



SPEECH

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SPEECH BY MINISTER FOR DEFENCE, DR NG ENG HEN AT THE DEFENCE SCHOLARSHIP AWARDS CEREMONY ON 28 AUG 2021, 1510HRS

My colleague, Senior Minister of State, Mr Heng Chee How,
Mr Lee Tzu Yang, Chairman, PSC
PSC Members,
Senior officials from MINDEF, and the defence community,
CDF, Service Chiefs and senior commanders,
Parents and family members,
Principals and teachers of polytechnics and colleges watching on the livestream,
Scholarship recipients,

A very good afternoon to all of you.

INTRODUCTION

1. I am glad that we are holding this year's Defence Scholarship Awards Ceremony physically. I must tell you, just like the National Day Parade, there were many twist and turns for this ceremony. The half-life of planning now is about two weeks, which is the incubation period of our dear friend, Mr. V I Rus (*virus*), but I am glad that we could finally do it for three main reasons. First, I think it reflects progress and confidence in our battle against the COVID-19 pandemic. As Singapore explained to the world and embarked on this strategy that we felt that this was an endemic virus and you had to live with the virus - an elimination strategy is not an option, neither is a free for all, declaring yes we have been vaccinated, hooray, let us stop this non-pharmaceutical interventions. Both extremes are unacceptable for us. One leads to just too many deaths and serious cases, while the other will cripple us, because we have such an open economy and also serious illnesses as well as deaths from other diseases that are neglected when our healthcare system becomes overwhelmed. So for us, organisations, companies, countries and indeed the World, those that can adapt to the virus, whatever your strategy, to function at a high pace without letting your healthcare systems become overwhelmed by large spikes of infections will have the comparative advantage. That is the name of the game. It is a cruel world and yes, there will be some winners and losers – we want to have a global cooperation on this but in reality, whether it applies to organisations or countries, those that can adapt faster, will have the comparative advantage. And it is not as easy as it sounds. Because in the last 18 months or so since the pandemic began, no country

has achieved what it originally hoped to achieve. Just scan, not a single country. Every country has been hit by a subsequent wave. Why? Because biological wars, like most other natural disasters, are inherently dynamic and unpredictable. We have little by way of armamentarium to respond. For Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), it was the humble thermometer that got upgraded with the help of the Defence Science and Technology Agency (DSTA) then to mass thermal imaging – they were our main instruments. I remember I was in Ministry of Education and every day we had to have 500,000 students measuring their temperatures. There was a shortage of thermometers – we used the ones on the skin, on the head initially. For COVID-19, temperature screening is ineffective and that is why it is not applied anymore, and vaccines and Safe Management Measures (SMMs) for non-pharmaceutical interventions are the only weapons. This simple ceremony where we meet each other face-to-face and share a quick meal, with ongoing SMMs, is a small but concrete way forward in this long fight against COVID-19. This is MINDEF/SAF's first large ceremony for this year – congratulations to all of you for attending the first one – in fact, probably the largest for many of us, I do not know how many of you have attended events the size of this. Fortuitous, because the easing of measures and high vaccination rates – the good work done by Ministry of Health (MOH) and other agencies to get our vaccination rates above 80% - and everyone here is vaccinated and or tested negative. I say this because this may be the norm for many more months, and perhaps even years to come. It is a depressing thought but I have not read any report that says that there is any visibility that the virus will disappear over the next few years. It is a good thing that MINDEF and the SAF again leads the way to establish that we can do it safely and effectively. That is my first reason.

