

# NON-OFFENSIVE DEFENCE AS A STRATEGY FOR NATIONAL SECURITY

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## ABSTRACT

In this essay, the author argues that, against conventional state-based threats, Non Offensive Defence (NOD) is a viable national security strategy if the state has defensible geography, a benign geopolitical neighbourhood, and low geostrategic value. Against terror, the author argues that the stove-piped nature of military NOD has limited effectiveness and that it is useful only as part of a larger umbrella of counterterrorism (CT) strategies. He first discuss the concept of conventional NOD and illustrate its permissive conditions using New Zealand and Singapore as examples, before presenting the applications and limitations of NOD as a CT strategy.

*Keywords: Security; Terrorism; Deterrence; Applications and Limitations; Non-Offensive Defence*

## INTRODUCTION

Introduced at the height of the Cold War, non-offensive defence (NOD) provided an 'alternative defence' concept to NATO's Follow-on Forces Attack and nuclear deterrence strategies against the Warsaw Pact.<sup>1</sup> NOD seeks to minimize bellicose and escalatory interstate relations in an anarchic and 'self- helping' international system, by shifting the offense-defence balance towards defence and non-provocation.<sup>2</sup> It helps reduce the security dilemma while maintaining a credible deterrence against aggression. Critics, however, argue that NOD is utopian and that it wrongly assumes a hegemonic attacker could be sufficiently deterred, or repulsed, into accepting the geopolitical status quo ante.<sup>3</sup>

Post-Cold War, the global security environment has become more volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA). On top of conventional threats, national security interests have deepened and broadened to include, amongst others, non-conventional threats such as terrorism and its societal impact. After 18 years of the global war against terror post-9/11, however, a decisive victory remains elusive. Based on a Brown University study, the war has cost over \$6.4 trillion and 801,000 lives.<sup>4</sup> Yet, terrorism has not abated but has become more pervasive. Therefore, given the new security environment, I will devote some attention to explore NOD as a possible alternative to the offensive approach against terror, while maintaining

the primacy of analyzing the viability of NOD from a conventional angle.

The author argues that, against conventional state-based threats, NOD is a viable national security strategy if the state has defensible geography, a benign geopolitical neighbourhood, and low geostrategic value. Against terror, I contend that the stove-piped nature of military NOD has limited effectiveness and that it is useful only as part of a larger umbrella of counterterrorism (CT) strategies. I will first discuss the concept of conventional NOD and illustrate its permissive conditions using New Zealand and Singapore as examples, before presenting the applications and limitations of NOD as a CT strategy.

## CONCEPT OF CONVENTIONAL NOD

A state which cannot ascertain if the military preparations of another are for defensive or offensive purposes would experience a security dilemma.<sup>5</sup> It may then adopt matching countermeasures to increase its security, which in turn could be perceived as threatening to others. This perpetuates a cycle of insecurity that could trigger an arms race and worsen interstate tensions, thereby encouraging conditions for escalation and war. NOD's value proposition, therefore, is that states can mutually avoid the security dilemma if they adopt a defensive strategic posture that

provides credible defence without threatening others. According to Møller & Wiberg, NOD seeks to: (1) facilitate arms control and disarmament by removing insecurities due to competitive arms dynamics; (2) enhance peace by eliminating the need for pre-emptive and preventive wars; and (3) provide effective yet non-suicidal defence options.<sup>6</sup>

Barnaby & Boeker comprehensively defined NOD as: 'The size, weapons, training, logistics, doctrine, operational manuals, war-games, maneuvers, textbooks used in military academies, etc. of the armed forces are such that they are seen in their totality to be capable of a credible defence without any reliance on the use of nuclear weapons, yet incapable of offence.'<sup>7</sup> That one is perceived to pose no threat is important. Whether a state's NOD strategy would be interpreted as such by others depends on how aligned its national policy and military doctrine are to the principle of non-offense. National policy goals dictate military doctrine, which determines force structure and equipment requirements. The latter are rarely unambiguously defensive or offensive. Special Forces can be deployed in CT homeland defence or covert insertion operations. An amphibious ship may be used for humanitarian or power projection purposes. A state's non-offensive claim is credible only if its policy goals are clearly peaceful and manifest as defensive military doctrine. This alignment can be further strengthened through various NOD approaches, such as 'defensive defence', 'non-provocative defence', 'confidence-building defence', and 'structural inability to attack'.<sup>8</sup>

## **CONDITIONS THAT MAKE NOD A VIABLE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY**

In employing NOD as a national security strategy, a state ultimately seeks to ensure its sovereignty by managing the threat perception between itself and other states. However, can any state adopt a NOD strategy in our realist world? Simply being perceived as non-offensive or defensive is an insufficient and somewhat subjective guarantee of national security. An adequate security policy should also consider and address the strategic environment that it would operate within. For NOD to be a viable national security strategy, states must satisfy the three key strategic conditions of (1) defensible geography, (2) benign geopolitical environment, and (3) low

geostrategic importance. These conditions make the state not only feel more secure and hence be less aggressive in their defence outlook, but also appear less vulnerable to aggression by others.

