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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## The Evolution of National Service in the Singapore Story

By Ong Weichong

### Synopsis

*The narrative of NS continues to evolve, so does its relevance to national security.*

### Commentary

MINDEF'S RECENT decision to ban certain offensive lyrics in a popular marching song 'Purple Light' has reignited much discussion in social media and alternative media circles on perceptions of National Service (NS) in Singapore. Much of the focus has been on gender relations in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), but bloggers have used the opportunity to widen the scope of discussion. In one such commentary in Yahoo! News, 'Is it time to reconsider National Service?', Kirsten Han asserted that:

"NS ... is a thorn in the side of Singaporean men ... Men often play the NS card when it comes to discussions of gender equality, telling women that until they have been conscripted they have no right to speak out on sexism. This tactic is also adopted when conversations on immigration arise; foreigners' rights should always be secondary to ours because they have served in our military... Since we can accept that NS is problematic and unfair, it makes sense for us to begin to question conscription and its place in Singapore."

### Shaky assertions

Ms Han's assertions do not stand up to critical scrutiny for the following reasons:

> Her claim that the "NS is a thorn in the side of Singaporean men" does not square with recent empirical evidence nor does she provide any to support her claim. On the contrary, a recent independent survey carried out by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) showed that 98% of respondents agreed that NS is "Necessary for the defence of Singapore";

> Her comment on men playing up the NS card when it comes to discussions on gender equality and immigration does not paint an accurate picture of the larger ongoing debate on NS. The government-led conversation to strengthen NS precisely seeks to mitigate the negative effects of playing up the NS card on the above issues;

> However, the most worrying of Ms Han's assertion is that "Since we can accept that NS is problematic, it makes sense for us to begin to question conscription and its place in Singapore". In this case, Ms Han does not provide the evidence to substantiate her claim that "NS is problematic and unfair". Utilising such unsubstantiated assertions as a rationale to question the place of conscription has no place in serious policy

debate – much less as a basis for sound defence policy making.

In the Singapore context, NS adds rather than subtracts from the country's military deterrence, homeland defence and defence diplomacy capabilities. More importantly, NS has ensured that Singapore continues to have a military that remains connected to the society that it protects. To maintain that connection, it is crucial to have places and spaces for rigorous debate on the role of NS in Singapore – be it through government-led or civil society-driven initiatives.

However, in the largely 'unpoliceable' space of alternative media, assertions that lack rigour can easily be misinterpreted as informed opinions – particularly when written by prominent figures in the blogosphere.

### **Why NS and a strong SAF still matter**

Historian Victor Davis Hanson reminds us that “Even with changing technology and ideologies ... conflict will remain the familiar father of us all”. Having said that, it is easy to quantify how much food a dollar can buy, but how much security can a dollar spent on defence buy? Admittedly, this seemingly simple question is a difficult one for even defence experts and policymakers. An excerpt from a November 2013 SIPRI report on defence macroeconomics highlights this conundrum:

*“To even begin to calculate...one would need to know...the prevailing and known threats and their associated costs and the likelihood of unknown threats and their probable costs. One would need an assessment of the mitigation measures available, and the costs and effectiveness of each response...one would need to estimate probabilities of threats materialising, and the probabilities of security measures succeeding in mitigating those threats...many of these threats are unknown or intangible, and the costs of losses are immeasurable.”*

In short, like life insurance and medical insurance, defence spending protects individuals against the probabilities of life-threatening threats and losses – some of which may be unknown, intangible or immeasurable. The fact that these threats and losses may not always materialise immediately does not mean that they are not real. In the case of Singapore, NS is not only part of the 'insurance premium' paid by citizens for that protection, but a key component of that umbrella of protection – as instruments of military deterrence, homeland defence and defence diplomacy.

### **Citizen soldiers**

When you see an infantryman patrolling Changi Airport with his Hometeam brethren-in-arms, chances are he will be a citizen soldier providing deterrence against security threats. When you hear of a World War Two era bomb being safely disposed off in a residential area, chances are several members of that disposal team will be citizen soldiers from the Combat Engineers keeping Singapore homes safe. When you read of the SAF's personnel, ships, aircraft and other assets assisting in humanitarian efforts in the aftermath of regional natural disasters, chances are a significant portion of the personnel will be citizen soldiers, sailors and airmen extending the reach of Singapore's defence diplomacy.

The core capabilities that allow the SAF to carry out the above missions and tasks are painstakingly built over years and sometimes decades – upon the shoulders of NSmen. Many of these core capabilities in military deterrence, homeland defence and defence diplomacy are not scalable like Lego blocks. Simply put, like humpty-dumpty once broken, they can never be put back again.

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