

# Military Conscription and Its Role in Shaping a Nation

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2021/07/25/military-conscription-and-its-role-in-shaping-a-nation/>

NINA NASR, JUL 25 2021

The military was created long before the formation of the current modern state. Established for the purpose of obtaining and protecting territory and resources, the military has played and continued to play a significant role in state formation and building. Consequently, the state and the army's intricately intertwined relationship has attracted a significant amount of scholarly attention. However, the military is an institution that has expanded beyond its initial goals of offense and defense. Such an expansion has come as a defiance to the general and technical perception of what the military represents. It is a tool for state formation and building but it has also become a means from which nation-building and cohesion could be promoted. While there is a sufficient amount of research on the military relative to state building, existing literature only goes so far in explaining the effective role of the military vis-à-vis nation-building. Thus, this study will be focused on the latter; it will specifically evaluate one of the military's policies, conscription, with respect to the activation of national sentiment. By assessing the degree to which military conscription can break down existing ethnic barriers and unite citizens with a common national cause and identity, we can positively reframe the controversial perception of conscription. On a broader scale, it will also refine our current understanding of the military not just as a coercive institution but also as a social one with short-term and long-term influences on social attitude, behavior and consequently, nation-building.

### Research Questions

In order to understand the potential conscription has in building a nation, it is necessary to evaluate the scope of its influence, with respect to its surrounding environment. Such an objective can be split into two inquiring parts: to what degree does military conscription have a uniting impact on society? And in what context is such an impact nurtured/hindered? The former can be studied by taking into consideration each case study's social structure and the dynamic relation and interaction between their different social/ethnic groups. This brings us to the sub-questions: what impact does conscription have on inter and intra-ethnic interactions? And can it strengthen sub-groups' loyalty towards the national community that they are a part of?

The latter can be studied by comparing both case studies to identify common background variables that have ensured the successful establishment and continuation of their conscription programs. This also brings us to further sub-questions: what would explain the successful application of conscription as a nation-building strategy? And, how could it be used to explain the success of some countries, and the failure of others, to maintain conscription as a nation-building process?

### Methodology

The main method employed in this study is an in-depth comparative analysis of two very different case studies: Switzerland and Singapore. While such a selection might seem random, it is, in fact, driven by the cause to highlight and emphasize a specific characteristic of interest to our study. Both case studies have successfully implemented mandatory military service that has, in turn, contributed to their country's nation-building. Using secondary sources ranging from books to academic articles, this study will be comparing these case studies in order to find common background factors that have led to the successful use of conscription as a nation-building tool.

However, the findings of this research have to be understood in consideration with some of its limitations. Taking a

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comparative method does relatively restrict the context in which the data will be collected and analyzed. This is especially the case for this research since I have refrained from choosing a case study that has implemented conscription but failed to incite a national identity. However, it is important to note that Switzerland and Singapore are case studies that are very different in terms of history, culture and structure, with very different processes of state formation. Yet, they still share the same dependent variable — the successful application of conscription as a nation-building strategy. By looking at these two highly different cases, I can extract the potential independent variables and conditions that could further help this process. Since these variables should be found in both cases, it is thus improbable that any factor different across the cases would be the independent variable. In other words, a constant cause is needed for a constant outcome. Consequently, the factors that vary in between these countries will be dropped making it easier to identify and extract the background factors constant/common for both cases — the independent variables.

The paper is divided into 5 sections. The next section provides an overview of the existing literature and debates on the topic. The third and fourth sections respectively focus on the case studies of Switzerland and Singapore. Both sections focus on potential factors, with respect to each country, that have contributed to the success of conscription as a nation-building tool. Finally, the last section spells out the comparative lessons of the case studies and their theoretical implications.

## Literature Review

When it comes to the military's role with respect to nation-building, the literature is divided into two main perspectives. One perspective argues that it has a positive role with an organizational and stabilizing impact on the nation and state (Coleman & Brice, 1962; Pye, 1962), and/or the potential of acting as a unifying institution. The other perspective claims the opposite (Dietz, Elkin and Roumani, 1991). Krebs (2004), for example, argues that nations are collective and cannot be built on individuals' decision to affiliate, while Luckham claims that the military institution is a budgetary burden and consequently restricts investment in human capital (1974).

However, Lamb and Pisani subscribe to neither perspective. They argue that the military's role regarding nation-building has been impactful in both a positive and negative manner (2018). According to their historical study of the armed forces in Europe and Africa, the impact of the military and the extent to which it was constructive or destructive is based on how and in what context the state was created and developed.

