

Population Issues in Singapore and Its Implications to National Security*

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Abstract

Singapore, in order to take advantage of foreign talents for its economic growth, employed a proactive immigration policy during the 2000s to prepare for population decline brought about by an aging population and falling birthrate. While that led to an increase in the population, it also created social unrest, leaving the long-standing nation's reign by the ruling People's Action Party in jeopardy. In terms of national security, it was the robust Singapore Armed Forces that underpinned the country's "Deterrence and Diplomacy" strategy. That strategy was also bolstered by the National Service, which requires all male Singaporean citizens to undergo military training, as well as the sufficient defense budget. However, amid growing competition for employment between citizens and newcomers sparked by an influx of immigrants and increasing social costs to take care of the elderly in the society, there has been a demand to review the country's national security posture. The increased demand for newcomers to take part in the country's national defense has exposed the issue of the status of Malays in the military, which was already a sensitive topic from the view point of ethnic harmony. Except for the newly established volunteer corps through which those exempt from the National Service can serve, no other significant solutions have been introduced, and great challenges for the country's future national security remain.

Introduction

Amid the rapidly shrinking birth rate and the aging population, Singapore published "A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore: Population White Paper" in January 2013.¹ In order to hold back a decline in the citizen population and to sustain a dynamic Singapore, the government proposed it would be encouraging marriage and parenthood among citizens by introducing and enhancing various economic incentives. The government also announced it would continue to accept immigrants to supplement the falling birthrate and accelerate the integration of citizens and newcomers. The government's policy to welcome more immigrants in recent years created powerful political and social changes and a national debate. The government's insisting that continuously welcoming new immigrants is the only way out indicates the sense of urgency that the decreasing population and international competitiveness

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¹ National Population and Talent Division, *A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore: Population White Paper*, January 2013.

directly affect the survival of the state.

While the declining birthrate and growing immigrant population will not immediately affect the country's ability to maintain its current defense capability, in mid to long term it is possible that these two factors may have an impact on Singapore's national defense and security policy, which is comprised of prioritized investment in national defense, an approach to the "Total Defence" with the National Service in the center, and ethnic harmony.

This article intends to help understand the country's future movement through the analysis of Singapore's population problem, social changes the new immigration policy brought in particular, and implications those changes may have on the country's future national security.² There are certain legal and social restrictions in Singapore when it comes to publicly speaking about its national security and ethnicity issues.³ For that reason, this article mainly studies discussions made in Parliament in which freedom of speech is guaranteed. Among them, the article focuses on discussions in Parliament during the 2011 General Election and the 12th Parliament that was established following the election.

1. Issues Regarding Singapore's Population

1) Historical Background and Demography

Singapore, which was a British colony since the 19th century, first declared independence as part of neighboring Malaysia in 1963. Singapore then separated from Malaysia and became an independent state, as discussed in Chapter 3. Since Singapore has been the center of colonial management in Southeast Asia and an international port facing the Strait of Malacca, the main body of the population is comprised of Chinese, Malays, and Indians⁴; in fact, three quarters of Singapore's population is Chinese.

At the time of independence in 1965, Singapore, with a total population of 1.89 million, was a tiny island state deprived of natural resources. While the country urgently needed to develop human resources, it also had to contain a massive population increase under little economic growth, a phenomenon commonly seen in newly independent states. For this reason, the Singaporean government implemented a policy which encouraged women to have two or fewer children in the 1960s. As a result, its total fertility rate dropped to less than two by 1977. In the 1980s, the government enforced a hybrid policy which encouraged women with higher education to marry and have children, but discouraged less educated women to give birth.⁵ This policy generated a great deal of national debate and caused the People's Action Party to lose its total dominance in

² Part of accounts on the Singapore government and the Singapore Armed Forces in this article includes updated and reconstructed accounts from the author's past discussion: Yoshihide Matsuura, "Shingaporu – Kokka Anzenhoshou Seisaku Keisei Kikou [Singapore: National Security Policy Making Mechanism]" in Yasuhiro Matsuda (ed.), *Enuesushi, Kokka Anzenhoshou Kaigi: Shuyoukoku no Kikikanri Anposeisakutougou Mekanizumu* [NSC, National Security Council: Comparative Studies of Crisis Management and Security Policy Making Mechanisms] (Tokyo: Sairyusha, 2009), Chapter 6.

³ Norman Vasu and Bernard Loo, "National Security and Singapore: An Assessment," in Barry Desker and Ang Cheng Guan (eds.), *Perspectives on the Security of Singapore* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2016), pp.30-31.

⁴ Although many studies on Malaysia and Singapore call this classification ethnicity/ethnic group, the Singaporean government often uses the term race. This article will use the former term unless quoting.

⁵ For more details on Singapore's population policy, see Saw Swee-Hock, *Population Policies and Programmes in Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), 2005).

Parliament in the 1984 General Election for the first time in the party's history.⁶ Singapore became an aging society in 2000 when more than 7% of its population was over 65 years old.

2) Immigration Policy after the 2000s and Changes in Society

Although Singapore has always welcomed foreigners to supplement a society that is not sustainable on its own, the sagging birthrate and the aging of its population became even more apparent during the 2000s. With the first generation of baby boomers (people born after WW2 and before independence) turning 65 years old in 2012, the country's total fertility rate was recorded as 1.20 in 2011. It is expected that Singapore's population will start shrinking in 2025, without external factors.⁷ A UN population research estimates in 2026 Singapore will become a "super aging society" in which more than 21% of the total population is over the age of 65.⁸ As a counter measure, the Singaporean government has enforced liberal policies with regard to welcoming immigrants and foreign laborers. The number of immigrants and foreign laborers, whom the government began accepting more in certain fields since the 1990s, has gone up drastically due to a 2006 policy in which Singapore widened its window for immigrants.⁹ As a result, the total population of Singapore increased from approximately 4.02 million in a 2000 census to about 5.08 million in a 2010 census. During that time, the number of residents, which includes both citizens and permanent residents, increased by approximately 510,000. Of this increase, 260,000 were citizens, while 250,000 were permanent residents, which meant almost half of the increased residents were born outside of Singapore. During the same time period, the non-resident population, which includes foreign workers, increased by about 260,000.¹⁰ Consequently, the ratio of people who were born outside of Singapore (permanent residents and non-residents) against the total population of Singapore jumped up from about 26% in 2000 to about 36 % in 2010. The same ratio was 39% in 2015 (Figure 1). The population white paper published in January 2013 sets a possible goal for the total population in 2030 at 6.5 to 6.9 million (of which 3.6 to 3.8 million are citizens, 0.6 million are permanent residents, and 2.3 to 2.5 million are non-residents).¹¹

The acute increase of newcomers over a short period of time brought various side effects to Singaporean society. Increased demand for housing and the fact that real estate in Singapore has become an investment target for foreign investors ultimately raised property values, making it difficult for citizens to find housing. Moreover, the global financial crisis in 2008 pushed up the unemployment rate, and employment opportunities for citizens shrunk due to competition with newcomers. It has also become a significant problem that the service and operation of social infrastructure, in particular public transportation such as buses and the Mass Rapid Transit, has not

⁶ Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story 1965-2000* (Singapore: Times Editions/Singapore Press Holdings, 2000), Chapter 10; Keiko Tamura, *Shingaporu No Kokka Kensetsu – Nashonarizumu, Esunisiti, Jendaa* [Nation Building of Singapore: Nationalism, Ethnicity, Gender] (Tokyo: Akashi Shoten, 2000), pp.220-221.