## **Defensible Geography**

Territorial integrity is key to state sovereignty. To advance an offensive, attackers must gain territory and hold ground. Physical terrain, therefore, forms a natural first layer of defence. Borders such as mountain ranges and expansive water bodies are more defensible and less easily breached than those that are flat, porous, and accessible. Additionally, strategic depth, in terms of a vast internal territory and a resource-filled hinterland, allows defenders to reconstitute and sustain their forces further inland, thin-out invading troops, and launch counter-offensives to repel attackers out of the state. States that possess these terrains are thus more secure and less likely to be successfully invaded. For example, Switzerland is surrounded by alpine borders and has rarely been invaded, while Russia leveraged its strategic depth to defend itself and defeat Napoleon's and Hitler's invading troops.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, Kuwait, a small state which shares a long, porous border with Iraq, was defenceless against its more powerful neighbour.

A state's human geography, specifically its population make-up, is another factor that adds to its geographical defensibility. It is easier to rouse nationalistic sentiments and strengthen national unity in an ideologically and ethnically homogenous population. Such unity would allow the state to mobilize popular resistance to fight a guerrilla-like people's war in self-defence, thereby making an invasion more costly for the belligerent. For example, Mao's 'active defence' and 'people's war' strategies reflect the Chinese Communist Party's intent to mobilize and militarize its nationalistic society to liberate itself against aggressors.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, for a state blessed with defensible terrain and popular nationalistic support, a NOD strategy premised on deterrence by denial is achievable.

## **Benign Geopolitical Environment**

Two intricately linked factors affect a state's interpretation of its geopolitical environment, which in turn determines its security approach. First, past experiences, such as occupation by foreign powers and

conflict, deepen the 'sense of threat' and shapes its strategic culture and security outlook today.<sup>11</sup> Second, a hostile regional environment characterised by interstate tensions and identity politics such as populist nationalism would dictate that a state adopts a more aggressive posture to deter attacks by punishment.<sup>12</sup> States that experience historical and present animosity with its neighbours would find themselves hard-pressed to employ a non-offensive national security strategy. Israel is a good example. Including its war for independence, Israel has fought eight wars with its Arab neighbours since the 1940s.<sup>13</sup> Given its additional lack of strategic depth and porous borders, it must maintain a strong military for pre-emptive and preventive wars and cannot afford to adopt a NOD posture in its geopolitically hostile neighbourhood.<sup>14</sup>

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However, NOD strategies are viable if the regional geopolitical environment promotes peace, mutual trust and cooperation, and a rules-based order between states. In the case of Switzerland, a foreign policy of neutrality officialized at the 1815 Vienna Congress sought to unilaterally assure others of its geopolitical and military intent. This has proven to be effective when coupled with other conditions such as credible defence and defensible geography, as Switzerland has not been invaded since the policy's implementation.

Transparency of intent, therefore, helps to allay security concerns and lays the foundation on which states can build trust and gain confidence with each other. After centuries of infighting culminating in the World Wars, Europe has also turned its back on a violent past. Its states have embraced political and economic cooperation mechanisms within the European Union and global system to meet their national interests, rather than resort to arms. This led to a more benign intra-continental security environment that has

facilitated the adoption of more defensive strategies amongst its states.

## Low Geostrategic Importance

In a world dominated by maritime trade and energy flows, a global power must ensure its unfettered access to its worldwide commerce and energy supplies. States that border maritime chokepoints, control critical sea lines of communication (SLOC), or possess vast energy reserves of oil or natural gas are, therefore, strategically important to such powers.<sup>15</sup> Their value makes them more vulnerable to strategic contention between competing powers, which may compel these states to choose sides. Covetous neighbours may also turn aggressive and contest or even invade and take over energy-rich territories. The Middle East possesses several examples, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait. The UAE border the Strait of Hormuz chokepoint, a vital oil artery through which 30% of seaborne oil passes through.<sup>16</sup> At the Western end of the Persian Gulf, Kuwait's access to oil prompted an invasion from neighbouring Iraq beset with debt.<sup>17</sup> Given the security vulnerabilities that come with their geostrategic value, these states would have to maintain stronger militaries that can inflict punishment and deter potential aggressors.

The author examines two examples—New Zealand (NZ) and Singapore—to illustrate why states can consider NOD as a viable national security strategy only if the three permissive conditions described above are fulfilled.