Frederick et. al (2017) attribute the effectiveness of the military, not on state-formation as Lamb & Pisani argue, but rather on its degree of cohesion and consequently the usage of national identity and ideology vis-à-vis the military. They support this argument by taking a wide-range of case studies such as Iraq, South Korea, South Vietnam and several African states to study how the presence/absence of a nation-building project highly impacted the survival of the state. In fact, this argument can be further supported by a study done on the IDF, Israeli Defense Forces, which also finds a positive relationship between the army's integrative/socializing mechanisms, the force's effectiveness and the nation's survival. (Henderson, 1985). Not only does the army seem to be fairly reliant on national identity for cohesion and efficiency, it has also come to symbolize a different form of identification, one that supersedes society's divisions and conflicts (Lomsky-Feder & Ben-Ari, 2015). Evidently, with the reduction of international conflict and the increase in international interdependence, the military and its focus on nation-building has increasingly expanded and proved to be influential.

Zooming in on the literature concerning conscription will show how the military has incorporated elements of nation-building. While many countries no longer implement conscription and have converted to all-volunteer forces (AVF), there are still many states that have maintained their conscription programs and have thus maintained their significance. To abandon or retain such a program continues to be controversial, especially considering arguments that it is a financial burden, a major restriction of freedom, and a site of exposure to trauma. Yet, Switzerland, one of the happiest countries in the world, has successfully normalized mandatory military service as a practice in society.

In fact, there have been a wide-range of studies on the impact of conscription in many areas such as crime (Hjalmarsson & Lindquist, 2016; Lyk-Jensen 2018), labor market (Hjalmarsson & Lindquist, 2016; Bauer et. Al,

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2012), mental health (Lazar, 2014; Morley et. Al, 2020) and personality traits like that of discipline, belligerence, agreeableness etc. (Navajas et. Al, 2019; Schult, 2015). However, not enough research has studied whether or if partaking in military service may develop a sense of national identity. According to the Goh, former PM of Singapore, “nothing creates loyalty and national consciousness more thoroughly than participation in its defense.” This is exemplified in the case of Singapore; its conscription program has been maintained for decades and yet its abolition has never been an election issue (Kwok, 2014). In fact, in 2014 the UAE implemented a conscription program after taking inspiration from several states, including Singapore, considered to have some of the most effective conscription practices. The UAE did not do so purely for military reasons; once again, conscription is used as a political and symbolic tool to assert a ‘a more homogenous Emirati identity that supersedes local, tribal, religious, or ideological affiliations’ (Alterman & Balboni, 2017). Thus, as Cohen precisely words it, conscription establishes the military as a representative of a highly diverse and heterogeneous population (1985).

However, can this be applied to any diverse and heterogeneous population? Can it occur in extremely fragmented societies? According to Allport (1954), public policies, including that of conscription, can reduce the distinction of ethnic identities under the right conditions. Rivkin (1969) also argues that nation-building can be successful if applied under conditions “that are conducive to political stability, economic growth and peaceful change.” However, both writers fail to mention what these conditions are. While scholars have highlighted the ability of conscription to successfully overcome ethnic barriers and enable nation-building in certain states, the conditions necessary for such a strategy are vague. For that reason, this study will be comparing Singapore and Switzerland — two cases that have demonstrated the potential of conscription to ameliorate ethnic divisions. According to Kai Ostwald’s survey experiments, his empirical tests strongly demonstrate that Singapore’s service program has been both durable and successful in changing conscripts’ attitudes and behaviors with respect to ethnic interactions (Ostwald, n.d). Not only has it been maintained for decades in Singapore but it has also been accepted and embraced — despite being obligatory — with its abolition never being an election issue (Kwok, 2014). Switzerland is a similar case. It has a high percentage of Swiss citizens in support of maintaining conscription. This can be further supported by a recent Swiss referendum that disclosed an immensely popular level of support for mandatory military service (Ostwald, n.d; Kwok, 2014).

Singapore and Switzerland are very diverse countries. Yet, they have succeeded in normalizing the practice of conscription, among a heterogeneous population, for the sake of national defense. In other words, the policy of conscription, in these cases, encourages an outward-looking perspective rather than an inward one that focuses on groups’ allegiance towards their own group interests and needs. Thus, using these case studies to identify the necessary conditions for the successful use of conscription could provide other countries, especially ones wreaked with division, with comparative lessons from which to learn from and use.

## **The Historical Shaping of the Swiss Nation**

Switzerland is a confederation made up of twenty-six independent cantons that are unevenly divided according to four different language-speaking groups: German, French, Romansh and Italian. This multilingual entity is considered to be a successful example of the political integration of different ethnic affiliations. However, as a country with rich history, this is largely the result of the certain circumstances from which Switzerland arose and developed.

### *Geographic Vulnerability*

The particular languages found in Switzerland not only represent the aftermath of historical territorial dominions but also the exchange of Switzerland’s geographical and cultural borders with that of its neighboring countries. Switzerland is a small state that is landlocked by several countries; Germany to the North, Austria and the Liechtenstein principality to the East, Italy to the South, and France to the West. This brings us to the first factor as to why conscription has come to be a successful nation-building strategy in Switzerland: geographic vulnerability.