⁷ *A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore*, Executive Summary.

⁸ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision*.

⁹ For immigration policy after the 2000, see Chizue Honda, "Gaikoku Imin Seisaku [Policy on Foreign Immigrants]" in Keiko Tamura (ed.), *Shingaporu O Shiru Tame No 65 Shou* [65 Chapters to Get to Know Singapore] 3rd ed. (Tokyo: Akashi Shoten, 2013), Chapter 49.

¹⁰ Saw Swee-Hock, *The Population of Singapore: Third Edition* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2012), pp.18-19.

¹¹ *A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore*, p.48.

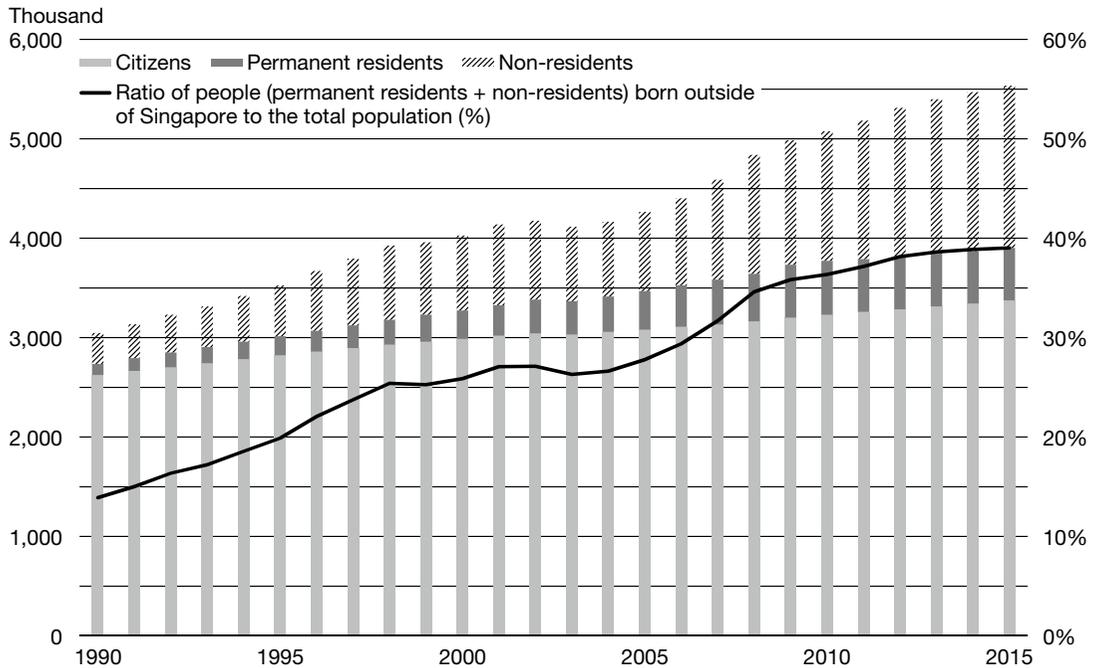


Figure 1 Population Trends in Singapore (1990-2015)

Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore

been fast enough to accommodate the steep population hike.

Another downside to the increased foreigner population is rivalry between newcomers and citizens. Other than the indigenous ethnic groups, such as the Chinese, who make up the majority of citizens, and the Malays, Indians and Eurasians (descendants of Europeans during colonization), who are the minorities, Singapore has welcomed many foreigners for various purposes, including economic activities. In recent years, however, emotional conflicts between newcomers, especially those from mainland Chinese, and citizens have become somewhat common. These emotional conflicts with the Chinese include differences in culture, custom, and economic disparity (the mainland Chinese are often wealthy business owners and hold white-collar jobs). Furthermore, the housing and employment issues mentioned earlier certainly do not help this either.

3) 2011 General Election: A Watershed

Under such circumstances, the 11th General Election was held in May 2011. Voted for were 87 legislative seats in a total of 12 single member constituencies and 15 group representation constituencies (GRC).¹²

¹² GRC is a type of electoral division or constituency in Singapore in which teams of candidates (4-6 members in 2011), instead of individual candidates, compete to be elected into Parliament as the Members of Parliament (MPs) for the constituency. Although the government stated the GRC scheme was primarily implemented to ensure ethnic minority representation in Parliament (at least one of the MPs in a GRC must be a member of a minority community in Singapore), it is not easy for opposition parties with little human and financial resources to field many candidates. The GRC was often seen as an obstacle for opposition parties to participate in the Parliament along with frequent changes in electoral divisions.

Results of the vote on May 7th showed that although the PAP defended its reign by winning 81 seats, which meant the continuation of a stable majority present since when the party was the autonomous government prior to Singapore becoming a sovereign state, the party only received a record low of 60.1% of the total votes since independence; furthermore, incumbent ministers lost seats, which is a first in the party's history. On the other hand, for the first time in the history of general elections in the country, opposition parties gained a record high of 6 seats, with a win in a GRC (5 seats) and in a single member constituency. After 3 members from opposition parties were appointed as non-constituency members of Parliament (NCMPs), according to regulations,¹³ 8 seats (2 of which were NCMPs) were occupied by the Workers' Party (WP) and 1 seat (NCMP) by the Singapore People's Party (SPP).¹⁴

Many critics described the election result as a great leap for the opposition parties and a "defeat" for the PAP. While Prime Minister and the party head Lee Hsien Loong declared victory, he also made a reflection that his party would study the election result and said "we will put right what is wrong, improve what can be made better and also improve ourselves to serve Singapore better."¹⁵ Senior members of the PAP, Lee Kuan Yew, who was the Minister Mentor at the time of the election and the first Prime Minister of Singapore, and Goh Chok Tong, Senior Minister at the time and the second Prime Minister, both resigned, and many management positions in the party were replaced by younger generations in the following cabinet reform.

