

NS50: Defending Singapore 50 Years and Beyond

by LTC Low Teck Loong, LTC Lee Kok Kiang, MAJ Nah Jinping & CPT Aaron Chan

Abstract:

In commemoration of the 50th anniversary of National Service (NS) this year, this essay traces briefly the origins of NS as a necessary response to the critical need of national security in newly-independent Singapore. The authors highlight that part of the success of the policy has been due to its evolution over the years to stay relevant to Singapore's society and meet our security needs. This has included building a strong NS training system, creating the Singapore Armed Forces Volunteer Corps (SAFVC), increasing opportunities for National Servicemen (NSmen) to contribute; easing administrative restrictions, improving recognition and benefits for NSmen, and encouraging community support for them. Lastly, the authors consider several possibilities of how the RSAF could tap on the NS resources in response to emerging threats in hybrid warfare, such as harnessing the current force and shaping the future, strengthening individual skills and knowledge, and strengthening partnership with the private sector and other ministries.

Keywords: National Service; Total Defence; Hybrid Warfare; Professional Trainings; Defence Partnerships

INTRODUCTION

Since the passing of the National Service (Amendment) Bill in 1967, every Singaporean male citizen is liable to be called up to serve NS upon turning 18. NS has played a big part in Singapore's success story. Indeed, without NS, we could not have built up the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and Home Team to protect ourselves from potential aggressors and the constantly evolving security threats. This essay celebrates 50 years of NS, and also aims to highlight several ways to continue to strengthen NS. Given the emerging threat of hybrid warfare, this essay also proposes possibilities that could be explored by the RSAF to enable our NSmen to make greater contributions in security and defence.

LOOKING BACK: THE GENESIS OF NS

When Singapore first became independent, the odds of survival were against us. Our strategic environment was dangerous and hostile. Back then, with no national defence force of our own, Singapore was defenceless and extremely vulnerable.¹ The painful memories of the Japanese Occupation and Indonesia's policy of *Konfrontasi* made defence an issue of survival. Our founding fathers quickly recognised the need to protect and defend our people and interests, if we wanted to shape our future. Given our small population and a lack of strategic depth, it was deemed that the only viable option was to build a defence force from citizen conscripts, who would be trained and led by a small group of regulars. In the event of an emergency, the whole nation could be mobilised to protect the country.

We have come far since the first 9,000 recruits were conscripted in 1967. It was not a popular move back then. The Chinese have a saying that good sons do not become soldiers, just as good iron is not made into nails. Hence, our founding fathers had to constantly emphasise the importance of NS. As then Defence Minister Dr Goh Keng Swee said, “Nothing creates loyalty and national consciousness more speedily and more thoroughly than participation in defence and membership of the armed forces.”² This was not simply a military issue, but a national one. Members of Parliament back then, including Ong Pang Boon, Othman Wok, and Jek Yuen Tiong, joined the military to show that there was nothing wrong with being a soldier. It was a national priority to make NS

acceptable to the masses. Through National Education efforts, the government gave conscripts a sense that what they were doing was important and meaningful, and convinced their parents that NS was important for Singapore’s survival.

Today, many NSmen have become fathers, and their sons have served NS in turn. This has created strong and positive bonds, and continues to strengthen our commitment to defence. Also, the NS experience has evolved through the years. Compared to the past, NS recruits now have access to world-class training facilities and amenities, and are trained to use the latest weapons and equipment, and fight as an integrated unit.



After a five-year hiatus, the Mobile Column returned to the National Day Parade Singapore 50 (SG50) celebrations, featuring nine families from the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), Singapore Police Force (SPF), and Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) comprising members who have served or are currently in service.

However, having the best hardware is not enough. What matters most is our Singapore spirit, which is essentially having the courage to stand up and the perseverance to carry on when the going gets tough, as well as the willingness to fight for our families, friends, and fellow Singaporeans. We have made NS a national institution and a defining part of the Singapore identity. We are determined to defend our home with our lives. Our NSmen are able to serve wholeheartedly, knowing that their families and employers continue to support NS strongly. This unity of purpose is crucial to SAF's deterrence, as it means that any potential aggressor will not only have to take on the SAF and Home Team, but also the entire Singapore population.

