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National Service at 55: Anchoring Singapore's Core Principles

By Ong Wei Chong

SYNOPSIS

Singapore will be always vulnerable, and it is necessary to defend and secure it with National Service. Technological advancement and the information age have made the struggle for the command of attention and influence increasingly competitive. More than ever, an efficacious National Education is needed to inculcate the fundamentals of National Service for Singapore's security.

COMMENTARY

IN 1954, the British colonial authorities in Singapore attempted to implement the [National Service Ordinance \(NSO\)](#). The colonial government believed that selective conscription, however limited, was necessary for Singapore's journey towards self-government. This first attempt at implementing National Service (NS) in Singapore met with stiff resistance from Chinese middle school students and they took to the streets to protest. The demonstrators were heavily influenced by anti-colonial sentiments and political developments in Communist China. Violence erupted when they clashed with the police on 13 May 1954.

The situation was exploited by the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) which stepped up their infiltration of Chinese middle schools particularly through the Singapore Chinese Middle Schools Students' Union ([SCMSSU](#)). In 1956, then Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock deregistered the SCMSSU which then Minister for Education Chew Swee Kee labelled as "nothing less than a Communist front organisation".

National Service: Why fundamental principles matter

The security environment that a newly independent Singapore found itself in 1967 was a gloomy one. The precipitated withdrawal of British forces from their East of Suez

role meant that Singapore had to quickly build up a credible military deterrent with limited resources. Mandatory NS was key to Singapore's national survival. On the domestic front, there were also clear threats coming from communalism and communism as groups in Singapore jostled for political gains.

Unlike the NSO of the colonial period, the National Service (Amendment) Bill of 1967 was universal in its principles and implementation. 96 percent of the 9,000-odd eligible enlistees showed up for registration. [NS registration evaders](#) who failed to do so were arrested by the police. There were anti-NS demonstrations in 1967, albeit on a smaller scale than in 1954.

In contrast to the anti-NS demonstrations and riots of the 1950s and 1960s, NS is viewed today as a Singaporean rite of passage and a cornerstone of Singapore's collective identity. The practice of NS policy based on the principles of universality and equity has earned the trust and support of Singaporeans since the implementation of the National Service (Amendment) Bill of 1967.

In response to the issue of NS defaulters arising from public interest in the case of Melvyn Tan in 2006, then Minister of Defence Teo Chee Hean reiterated those [principles](#). He stated:

“Singaporeans serve willingly out of a sense of duty, and also a sense that the system is fair. Every citizen does his part, and nobody can dodge his responsibility to serve without severe legal and social sanctions. The Government will strenuously uphold the National Service system, and preserve its fairness and equity.”

In the same statement, Minister Teo also touched on another fundamental principle of NS – it must meet the critical need of national security and survival. Hence, those serving NS are deployed only in the Singapore Armed Forces, Singapore Police Force, and Singapore Civil Defence Force.

Importance of National Security and National Education

Since then, there have been calls in the media to expand the scope of NS, that is, going beyond the critical need for national security and survival. Such calls should be treated with caution. Expanding NS to cover other causes and concerns is likely to undermine public acceptance of the NS policy for the sake of Singapore's independence and sovereignty -- the highest form of duty and service for the nation.

The implementation of NS policy based on the consistency of the enunciated principles has buttressed the public trust in NS for over 50 years. These principles should not be eroded without the strongest of justification.

Education is crucial in shaping mindsets towards NS and communicating the key principles of Singapore's national security. Since the introduction of the Total Defence (TD) concept in 1984, a whole-of-society approach to national defence and its pedagogy in the form of National Education (NE) in schools have evolved to engage students of each new generation on Singapore's philosophy of national defence and preparedness.

These platforms now include educative animation competitions, knowledge puzzles, a strategy card game, and a badge programme for uniformed student groups in schools that was recently updated in 2022. In addition, the recently revamped Singapore Discovery Centre allows for NE lessons to be imparted through the experiential approach of interactive experiences, games, and simulations.

National Education: How to Keep it Relevant

Beyond such NE platforms, the importance of NE throughout the NS cycle – from the period of serving full-time on NS (NSF) to the period of being a reservist (NSman) – cannot be understated.

In the contemporary digital era and information age, the proliferation of '[Like War](#)', or the fusion of war, politics and Internet power into accessible story-telling posts on smart phones, have transformed Silicon Valley tech giants, influencers, and Tiktok stars into tools of mass persuasion. The struggle for the command of attention and influence is unrelenting.

The challenge today is how to sustain interest in the enduring vulnerabilities of Singapore and generate relevant messaging and narratives on national security to boost national resilience for the tech-savvy servicemen.

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine, particularly its multitude of counteractions in combat and civil defence, is a timely reminder of why armed forces need to maintain their core competencies in military operations and to enhance interoperability across the land, sea, air, cyber, and information domains.

The focus of the NS cycle to strengthen, sharpen and sustain the operational proficiency and readiness of servicemen is crucial to carry on Singapore's military deterrent. Equally important is the role of NE in reinforcing a sense of national identity and purpose in servicemen. In the increasingly competitive space for attention and influence, effective conduct of NE by way of timely NE packages delivered throughout the NS cycle is essential.

Securing Singapore

Big data analytics and digital tools can now enable an ever-more tailored approach to suit the requirements of individual NS units and servicemen. Indeed, NE content and pedagogy have evolved with each new generation of Singapore's servicemen to incorporate advances in digital technology. 55 years of NS have also enriched the know-how to make NS even better.

We cannot ignore the impact of the information revolution, but neither should we forget that despite technological advances, Singapore faces what the experts described as "structural vulnerabilities". So long as war and conflict remain indubitably human in nature, NE is necessary to inculcate the fundamentals of why NS is crucial to protect Singapore's way of life.

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