The aforementioned issues of immigration, house prices, employment, and troubles and accidents with the public transportation infrastructure became the contested grounds for the 2011 General Election (as a consequence, ministers in charge of immigration, housing, public transportation resigned in the cabinet reform). Itaya evaluates that the dissenting votes were a manifestation of people's dissatisfaction with the government's and the PAP's stance towards issues such as commodity and house prices, as well as the rapid increase of foreigners, all of which were burdens on the citizens.¹⁶ Hisasue points out that not only young voters were not content with these issues, but they were also dissatisfied with the system of the country which has been described as a controlled society, and they took it to SNS to freely and proactively express their views, which influenced the election result.¹⁷ It is safe to assume these political changes were

¹³ NCMPs are appointed from candidates from opposition parties who received many votes but lost in a general election. They are, however, not allowed to vote on several types of bills such as bills to amend the Constitution and on the budget. The government stated that the NCMP scheme would ensure that opposition voices would be heard in Parliament.

¹⁴ Taisei Itaya, "Shingaporu 2011 Nen Sousenkyo No Bunseki – Senkyo Kekka Ga Shimesu Atarashii Seiji No Hajimari [Analysis of Singapore's 2011 General Election: Beginning of New Politics Indicated by the Election Result]" in *Hougaku Kenkyu* [Journal of Law, Politics, and Sociology] (Tokyo: Faculty of Law, Keio University, February 2013), pp.14-15; Ryouichi Hisasue, "2011 Nen No Shingaporu [Singapore in 2011]" in *Ajia Doukou Nenpou 2012* [Yearbook of Asian Affairs 2012] (Makuhari: Institute of Developing Economies, Japan External Trade Organization, 2012), pp.348-349.

¹⁵ "81-6: Workers' Party wins Aljunied GRC; PAP vote share dips to 60.1%," *The Straits Times*, 8 May 2011.

¹⁶ Itaya, pp.37-38. In his comparative analysis on the contested grounds in the 2006 General Election and 2011 General Election, with reference to Singaporean newspapers, Itaya pointed out the issue of "increasing housing prices" suddenly surfaced while "renovation of public housing" which the PAP had historically used as an incentive to vote for them (lower priority is given to electoral divisions which are represented by MPs of opposition parties) received less attention, concluding the center of contested ground in the 2011 General Election shifted to the government's policies. Itaya, pp.30-32.

¹⁷ Hisasue, pp.350-351.

initiated by developments in the society triggered by the arrival of an aging society with a low birthrate and the immigration policy that was implemented to sustain economic growth.

2. Emerging National Security Issues: From View Points of Opposition Parties

As mentioned earlier, PAP has been the ruling party ever since the country's independence, and the opposition parties are still far from taking over the government. Under these circumstances, all of the opposition parties largely support the government's policies, especially in national defense and security, and those subjects never became a significant contested ground in the 2011 General Election.

With that being said, viewpoints of some of the parties in the election presented national security problems that were not necessarily discussed explicitly in the past. These problems were brought to light by social changes, such as the low birthrate, improved longevity, and an influx of immigrants, and they led to discussions regarding national defense policies. Some of these points are introduced and organized in the following.

1) Workers' Party (WP)

The WP is a party with a long history going back to when Singapore was still an autonomous government. The party gained its first seat by the oppositions in Parliament in a by-election in 1981 after the independence, and it has won seats in single member constituencies since then. The WP stated its beliefs regarding national defense and security as follows in its manifest for the 2011 General Election (extracted and partly rephrased):¹⁸

- a. Recognize the need for powerful defensive military capability that can provide reliable deterrence against any possible intruders.
- b. Recognize the need for powerful military deterrence and active diplomacy to protect national interest and sovereignty.
- c. All citizens have obligations to contribute to national defense and security.
- d. All citizen-soldiers must feel a sense of belonging to Singapore in order to motivate them to defend the country.
- e. There must be transparency in defense expenditures without compromising on national defense and security.

On that basis, the WP proposed the following:

- a. Defense expenditures should be examined as closely as other government expenses to the extent military secrets are not being threatened.
- b. With further sophisticated information technology and military equipment available, a framework for an outward defense organization that can efficiently respond to defensive needs should be sought after.
- c. The National Service must not be an unnecessary burden on younger generations during their prime time. The government should continue to study the possibility of shortening the current two year service length.
- d. With appropriate security and background check in place, all Singaporeans should be given equal opportunities for promotion in the Armed Forces.

¹⁸ The Workers' Party, *Towards a First World Parliament: Manifesto 2011*, pp.53-54

2) National Solidarity Party (NSP)

Although the NSP, founded in 1987, has never gained a seat in general elections, the party produced a non-constituency member during the 2001 General Election, in which the party participated as part of a coalition of opposition parties known as the Singapore Democratic Alliance. The NSP showed its organizing power in the 2011 General Election by fielding 24 candidates in the same 8 constituencies as the WP.

The party's manifesto for "defense" in the 2011 General Election stated the following as merits when the party won, and argued for "increased commitment against terrorism," "reduced mission demands for national servicemen," and "the reduction of full-time National Service to 15 months."¹⁹

- a. Terrorism, not regional conventional armed conflict, is the primary security threat facing Singapore as a transport and financial hub;
 - Home security against terrorism should be accorded the highest priority.
 - The Ministry of Home Affairs²⁰ should be given a bigger budget to focus on transnational crimes and terrorism.
 - Singapore should focus its national resources and utilize the Singapore Armed Forces in security against terrorism.
- b. Singapore should downsize the Army and build up the Navy and Air Force to defend Singapore;
 - During a conventional war, the Singapore Armed Forces should enable its forward-defense military doctrine relying primarily on the Navy and Air Force, and limited Army troops consisting mainly of regular troops.
 - The Army, which comprises largely of National Servicemen, should be deployed within Singapore to defend our country against invading forces. Normally, a defender is a third the size of the attackers. Downsize the Army and restructure it to be deployed in Singapore.
 - Restructure the Army to conduct counter terrorism operations during peacetime.
 - The downsizing of the Army is in any case inevitable given our falling birth rate.
- c. Reduce national service to 15 months;
 - Current mission demands on the National Servicemen would be reduced to focus on defense and installation protection.
- d. Establish Singapore Volunteer Corps (SVC) to encourage National Servicemen to voluntarily participate in more National Service call-ups, apart from the mandatory ones.
 - National Servicemen who voluntarily participate in more National Service call-ups will enjoy the same Make-Up Pay.
 - The SVC would conduct training courses for new citizens and involve them in contributing to the defense of Singapore.

