



SPEECH

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SPEECH BY MINISTER FOR DEFENCE DR NG ENG HEN AT THE DEFENCE SCHOLARSHIP AWARDS CEREMONY AT THE ISTANA ON 19 JUL 2019 AT 1830HRS

My Parliamentary colleagues and officers,
SMS Heng,
Mr Lee Tzu Yang, Chairman Public Service Commission,
PSC Board Members, Permanent Secretary (Defence Development)
Leaders within MINDEF and the SAF,
DSTA,
DSO,
Parents,
Principals,
Distinguished Guests,
Scholarship Recipients

INTRODUCTION

1. We meet again at the Istana for this year's Defence Scholarship Awards Ceremony. The fact that we hold it here accords the high status of awards to those who commit to defending Singapore. It is the 48th year since the SAF scholarships were inaugurated, the first being in 1971 when then-President Benjamin Sheares awarded the recipients.

2. As President Sheares explained then, the SAF scholarships were introduced with the realisation of two important perspectives. Remember this was in 1971. First, defence organisations and militaries around the world are large complex organisations that required top talent to run them well. That was the first perspective that the founding government of that day came to realise or believed. Second, being a soldier was not considered by many as a rewarding career. As you can remember, Mr Lee (Kuan Yew) and Dr Goh (Keng Swee) were ultimate realists.

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They saw the world and treated the world as it is. And given the fact that Singapore did not have a tradition of military service, few top students and their parents would choose a career with the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) or the Ministry of Defence (MINDEF). They would choose to become lawyers, bankers, doctors but to be a soldier was not among the top three, I think not even among the top five maybe not even among the top eight. With these two realisations and the need to have a defence for Singapore, it was another bold stroke for our founding government that they introduced the SAF Overseas Scholarship to attempt to start a virtuous legacy to attract top talent to run our military. So that year, there were five intrepid souls who went against convention, who said, "I would put skin in this game, I will commit my life to this new venture, let's see where it takes me." As President Sheares said, to quote, "The five officers who are being commissioned today represent the best in brainpower and in character that our schools have produced. Two of them are President Scholars," unquote. One of them was Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

3. Has that experiment worked? Has that bold initiative borne fruit? I think we can safely say that after 48 years after that inaugural event, the SAF scholarships have succeeded in attracting top talents not only for our military's leadership, but for our leadership positions in both public and private sector. That is a lot to be said for that initiative, because it was not a given that it would have worked. Not only have we succeeded in military, riding on that success, we have expanded the program to bring in more talent for not only the SAF, but for MINDEF, DSTA and DSO. We received the highest number of applications ever this year, 1700 in total, and applicants continue to meet the high eligibility bar set. The selection panels did not only look for good academic grades but for those with a heart for service, an ethos of excellence and team work, and a strong sense of duty, honour and country. Because of the calibre of applicants, the highest number of awards was also given this year - 90 scholarship recipients in total. My congratulations to you and your families. It bodes well for our future that these defence scholarships remain attractive.

4. Here, I want to give my special thanks to those who spent considerable time and effort in selecting award recipients. Many hours were spent probing and assessing if those chosen had the wherewithal to defend our country stoutly and most importantly, the right values and instincts to be protectors of Singapore. Mr Lee Tzu Yang, PSC Chairman, and Mr Kwa Chong Seng who is Deputy Chairman, Board members, MINDEF admin officers, and SAF commanders deserve our deep thanks because of their commitment to help Singapore secure its future for another generation.

ENSURING A STRONG DEFENCE AMIDST UNCERTAINTIES

5. And for the next generation, different security challenges will confront a Singapore that has been radically transformed since 1965. Simply put, there is much more to protect. What do I mean? In GDP terms, we have the highest per capita GDP in Asia, and seventh globally, very different from 1971. In social capital terms, we are an oasis of racial and religious harmony that other countries seek to emulate. Citizens of other countries view Singapore as a safe haven to

place their finances, and even their families, when troubles brew in their home countries. The security and stability here provided by a good government and effective civil service, together with the Home Team and SAF, have incalculable value for Singapore. It goes beyond dollars and cents, the responsibility falls squarely on your shoulders, as defence scholarship recipients, to maintain this virtuous state of affairs that your predecessors have built up.

