

comment & analysis

Given the difference in what is expected of each country's conscripts, it is unfair to suggest full-time NS can be shortened simply because other countries have shorter periods of conscription.

TODAY FILE PHOTO



“Cliches about revolutions and drug smuggling may persist when Asians think about Latin America, and vice versa. The realities of trade and changes in global politics are, however, pushing both sides to rethink old assumptions.

SIMON TAY • 13

REVISITING NATIONAL SERVICE

Why full-time NS can't be shortened

HO SHU HUANG



form. As such, arguments that full-time NS should be shortened cannot be merely guided by internal logic alone, anecdotal observations or the experiences of other countries. They must fully recognise what full-time NS is expected to deliver.

According to a government poll conducted in 2011, over 90 per cent of those surveyed said National Service (NS) is necessary. Arguments that it can be shortened, however, are regularly made.

These arguments typically rest on two assumptions. The first concerns time. Some argue the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) uses it too inefficiently. “Hurry up to wait”, or “wait to rush, rush to wait” is often used to describe one's experience in NS. They reason that NS could be shorter if time were more efficiently used.

Others assume NS should be shorter because the advanced military technology that the SAF actively seeks is ostensibly a force multiplier that should reduce the amount of manpower required to maintain a high level of capability, as well as the time required to train individuals.

In fact, it was because of the increased efficiencies achieved through technology and innovation that the length of full-time NS was standardised to two years for all ranks almost a decade ago.

The second assumption is that if other developed countries conscript their citizens for shorter periods of time, surely Singapore can too. Supporters of this argument point to countries such as, inter alia, Finland, Denmark, Austria and Norway where conscription is shorter, often only a few months long.

These assumptions and their related arguments are not intrinsically illogical. They do not, however, sufficiently account for the functional objectives of NS.

NS does not exist for its own sake, but as its first principle states, it “must be to meet critical national need for security and survival”. It does so by providing a large body of highly-trained front-line troops for the SAF, a conventionally structured deterrent force.

Singapore's approach to defence dictates its function and therefore its

HIGH TRAINING STANDARDS

Singapore's defence policy rests on the twin pillars of defence and deterrence. The SAF provides the means to achieve the latter.

More than half of the active-duty Singapore Army, the biggest service in the SAF, is made up of full-time NS-men (NSFs). Few countries, even the aforementioned ones with long traditions of conscription, have such a high conscript-to-regular ratio.

NSFs fill a wide variety of vocations and appointments across the SAF and are trained to the same exacting standards as their regular counterparts. The high quality of NSFs was amply demonstrated in 2009 when a Leopard tank crew of three NSFs led by a young regular, having only trained with the vehicle for six months, beat seasoned regulars from Australia and the United States in a friendly tri-nation competition.

It is more often witnessed in the complex, high-tempo overseas exercises, such as Forging Sabre or Wallaby, that the SAF regularly conducts.

Such standards are typically not expected of conscripts in other countries because of the different doctrinal structure and lower technological sophistication of the militaries they serve in. In many instances, conscripts operate in a more evenly mixed military manpower system and augment the regular core of the military, rather than form it, as is the case in Singapore.

The training they consequently receive reflects this. Given the difference in what is expected of each country's conscripts, it is unfair to suggest full-time NS can be shortened simply because other countries have shorter periods of conscription.

NS cannot be benchmarked against conscription elsewhere as each system is fit for its own specific purpose.

● CONTINUED ON PAGE 12



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