3) Singapore Democratic Party (SDP)

The SDP was founded in 1980, and the first member of Parliament from the party was elected in the 1984 General Election. Although the party's manifesto for the 2011 General Elections is no longer on the party's website, according to news reports, the party proposed the following in

¹⁹ National Solidarity Party, *National Solidarity Party Manifesto (GE2011)*, Paras. 23-26.

²⁰ The Ministry of Home Affairs watches over policing, immigration control, correction, civil defense (including firefighting and medical emergency service).

regards to the National Service: shorter national service time and more volunteer hires, issues with reserve duty training, issues with conscientious objectors, and realizing more transparency in the use of the National Service by the government.²¹

Comparing the parties' manifestos, all of which clearly proposed a shorter length for the National Service, implies that this matter has become an important subject in Singaporean society. The NSP's bold proposal to downsize the Army is also relevant to reducing the length of and downsizing the size of the National Service by limiting its role. In addition, the NSP's argument to have "new citizens" train in the Singapore Volunteer Corps while the WP's calling for all citizens to have a sense of responsibility and belonging also speak about different duties citizens and the newcomers have in terms of national defense. As to budget, there is also a connection between the NSP's proposal to reorganize the Army to be deployed only domestically and the WP's commitment to making defense budget more transparent.

In sum, these proposals can be categorized into the following: 1) reduce the length of the National Service; 2) involve the "newcomers" in national defense; 3) implement more transparent and efficient use of the defense budget; 4) provide equal opportunities for promotion in the military;²² 5) support enhanced counterterrorism efforts.

3. Implications on National Defense and Security for the Future

Given the opposition parties' proposals introduced in Chapter 2, the following chapter will examine possible influence those proposals may have on Singapore's national defense and security policies in the future by referring to the 12th Parliament that was convened following the 2011 General Election.²³

1) Posture of the National Service

The National Service in Singapore requires all male citizens over 16.5 years of age to serve 24-months²⁴ as full-time National Servicemen (NSFs) and then to serve as Operationally Ready National Servicemen (NSmen) for 10 years before they turn 40 years old and retire from the reservist duty. The NSmen are obligated to 40 days of training each year, and they also get promotions. While 20,000 regular troops and 30,000 NSFs ensure national security during

²¹ "SDP manifesto tackles major issues," *The Online Citizen*, April 28, 2011.

²² In 2013, the SDP argued defense spending should be frozen with an increase allowing for inflation; national servicemen's salaries should be increased; length of the National Service should be reduced to 1 year. Singapore Democratic Party, *Shadow Budget 2013: Transforming Our Capabilities*, March 2013, Paras. E43, E44, and E5. It also raised the issue of discrimination in employment and promotion in the military that should be eliminated. SDP, *A Singapore for All Singaporeans: Addressing the Concerns of the Malay Community*, September 2013, pp.24-26.

²³ The author received inputs for arguments in Chapter 3 from the following papers by and discussion with Dr. Lam. Lam Peng Er, "Singapore's Relentless Quest for Security and Technology: 2012," in National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS) (eds.), *Security Outlook of the Asia Pacific Countries and Its Implications for the Defense Sector* (Joint Research Series No.9), 2013; "Singapore's Security Outlook in 2013: A More Turbulent East Asia," in NIDS (eds.), *Security Outlook of the Asia Pacific Countries and Its Implications for the Defense Sector* (Joint Research Series No.11), 2014.

²⁴ The length of the full-time National Service in the Army was reduced from 30 months to 24 months to match with the Navy and the Air Force in December 2004. SAF news release, 15 June 2004.

peacetime, it is believed that Singapore could mobilize 300,000 people, including the NSmen.²⁵

Singapore's limited human resources due to its size is one of the reasons why the country maintains conscription even though no foes exist as they do for divided nations such as South Korea and Taiwan. At the time of independence, direct threats for Singapore meant ongoing insurgency by the Malayan Communist Party guerrillas in Malay Peninsula, as well as bomb attacks and sabotage by the Indonesian military infiltrators as part of their anti-UK "Crush Malaysia" campaign. Furthermore, Singapore needed to deter Malaysia from attempting to annex or put Singapore under its influence again. The British government's decision to withdraw its troops from the East of Suez in the 1960s, after being stationed in Singapore since WW2, prompted the Singaporean government to build its own armed forces. After drafting a plan for a citizen's force and receiving training and equipment from Israeli military advisors, conscription in Singapore began in 1967, and by 1970, the Singapore Armed Forces had 16,000 active duty personnel and 11,000 NSmen.²⁶

The existence of the National Service means that there are men who have the will and skills of a soldier in every layer of society. This scheme embodies the core of the "Total Defence"²⁷ policy in which Singapore requires all citizens and members of society to take part in the country's defense. The National Service is not only vital for the country's defense, but it is also considered a bond that unites the multiethnic state through having all male citizens participate in national defense regardless of ethnicity. However, the system has come under scrutiny due to social changes in recent years, such as higher educational levels among young adults, a drastic increase of foreigners and a mobile workforce in a global economy. Particularly concerning to critics are the lengthy service time, the delay in starting higher education and entering the workforce, and the stability of employment.²⁸

In a committee of supply held in March of 2012 during the 12th Parliament, a MP from the PAP noted that while compulsory conscription was best suited for Singapore, a country that could not keep a large size army consisting of regular troops, Singapore's 24-month service time is one of the longest in the world when compared to other countries with conscription. The same MP continued that many Singaporeans were asking for a shorter service time for full-time national service, postponement of the start time, and flexibility in interruption of the National Service in order to pursue higher education in and out of the country.²⁹ A NCMP from the SPP, one of the opposition parties, pointed out that it was necessary to reduce the service time of the full-time National Service to fill the gap between foreigners who were increasing and Singaporean citizens who were delayed from entering the workforce because of the National Service. Furthermore, the

²⁵ Minister for Defence Ng stated Singapore can continue to mobilize 300,000 up to 2040 despite the falling birthrate. Reply by the Minister for Defence (Dr Ng Eng Hen) on SAF's Capability Given Declining Birth Rate, *Singapore Parliament Reports (SPR)*, 12 November 2012.

²⁶ For the establishment of the Singapore Armed Forces, see Lee, *From Third World to First*, Chapter 2.

²⁷ Total Defence is a framework for an all-round response to threats and challenges and involves all Singaporeans in the following five aspects: military defense, civil defense, economic defense, social defense, and psychological defense. "The 5 Pillars of Total Defence," Ministry of Defence (MINDEF) website.

²⁸ The last issue involves employers preferring to hire foreigners over Singaporeans who will be absent from work for reservist training, and employers firing employees who missed work for training. It is illegal for an employer to prevent an employee from attending training under the Enlistment Act.