NS: SOUND PRINCIPLES SUPPORTING NATION BUILDING

NS was the only solution back then for us to form a defence force quickly, and this was a bold first step in our nation-building efforts. Choosing the right model to build our military force required careful consideration. Any country must consider the geopolitical landscape and raise an armed force that is able to handle the various types of conflicts they are most likely to face. In the case of conscription, it comes with a significant economic cost, and has a tremendous impact on civilian-military relations. However, Singapore's NS system has fared well with the strict adherence to three key principles.³ First, NS must serve a critical national need, since it comes at a considerable cost to both the individual and the nation. This critical need is that of national security and our survival. The second principle is universality, which means all young able-bodied Singaporeans are conscripted. The third principle is equity, where all who serve NS are treated the same way, regardless of background or status. Through these principles, our NS system has been very successful.

"The nation-building aspect of defence will be more significant if its participation is spread over all strata of society."

-Dr Goh Keng Swee⁴

NS is important for involving the citizenry in the defence of Singapore. It serves as a strong force that integrates civilian and military bodies together for a single cause. This is anchored by a robust NS training system, comprising two years of full-time NS, followed by a ten-year Operationally Ready NS (ORNS) cycle. Through these training cycles, NSmen are updated on the latest technology and force multipliers, while gaining a deeper appreciation of what they do, and why NS is important. In addition, NS serves to integrate all Singaporeans across various social, ethnic, religious, language and cultural groups through the common experience of military training.⁵ This creates a form of shared consciousness and identity among all Singaporeans, which is crucial in our social fabric. Another facet of Singapore that has the effect of rallying the society's support for security beyond the military domain is Total Defence, which calls for different segments of society to play a part in defending the nation. The concept of Total Defence comprises five pillars of defence: psychological, economic, civil, social and military. Such a strategy ensures that defence is not just the responsibility of the military alone, but that of the entire nation.

Our commitment to protect Singapore has given us over 50 years of peace and stability. Through its very existence and capabilities, the SAF has contributed significantly to the stable and peaceful security environment of our country. However, looking ahead, we must guard against complacency, for the nature of threats we face is constantly evolving. Increasingly, threats of a hybrid nature, including but not limiting to cyber warfare, low intensity conflicts and

irregular or unconventional warfare, have manifested across various civil and military realms. Singapore's inherent vulnerability as a small island state remains unchanged, and we continue to need strong defence capabilities, as well as a strong and resilient citizenry.

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STRENGTHENING NS

National Service has continuously evolved over the years to stay relevant to Singapore's society and meet our security needs. The defence of Singapore cannot lie solely on active regulars and servicemen. The SAF must also continuously maintain the professional competence of our NSmen. The establishment of the Committee to Strengthen NS (CSNS), chaired by

Defence Minister Dr Ng Eng Hen, was set up in March 2013 precisely to explore and ensure the relevance of NS, and enable NS to better serve Singapore and Singaporeans.

CSNS spearheaded initiatives targeted at improving the NS structure and expanding community support for servicemen. The following paragraphs provide a brief summary of the implemented and on-going initiatives.⁶

A Strong NS Training System

The National Service structure has been improved by strengthening the NS training system through harnessing the existing pool of SAF, Singapore Police Force (SPF) and Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) regulars who are equipped with the latest training methodology and technology. The addition of well-trained individuals to the training system will ensure that training is effective and safe, and that values will be inculcated effectively. The initiative will also increase the ratio of regular trainers to trainees across the SAF. From November 2016, pre-enlistees can indicate their choice of vocations, and the SAF will take into consideration an individual's skills,



Dr Ng Eng Hen chairing the fourth Committee to Strengthen NS (CSNS) Steering Committee at the Home Team Academy.

experience and vocation preference when deciding what vocation the serviceman is posted to. Our Full-time National Servicemen (NSFs) are likely to be more motivated to do their best with the enhanced matching between the individual's choice and organisational requirements, which could lead to a better NS experience for them.

SAF Volunteer Corps

The SAF Volunteer Corps (SAFVC) was established in October 2014 to give the wider Singapore community an opportunity to contribute to the defence of Singapore. The inaugural cohort of SAFVC marked the end of their basic training in June 2015. With the establishment of the SAFVC, women, first generation Permanent Residents (PRs) and new citizens can now contribute in areas such as legal, security, psychology and engineering.

