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NS' role in defining the vision of a new society

BY

[EUGENE K B TAN](#)

March 15, 2017

Yesterday marked the 50th anniversary of the introduction of National Service (NS), a cornerstone of our defence strategy and a hallmark of the Singaporean way of life. In a short span of 50 years, NS has come a long way and continues to mould generations of Singaporean men.

Military service embodies the ultimate sacrifice that a citizen makes in defence of his homeland's territorial integrity and sovereignty. This metaphor of military service and citizenship as integral to nation-building has been a powerful one since the republican city-states of ancient Greece.

In introducing the National Service (Amendment) Bill on March 13, 1967, which Singapore's first Parliament passed the following day, then-Defence Minister Goh Keng Swee began his speech by posing this question: "Why bother about defending Singapore at all?"

Dr Goh said his question was not facetious despite there being "people, laymen as well as experts, who say that we should not (bother about defending Singapore)".

"They tell you that the island is quite indefensible, and if there is a sustained major attack upon it, it is unlikely that, without major assistance from outside, Singapore can hold out. ... I believe that the people who hold the contrary view are mistaken," he added.

"For the logical conclusion drawn from their premise must be that Singapore should revert to a colony or a satellite of whoever wishes to afford it protection. If you are in a completely vulnerable position, anyone disposed to do so can hold you to ransom and life for you will then become very tiresome".

Dr Goh's words have a persistent and profound resonance half a century on. In 1967, Malaysia still commanded two infantry regiment battalions and a naval detachment in Singapore. Britain was also preparing to withdraw its military bases

east of the Suez. More significantly, this bold vision of NS for a new society, then barely secure, has strengthened what it means to be Singaporean.

Under the Enlistment Act, both men and women can be conscripted, although only men have been enlisted for NS since 1967 for up to two years (previously two-and-a-half years). This is followed by operationally ready service until 40 years of age for non-commissioned officers and 50 years of age for commissioned officers.

Since 1967, more than a million Singaporeans have served NS in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), the Singapore Police Force (SPF) and the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF), with the third generation of NSmen enlisting and building on the foundation laid by their fathers and grandfathers.

Beyond the confines of the barracks, military recruitment and placement policies have tremendous potential to shape society. National service can and has nurtured national and civic consciousness. In particular, the contours of national identity and citizenship are intimately shaped and determined.

Security concerns are dominant themes in independent Singapore's governance and historiography. The strategic anxiety of a small city-state is shaped by its assessment of South-east Asia as a volatile neighbourhood, a history of uneasy relationships with its closest neighbours, and an abiding concern with the primordial pulls and power of race, language and religion.

The SAF is a largely conscript defence force and is, from time to time, portrayed as a pillar of Singapore's multiracial ethos — an institution that bonds the servicemen and servicewomen regardless of their class, race, language or religion, in the defence of Singapore's sovereignty.

Mandatory military service has provided a shared purpose and a shared experience for Singaporean society. When explaining the proposed law on national service in Parliament on March 13, 1967, Mr Goh said: "Nothing creates loyalty and national consciousness more speedily and more thoroughly than participation in defence and membership of the armed forces".

The Government has always maintained that SAF's operational requirements take clear precedence over the nation-building function. From a largely ethnic Malay police force and armed forces, the Government upon independence sought to recruit more Chinese and Indians into the police and armed forces.

To "racially balance" the SAF, universal conscription of Malays was not practised between 1969 and 1973 to facilitate the evolution of the SAF to a mixed-race one.

Such a development was perhaps not surprising. It underscored the demanding dilemma and challenge of nation-building in a fledgling nation-state: How to integrate a multiracial society amid polarised race relations as a result of the painful ejection from Malaysia, and racial riots in 1964 and 1969.

In tandem with a growing sense of national identity and belonging, all eligible and medically-fit Malays have been enlisted for national service for more than four decades now.

In the next stage of nation-building, we can expect a closer integration of Singaporeans in the SAF, SPF and SCDF.

This confidence, recognition and accommodation of the minority communities within the complementary framework of an overarching Singaporean civic identity and loyalty will also enhance the operational readiness of the SAF and boost nation-building efforts.

Since its inception, the SAF has also become a traditional training ground for Singapore's future leaders, especially in politics. In the current Cabinet, seven of the 20 Ministers, including Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean and three fourth-generation leaders, were professional military officers.

NS is no longer just a rite of passage. It has become a movement, a way of life, for the many Singaporean sons and their families, including daughters, wives and mothers, who provide the unstinting moral support to their fathers, husbands and sons as they collectively contribute to Singapore's defence, peace and prosperity. Employers play a critical role in ensuring that the security umbrella provided by the NSmen is not taken for granted.

The demands of NS on individuals, families and society are real, sometimes all too demanding and painful. But they matter immensely in keeping Singapore secure and sovereign and in maintaining our way of life in good and bad times.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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