Initially, Switzerland was a small territory with a small population and greater, more powerful and populated neighboring countries. This left Switzerland vulnerable and open to the repercussions of any major conflict in Europe. The threat of a common external enemy and the potential end to political sovereignty and freedom obliged this league

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of small states to come together in agreement. While most modern states were shaped by contesting the particularism of their different segments, Switzerland deviated from such a pattern. In contrast, Switzerland arose by the preservation and development of the autonomy and character of each of its constituents. Since the cantons were no longer under a feudal structure and the power of protection it is obliged to provide, the cantons were required to depend on themselves to settle any conflicting interests and disputes among themselves. While external aggression and collective security was definitely an incentive for cooperation, the establishment of their alliance was further reinforced by the defense of a common set of principles such as self-governance, liberty, autonomy and democracy; the same set of principles that the current Swiss nation is founded on. Thus, with the need to preserve these principles, Switzerland collectively rose unified and resistant against external control.

Their practice of collective security overshadowed existing differences and directed the focus on common political values between the different linguistic groups. Thus, it is their resistance against foreign powers that led to the focus on common nationalistic goals rather than the prevalence of trans-ethnic features (Wilner, 2009). Consequently, an environment conducive to conscription was established. Their reliance on conscription was needed to accumulate a dependable fighting-force that would deter threats and defend their independence. The establishment of a citizen's militia made it every Swiss citizen's responsibility to defend the state regardless of group identification. Thus, Switzerland's geostrategic vulnerability and the potential threat of invasion established a defensive military-style culture with an all-encompassing social duty to defend the nation (Wilner, 2009). This created a national identity separate from sub-group identification that emphasized and relied on the common values of self-governance and political liberty. In light of the historical competition between foreign powers and the security problem it poses, the cooperation of the Swiss cantons, for the sake of political (rather than ethnic) values, eventually grew into a federal union. Despite the region's current stability and scarce number of aggressors, conscription is still a policy that is culturally and politically needed to preserve Switzerland's democratic values and its traditional security-strategy of deterrence (Stringer, 2017).

Geo-strategic vulnerability is one of the conditions for the successful implementation of conscription as a nation-building strategy. However, it can be easily met in a world characterized by anarchic global relations. For that reason, it is important to note how the condition was utilized in a way that would, or would not, provide an environment stable for nation-building. This can be seen in the fact that most countries wrecked by divisions — such as Lebanon, Iraq, Syria — were and remain to be geo-strategically vulnerable to invasion and interference and yet a national identity outside of their group's interests is yet to be properly formed. This could be largely attributed to a lack of political consensus (Salamey, 2019) on the general goals of society which is, in contrast, evidently present in the case of Switzerland. For the sake of collective security, the compromise and social bargaining of the different polities in Switzerland resulted in their socio-political cooperation. For that reason, they were (and continue to be) aligned with a broader political community that has eventually manifested itself into a politically tolerant culture and identity. Such a community would not have come to place without the integratory push of external pressures and threats. This push acted as a consolidating force and was actualized through the cooperation of conscripts of different linguistic and ethnic backgrounds, united by the collective need to protect their independence.

## *Neutral Foreign Policy*

Another factor that has paved the way for conscription as a successful nation-building tool is related to Switzerland's foreign policy. Switzerland's renowned principle of armed neutrality has led to a foreign policy that has resulted in an exceptional lack of conflict from the late 1700s onwards (Kwok, 2014). This neutrality goes all the way back to the Peace of Westphalia when it was officially recognized in 1648 (McComas, 2016). However, Switzerland was still sought after for its great geo-strategic territory especially with respect to the Alpine region which consisted of several European transit routes. For that reason, such recognition was not essentially actualized as demonstrated by the French occupation of Switzerland in 1798 and its transformation into a battle-zone between the European powers in 1799. It was the Napoleonic wars that provided a glimpse of the threatening impact a non-neutral Switzerland would have. Consequently, neither of the neighboring states would tolerate an opposing power dominating Switzerland. Thus, after Napoleon's defeat, recognition of Switzerland's neutrality was renewed at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 (McComas, 2016).

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Switzerland's position of permanent neutrality towards other powers meant that they are not allowed to engage in warfare nor may their territories be — to any extent — the stage for warfare. This neutrality served both external and internal functions. Switzerland's 'designation' as a buffer zone protected its independence and freedom from that of external affairs. It also stabilized Europe's fragile balance-of-power as outlined in the Treaty of Paris, 1815; the neutrality and independence of Switzerland would "enter into the truest interests of the policy of the whole of Europe" (Schindler, 1998). While neutrality was initially a condition — imposed by European powers — for Switzerland's independence, it eventually became a moral virtue from which Swiss national identity was built on. This brings us to the internal function of neutrality that has provided the means to promote internal integration. Due to the lack of homogeneity with respect to religion, linguistics and culture, neutrality provided a common and non-instigating identity to associate with. A policy that proved to be both important and sturdy in contrast to the power of ethno-nationalization that was prevailing in Europe (Schoch, 2000). Being free and separate from external pressure not only strengthened internal integration but also preserved Swiss unity throughout several major events. Swiss neutrality managed to prevail throughout the Reformation and the following decades of religious conflict that crippled the rest of Europe. It also persisted throughout two highly destructive World Wars.