Increasing Opportunities For NSmen To Contribute

While NSmen appreciate incentives that recognise their service, such incentives are not what drive long-serving NSmen. NSmen are contributing with greater satisfaction as they are increasingly being employed in operational, instructional and leadership roles. On top of that, through deliberate job matching, NSmen can be deployed more effectively. On the whole, the organisation benefits from increased NS contributions while NSmen can have a better NS experience through meaningful service.

Easing Administrative Restrictions

In order to create a positive NS experience, CSNS has looked into easing administrative restrictions throughout the entire National Service pipeline. For example, the percentage of pre-enlistees enlisted within four months after their post-secondary studies will be increased from 45% to 90%. This means that polytechnic graduates could have a shorter waiting

time and start serving NS earlier. CSNS has also proposed ways to reduce the transition time between post-NS and tertiary studies.

In-camp Training (ICT) has also been made less cumbersome in several ways. First, NSmen are allowed the flexibility to use electronic and lifestyle devices in non-sensitive areas within camps during their ICT. Next, reporting requirements for exit control for NSmen was revised from the travel period of more than 24 hours but less than 6 months, to more than 14 days and less than 6 months. In other words, NSmen no longer have to notify the Ministry of Defence (MINDEF) of overseas trips lasting 14 days or fewer, instead of the previous 24-hour limit. Additionally, NS Relations Offices were established in the SCDF, SPF and SAF to facilitate NSmen with more complex administrative matters.

Recognition And Benefits For National Servicemen

National Servicemen have gained increased recognition and benefits through the revamp of the NS HOME (Housing, Medical and Education) which totals to a \$15,000 subsidy over three service milestones applicable to supporting their education, housing and healthcare. Increased insurance coverage for our NSmen has also been implemented during their full-time NS and ICTs. For example, compared to the former SAF Group Term Life insurance scheme, the new scheme has seen an increase in areas of coverage for a lower premium. On top of that, the SAF has been working with the Workforce Development Agency to accredit soldering skills acquired during NS. This could increase employability and ease NSF's transition into the workforce. In addition, NSmen now receive \$150,000 of insurance coverage while serving NS.

Encouraging Community Support For National Servicemen

CSNS proposed for community support to NSmen to be expanded in a multifaceted way. For example, awards such as the 'NS mark' will be given to companies with pro-NS policies. Such recognition may be considered for MINDEF/SAF contracts and hence would encourage companies to enforce good human resource practices that support NS. Next, facilities such as the Singapore Armed Forces Recreation Association (SAFRA) and HomeTeam National Service (HomeTeamNS) recreational facilities were extended not only to the servicemen, but also to their families. On top of that, families of servicemen will be recognised through the Family Recognition Voucher (FRV) scheme which was increased from the top 10% to top 30% of ICT performers. Furthermore, meaningful gifts are given to NSmen during significant stages of their life such as marriage or birth of a child. Finally, in order to enhance stakeholder engagement, the ACCORD (Advisory Council on Community Relations in Defence) was restructured and expanded to comprise (a) an Employer and Business Council; (b) an Educational Institutions Council; and (c) a Family and Community Council. These three new councils will actively reach out to their respective sectors of the community.

SAFEGUARDING OUR FUTURE WITH NS

We will next look at the possibilities of how the RSAF could tap on the NS resources to further strengthen our capabilities against the emerging threats in hybrid warfare, such as defence in cyber warfare. We believe that there are expertise in the domain of cyber warfare residing in the NS resources and can be tapped to build up the RSAF's capability in these domains quickly. Three initiatives that the RSAF could consider are: (a) Harnessing the current force and

shaping the future; (b) Strengthening the individual's skills and knowledge; and (c) Strengthening partnership with private sectors and other ministries. Some of these initiatives may require NS policies to be adjusted at the MINDEF/SAF level.

Harnessing The Current Force And Shaping The Future

The NS system could be refined so that knowledge, skills and capabilities associated with identified domains in hybrid warfare could be better harnessed from our NS resources. In the previous section, we mentioned that pre-enlistees would get to indicate which vocations they would prefer to serve in, and the system would look at matching vocations and individuals' aptitude to their interest.⁷ We can also explore another initiative where the RSAF proactively takes in pre-enlistees with the right skillsets in building up expertise in niche areas. This can be done by identifying pre-enlistees with the necessary academic background and arranging for them to fulfil their NS requirements in positions related to identified domains in hybrid warfare. For example, polytechnic graduates with an electronic engineering background could be earmarked to perform their NS in positions related to the employment of Electronic Warfare (EW) in the RSAF.

