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Headline: 50 years on, S'pore's National Defence Service is now a shared legacy



Beyond its primary role as a defence force, NS has immense potential to shape society by nurturing national and civic consciousness, critical for Singapore's multiracial society. FILE PHOTO

## 50 years on, S'pore's National Defence Service is now a shared legacy

It provides a security umbrella under which economic and commercial ambitions & aspirations can be purposefully pursued. BY EUGENE K B TAN

**E**XACTLY 50 years ago, on Aug 17, 1967, Singapore's pioneer batch of 900 full-time National Servicemen (NSmen) enlisted in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) 3rd and 4th Battalions of the Singapore Infantry Regiment. Barely six months earlier, in March 1967, Parliament had passed the National Service (Amendment) Bill.

In moving the Bill, then-defence minister Goh Keng Swee had posed Members of Parliament the rhetorical question of "why bother about defending Singapore at all?". Singapore had no military that it could call its own. In fact, Malaysia still had its troops stationed in Singapore.

At independent Singapore's ceremonial opening of the first Parliament on Dec 8, 1965, Malaysia's top-ranking military officer in Singapore had insisted that Malaysian army outriders "escort" then-prime minister Lee Kuan Yew from his City Hall office to Parliament House. Today, National Service (NS) has become a cornerstone of Singapore's defence, security and society.

Mr Lee had argued in Parliament in December 1965 that "we must first dispel the illusion that because we wanted merger in Malaysia, therefore we were vulnerable without merger. Whilst politically an independent Singapore holds hazards in the long term, not just for ourselves but for all in South-east Asia, economically it does not follow that it is within the dispensation of our neighbours to decide our economic destiny. Two years of confrontation (with Indonesia) have given us an opportunity to demonstrate that we do not live on the bounty of our neighbours".

A strong defence, accompanied by shrewd diplomacy and a political determination to remain sovereign and relevant to the region and the world on its own terms, has been critical in Singapore's economic development and overall progress.

A professional military would have been economically crippling for an economy that was then heavily dependent on the British forces based in Singapore. By the late-1960s, the British were already planning to withdraw their forces east of the Suez. So the choice of a largely conscripted defence force was foisted upon us, but one that Singapore has made a virtue of.

Today, NS is no longer just a rite of passage for young men on the threshold of adulthood. Under the law, both men and women can be conscripted. However, only men have been enlisted to serve for up to two years (previously, 2½ years).

Since 1967, more than a million Singaporeans have served NS in the SAF, the Singapore Police Force and the Singapore Civil Defence Force.

It has become a way of life for many Singaporeans' sons and their families, including wives, daughters and mothers who provide unstinting moral support to their husbands, fathers and sons as they contribute to Singapore's defence, peace and prosperity.

Employers have also played a pivotal role as NS duty continues into the prime of NSmen's lives: Full-time NS is followed by operationally ready service, typically until 40 years of age for non-commissioned officers and 50 years of age for commissioned officers.

Given the extensive commitment, efforts continue to be made to strengthen the tripartite relationship between the Ministry of Defence and SAF, employers and NSmen. They include recognising supportive employers and businesses, and addressing various issues and challenges faced by employees in fulfilling their NS duty.

Recent initiatives include the NS Mark Accreditation Scheme that encourages and recognises businesses and organisations to adopt a more NS-friendly workplace culture through policies and human resource practices that support NS and NSmen.

For selected In-Camp Training (ICT), performance feedback is provided to employers to highlight and provide recognition of NSman employees' skills and attributes demonstrated during ICT and the competencies acquired that would be beneficial to the workplace as well.

NS and the economy are not two unrelated fields of endeavours; they impact intimately upon each other. A Singapore that is vulnerable and poorly defended will not inspire companies to invest and people to live in Singapore. Our status as an air and sea hub would be gravely threatened as well.

NS provides the broad and sturdy security umbrella under which economic and commercial ambitions and aspirations can be purposefully pursued.

Singapore's conscript military, in turn, requires employers to recognise their role in supporting NS and to ensure that NSmen are not discriminated against because of their seeking to fulfil their citizen-soldier responsibilities while balancing work and family commitments.

That a citizen's military service is integral to patriotism and nation-building has been a powerful metaphor since the days of the republican city-states of ancient

Greece. Military service, especially during times of external aggression, embodies the ultimate sacrifice that a citizen makes in defence of his homeland.

Security concerns are and will continue to be dominant themes for Singapore. The country's strategic anxiety is also shaped by Singapore's exceptionalism in South-east Asia. Singapore is the only nation-state where the ethnic Chinese are dominant politically and economically.

Add to that a history of uneasy relationships with our closest neighbours, the primordial pulls and power of race, language and religion, and the rise of an increasingly assertive China with growing interest in the region.

NS remains as crucial, if not more important, as it was in 1967. Dr Goh had then explained that Singapore would easily "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". This fundamental reality continues to possess profound validity half a century on.

Beyond its primary role as a defence force, NS has immense potential to shape society by nurturing national and civic consciousness, critical for Singapore's multiracial society. As an institution providing a shared experience, NS helps bond servicemen and servicewomen in the military, police and civil defence forces regardless of their class, race, language or religion.

When explaining the proposed law on National Service in Parliament on March 13, 1967, Dr Goh had said: "Nothing creates loyalty and national consciousness more speedily and more thoroughly than participation in defence and membership of the armed forces."

Given the concerns of anxious survivalism and chronic vulnerability are ever present, NS requires sustained recognition for its continued purpose and relevance. The corporate sector and employers have a stake to ensure that NS is neither a liability nor seen as a cost of doing business. NS should be seen as a social investment. Like a computer's operating system, NS has silently buttressed Singapore's standing as a safe and secure place for business.

As we commemorate 50 years of NS (NS50), it is an opportune time to recognise and reflect on the contributions of past and present national servicemen. It is timely to renew the centrality of NS for all stakeholders and to enhance the network of support.

NS50's theme of "From My Generation to Yours" signifies NS as a shared legacy and ethos across generations. This inter-generational commitment and duty must be transmitted on from one generation to the next.

It bears constant reminding that Singapore's sovereignty is not a given even if it is often taken for granted. Businesses are part of this shared purpose. The tripartite relationship that undergirds NS is like a tripod - every leg is necessary to make things work.

Any bold vision for Singapore would be a mere mirage if what it means to be Singapore and Singaporean are incapable of being defended. Singaporeans are the best and only defenders of our sovereignty and way of life.

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