While Switzerland did uphold its state of armed neutrality in WW1, it proved to be difficult as its neighbors were a mix of Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary) and Entente Powers (France and Italy). This stirred up conflicting sympathies as German-speakers felt emotionally attached to the German empire and the French-Italian speakers to that of France and the Entente. This was the first time in Switzerland's history that alliances were made according to the aspect of language (Wilner, 2009). While this did cause some internal conflict, Switzerland still managed not to take sides or partake in the war. By WW2, Switzerland was more prepared. Although the military threat was essentially larger, the internal language-based divisions were not as important. As the Axis powers gradually began to represent anti-democratic forces that opposed Swiss traditions and values, there occurred a decrease in Swiss-German loyalty (Kerr, 1974). This demonstrates the positive aftereffect of establishing political values that align with a broader community.

The non-alignment policy also played an important role in Switzerland's defense strategy. Given that neutral countries are not allowed to favor or assist any other countries, the opposite also applies. Thus, conscription and the security/deterrence it provides becomes a necessary strategy for the lack of protection under neutrality. In fact, an empirical study was conducted on the determinants of conscription's decline between the timeframe of 1970-2010 (Hall & Tarabar, 2016). Membership in military alliances was found to be related. As countries increasingly partake in strategic and protective alliances, they feel less threatened and consequently reduce their military force. Considering Switzerland does not have such privileges, it had and still has to be as self-sufficient as possible with respect to its defensive capabilities.

Despite the region's current stability and scarce number of aggressors, Swiss conscription is still a relevant policy that remains necessary in a neutral country that has no military alliances. While the original reason behind conscription was largely military, history shows that it is a representation of collective security that has been anchored, alongside the principle of neutrality, in the political identity and practice of the Swiss state. In other words, the purpose of conscription has changed and become essentially more political. This would explain why a recent Swiss referendum on the abolition of conscription reflected an immensely popular level of support for conscription, despite the lack of external motive (Reuters Staff, 2013).

## *Direct and Consociational Democracy*

The successful maintenance of conscription does not only have to do with the particular conditions from which Switzerland developed, but also with the complex institutional-structure of the current federal state. Referendums are part of an important institutional feature that impacts Switzerland and its wide-range of decisions, including that of conscription and consequently nation-building. This feature is known as direct democracy. The Swiss model has granted a high level of participation and self-determination to its citizens allowing them to be more involved in the formation or alteration of Swiss law. In fact, at least one-third of all the referendums held at the national-level worldwide have occurred in Switzerland (Kaufmann, 2019). Thus, the extent to which Switzerland has provided its citizens with a direct voice in their own affairs is beyond compare to any other country. Indeed, like any other average

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representative system, most of the political decisions are made by the legislative and executive branches. However, with respect to the most important of issues, especially related to the constitution, the people have the final say by means of referendum. Thus, direct democracy controls and regulates the power of the political elites while also giving these important political decisions high rates of approval and legitimacy. Despite criticism of maintaining conscription in a stable region, in 2013, Switzerland rejected a referendum on the suspension of conscription – for the third time in 25 years. 73% of voters from all across the twenty-six cantons rejected the abolition while only 27% were in favor (Reuters Staff, 2013). Evidently, Switzerland's semi-direct democracy has over and over again provided conscription a legitimate foundation for its application in a world where all-volunteer forces (AVF) are the trend.

Yet, it is not the only institutional feature that impacts conscription; Switzerland's mixture of both direct democracy and power-sharing is what makes its system so distinct. Within this government type, rather than the application of majority decisions and a 'winner takes it all' structure, each group gets something. As aforementioned, Switzerland did not replicate its neighbors' inclination towards unification and homogenization. It did not encourage the identity of one specific group at the expense of the other. Instead, it formed a state that preserved the cantonal autonomy of the different group identities. Rather than focus on the establishment of cultural, linguistic, and religious homogeneity, Switzerland accepted its pre-existing diversity and built its institutions on it. This can be seen in the consociational structure of the government and its emphasis on shared decision-making and group inclusion. However, it is important to note that Swiss institutions, as seen through a glimpse of its history, were already accepted and functioning at all levels (Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, 2008). This explains why a broad political identity — preaching common political values — was able to simultaneously emerge. This would also explain why, in contrast, countries with weak and politically contested institutions are unable to incite a sense of identity. Even if only one group were to challenge the state's institutions and its credibility, such institutions will not be able to serve as the basis of an overarching and shared political identity. Yet, in the case of Switzerland, political institutions and values have proven to be able to establish a communal sense of belonging, distinct from that of individual ethnic and cultural bonds.