This idea can be extended to the NSmen resources as well. Every year, we have thousands of NSmen who continue to contribute to the RSAF through ICTs. Amongst them, some possess in-depth knowledge and are professionals in specific fields such as cyber security, corporate communications or engineering. Very often, NSmen with such talents are employed in general fields for their ICTs that do not give them the opportunity to contribute their civilian professional expertise. Through a re-vocation exercise, we can maximise the contributions of NSmen with niche

capabilities. This can be done through identifying potential NSmen who fulfil our requirement based on their experience in relevant fields or qualifications. Once this group of people is identified, we can encourage them to join vocations that are relevant and can contribute more to hybrid warfare. By being able to make a difference, they may glean a much more positive experience from NS. We will have a win-win situation where the RSAF can be the choice organisation in attracting talent in addition to the regular workforce, while the identified pre-enlistees and NSmen can serve their NS in a vocation related to their expertise and interest, with opportunities to improve professionally.

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Next, we can review the current MINDEF/SAF policy of determining the deployability of individuals. The aim is to expand the pool of human resources for NS and allow more Singaporeans to contribute in a more meaningful way. It will be timely to review the assessment of individuals' deployability and examine their potential to be employed in a selected field. This can be seen in the Israeli Defense Force (IDF).⁸ Unit 9900, an intelligence unit from the Israeli Army, employs teens with autism in view that their heightened perceptual skills could contribute greatly to the intelligence work of the unit. In many militaries, teens with autism would have been

exempted from service or could contribute in very limited areas. However, by identifying unique traits related to autism, the IDF has created additional ways for Israelis to contribute to their country. Such ideas can be explored for MINDEF/SAF to expand the pool of precious human resource, and at the same time, enlist more Singaporeans to contribute in defence, especially in niche capabilities.

In shaping the future, we can help NSFs preserve relevant skills and knowledge in the realm of hybrid warfare which they acquired in NS. One approach is to assist them in their transition to the specific workforce of the identified domains. This can be done through career fairs or partnerships with the private sector companies similar to the Enhanced Career Fairs introduced by MINDEF and the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) in November 2015.⁹ This will not only allow the smooth transition of this niche group of NSFs into the workforce in specific domains, but also allow the NS system to maintain a pool of relevant expertise for future call-ups. In this manner, they can gain deep expertise in the selected domains and contribute meaningfully when they report back for ICT in the same domain. The SAF can also consider leveraging the Volunteer Corps (VC) platform to expand the pool of resources and tap the expertise from the private sectors. Possible initiatives can be to provide companies with certain privileges if their company's staff are part of the VC or if their NSmen are deployed in specialised domains.

Strengthening Individual Skills And Knowledge

After looking at widening and developing the specific pool of resources, we can explore possibilities where the skills and knowledge of NSFs and NSmen in

specific fields enhanced and strengthened. This can be through improving the learning environment and strengthening the individual's deep learning cycle.

In order to stay relevant in the dynamic operating environment, NSFs and NSmen in these specific fields would be more committed and productive if they are could upgrade themselves during the ICTs. This could be done through attending personal upgrading courses, seminars or forums conducted by in-house trainers, and benefiting from the sharing of personal knowledge and experiences by NSmen on specific fields that are relevant to the RSAF. For example, NSmen serving as corporate communications specialists in the private sector could share their experiences during their ICTs on communication strategies through a learning day arrangement. This could help other NSmen widen their perspectives and better appreciate the challenges in relevant topics.

Besides in-house trainings, we can leverage on external institutions for professional trainings. For example, the Cyber Security Institute (CSI) was launched by Singtel with the aim to provide training and courses related to cyber security in April 2016.¹⁰ We could explore extending these upgrading courses conducted by external professional institutions to

NSmen during their ICT. NSmen could view ICTs as opportunity to upgrade, and see value in their time spent during ICTs. The logic is simple: if we strongly believe that NSmen play an important role in our fighting force, we should equip and train them with the necessary knowledge and skills. In this manner, their employers will not view their absence as a loss to the companies, but an opportunity to partner the SAF to continuously help their staff to upgrade. This will lead us to our third strategy, which is to strengthen our partnership with the private sector and other ministries.