## NOD IS VIABLE FOR NEW ZEALAND...

### Defensible Geography

NZ is remotely located at least 1,500 kilometers from its nearest neighbour Australia, with whom it shares a close relationship. The South Pacific Ocean, therefore, serves as a vast aquatic defensive buffer against offensive advances from any direction. Given its land size (268,000km<sup>2</sup>) which supports a small population (4,700,000), and an abundance of mountains, lakes, and arable land, NZ also enjoys the strategic depth for subsistence and the sustenance of defensive operations. Moreover, NZ citizens are fiercely protective of their national identity and are known to be united and resilient, thereby adding to the state's social defence against adversity and attacks.<sup>18</sup>

## Benign Geopolitical Environment

Since it became a British colony, NZ's sovereignty has never been threatened, except during a brief eight-month period in 1942 when it had to prepare against a Japanese Navy that held command of the Pacific.<sup>19</sup> According to its latest Defence White Paper and Defence Policy Statement, NZ will not 'face a direct military threat in the foreseeable future.'<sup>20</sup> It enjoys excellent political, military, economic, and social and cultural relations with Australia. Importantly, both countries also share common security interests and pledge mutual support when one is faced with a security threat. With its South Pacific island neighbours, NZ maintains strong Maori cultural and historical ties which underpin peaceful relations.



*The current NZ Army Multi-terrain Camouflage Uniform (MCU), in service since 2013.*

## Low Geostrategic Value

As an island nation at the southwest edge of the Pacific Ocean, NZ does not border or control any maritime chokepoints or critical SLOCs. It also does not possess abundant reserves of energy, with dairy products listed as its most valuable export.<sup>21</sup>

NOD strategies, therefore, are viable for NZ as it is unlikely to face conventional threats. NZ's small military of only 14,900 personnel (or 0.3% of the population), including reserves and civilians, is sufficient for its largely non-offensive roles.<sup>22</sup> These tasks include defending key physical and electronic lines of communication, ensuring co-operative security of the Southern Pacific, fulfilling obligations to defence treaties and arrangements, for e.g. the Five Power Defence Arrangement, and contributing internationally in humanitarian and peacekeeping missions. Its Air Force focuses on maritime surveillance and airlift and

lacks fighter and assault capabilities. Its Navy, meanwhile, operates only two frigates, one amphibious ship, one replenishment tanker, and a small number of littoral patrol crafts to secure its vast maritime environment. In the absence of conventional threats, NZ can still meet its security interests with a NOD strategy and maintain a small military without having to worry about matching its force capabilities with other states.

## ... BUT NOT FOR SINGAPORE

### Geographically Indefensible

Singapore is a small island state sandwiched between peninsular Malaysia and the Indonesian Riau archipelago. The narrow Johor Strait between Singapore and Malaysia is an ineffective northern barrier against invasion. In fact, during World War II (WWII), Japanese forces crossed the Johor Strait to invade Singapore even after the main Causeway link-bridge between both states was destroyed. To the south, while the Singapore Strait (SS) provides around 19km of separation from Indonesia, it remains an ineffective buffer against long-range artillery attacks. It is densely populated with 5,700,000 people on 724km<sup>2</sup> of land, has no resource hinterland, and thus has no strategic depth to fend off attacks. Adversaries may also weaken Singapore's national unity and resilience against attacks by triggering dormant racial or rich-poor fault lines in its pluralistic society.

### Vulnerable in a Volatile Neighbourhood

Historical experiences have entrenched a sense of insecurity within Singapore's political elites. Singapore's fall to the Japanese in WWII highlighted the need for an independent and robust national defence against aggressors. Communist influence through the Malayan Communist Party threatened to undermine state sovereignty. Indonesia's low-intensity Konfrontasi attacks in Singapore, the deadliest of which was on the MacDonald House bombing, showed that neighbours were open to violent sabotage and subversion.<sup>23</sup> Recent relations with neighbours have become more cordial and co-operative. Yet, tensions continue to simmer beneath a calm surface. With Malaysia, issues that affect Singapore's vital interests, such as disagreements



over bilateral water agreements and maritime territorial disputes, resurface regularly.<sup>24</sup> With Indonesia, its 'big brother' mindset towards Singapore often results in insensitive behaviour, such as labelling Singapore as a 'Little Red Dot' and a 'small country'.<sup>25</sup> These issues typically coincide with the neighbours' election cycles, thereby strengthening claims that others use Singapore as a 'bogeyman' for political distraction.<sup>26</sup>



MacDonald House, Orchard Road, Singapore.