2. The second reason is that a physical ceremony befits the occasion more significantly and appropriately than one in which we meet through video conferencing. Yes, we have become more effective and efficient in conducting such video conferences. But the *raison d'être* for the Defence Scholarship Awards Ceremony is a public commitment by each recipient to our country and her defence, as well as to each other in the SAF and the MINDEF-related organisations. It is a prestigious award and cause for celebration for you and your family members. But those who received the award today, also acknowledge the responsibility and accountability to lead in the defence of Singapore's sovereignty and interests; to honour through your words and deeds, the high expectations set by a distinguished alumni of past recipients, many of whom are here today; to uphold the values and uncompromising standards of integrity and probity. This physical meeting acts as a physical handshake to seal that pact, which you make with your country, your organisation and each other today. I say this to you as custodians of our nation's defence. I say this at a time when our SAF, RSAF and Army personnel have transported evacuees from Afghanistan. As you know if you have been following the news they took off on Thursday, they took a hop to Qatar, and I am glad to announce that they managed to bring the first batch of 149 evacuees from Al Udeid in Qatar to Germany. I saw the pictures of young children, families, women and men. And you think, what goes through their mind? It is the fear and the terror that they have gone through and the relief as they landed away from Afghanistan and the new lives, the more hopeful lives they will get in Germany. That is what happens when a country gets torn apart. Unfortunately, the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.

3. The third reason is more prosaic. I am just happy to meet people in person, particularly the recipients and their family members. Nowadays, sharing a short meal and having a conversation is an uncommon event and what we take for granted, especially for

MINDEF/SAF where we have many meetings virtually. I am just happy to meet all of you in person.

GROOMING FUTURE LEADERS WITH DIVERSE TALENTS

4. Much effort has been given to select the right persons to whom we entrust the future of Singapore. I am not overstating the importance of these awards. MINDEF and the SAF are key custodians of Singapore's security, without which there can be no progress for the country. Mr Lee Kuan Yew reminded us of this truth when he spoke to officers at the Temasek Society's 30th anniversary in 2012. I want to thank Chairman PSC Mr Lee Tzu Yang, Deputy Chairman Mr Kwa Chong Seng, members Mr Edward D'Silva, Associate Professor Benjamin Ong and other PSC members for their arduous task of selecting our scholarship recipient awardees.

5. Why do we expend considerable resources in selecting recipients? Is it worth all the effort? You read Benjamin Kahneman's book "Slow Thinking and Fast Thinking" – I am not sure if it applies to scholarship recipients but he claims that a point system may just work just as well... I do not think so. We have got to interview the person and see what he is made of, those things cannot be captured by a point system. So, the answer to that - if it is worth all the effort, is a resounding yes. The SAF Scholarship Scheme, introduced in 1971, and now into its 50th anniversary this year, continues in this deeply held belief, that our hold on the future rests with its leaders. Let me repeat that. This is a simple belief and a deeply held one, that our hold for the future rests with its leaders, nothing else. If you think about it, it is a tenuous hold, but the only one that we have. Simply because we cannot predict the future in 10 years, less so even 20 and 30. The COVID-19 pandemic descended on Singapore and the rest of the World in a twinkling of the eye, and disrupted our normal way of life. Just think of what you were doing in January last year. Nobody expected from January last year that our lives will be changed overnight, and some aspects of our life will never return completely.

6. I remember a quote by US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, and he was addressing West Point cadets – this was in 2011 during a Graduation Ceremony, let me quote him: "When it comes to predicting the nature and location of our next military engagements... our record has been perfect. We have never once gotten it right." This is the Secretary of Defense, previously US Central Intelligence Agency Chief, speaking to military cadets and telling them that the world's greatest military with all its forensic software, has never gotten it right about what the next engagement is going to be. Some of you may say, well that is not surprising, but listen on. "... we have never once gotten it right. We had no idea a year before any of these missions that we would be so engaged." Not five years, not 10 years but a year before the US military was engaged in any campaign. They never knew what it would be. If such a superpower could not get it right, why would we expect smaller countries, like Singapore, to predict the future. Financial magazines often put ever-changing tables of the top 20 companies over the past hundred years. So they have tables from 2000 to 2020, so on and so forth. And if you look at these tables, very few, if any, companies will remain there for more than two decades. The top 20 constantly change over time.

7. Our only hold on the future rests on the shoulders and in the hearts of young Singaporeans today, who can shape Singapore's future and protect her interests. The leaders that are with you at your tables, and we have done so that you will learn from them. But the leaders that we put there cannot teach you exactly how to respond to each critical challenge.