²⁹ Question by Dr Lim Wee Kiak (Nee Soon), Head J – Ministry of Defence (Committee of Supply), *SPR*, 6 March 2012.

same NCMP argued the government needs to understand that employers at labor-intensive work places prefer to hire foreigners over citizens who could be absent from work when called upon for reservist trainings, and that there need to be incentives to encourage more men and women to become regular troops, which will reduce dependency on the NSFs.³⁰ By introducing a phrase that has become commonplace in Singapore, “NS [National Service] for Singaporeans; jobs for foreigners,” a MP from the WP proposed variations of the National Service for immigrants which could take the form of a shorter National Service program, or island defense or protection of key installation duties.³¹

In response to these arguments, Minister for Defence Ng Eng Hen defended the current system, arguing that NSFs are assigned to the front line of defense not in the rear, and that an abundant number of personnel and long training length are vital for this reason. He pointed out that the reason why the length of the National Service was reduced to 2 years from 2.5 years in 2004 was because technological innovation that came with the “3rd Generation Singapore Armed Forces” (3G SAF) required less personnel and training time and that the number of Singaporeans subject to the National Service each year was expected to increase until 2015, as the children of baby boomers reached the minimum age for the National Service. He then concluded that the current length for the National Service should be maintained until thorough investigations were completed, particularly given that the number of citizens subject to the National Service starts to decline in 2016.³²

Immigration and the national service were very much discussed during a question-and-answer session on the Population White Paper in February of 2013. In particular, there was a lot of criticism of the fact that permanent residents and first-generation citizens are exempt from the National Service and that second-generation citizens who are required to serve in the military are often sent out of Singapore by parents before they reach the age for the National Service, in order to avoid the duty.³³ A NCMP from the SPP questioned how the government was planning to convince younger generations of the necessity of the National Service when Singaporeans are already sacrificing 2 years and more of their lives as NSFs and NSmen while also seeing jobs taken away from them by foreigners, especially given that the citizen population is estimated to drop to just above half of the total population by 2030 (suggesting the other half of the population can leave Singapore in case of contingency).³⁴

At a question-and-answer session during a budget statement in March 2013, a MP from the governing PAP defined the National Service as something that “forges a common bond which is unique to us [Singaporeans] and, in some ways, helps define who we are.” The MP emphasized it is a clear indication of their commitment to become part of the Singaporean society when permanent residents and new citizens take up the National Service or send their sons to the service. Additionally, the MP suggested to impose a “National Defence Duty” on permanent residents and an annual duty equivalent to trainings for NSmen for first generation citizens who are exempt from

³⁰ Question by Mrs Lina Chiam (Non-Constituency Member), *ibid.*

³¹ Question by Mr Pritam Singh (Aljunied), *ibid.*

³² Reply by the Minister for Defence (Dr Ng Eng Hen), *SPR*, 6 March 2012.

³³ Question by Mr Inderjit Singh (Ang Mo Kio), *A Sustainable Population for A Dynamic Singapore*, *SPR*, 5 February 2013.

³⁴ Question by Mrs Lina Chiam (Non-Constituency Member), *ibid.*

the National Service due to ages and other conditions.³⁵

During a question-and-answer session at the committee of supply, a MP of the PAP insisted on shortening the length of the National Service to 18-20 months and reducing training for NSmen, given the tough competition male Singaporeans face in global education and the workforce.³⁶ It was also suggested by a MP of the WP that new citizens be called up for trainings each year until the age of 40 (legal retirement age), and that they be assigned to duties such as the protection of key installations after initial trainings.³⁷

While showing appreciation for all the MPs being in favor of the National Service despite significant changes in Singapore and among its citizens after 45 years since the service was first implemented, Minister for Defence Ng noted various points raised by the MPs and citizens and announced the establishment of the Committee to Strengthen National Service (CSNS) in response to those voices.³⁸

The CSNS, which is a 20-member committee chaired by the Minister for Defence and consists of senior members from the Ministry of Defence and Singapore Armed Forces as well as relevant ministers and experts from the private sector, examined various aspects of the National Service for one year and submitted a report to the government in May 2014.³⁹ The report included recommended reforms, such as improving and streamlining training, assigning NSF to duties where they can utilize their special skills and knowledge, adjusting the start of the National Service against the timing for higher education, helping citizens find jobs and start school after the National Service, and giving NSFs opportunities to reenlist as regular troops afterwards. Furthermore, it proposed incentives for families and model employers to encourage society to support the National Service.

It was also suggested in the report that the government establish the “Singapore Armed Forces Volunteer Corps” (SAFVC), in which women and those born outside of Singapore (permanent residents and first-generation citizens) can volunteer to train periodically and serve. The SAFVC is aimed at male and female Singaporean citizens ages between 18 and 45 who are exempt from or have completed the National Service and first-generation newcomers (permanent residents and new citizens). The SAFVC seeks volunteers who can assist regular troops in their operations or engage in specialized duties in the fields of security, watchkeeping aboard ships, public communications, C4, engineering, legal, trainings for merchant ships, medical, and psychology.⁴⁰ The first group of the SAFVC that was recruited in October 2014 began training in March 2015, and 226 personnel completed the basic training in June.⁴¹ It was reported that part of the volunteers were assigned to security duties in a National Day parade in August of the same year.⁴²

³⁵ Question by Mr Hri Kumar Nair (Bishan-Toa Payoh), Debate on Annual Budget Statement, *SPR*, 6 March 2013.

³⁶ Question by Dr Lim Wee Kiak (Nee Soon), Head J – Ministry of Defence, *SPR*, 11 March 2013.

³⁷ Question by Mr Pritam Singh (Aljunied), *ibid*.

³⁸ Reply by the Minister for Defence (Dr Ng Eng Hen), *ibid*.

³⁹ MINDEF, *Committee to Strengthen National Service: Report*, May 2014.

⁴⁰ “SAF Volunteer Corps,” MINDEF website.

⁴¹ “First Cohort of SAFVC Volunteers Successfully Completes Basic Training,” Press Release, MINDEF website, 27 June 2015.

⁴² “Greater efforts to boost voluntary support for National Service,” *Today*, 19 Jan 2016. Many of the volunteers introduced on the Ministry of Defence website and media are female including those born outside of Singapore. The SAFVC is anticipated to be a means to utilize women, who are exempt from the National Service, in the military field.