## Geo-Strategically Important

Singapore's location allows it to monitor and control maritime traffic entering and leaving the Straits of Malacca and Singapore (SOMS). SOMS is the world's second-busiest waterway for trade, oil, and gas shipping, and it is of strategic interest to the US and China, two global powers and top energy importers.<sup>27</sup> As a maritime nation, Singapore would also be concerned with its maritime trade's secure and free access through its neighbours' waters, for its economic prosperity and survival.<sup>28</sup>

**The Straits of Malacca and Singapore is the world's second-busiest waterway for trade, oil, and gas shipping, and it is of strategic interest to the US and China, two global powers and top energy importers.**

Given these unconducive strategic conditions, it would be unfeasible for Singapore to adopt NOD as its national security strategy. Instead, to secure its national interests, it must deter by punishment. In a conflict scenario, Singapore must prevent its SLOCs from being disrupted, and thus cannot merely rely on defensive measures within its borders. The heightened sense of vulnerability is reflected in the Singapore Armed Forces' (SAF) doctrine of forward defence and pre-emption.<sup>29</sup> It aims to overcome Singapore's lack of strategic depth through the ability to project power further afield to: (1) secure its SLOCs, (2) bring the fight away from its economic homeland, and; (3) strike first in self-defence. This doctrine is operationalised through assets such as the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) artillery, fighter and refueling tanker aircrafts, submarines, strike-capable ships, and amphibious landing ship tanks.

## NOD AGAINST TERROR?

Having covered NOD's applicability for conventional security, the author now shifts the discussion towards the feasibility of NOD against terrorist threats in today's new security environment. To what extent has the increasingly costly offensive against terrorists deterred them? Will a NOD strategy that maintains credible military deterrence against aggression, but poses no threat to the terrorist, work better instead? The author contends that, like its offensive counterpart, the stove-piped nature of military NOD has its limitations, and that it is useful only as part of a larger umbrella of CT strategies.

## Applying Military NOD to CT

How does one use the blunt military instrument non-offensively against terrorists? The author feels that the most effective way would be to leverage the military's security training and resources and deploy them in preventive CT operations to harden targets, protect key installations (KINS), and control borders. Target hardening would make important people, for e.g. government officials, places, and signature events like The Shangri-La Dialogue, difficult to attack. Protection of KINS would secure critical infrastructure such as transportation hubs,

telecommunication centres, banks and power stations. Border control involves surveillance and patrol of air, land, and sea borders to detect and prevent the smuggling and intrusion of terrorists and their equipment.<sup>30</sup> One should also note that while the military is most suitable for these security tasks, it does not execute them alone but leverages intelligence sharing and support from other security agencies, for e.g. police and customs, as well.



*The scene of the October 2012 Aleppo bombings, for which al-Nusra Front claimed responsibility.*

## Limitations

However, a military NOD strategy in the form of preventive CT is a stove-piped approach to a broader security issue. First, prevention is not absolute. It is impossible to completely prevent a terrorist incident. Against states, it is easier to predict and counter enemy attacks on conventional military targets. For terrorists, however, anything can potentially be a target, especially if their intent is to attrite social resilience on their terms. Second, NOD as a CT strategy, wrongly assumes that all terrorists are rational actors who can be deterred by denial. A determined terrorist organisation can see the continued struggle and violence against the state and society as an avenue to rouse support for their cause. Additionally, suicide bombers who are motivated by radical ideology, or threats or rewards to their families, can be too desperate to be deterred. Third and most importantly, NOD as a military solution is insufficient. The fight against terrorism is a battle of both arms and ideas.<sup>31</sup>

The state must employ other non-military instruments to: (1) block terrorist ideology from spreading, (2) moderate extremist views, (3) rehabilitate captured terrorists and reintegrate them to society, (4) eradicate their financial sources, and; (5) resolve disputes and societal conditions that germinate extremism.<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, the fight against terrorism is not a military campaign, but a 'contest for the hearts and minds of ordinary Muslims around the world.'<sup>33</sup> NOD simply makes up one end of the military spectrum amongst a broader umbrella of non-military options that a state must leverage to maximise its chances of success against terrorism.

**The fight against terrorism is a battle of both arms and ideas.**

## CONCLUSION

Even as our world becomes more globalised with more avenues for diplomatic and peaceful resolution of interstate differences, geopolitics remain inherently realist and pragmatic. As such, NOD as a national security strategy against conventional threats is only viable for states that are: (1) geographically defensible, (2) not threatened by the regional strategic environment, and (3) of low strategic value in the international order. With the deepening and broadening of national security interests post-Cold War, states also face more non-conventional security threats, such as terrorism. These threats typically carry ideological undercurrents beneath their violent surfaces. Therefore, even less antagonistic military strategies such as NOD are ineffective if employed alone to combat terror. NOD is only viable as a CT strategy if used in tandem with other non-military options that address the ideological aspects.

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