It also must be pointed out that Switzerland is not a country that has experienced prolonged internal conflict as popularly seen in ethnically-diverse countries (mainly due to its neutrality). While it did experience civil war in 1847, it was short only causing a small number of casualties. In other words, it did not trigger a great level of suffering. For that reason, Switzerland does not have an 'emotionalized' population nor are they represented by 'emotionalized' elites (Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, 2008). The inter-ethnic interactions between the different ethnic groups are not as delicate as popularly seen in ethnically-diverse countries. Thus, not only is there a certain level of trust and tolerance among different groups but there is also a concentrated effort by these elites to establish and support a shared national identity. This is supported by Wilner who claims that in 1917, the elites from different ethno-linguistic groups "very quickly moved to an appeasement policy in attempt to realign political sentiments along the nationalist axis that they had designed in previous decades" (Wilner, 2009; Wimmer, 2011). Another example is the creation of the term "Geistige Landesverteidigung" in 1938 by elites in the Federal Council. Equivalent to "spiritual national defense", this term promoted Swiss political/cultural ideas and values in order to diminish rising ethnic pressure and counter the propaganda of surrounding countries (Wilner, 2009; Ormes, 2011). Evidently, the continuing trust between both groups and elites have created an environment conducive to the institutional accommodation of different cultural groups. Switzerland's situation is exceedingly unlike countries that implement power-sharing as a temporary means to avoid ethno-political conflict.

The combination of direct citizen participation, the institutionalization of common political values, inclusive decision-making, and the lack of emotionalization at all levels has paved the way for an institutional structure that is trusted by the people. Evidently, such a strong and complex institutional structure has created an atmosphere which is not only conducive to conscription but to the military as a whole. The Swiss military has been and continues to be, in essence, a cultural institution. Not only does it represent Swiss culture and history but it also embodies an overarching political identity in which promotes trust, tolerance and diversity. For that reason, the citizens' perception of the military and other institutions is a positive one that continues to encourage the establishment of a national identity. This positive perception towards state institutions, especially the military apparatus, is not commonly seen in countries divided by ethnic divisions.

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## The Artificial Shaping of the Singaporean Nation

Singapore is a small city-state made up of one main island and more than 60 small islets. It has 4 major ethnic groups according to the CMIO model of ethnic classification; the Chinese, the Malays, the Indians and the others which include nationalities mostly from Central Asia and Europe. However, the sizes of these different groups, with respect to each other, are in no way proportional. The Chinese in Singapore form the ethnic majority as they make up 75% of the population while the Malays, the constitutionally-recognized indigenous people of Singapore, amount to around 13.7%. The Indian ethnic group is at 8.7% leaving a remaining 2.6% for other nationalities (Ortmann, 2009). Evidently, Singapore's diverse ethnic composition makes it difficult to establish a common feeling of identity. However, the success and development of Singapore as a city-state shows that peaceful coexistence and effective governance was able to be attained and differences surpassed.

### *Geographic Vulnerability*

In 1965, Singapore was removed from Malaysia and was forced to become an independent and sovereign state. An independent and sovereign state with a Chinese majority squished between the larger and more populated Malaysia and Indonesia; neighbors that are predominantly Muslim. The establishment of its fragile independence within a potentially threatening territory had consequently established national survival as the main goal of Singapore. This was clearly stated and recognized by Singaporean Prime Minister Lee in 1965:

"We want peace simply because we have not the capacity to make war on anybody. We are surrounded by bigger and more powerful neighbors with whom we cannot afford to settle disputes by force of arms. My country is well aware that it is situated in a region of the world which has traditionally been the battleground of big power conflict. Singapore itself, by virtue of its location, has attracted the attention of nations who wish to dominate Southeast Asia"

Moore, 2017

Not only did its geographic location pose a threat to this newly created state but also the structure of its society. Its society is fragmented by its increasingly different ethnic composition as each group identifies with a different language, religion and culture. Differences that were clearly seen and manipulated in the communal tensions that led to the separation of Singapore from Malaysia. Thus, the amount of investment in the state's relations with any one of the groups is highly sensitive and restricted by its relations with the others. Evidently, after independence, Singapore was faced with both internal and external conditions of vulnerability impacting every level of society. Thus, in order to lessen such vulnerabilities, Singapore moved towards the method of securitization (Chang, 2019). This led to the prioritization of policies focused on countering and securing their vulnerabilities. This was actualized by a range of security measures taken. For instance, in 1965, Singapore passed a security proposal that would establish the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) responsible for the protection of national defense. In 1967, it introduced the National Service policy as an 'exceptional' security practice for securing their vulnerability. Its implementation played and continues to play a dual role of military defense and nation-building respectively targeting both external/geographic and internal/social vulnerabilities. This was followed up by another security policy, in 1984, known as the Total Defense Doctrine. Implemented to "unite all sectors of society in the defense of Singapore", the Total Defense Doctrine tackles military defense, economic defense, civil defense, social defense, digital defense etc. These different areas of defense are conveyed to be, individually and collectively, dependent on the effort of all of society in deterring potential aggressors. Additionally, in 1970, the Ministry of Defense was divided into two ministries, the Ministry of Defense (MINDEF) and the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA). Each ministry became responsible for external and internal security respectively (Chong, 2020).

