

Accommodate More Volunteers for Singapore's Defence

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The recently published results of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey on Singaporean attitudes towards National Service (NS) will undoubtedly be a shot in the arm for discussions on national defence volunteerism, a thread that has emerged in the larger conversation on how support for NS can be strengthened.

While there is ambivalence over whether NS should be obligatory for females and first-generation Permanent Residents (PRs), the survey results clearly demonstrate there is sizeable support for allowing them to contribute directly to Singapore's defence as volunteers.

Crucially, this sentiment is shared equally by those who currently serve NS and those who do not. This finding is not unexpected, and merely reinforces similar views that have often surfaced in earlier discussions facilitated by the Committee to Strengthen National Service (CSNS).

MILITARY VOLUNTEERS A CHALLENGE

Much of this discussion assumes such volunteer service will be done in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF). This is arguably natural, considering how the majority of those liable for NS serve in the military, and the immediate tendency to equate national defence with it.

The SAF has already begun to explore ways its currently-limited volunteer scheme can be expanded to include combat roles.

Enlisting volunteers for military service is, however, challenging in practice.

Military service requires lengthy training because of the complexity and uniqueness of the profession of arms. Military jobs that can utilise existing civilian skills, such as military medicine, are the minority, and are highly specialised. As such, vocations which may allow for a shorter training regime because they build on existing skill sets are limited.

On the other hand, the majority of military vocations are geared towards the effective use of controlled violence against an adversary in a physically and mentally strenuous, even unnatural, environment.

Soldiers therefore have to be physically and mentally resilient, masters of both basic soldiering and vocation-specific skills, and able to function collectively as part of a larger, complex unit.

Such training requires sufficient time to be conducted adequately and safely, and is the reason why NS training is structured as a comparatively lengthy initial full-time stint with regular In-Camp Training thereafter.

Assuming that new jobs are not specifically created for them, prospective volunteers would therefore have to undergo the same training as Operationally-Ready NSmen. As such, volunteering for service in the SAF could involve a larger commitment than what one typically associates with volunteerism.

That there was significantly stronger support among those surveyed for women to contribute to Singapore's defence as volunteers in a "professional role" or at "NS events", rather than actually serve NS, suggests that any offer to volunteer would be conditional.

OPPORTUNITIES ELSEWHERE

How, then, might individuals interested in overtly contributing to Singapore's national defence be accommodated? Perhaps the best way forward is not to seek ways to enlist them into the SAF, but rather, encourage interested parties to volunteer with the Singapore Police Force (SPF) and the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF).

The reason is twofold. First, the structures to accommodate them are already in place. The SPF's Volunteer Special Constabulary (VSC) and the SCDF's Civil Defence Auxiliary Unit (CDAU) are already well established, the former created in 1946, and the latter, in 2006.

Medically-fit Singaporeans and PRs of both genders can apply to both. In each, there are numerous appointments that can be filled by volunteers who can competently discharge their duties with comparatively less training than would be required if they were enlisted into the military.

This training is also often conducted part-time over several months, rather than in fixed blocks — a more appropriate schedule for volunteers, as it allows greater flexibility. Civilian skill sets, such as interpersonal communication and negotiation, are also more relevant to the nature of the work, unlike in the military. VSC and CDAU officers serve alongside their NS and regular counterparts, and are equally empowered in their jobs.

BROADER MEANING OF DEFENCE

Second — and more importantly — volunteering in these uniformed services also contributes to Singapore's defence. Military defence is but one pillar of five in the Total Defence framework. National security is no longer solely concerned with the protection of national sovereignty from external aggression, but also involves combating possible domestic threats from within — such as terrorism or organised crime — or local calamities, such as large-scale industrial accidents, that could destabilise the nation.

In addition, hundreds are enlisted into the SPF and SCDF annually for their full-time NS, and thousands more serve as Operationally-Ready NSmen thereafter, recognition that these services serve Singapore's "critical security need", too.

If the nub of the issue that spawned this interest in volunteering is a desire for more opportunities for sharing the defence burden across a wider body of residents, then service in the Home Team cannot be discounted and that in the SAF privileged.

Coincidentally, the CSNS discussed the findings of the IPS survey at the Home Team Academy during its fourth meeting. If it is determined that there is indeed sufficient desire by those who currently do not serve NS to contribute to Singapore's defence as volunteers, the way to accommodate them may already be in front of us — expand and raise the profiles of the volunteer schemes in the SPF and SCDF.

NS is National Service, and Singapore's defence has to be more broadly understood. Although it may seem intuitive to assume so, both are not the monopoly of the military alone.

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