared with what is spent on other needs such as healthcare.

In response, Dr Ng said Singaporeans generally recognise the need for a strong defence force, in light of rising tensions within the region in recent years, such as the tussle between Japan and China over islands in the East China Sea.

Referring to other transnational disputes, Dr Ng told the audience of more than 300 NUS alumni, students, faculty and staff in attendance: “If we didn’t have a firm and strong deterrent force, I think Singaporeans will be much less confident about our future.”

Dr Ng also said the Ministry of Defence has spent an “inordinate time” in being “very transparent with what we have (and) what we use it for, and it’s a completely deterrent force”, adding that Singapore is a very strong leader in the field of military cooperation with other nations.

“I don’t think, if we continue in this current trajectory, that our intentions will ever be misunderstood ... But our message of deterrence is working,” he said. “Yes, your tax dollars and our defence budget are a large proportion of our Government spending — but I’ll tell you, it’s worth it. I’m very, very conscious of the amount we spend and I want to make sure that whatever we buy makes absolute sense.”

Noting that spending on defence and healthcare were not mutually exclusive, he added: “You can spend less and have a half-baked force.”

The question of defence and the role of National Service (NS) drew widespread public interest last year, with the Committee to Strengthen National Service set up to look at how to make NS more meaningful and to provide more recognition to those who served.

Dr Ng yesterday noted that an Institute of Policy Studies survey last year found that the approval rate of NS among Singaporeans was 95 per cent, a sign that they understood the importance of defending the nation.

When an audience member asked about alleged discrimination against Malays in the armed forces, Dr Ng said: “I’d say that we’ve progressed very much (in that regard). We’ve Malays

in every vocation — we have Malay pilots, we have Malay commandos ... we have 3, 6, 9 divisions, one of them (was led by) a Malay General.”

He also highlighted his concerns for Singapore — namely the need to protect the secular space while respecting different religions and preserving the family unit.

Noting that Singaporeans have become more religious over the years, he said there is a need to maintain a “white space” so “that everyone finds commonality”.

Another area of concern was how the traditional family structure in Singapore is under stress. “I’m concerned that in our desire to strengthen the social safety net, we’ve inadvertently sent a message that weakens the family unit (as the first line of defence),” he said.