The continuous state of anxiety about the state's survival has created an insecure environment that has reoriented the people to accept such securitization policies, especially that of conscription. The implanting of Singapore's vulnerability as a prevalent discourse — reinforced by the implementation of security policies — has created a positive and exceptional attitude towards conscription. In fact, in Lee's memoirs, he highlights the need to tailor people in a way that they would accept how essential it is to have "a people's army" (Yew, 2000, p. 33). Thus, by the constant appeal to the people's fear, vulnerability has been deeply-rooted in people's perception consequently

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leading to a defensive and militarized mentality — a mentality that reflects the fusion of civil-military relations. As Brown claimed, Singapore legitimized its rule through “an “ideology of survivalism” (2000) which has been continuously used to compensate for the lack of national identity. The discourse of national survival became the means from which to mobilize the population and incite national consciousness. It has been further actualized and reinforced through conscription for the greater purpose of national integration — a purpose that remains to be an issue for an import-dependent country within a region made up of its very close, larger and more populated neighbors.

## *Meritocracy and Elite Governance*

The obstacles facing this young nation provided great incentive for an ideology of survivalism, however, it could not be exclusively depended on as a long-term resource. Although Singapore’s independence and expulsion from Malaysia left it scarce of both human and natural resources, it was capable of achieving significant growth as GNI/capita measured an increase from \$34,576 in 1990 to \$83,793 in 2018 (a 142.3% increase) (UN, 2018). Singapore’s remarkable economic and social advancement, in a relatively short period, hindered the credibility of the survival discourse making it no longer compelling enough for the mobilization of its people. As a young state made up of immigrants coming from different ‘native lands’, such as China, India and Malay states, it is consequently lacking in shared historical and cultural roots. Due to this weak foundation from which to construct a national identity, the government turned to different alternatives. One of which was elitism. With the rise of democracy and the idea of political legitimacy, elitism was left behind in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, Singapore remains an exception (Skrbis & Barr, 2008).

Considering the dynamics of Singapore’s composition, establishing a sense of national identity required an active, adaptable and leading government. For that reason, from the time of its independence, the issue of national identity was largely a governmental project. This goes to show that nation-building was not a naturally occurring process but rather ‘artificially’ developed through the policies implemented by a selected elite administration. An administration that has directly tied the survival of the state to its own existence. This is mainly reinforced by the government’s support for meritocracy, which is largely an elite-building process. Established as a foundation of Singapore’s national identity, the meritocratic approach promoted a system grounded on the tendency of achievement rather than that of ascription. From a highly competitive educational system, top performers are selected and trained into a ruling elite that would pragmatically guide and reform society from above. For that reason, the country’s investment in nation-building is largely intertwined with the investment going into elite formation. While this top-down approach certainly has an alienating effect, this elitist approach to politics — founded on that of meritocracy — has become crucial to Singapore’s national identity. This is largely due to the influential role of elites’ in shaping national and political discourse according to their principles. In other words, Singapore’s national identity is the product of the elites’ direct and active role they play, from above, in actualizing and institutionalizing pragmatic ideas and practices that would ensure coexistence.

This is exemplified by the establishment of the Ministry of Culture, in 1959, to drive cultural programs that would foster a sense of pride, loyalty and national identity across a population that initially had no roots in Singapore. It launched the first national symbols — its new red and white flag, the state crest and state anthem. It created events and activities that explicitly promote nation-building and improve “inter-cultural awareness, racial understanding and bonding among the four main races” (Ministry of Communications and Information, 2018). It also established Singapore’s National Day Parade (NDP) which maintains, to this day, a military theme. The parade is continuously presented as a symbol of Singapore’s capabilities with respect to the country’s citizen army. In fact, quite recently in 2018, the Minister for Defense, Dr. Ng Eng Hen, reminded citizens of the significance of participating and sponsoring in the NDP:

“Because we can forget what it is about, we can think it is just a parade show. But as a relatively young and independent country, each NDP that we hold every year is about a nation still establishing itself, and not least through a common identity” .... “the NDP reminded us of the struggles in our past and that we can be stronger helping one another as a community”



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Min Zhang, 2018

This highlights their continuous manipulation of anxiety with respect to the country's uncertain future. This consequently reinforces the relevance of conscription and the need for a citizen-army. In fact, a study was done on the previous PM, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew and the speeches he gave at 26 different National Day Rallies between the timeframe of 1959-1990. The identification and expression of threats in the environment turned out to be a very common theme found throughout most of the speeches (Tan & Wee, 2002). Evidently, elites play a significant role in their indirect integration of ideas into national and political discourse — discourse that is consistent in reflecting a certain and consistent perspective of the nation. This is exemplified in the constant promotion of 'national' principles: economic growth, multiracialism, equal opportunity and upward socio-economic mobility for all citizens regardless of their ethnicity in Singapore's constructed nation-building myth.