On the other hand, the CSNS report did not mention reviewing the length of the National Service, and it also did not give grounds for adjusting the ratio of the number of personnel that can be mobilized in a contingency to regular troops, which is believed to justify the current length of the National Service. There was supposedly a unanimous consensus in the committee that any changes in trainings were not to undermine the operational readiness of the Singapore Armed Forces, Police, and the Singapore Civil Defence Force.⁴³ With that said, the government has not responded sufficiently to the question whether or not Singapore should maintain the current scheme for mobilization, in which an invasion from outside is the scenario, in light of recent arguments that the country's national security focus is shifting to an asymmetry threat of terrorism instead. While the establishment of the SAFVC is the first step forward to involving first generation citizens in national defense, a sense of unfairness still remains among Singaporeans, as the SAFVC is not mandatory but only voluntary and drastic reforms have yet been made to the National Service.

2) Maintaining Defense Budget

Singapore, which acknowledges that its survival relies on a free economy and regional peace and stability, prioritizes national defense to ensure this. Approximately one quarter of Singapore's state budget is allocated for national defense in order to maintain a robust military (Figure 2). The government permits the country to spend up to 6% of its GDP on defense, and each year a little shy of 4% of its GDP goes to defense.⁴⁴

However, a defense budget that takes up the largest pie in Singapore's state budget is given harsh looks as social security expenditures such as medical and nursing costs as well as safety net costs for if the economy deteriorates are anticipated to increase in the future, primarily due to the aging population.

At a question-and-answer session during the budget statement for FY2012 in February of 2012, a PAP MP requested the defense budget be reviewed to fund for enhanced social security for the elderly and the disabled. While acknowledging the importance of defense for the small nation, the MP urged the government to study the optimal resources Singapore should expend on defense versus other new and pressing social needs in light of the changing nature of warfare the defense team has to wage, from traditional to cyber wars and terrorism.⁴⁵ Another MP of the PAP argued that allocating defense budget to other social needs would undermine Singapore's national security and lead to an undesirable result.⁴⁶ Moreover, Minister for Finance Tharman Shanmugaratnam responded that basic expenditures such as education and national defense should not be trimmed for Singapore to keep moving forward, while acknowledging the need for a long-term plan to respond to new costs for healthcare and nursing care due to its aging population.⁴⁷

During the committee of supply to follow, a MP of the PAP pointed out that not only citizens and MPs from the opposition parties but also MPs of the PAP were saying the government should

⁴³ "Committee to Strengthen National Service Holds Fifth Meeting," Official Releases, MINDEF website, 5 December 2013.

⁴⁴ Reply by the Minister for Defence (Dr Ng Eng Hen), Head J – Ministry of Defence (Committee of Supply), *SPR*, 11 March 2013.

⁴⁵ Question by Ms Denise Phua Lay Peng (Moulmein-Kallang), Debate on Annual Budget Statement, *SPR*, 28 February 2012.

⁴⁶ Question by Dr Lim Wee Kiak (Nee Soon), Debate on Annual Budget Statement, *SPR*, 1 March 2012.

⁴⁷ Reply by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance (Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam), *ibid*.

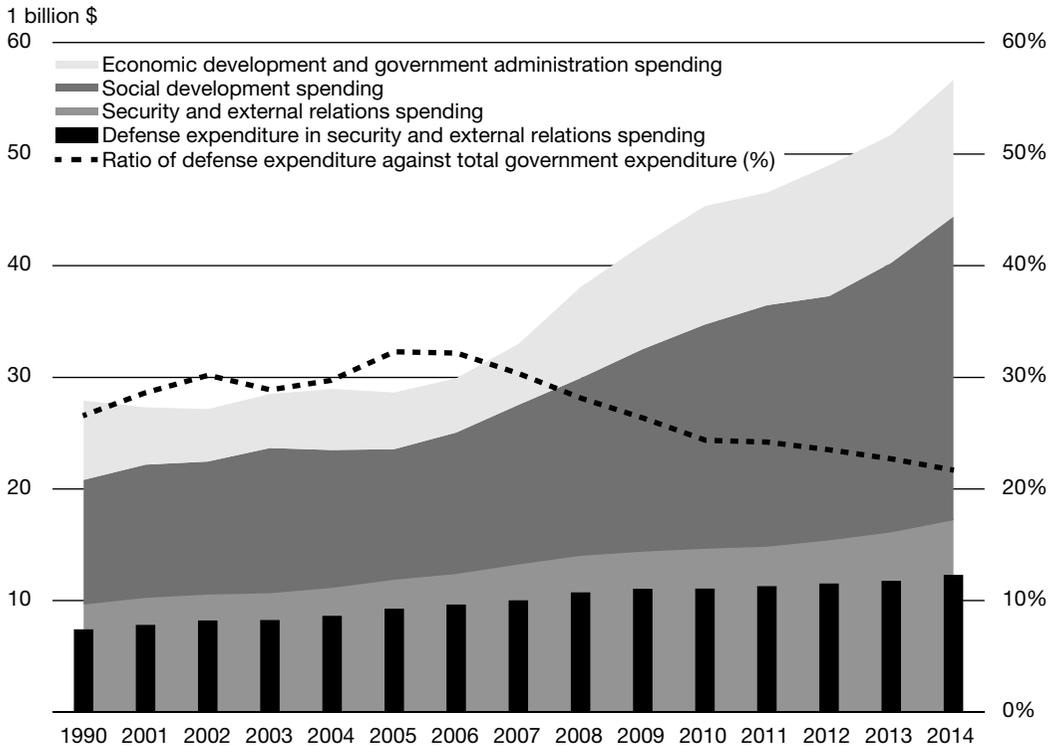


Figure 2 Singapore's Government Expenditure (2000-2014)

Note: Security and external relations spending indicates the expenditure controlled by the Defence, Home Affairs, and Foreign Affairs ministries, while the social development spending is an expenditure controlled by the following ministries: Education, Health, National Development, Environment and Water Resources, Culture, Community and Youth, Social and Family Development, Communications and Information, and Manpower.

Source: Department of Statistics, Singapore

allocate some of its defense budget, which comprises 20% of the country's entire expenditure, to other social costs, and questioned if it was necessary to maintain the current level of investment in defense and whether that investment was value for the money.⁴⁸ Furthermore, a member of the Workers' Party referred to the changing strategic environment for the country, such as the development of the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus and the improved relations with Malaysia, and stated the relationship between Singapore and the neighboring countries were now in a new stable phase. The same MP continued that the pressure on the government to cut down on defense to pay for health and education was inevitable, and the MP asked the size of a military the Ministry of Defence believed Singapore needed given the strategic outlook.⁴⁹ Minister for Defense Ng responded by saying these very questions on the downsizing of defense posture were an indication of the success that the country has built a military that was professional and capable of achieving missions in various security challenges thanks to the hard work of predecessors. With

⁴⁸ Question by Dr Lim Wee Kiak (Nee Soon), Head J – Ministry of Defence (Committee of Supply), *SPR*, 5 March 2012.

