

***Pukul Habis: Total Wipeout: A Story of War in Malaysia and Singapore.* By David Boey. Singapore: David Boey Creatives, 2022. Softcover: 400pp.**

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and concerns over a potential Chinese attack on Taiwan have brought the conduct as well as the deterrence of interstate war to the foreground of contemporary discussions about international security. But, despite the prominence of concerns over terrorism, internal security, piracy and other relatively low-intensity challenges over the last two decades, potential conflict between states never went away as a focus for those who think about defence and security in Southeast Asia. This has been particularly so in Singapore. The structure, equipment and training of the city-state's armed forces provide many clues to their intended operational roles, which are evidently concerned primarily with deterrence and (if necessary) defence against conventional military threats. However, to a greater or lesser extent, the orders of battle, procurement patterns and military exercises of some other Southeast Asian states, including Malaysia, reveal that their political leaders and defence establishments also have possible conflict with other regional states on their minds.

For several decades, David Boey—a Singaporean who was at one point a correspondent for *Jane's Defence Weekly* and later Defence Correspondent for *The Straits Times*—has thought long and hard about his country's defence preparations. In a country where almost every locally raised male has some military expertise due to Singapore's National Service system, Boey is probably the most knowledgeable person, outside government, on the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF). It should be no surprise that *Pukul Habis*, his fictional account of a war between Singapore and its neighbour Malaysia, reflects his near-encyclopaedic knowledge of the SAF and is replete with military detail. But Boey's transition from his previous journalistic writing to the very different medium of fiction is also impressive.

Following in the footsteps of previous authors of speculative war fiction—including novels as diverse as Hector Bywater's *The Great Pacific War* (1925), General Sir John Hackett's *The Third World War* (1978) and Tom Clancy's *The Hunt for Red October* (1984), not to mention earlier books by Singaporean authors such as Douglas Chua's *Crisis in the Straits: Malaysia invades Singapore* (2001) and Wee Ee Hon's *Ko Island: What if NS Men had to fight?*

(2004)—Boey's book describes how bilateral tensions between Malaysia and Singapore could escalate to full-scale warfare. This involves, among other things, an SAF advance into the Malaysian state of Johor, Malaysia's use of air power and multiple-launch rocket systems to attack Singapore, naval clashes in the Singapore Strait and submarine warfare against Singapore's amphibious warfare ships as they head for Malaysian shores. Written in large part, though not exclusively, from the perspective of the Malaysian Armed Forces, the story adds a strong human dimension to its imaginary war by focusing on the thoughts and feelings of service personnel ranging from ordinary soldiers to senior officers. In an apparent effort to redress the gender-bias often inherent in books about warfare, Boey emphasizes the roles of female personnel and decision-makers.

The author is at his best when writing in detail about the operational and tactical dimensions of this fictional war. Boey displays not only his expert knowledge but also his empathy for service personnel to good effect in his descriptions of night-fighting in an oil palm plantation between a Malaysian territorial army anti-tank unit and SAF armoured infantry, clashes between the two countries' fixed maritime installations, a beach assault by Singapore forces and armoured warfare in the "Pineapple Sea". These sections are all classics of the genre.

An interesting and important feature of the book is the author's emphasis on the techniques of deception employed by Malaysia, on paper the militarily weaker of the two sides. It secretly brings retired MiG-29 fighters back into service, clandestinely purchases a squadron's worth of light helicopters for use in an attack role, sets up a decoy regiment using imitation rocket launchers and acquires artillery-launched Electronic Warfare devices. As the story unfolds, these clever measures help blunt the notional advantages of the numerically and technologically superior SAF. However, sometimes it seems that Boey is forcing Singapore to fight with one hand tied behind its back. One might ask why, in the story, does the SAF not use its offensive assets more effectively? Why is there no attempt at strategic pre-emption, exploiting Singapore's superiority in air power and C5ISR (Command, Control, Computers, Communications, Cyber, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance), particularly in terms of an Offensive Counter Air campaign that one might expect to see against Malaysia's own air force at the start of such a conflict? And what about the cyber dimension, which hardly figures in the book?

Another slightly puzzling feature is the relative lack of attention

paid to the political dimension of this hypothetical war. The explanation of why these two closely inter-dependent states go to war in the first place does not seem fully convincing. In reality, the obstacles to war breaking out would be formidable, ranging from the personal contacts between the two sides' political leaders to the probable damping effect that the region's major powers (particularly the United States) could be expected to exert as tensions rose. Boey recognizes the potential significance of the role of the United States but uses the *deus ex machina* of a volcanic eruption to neutralize the impact of a US Navy carrier battle group's presence close to Singapore. Similarly, an unprecedentedly violent tropical storm intervenes at the end of the book to enforce a pause in the SAF's advance into Johor—almost a literal case of “rain stopped play”. The mechanics of ending such a war would be particularly interesting to explore but Boey deals with these rather summarily through (spoiler alert) a truce negotiated by the two sides' military commanders and the arrival of a Japanese task force in a peacekeeping role.

A larger matter is whether, since the 1997–98 Asian Financial Crisis that severely undermined Malaysia's defence spending and, eventually, its military capabilities, open conflict with Malaysia remains such a serious concern for Singapore as it once was. But it is important to remember that *Pukul Habis* is intended as a work of fiction. Boey has produced a well-written, highly readable and attractively designed novel that brings home how costly and harrowing a subregional interstate conflict in Southeast Asia would be for all concerned.

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