First of all, we may not be around physically, but even if we were, it will be your hands at the helm.

8. For MINDEF and the SAF, it will be the hands of recipients today that must hold steady our Singapore and help her navigate through treacherous situations, like we are in now, if they arise. The 84 recipients today are chosen from different backgrounds, some by policy design, but also reflecting the diversity that exists among Singaporeans. In 2016, the SAF Engineering Scholarship was introduced to enhance our engineering expertise. This was followed in 2017 by the PSC Scholarship (Engineering) to attract top talent for our defence technology community. With limited manpower, the SAF needs to leverage technology.

9. So, accordingly, 40% of our scholarship recipients will be pursuing STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) disciplines for their tertiary education. They will fill in existing and new vocations like the SAF Command, Control, Communications and Computers Expert (C4X) vocation and the Defence Cyber Expert job specialisation, introduced just two years ago in 2019.

10. I am also glad that the 84 scholarship recipients this year come from many pre-tertiary institutions – in fact, we have the highest ever, from 19 institutions. This reflects that our entire school system is of a high standard, with more schools able to nurture and groom leaders for our society.

LEADING THROUGH FUTURE CHALLENGES AND UNCERTAINTIES

11. Whatever your diverse backgrounds and differences, the commitment each of you makes today binds you all as one to our nation's defence, and because of that, to constantly seek to improve MINDEF and the SAF when you join. Because of good leaders and adequate resources which the Government has provided us, the SAF has achieved much over the years. It is now recognised as a high functioning, well-oiled military force, able to conduct a wide spectrum of operations – a professional and capable modern military. Just think about it. We had the visit from United States Vice President Kamala Harris and Prime Minister Lee offered to her - our RSAF's Multi-Role Tanker Transport. Within 48 hours, our chaps on the ground got it ready and they were off, the first batch of evacuees have successfully landed in Germany. When we had the 2004 Tsunami, as you remember it was in Aceh, Krabi, Maldives. We sent three of our four Landing Ship Tanks, that is 75%. It was Boxing Day, and at the push of a button, 100% percent serviceability. That is a well-oiled machinery. And it did not happen by chance.

12. But that apart, the SAF's heart must always be in the right place. Above all, it must put the well-being of Singaporeans at the core of its mission and motivation. This is why when COVID-19 struck, MINDEF, SAF and our defence community stepped up and contributed spontaneously, whether it was in conducting contact tracing operations, which we are still involved in, building new mobile swab stations and self-check temperature kiosks, optimising lab testing or at a larger scale, managing the COVID-19 pandemic in the foreign workers' dormitories last year. This is the same reason that we decided to help the national vaccination programme. There are mobile visits, we are going to mobilise some units, some NSmen during their In-Camp Training, to participate and to help MOH to reach out to make sure our vaccination rates are as high as possible. Because when we open up, there will be serious illness and even deaths and we want to bring it down as far as possible, and the only weapon

we have is vaccination. Today, MINDEF and the SAF have moved ahead of the national curve and achieved high levels of vaccination, 95% fully vaccinated, so that we ourselves can contribute and continue to be operationally ready in an endemic environment.

13. Your responsibility and task when you return from your studies is to make sure that the SAF's heart remains pure and beating strong. The SAF will always defend Singapore to keep it secure and independent, peaceful and prosperous. We will always serve Singaporeans first to protect their well-being, livelihoods and way of life.

CONCLUSION

14. Again, let me thank Chairman PSC and its members, and the leaders from MINDEF, SAF, DSTA and DSO for taking the time and effort to find the best young promising Singaporeans to lead MINDEF and the SAF. I also want to thank principals and school leaders for their partnership in this noble endeavour. And also your family members and teaching staff for imbuing the right values and qualities that brought you here today.

15. I wish each one of you the very best in your future endeavours and wish you a promising start to your future careers with MINDEF and the SAF. Thank you very much and congratulations.

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