⁴⁹ Question by Mr Pritam Singh (Aljunied), *ibid*.

that said, he noted that a steady spending enabled the Singapore Armed Forces to get the best value for investments with a long-term perspective, and they were making an effort to scrutinize available options for the most cost-effective solution, including upgrading existing vessels and tanks instead of purchasing new ones. He then pointed out the European experience and suggested that it was difficult to predict future security environment and it was safer to keep the investment.⁵⁰

At a question-and-answer session during the budget statement for FY2013 in February 2013, a prominent social activist and nominated member of Parliament⁵¹ made a proposal that the defense budget should only increase within the country's inflation rate,⁵² as social development expenditure for social safety nets, education and healthcare were anticipated to hike. In response, the Minister for Finance Shanmugaratnam gave no definite answers.⁵³

It was pointed out at the committee of supply by a MP from the WP that Singapore was given D+ grading on the scale of F to A in its Government Defence Anti-Corruption Index published by an international NGO Transparency International (TI), and that the Ministry of Defence should be sharing more information with Parliament and the citizens about the country's defense expenditure.⁵⁴ Mr. Chan Chun Sing, Senior Minister of State in the Ministry of Defence, told in his response that information regarding sensitive operations and the cost related to classified research and development projects would have to be disclosed in order to score higher in the index, but the government will not do so in fear of compromising the country's security. He also stated his trust in the government's extensive anti-corruption processes, which include thorough examinations by the Internal Audit Department within the ministry and the Auditor-General's Office, and that the Ministry of Defence has been described as a "reference customer" by suppliers because the Ministry drives a hard bargain when it comes to pricing.⁵⁵

There is no doubt the pressure to allocate more national resources for social security costs will increase in the future. If the defense budget is no longer an untouchable sanctuary and the review of budget allocation is inevitable, Singapore will need to reexamine what capabilities its armed forces should maintain and consequently what roles the NSF and the NSMen should be given.

3) Issues with Ethnicities in the Singapore Armed Forces and National Integration

Meritocracy regardless of ethnicity has been the PAP's primary ethnic policy ever since the country's independence. At the same time, the government has created and encouraged harmony among ethnic groups and the "Singaporean" identity knowing differences would always exist between ethnic groups.⁵⁶ However, sensitive issues lie between the Chinese majority and the

⁵⁰ Reply by the Minister for Defence (Dr Ng Eng Hen), Head J – Ministry of Defence (Committee of Supply), *SPR*, 6 March 2012.

⁵¹ Nominated members of the Parliament are appointed by the President from various fields to bring more independent voices to Parliament. There is a limit on the right to vote just like the NCMPs.

⁵² Question by Mr Laurence Lien (Nominated Member), Debate on Annual Budget Statement, *SPR*, 5 March 2013.

⁵³ Reply by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance (Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam), Debate on Annual Budget Statement, *SPR*, 7 March 2013.

⁵⁴ Question by Ms Sylvia Lim (Aljunied), Head J – Ministry of Defence, *SPR*, 11 March 2013.

⁵⁵ Reply by the Senior Minister of State for Defence (Mr Chan Chun Sing), *ibid.*

⁵⁶ For Singapore's ethnic policy, transformation of society by reorganizing the housing environment in particular, see Satoshi Nabekura, *Shingaporu "Tajinshu Shugi" No Shakaigaku – Danchi Shakai No Esunishiti* [Sociology of Singapore's "Multiracialism": Ethnicity in Public Housing] (Kyoto: Sekai Shisou Sha, 2011).

Malay and Indian minorities. This is a serious issue, especially for the Malays, due to the historical background between Singapore and Malaysia.⁵⁷

While the country's security's priority is placed on maintaining a free economy and the regional stability that ensures it, Singapore has always seen Malaysia (and Indonesia to a lesser extent) as its potential enemy, though this was never outright stated. Behind that thinking was Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's founding father. Lee Kuan Yew led the independence movement as a PAP politician, won the national election in 1959, became the Chief Minister, and served as the Prime Minister of Singapore until 1990. Even after he turned over the job to Goh Chok Tong in 1990, he remained in the cabinet and followed the country's path as a senior minister, and then as a Minister Mentor from 2004, when his son Lee Hsien Loong became the Prime Minister, until his resignation in 2011 following the General Election.

Although Singapore initially gained independence from the United Kingdom as part of Malaysia in 1963, it was virtually expelled from Malaysia in 1965 due to disagreements between the Malaysian central government and the Singapore state government, which eventually led to fatal race riots. The tensions arose as the Malaysian central government politically favored the Malays (most of them were Muslims), which were the majority, and the Singapore State government insisted on a meritocracy despite the country's majority being Chinese. The two governments could not agree on the economic front either. As Singapore is often described as "a little island of Chinese in a Malay ocean," Lee Kuan Yew's self-recognition that Singapore was a little country surrounded by Malays, which originated from his fear of the aforementioned hostile relationship with Indonesia and Malaysia's adventurism, had significant influence on Singapore's national security.⁵⁸

In that light, the PAP government deemed the Malays in Singapore as a group that was non-reliable in case of a contingency with Malaysia, and the government attempted to exclude the Malays from the Singapore Armed Forces. The Singapore government, who wanted to keep the ratio of the Malays in its military low, virtually terminated the National Service among the Malays between 1969 and 1973. Even Malays in the regular troops were encouraged to opt for early retirement. While Malays are now included in the National Service, it is believed Malays are more often assigned to duties within the Singapore Civil Defence Force instead of the Singapore Armed Forces.⁵⁹

Lee never changed his view on the Malays, and he was criticized by the Malay community when, as a senior minister in 1999, he commented that "if, for instance, you put in a Malay officer who's very religious and who has family ties in Malaysia in charge of a machine gun unit, that's a very tricky business."⁶⁰ At a meeting with Malay groups following his comment, he made it clear

⁵⁷ Lily Zubaidah argues that the Malays are being discriminated on historical and political grounds in Singapore, and the Malay community is being marginalized. Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community* (Shah Alam: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁵⁸ For example, for many years Singapore has relied on Malaysia for its water supply. Lee Kuan Yew has stated if Malaysia shut down the water supply against the Singapore-Malaysia Water Agreement and Singapore was to suffer from shortage of water, his government would use force to recover the water supply. Lee, *From Third World to First*, p.276.

⁵⁹ Tim Huxley, *Defending the Lion City: The Armed Forces of Singapore* (St Leonards NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2000), pp.102-104.