6. Your generation will face a different set of problems. There will be unique security threats for which there will be no model or easy answers, whether from within Singapore or the outside world. It is so for every new generation. To prove the point, just look at the SAF's deployments in the past decade. It would not have been possible for MINDEF and the SAF to predict that we would deploy to Afghanistan or Iraq. It was a surreal moment when I visited our troops near Kandahar or flew over the Tigris and Euphrates, I asked myself, how could we have predicted that we are there? Who could have imagined that terrorism would be a global challenge as it is today, requiring the SAF's contributions in places thousands of kilometres away?

7. Neither could we have predicted that the SAF would be mobilised so extensively in counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden; in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief missions to Christchurch, Nepal, Texas, Sulawesi, Laos, Myanmar, China, just to name a few; or that we would use our assets to search for Malaysian Airlines Flight 370 (MH 370) and Indonesia AirAsia Flight 8501 (QZ 8501).

8. If MINDEF and the SAF had been stuck in our thinking, confined within the self-imposed bounds of traditional defence threats, we would have proven to be ineffective and irrelevant to today's security challenges and not punch above our weight in international standing. As with every change, whether it was the SAF Overseas Scholarship introduced in 1971, or whether it was the many missions that the SAF undertook, the leaders had to lead the charge to think differently, jettison outdated assumptions and quickly build the new capabilities to deal with the new challenges.

9. For this new generation – cyber, data, space and autonomous systems will be rapidly growing frontiers, for which we will need bright minds and visionary leaders, and you will lead that charge.

BEING LEADERS WITHIN THE DEFENCE COMMUNITY

10. Over the years, the format of our scholarships has also evolved in order to keep pace with the changes within Singapore and our external challenges. So we used to have this at separate ceremonies for MINDEF/SAF, DSTA and DSO. We have moved away from rigid and restrictive silos to reflect the ownership of security threats by all of you in the defence agencies, wherever you are, whether it is in MINDEF, the SAF, DSTA, and DSO. Because many of the solutions require multiple domains of expertise and cross-domain synergies. Our new SAF platforms embody this shared responsibility and co-ownership of solutions. Because today, even at inception, SAF officers, defence scientists and engineers meet to design new platforms that take into account

operational needs and our constraints of resources. That is why we can operate today's SAF platforms with far smaller crew with increased potency.

11. The selection criteria for scholarship recipients has also widened to take into account the need for expanded skill sets beyond narrow academic confines. This year's scholarship recipients come not just from a handful of schools, but from 20 different educational institutions, including our polytechnics. Here, I must make special mention and express my deep thanks to the principals and teachers who are here with us today. I spoke to the scholarship recipients and asked what ignited the spark for you to want to apply for these scholarships. Many of you said, "My teacher." The SAF and MINDEF trusted that there were potential applicants beyond the few schools we traditionally produce MINDEF/SAF scholars and reached out to you. And a few years back, we reached out to various schools, and the principals have repaid that trust because they have been our tireless talent scouts on the ground and key partners in identifying and encouraging eligible students to apply for our scholarships. I spoke to two recipients who came from polytechnics, I said, "Same question, what ignited that spark?" One of the polytechnics, they said, identified a certain number, encouraged us to apply for this and then coached us. That is commitment. That your students are here today at the Istana, speaks volumes for your belief in them and your commitment to Singapore's future.

12. The choice of study by recipients is also heartening and stands Singapore in good stead to benefit from the wide range of domain expertise our scholars will acquire. First, we have a bumper crop of eight PSC (Engineering) scholars this year, more than in previous years. More than half our recipients will pursue STEM-related courses. The others will pursue diverse fields, including political science, economics, psychology, international relations and law. For the first time too, we have award recipients studying Information Systems Technology and Design, which is timely given the expanding cyber threats.

13. I want to thank your family members for their support as you embark on your careers with SAF and MINDEF. Like your many predecessors, some of you will go on to lead not only MINDEF/SAF, DSTA, and DSO, but will become top civil servants and leaders in Government.

14. Always remember that with this prestigious scholarship, comes high expectations and onerous responsibilities. Conduct yourselves accordingly, in keeping with the high standards set by those who have gone before you. If you remain true to the positive values that set you apart, and committed to fellow Singaporeans to protect our beloved homeland and its people, then many rewarding and fulfilling experiences await you in the years to come in MINDEF and the SAF. The best is yet to be. Congratulations, once again, to all our scholarship recipients and to your family members, teachers and principals. Thank you very much.

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