This has been established as a necessary tactic to develop a shared identity that can cut across ethnic and cultural lines. A tactic that has succeeded in reshaping the people's sense of identity with a nation not defined by race but rather by political factors. Not only does this demonstrate that national identity is actually a social construction but it also highlights the important role of the elites in establishing and reinforcing it. Despite some claims of meritocracy being the means and justification for the ruling party's continuous hegemony, Singapore has one of the most trusted governments. Not only did it rank 6<sup>th</sup> among 180 countries in Transparency International's 2017 Corruption Perceptions Index but it was also one of a few countries classified by Edelman's Trust Barometer as enjoying high levels of public trust (Li Sa et. Al, 2018). This is most likely due to the effectiveness of the government in its commitment to the creation and application of 'pragmatic', rather than ideological, policies. This is more than supported by Singapore's consistently high ranking on the Worldwide Governance Indicators (Governance in Singapore, n.d). The results of these different indices can be seen in the fact that decades have passed and the current meritocratic leadership continues to be re-elected. This has occurred in parallel to the practice of conscription which has also been maintained for decades with its abolition never being an election issue. Evidently, as long as the current system of governance is effective, it will continue to be upheld. Thus, the principles it reinforces, including the citizen-army mentality, will be preserved and consequently conscription will continue to be embraced. In other words, the maintenance of conscription is largely intertwined with the existence of the elites and their principles that have largely shaped national and political discourse.

## Conclusion

### *Comparative Analysis*

Both Singapore and Switzerland, among the richest and most politically-stable nations in the world, were built on their highly diverse ethnic composition. A diversity that they both embraced, institutionalized and executed. However, the product of each country's historical roots and social conditions was an inverted style of governance. In the case of Switzerland, a bottom-up system is applied in which the local/canton level is involved in policy making. This is reflected by the emphasis on a high level of local/canton autonomy that can be traced back all the way to Switzerland's origin. However, in the case of Singapore, a young state forced into independence with no common cultural and historical roots, a top-down approach was adopted. As a response to the lack of substance for a national identity (and the risk of conflict), the state applied strong political direction and governance in order to make national decisions that would filter down and shape lower levels. Yet, in both case studies, conscription as a tool for nation-building is successfully being applied. Thus, in comparing Switzerland's consociational and direct democracy with that of the Singapore's elitist 'democracy', the form of government can be dropped as one of the potential causes and conditions for the maintenance of conscription.

Despite the difference in political systems, both countries have strong institutions that are consistently ranked high in their performance and quality. One of which is the military. Both have developed a system institutionally strong enough to manage and prevent the polarization of factions. Their ability to do so has legitimized the authority of state institutions. It is also important to highlight that both states have created a government in which legitimacy is not founded on the sensitive power of ideologies. In the case of Switzerland, the government's legitimacy is derived from the people and their high level of participation. In the case of Singapore, it is derived from merit. Therefore, their state

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institutions give legitimacy to the acts of the government as a whole, rather than the choices of a specific leader or party. In other words, their strong state institutions legitimize the authority and structure of the government consequently legitimizing their implementation of policies, including conscription. Accordingly, strong institutions seem to be a necessary precondition, and an essential foundation, for the role of conscription in national integration.

Another factor common to both countries that, in fact, brought about their existence- is their extensive vulnerabilities, both geographic and social. As both are small states surrounded by larger, more powerful and populated neighbors, the need to self-sufficiently secure their independence and survival was of utmost importance. This factor is not only common to Switzerland and Singapore but to most small states as they are the most susceptible to invasion or attack, in an international system perceived to be anarchic. For that reason, it is also important to highlight the response to such vulnerability. With respect to the case studies, both states have successfully adopted a strategy of deterrence, a strategy that has lost its significance and necessity after the Cold war. However, both Singapore and Switzerland have continuously adjusted their policies to the type and level of threat present. In doing so, they continuously reinforced and actualized the idea of their potential vulnerability. This created an environment that was (and had to be) unifying, rather than divisive, in order to survive. In the case of Switzerland and its historical policies of neutrality and non-alignment, it gradually established a politically tolerant and accommodating culture. In the case of young Singapore and its securitization policies, it established the means from which to mobilize the population and incite national consciousness. Despite applying different tactics, both states have adopted strategies of deterrence and seek to preserve it through conscription, as it mobilizes the forces needed to assert these policies.

