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AN ABOUT-FACE TO THE FUTURE: The SAF's New Career Schemes

Ho Shu Huang

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The SAF's new Enhanced Officers' Career Scheme (EOCS) extends the retirement age of its regular commissioned officers by five years. Does this suggest an earlier miscalculation in the previous manpower policy set in 1998?

ON 14 MAY 09, it was announced that career Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) officers could now retire at the age of 50 under the Enhanced Officers' Career Scheme (EOCS). This appeared to be an about-face from the previous policy set in 1998, when in an attempt to keep the SAF's leadership young, the retirement age for regular commissioned officers was set at a relative young 45. Two other policy revisions, the Enhanced Warrant Officers' Career Scheme (EWOCS) and Military Domain Experts Scheme (MDES), were also announced. The former will allow faster promotion through the new rank of Third Warrant Officer (3WO). The latter scheme will manage soldiers with specialist skills and experience within a new single unified rank system.

Changing times, changing policy

The EOCS seems to have been introduced to mitigate the concern among regular commissioned officers that they were being retired too early, and correct what some perceived to be a flawed policy of retiring them in their prime. The Ministry of Defence (Mindef) argued that the strategic environment has changed, and the SAF now requires experienced officers. The new career schemes are merely a response to the new demands placed upon the SAF such as terrorism, humanitarian, disaster relief and peace-keeping missions.

Rather than pass judgement, what is more important is why the earlier policy. First, the SAF of the late 1990s was already highly professional under stable civilian leadership, consistently well-funded and without immediate adversaries. Mindef therefore had the political latitude, funds and secure environment to try new policies, such as the radical policy of keeping the SAF's leadership young. In light of how many other militaries around the world are fraught with budgetary problems, inherent conservatism and internal politicking, Mindef's good use of the space to innovate must be recognised.

The policy of early retirement emerged because Mindef could, and dared to, implement something so bold, a luxury few countries have.

Secondly, this desire to experiment underscores a more fundamental reason to the earlier policy. Mindef has always seen technology as a crucial force-multiplier. The rise of Information Technology (IT), culminating in the Dot.com boom of the late 1990s, reinforced this optimism in technology. Mindef thus paid close attention to the IT-powered Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) which suggested precision munitions and integrated communication networks would be the basis of future military effectiveness. Mindef embraced the RMA, the basis of the Third Generation (3G) transformation effort.

The Dot.com era also reinforced the perception that technological innovation was led by the young who were the most comfortable in applying and developing technology. By logical extension, the leadership of the SAF therefore had to be young in order to keep up with rapid technological advances. Consecutive Chiefs of Defence Force (CDF) from the late 1990s to the present all assumed their appointments in their early 40s. Together with their respective Ministers for Defence, they also have without exception advanced degrees in science or engineering as well.

There was also intellectual grounding in this belief too. Contemporary military thought suggested innovation was a top-down process. The way to operationalise the RMA in the SAF was to keep its leadership young and thus interested in technology. True to Singapore's technocratic roots, the 1998 policy was merely an application of the military *zeitgeist* of the day in the most efficient manner possible. This policy was a product of its time and context. It must therefore be judged on its own terms, and not those of the present.

New Employee Expectations

The SAF's new career schemes are also an attempt to make regular service more attractive to younger Singaporeans. Peace inevitably results in the normalisation of military service as a regular job, exceptional only in routine and tasks. Military service is now a career, as opposed to a calling, subjected to the expectations of the self-centred and self-confident Generation Me who ask not what they can do for the organisation, but what the organisation can do for them.

Chief among these expectations are career longevity and opportunities for promotion. With the national retirement age set at 62, the earlier commissioned officer retirement age of 45 seemed artificially low. The five-year extension, however, still puts it a full 12 years ahead of the national norm. With other industries still largely adopting the national retirement age, this later, but still truncated, retirement age may still remain a psychological hurdle that many may still find hard to overcome.

More important are shifting expectations of promotion. The introduction of the 3WO rank recognises this. With Singapore's emphasis on continuous education, the Warrant Officer and Specialist (WOSPEC) Corps is becoming increasingly qualified and correspondingly more ambitious. Whereas it used to take over a decade to reach the rank of warrant officer, the new 3WO rank can now be attained from the sixth year of service, an attractive proposition to a potential recruit.

This, however, is only a partial response to a larger manpower challenge the SAF, as an employer, faces. The traditional military organisation, where the system of commissioned officer and WOSPEC corps pigeon-holes recruits into one of the two career tracks shortly after enlistment, is poorly structured to manage soldiers who develop differently. A recruit's career path is based on his or her educational qualifications, disadvantaging late bloomers. Although commissioned and WOSPECs serve different, yet equally important, functions within the military, the latter are still subordinate to the former in rank.

More importantly, there is only limited upward mobility. This dual-hierarchy, with its aristocratic origins, does not sit well with younger Singaporeans who, because of the country's meritocratic culture, firmly believe hard work and talent should ultimately decide how far one progresses.

Replacing the dual hierarchy

The MDES addresses the deficiencies of this system by replacing this dual-hierarchy with just one where experience and ability determine one's place in a single hierarchy. When converted to the MDES, it would now be possible for an experienced WOSPEC to outrank an inexperienced junior commissioned officer. Late bloomers who may have taken a longer path to higher qualifications can therefore now have higher aspirations. This streamlining of the hierarchy follows the implementation of other private-sector "best practices" such as the Current Estimated Potential (CEP) employee appraisal scheme and International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) certification.

Furthermore, the MDES also appeals to young Singaporeans who eschew overt projections of rank which the existing dual-hierarchy inherently does. Its later retirement age of 60 also makes a lengthy military career now possible, normalising it.

Although only selectively implemented within the SAF, the MDES' shift away from the traditional rank structure is yet another bold experiment. Whether it is expanded or revised in future remains to be seen. What is certain is that with its new career schemes, the SAF may have initiated its own RMA – a Revolution in Manpower Affairs.

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