Moving ahead, the RSAF could explore defence partnerships with private companies and external agencies such as the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Communication and Information. We have to recognise the important role played by private companies in the specific fields related to hybrid warfare

Strengthening Partnership With The Private Sector And Other Ministries

Threats that exist in hybrid warfare are not limited to targeting the SAF or the RSAF. No agency



NS Mark: An accreditation scheme to recognise organisations that pledge their commitment to National Service and Total Defence.



NSFs celebrating the successful completion of Basic Military Training.

in Singapore can afford the resources or the expertise to fight against these threats in silos. We will need to strengthen our defence eco-system against such threats, as well as collaborate with other relevant agencies and companies to instill public confidence and our people's commitment to defend the nation. Moving ahead, the RSAF could explore defence partnerships with private companies and external agencies such as the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Communication and Information. We have to recognise the important role played by private companies in the specific fields related to hybrid warfare. We should explore more opportunities to strengthen this partnership where there are mutual benefits to the RSAF and the companies. Possible means include attachments, internships or collaboration research programmes for selected individuals in the identified fields during their full time NS or ICTs for

cross learning. One possible arrangement for such collaboration is the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) and the Singapore Technologies (ST) joint cyber security laboratory. Such arrangements will allow our NSFs and NSmen to widen their perspectives on various issues and gain new insights or trigger new initiatives on the ground.

We could consider similar initiatives for partnership with ministries and national agencies. For example, the Cyber Security Agency (CSA) is the leading body at the national level overseeing cyber security strategy, education and industry development. An initiative could be the sharing of human resources between CSA and the RSAF in the field of cyber defence to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and experience. We could also collaborate with CSA to establish partnerships with the other ministries.

CONCLUSION

The NS system has contributed greatly to the defence of Singapore and the shaping of the Singaporean identity. Since the birth of NS in 1967, NSFs and NSmen have participated in operations that we have termed as hybrid warfare in today's context. While the NS system has enabled the RSAF to achieve many milestones and significant achievements in the past 50 years, it is timely to explore new initiatives that will enable the NS system to continue to contribute to the RSAF in the future. This is important with the RSAF's mission extending into the realm of hybrid warfare, thereby bringing unique challenges that our current arrangement in the NS system may not be able to fully address. This essay suggests three areas which could enhance the contributions of NSFs and NSmen: (a) Harnessing the current force and shaping the future; (b) Strengthening the individual's skills and knowledge; and (c) Strengthening partnership with private sector and other ministries. While some of the initiatives are not new, they can bring value when applied effectively in the RSAF's context. These initiatives can enable the RSAF to gain knowledge and expertise quickly in key domains in hybrid warfare. In addition, by better tapping on NS resources, we can engender greater commitment to defence in the NSFs and NSmen as they contribute more significantly to the defence of Singapore in the next 50 years and beyond. 🌐

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LTC Low Teck Loong is an AWO (C3) by vocation and is currently serving as the Deputy Commanding Officer in 111 SQN, Air Combat Command. LTC Low holds a Bachelors of Engineering (Mechanical & Production Engineering) and Masters of Science (Management) from the Nanyang Technological University (NTU). He graduated as the Distinguished Graduate from the 44th Goh Keng Swee Command and Staff Course.



LTC Lee Kok Kiang is an AWO (GBAD) by vocation and currently CO of 163 SQN. He holds a Bachelors in Mechanical Engineering (Honours) from NTU and a Masters of Science in Operations Research from Naval Postgraduate School. He graduated from the 45th Goh Keng Swee Command and Staff Course in 2014. His previous appointments include Branch Head of Defence Relations and Engagement Office (DREO) and S3 of 163 SQN.



MAJ Nah Jinping is a F-15 pilot and is currently Staff Officer (SO) of Air Weapons System Branch, Air Plans Department. She is a recipient of the SAF Merit Scholarship award and holds a Bachelors of Science (Honours) in Psychology from the University of Nottingham and a Masters of Arts in Educational Studies from the University of Michigan.



CPT Aaron Chan is currently serving as an SO in the Training and Development Branch, Defence Psychology Department. He was awarded the SAF Merit Scholarship in 2008. CPT Chan graduated from University College London (UCL) with a Bachelors of Science in Psychology (Hons, 1st Class) in 2011, and subsequently with a Masters of Science in Social Cognition (Distinction) in 2012.