

DSO's mission to tap tech to defend S'pore must continue: PM

It has come a long way in 50 years and proved to be invaluable during Covid-19 pandemic



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When Singapore's pioneer leaders like Dr Goh Keng Swee built up the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), they knew that as a small island state, the country had to make full use of technology to overcome its manpower limitations.

But as critical tech were sometimes not available to the Republic, Dr Goh decided to set up the Electronics Test Centre or ETC in 1972.

ETC, now known as DSO National Laboratories, was named after the initials of the first three pioneers of the outfit - Mr Er Kwong Wah, Mr Toh Kim Huat and Mr Benny Chan - said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at its 50th anniversary dinner in Shangri-La Hotel on Friday.

PM Lee added that while many defence technologies were available commercially, Singapore preferred not to buy "so as to keep our secrets secret".

"The moment SAF revealed what it had, potential adversaries would start searching for ways to defeat it, and we would lose the important element of surprise," he said, adding that this made it important for the country to develop its own secret-edge technologies.

DSO has come a long way since then, whether in more established areas like electronic warfare, guided weapons and cryptography, or in newer domains such as chem-bio-defence and satellite technology, he added.

Its bio-defence capability proved to be invaluable during the Covid-19 pandemic. It developed Singapore's own polymerase chain reaction test kits, which helped to identify and isolate positive cases.

Today, DSO's mission - to develop and deliver secret-edge technologies to SAF, to help safeguard Singapore's security and sovereignty - remains unchanged, and has become more relevant than ever, said PM Lee.

This comes as warfare becomes more tech-intensive and armed forces are increasingly relying on cutting-edge technologies such as robotics and artificial intelligence.

In the current troubled strategic landscape, countries are restricting exports of sensitive technologies. This will affect Singapore's access to components and advanced products.

At the same time, the cyber domain has become a new battle arena. Cyber-security threats are growing in scale and sophistication as societies become more connected and more dependent on digital technologies, PM Lee said.

"To stay in the game, SAF needs to maintain its technological edge, and integrate cutting-edge technologies into its formations and operations, for better sense-making, command and control, and strike," he added.

SAF and its officers have become more knowledgeable and discerning users of technology, he said.

The creation of the fourth service of the SAF - the Digital and Intelligence Service - reflects and continues this long process of maturation, and SAF's growing mastery of modern information and technological warfare.

PM Lee urged DSO to continuously innovate and adapt to stay relevant. He also talked about its most important asset - its people. Today, it is 2,000-strong, with more than 1,600 research scientists and engineers.

With the intensifying competition for science and technology talent, DSO must be able to interest, inspire and induct a continuing flow of high-quality people, PM Lee said.

"Much of what you do will be highly classified, and kept out of the public eye. But if you have done something outstanding at DSO, we will make sure that you know it, and that your achievement is properly recognised, secretly if necessary," he added.

In conjunction with its golden jubilee, DSO held an exhibition which displayed archived documents, artefacts and photos at the Shangri-La Hotel.

It also launched its DSO50 commemorative website, The Relentless Pursuit, on its 50-year journey.

Chief executive Cheong Chee Hoo said in his address that DSO's mission remains as it was when it started 50 years ago - to develop technologies and solutions that provide a cutting edge to the defence of Singapore.

"We are extending our capabilities to support related needs in other national security agencies and whole-of-government crisis preparedness and management efforts," he added.

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