⁶⁰ "Reality is race bonds exist – SM," *The Straits Times*, 19 September 1999.

that he was against full equal opportunity by stating that while regular troops were evaluated on a purely merit system (including the Malays), there was a need to take in sensitive positions and consider one's ethnic and religious background for the NSFs.⁶¹ Minister Mentor Lee repeated his belief in a compilation of his interviews published right before the 2011 General Election, stating it was difficult for Malays and Muslims to be fully integrated into Singaporean society.⁶² A Malay candidate from the PAP who lost the election criticized Lee, saying the Malays and Muslims in Singapore were hurt by Lee's comment and it affected the election.⁶³

As this indicates, the issue of the Malays in the Singapore Armed Forces had been around for a long time, but it became the center of attention again in light of the discussions on new residents' participation in national security. During a deliberation of the committee of supply in 2012, a Malay MP from the WP noted that more NSF of Malay descent were assigned to the Singapore Civil Defence Force and the Police, and that the ratio of the Malays in the Singapore Armed Forces was disproportionately low compared to the country's demographics. Then, he asked whether or not the newcomers were less of a security risk than the Malays if they were to take more part in the National Service, or if this disproportion was due to security reasons.⁶⁴ Moreover, a MP of Malay descent from the governing PAP stated that though many of the citizens in rational terms saw this issue as security related rather than discrimination, it was an emotionally charged matter for Malays. The MP then asked if there had been any developments to solve the issue in the Armed Forces.⁶⁵ Minister for Defence Ng denied the allegation, saying the number of Malay NSF assigned to the Singapore Armed Forces was greater than those assigned to the Police and the Singapore Civil Defence Force combined, and stated that assignments and promotions for the Malays were determined based on one's qualifications and merits just like everyone else. He also mentioned many Malays were now put in charge of more challenging positions such as commandos, engineers, artillery, signals, pilots and sea soldiers thanks to improved educational level.⁶⁶ Yet, it is difficult to verify since the number or ratio of each service and specialty by ethnicity is not available to the public.

It is believed that the issue of the Malays in the Singapore Armed Forces will thaw overall through generational turnovers, as symbolized by Lee Kuan Yew's retirement and death in March 2015 and positive changes in the relationship with Malaysia. As discussed in Section 1 of this chapter, the National Service has played a certain part in forming the Singaporean identity in this multiethnic country. The rationality behind seeing only the Malays as a problem will be weakened when more Singaporeans born outside of the country join the National Service or volunteer to serve in the Armed forces and the SAFVC.

On the other hand, realistically speaking, terrorism has become a major threat for Singapore since the September 11 attacks. Many were arrested for an attempted terrorist attack using bombs

⁶¹ "Integration has brought benefits to all'," *The Straits Times*, 4 March 2001.

⁶² Han Fook Kwang et al., *Lee Kuan Yew: Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going* (Singapore: Strait Times Press, 2011), Chapter 6.

⁶³ "MM's remarks on Malays: Timing was bad," *The New Paper*, 13 May 2011; "Many remain hurt by MM Lee's remarks," *Today*, 13 May 2011.

⁶⁴ Question by Mr Pritam Singh (Aljunied), Head J – Ministry of Defence, *SPR*, 6 March 2012.

⁶⁵ Question by Mr Zaqy Mohamad (Chua Chu Kang), *ibid*.

⁶⁶ Reply by the Minister for Defence (Dr Ng Eng Hen), *ibid*.

by a radical Islam group Jemaah Islamiyah in 2001.⁶⁷ In recent years, it shocked the country that some of its citizens were influenced by the radical ideology of the Islamic State, with some of them even attempting to join their jihad.⁶⁸

The Singapore government must ensure tightened security measures against terrorism, as being vulnerable to terrorism damages the image of safety and stability that is crucial for foreign investment, which a tiny state with no natural resources very much relies on.

Having said that, a global trend in which there is a cycle of fight against terrorism, the spread of anti-Islam ideology fueled by that, and the resistance against that ideology could make the Malays, Muslims, and other ethnic groups have suspicion for one another, leading to social instability in the country. The government has exerted itself to make sure the fight against terrorism does not split society into two, with Islam as the axis of a confrontation (a reason why Lee Kuan Yew's comment was met by strong disappointment and backlash), and it has made various direct efforts towards encouraging moderate Islam in the Malay and Muslim communities and promoting dialogues between various religions. Adding to that, it is also important to resolve a strongly rooted sense of politically and economically being discriminated against among the Malays and promote harmony among communities and national integration, including the newcomers.⁶⁹

Conclusion

Opposition parties took a great leap in the 2011 General Election against the backdrop of social issues stemming from a low birthrate and an aging population as well as a rapid influx of foreigners. Consequently, that led to the de facto retirement of the elders of the governing PAP, including Lee Kuan Yew. The country has taken an interesting path since then in the sense that not only members of the opposition parties but also of the governing party express views different from the government. The government is also more willing to listen to diverse opinions from the public. It is safe to assume that change (combined with the patriotism fueled by the demise of the "founding father" and the 50th anniversary of the country) enabled the PAP to regain support in the General Election in September of 2015.

Nevertheless, the issues related to national security discussed in the previous chapters will not disappear, and they will continue to impose restrictions on the government in terms of forming national security policies as long as there is a continuing influx of immigrants. Of all the issues, the review of the responsibility and involvement of the citizens in national security will continue

⁶⁷ Ministry of Home Affairs, *White Paper: The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism*, 7 January 2003.

⁶⁸ "2 Singaporeans planning to join ISIS detained, 2 others on Restriction Orders: MHA," *The Straits Times*, August 19, 2016.

⁶⁹ One example of a dispute between mainland Chinese and indigenous Singaporeans developing into a voluntary act among citizens is "Cook and share a pot of curry day" in August 2011. See Chizue Honda, "*Kajin To Tairiku Chuugokujin* [Chinese Singaporeans and Mainland Chinese]" in *Shingaporu O Shiru Tame No 65 Shou*, Chapter 22. Additionally, strong resentment towards new immigrants was expressed in various places when a new immigrant from the mainland China recklessly drove his Ferrari and killed a couple of people in May 2012. "In Singapore, Vitriol Against Chinese Newcomers," *The New York Times*, July 26, 2012. On another note, in November of the same year, more than 200 bus drivers originally from the mainland China went on a strike for the first time in 25 years, which was illegal. In addition to this, a riot, first in Singapore ever since its independence, by migrant laborers from the South Asia broke out in December 2013. Police cars and ambulances were set on fire. As these events indicate, discontent among low-wage migrant laborers has become a social problem in Singapore.

to be required as well as the future of the National Service and the participation of the newcomers in national defense. In a sense, this reexamination manifests a great challenge of redefining the “Singaporean” identity, an experiment that Singapore will undertake over the next 50 years.