The final common factor that explains the successful application of conscription as a nation-building strategy is the establishment of a common civic identity. Despite the different sequence in establishing a civic identity (whether before or after applying conscription), both states have created a common national identity that simultaneously respects and recognizes poly-ethnicity. They did not embrace ethno-linguistic nationalism, but rather promoted a common civic culture founded on distinct political features; features that were politically (and rhetorically) tied to the survival and independence of the state. In the case of Switzerland and its rich history, the cooperation of the cantons originally began as a way to defend a common set of political principles such as self-governance, liberty and democracy. This need for civil defense paved the way for the need for conscription. The same set of principles that held the Swiss polity together at the time have come to characterize Swiss culture today. This establishment of a broader community based on civic and political values is also apparent in the case of Singapore. However, Singapore, as a recently-established state, established its civic identity after (and through) applying conscription. In contrast to Switzerland's natural and historical process, Singapore has artificially planned and developed a civil culture to continuously promote and reinforce. Meritocracy is at the core of this as it has established a system running on hard work, merit, and achievement, rather than that of ascription. Such an approach has been embedded and propagandized in the educational, political and economic structure of the state, alongside the values of multi-racialism and religiosity. Thus, in both case studies, political and civic values have been used as a means to align and encourage an outward-looking perspective that would redirect groups' allegiance towards the broader community that they are a part of. A well-established community that conscripts, regardless of their linguistic and ethnic background, would be willing to defend and protect. It is important to note that the building of a common identity was facilitated by the fact that both countries do not have an 'emotionalized' population nor are they represented by 'emotionalized' elites. This largely refers to the fact that both countries have not experienced any prolonged and major internal conflicts. Therefore, the inter-ethnic interactions between the different ethnic groups are not as delicate or sensitive as popularly seen in ethnically-diverse countries.

## *Implications*

While the military might have been originally used for the sake of state formation, it is evident that it is no longer limited to such a technical purpose. Offense and defense are still the major functions of the military; however, they are being executed alongside another function, nation-building and cohesion. This is a social function clearly exemplified by countries that still apply conscription in a globalized and interdependent world dominated by all-volunteer forces (AVF).

The study of Singapore and Switzerland has not only reflected the positive impact of conscription on inter and intra-

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ethnic interactions, but also its ability to further strengthen sub-groups' allegiance towards the national community. In both cases, the states were aware that without internal cohesion, they would become more vulnerable and susceptible to invasion. Thus, their ability to form a state that surpassed the continuous threat of their heterogeneity was largely the result of the simultaneous building and reinforcement of the nation. In other words, since the absence of a common identity would hinder the building of a national community that is essential for effective state-formation, nation-building and state-building became a double-task that had to occur at the same time. A double task that conscription was able to tackle. This not only breaks the 'stereotype' associated with the idea of forced military service but also reframes our understanding of the military as a social institution. The military has the ability to be a coercive institution and also a social one with evident short-term and long-term influences on social attitude, behavior and consequently, nation-building. Such influences can be seen in both case studies today as their support for the conscription policy — in a stable and interdependent region — continues to be consistent throughout the years.

Conscription has a potentially unifying impact on society. However, that potential and whether or not it can be actualized is dependent on the context in which it is occurring. By comparing case studies that have successfully implemented mandatory military service as a nation-building tool, I was able to extract 4 common factors needed to create a context in which maximizes the unifying potential of conscription: strong state institutions, geographic and social vulnerability, the adoption of a deterrence approach, and finally, the establishment of a civic identity. These conditions could be used to provide other countries, especially ones wrecked by division, with comparative lessons from which to learn from and use. Such lessons can be especially derived from Singapore, a young state with no common historical/cultural/political roots, that was able to successfully establish both a state and a nation in a short-period of time. Switzerland, on the other hand, is largely the product of its rich history and the certain circumstances from which it arose and developed. This makes Singapore more of a relatable and pragmatic model to follow and learn from than that of Switzerland.

This research was based on case studies that have implemented conscription and succeeded in inciting a national identity. Thus, further research should be done on the existence/absence of the aforementioned conditions in countries that have implemented conscription but failed to incite a national identity. Also, considering that Singapore and Switzerland are among the most developed countries in the world, it would be more realistic to analyze the satisfaction of these conditions, or lack of, in fragile or deeply-divided countries. For instance, in the case of sectarian Lebanon and its weak state, it does not satisfy most of the conditions. Thus, unlike Switzerland and Singapore, would state-building policies need to be applied prior to the concerns of nation-building policies? Accordingly, is conscription only successful in developed countries that have already established a strong state foundation? In other words, can conscription impact extremely fragmented societies that have undermined the state? Would it not be possible for a strong and legitimate military to have a unifying impact in the presence of a weak state? Considering the implication that conscription cannot flourish in all types of environments, such questions should be pursued in order to provide more insight on when and where to use military conscription as a tool for building a cohesive nation.

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