THE ROLE OF YOUTH IN STRENGTHENING NATIONAL DEFENSE MANAGEMENT: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract:

The role of youth in national defense management is increasingly recognized as vital for national security. Youth participation in defense initiatives enhances resilience, leadership, and technological integration. However, challenges such as limited awareness, resource constraints, and policy gaps hinder their full potential. This review explores the opportunities and challenges in youth engagement in Malaysia's defense sector. This paper aims to (1) identify key theories relevant to youth involvement in national defense, (2) examine the effectiveness of youth participation, (3) analyze challenges and opportunities, and (4) provide strategic recommendations for enhancing youth engagement. Findings highlight that youth contribute significantly to national resilience, cybersecurity, and community-based security efforts. However, participation barriers such as lack of motivation, outdated training methods, and limited policy support persist. Comparative insights from Singapore, South Korea, and Sweden suggest strategies for improving youth engagement, such as integrating technology and offering policy incentives. Strengthening youth participation in national defense requires policy reforms, technological advancements, and educational collaboration. Future research should focus on longitudinal assessments, innovative training approaches, and sociocultural influences to enhance youth contributions to national security. A structured, multi-faceted approach is necessary to maximize their role in defense management.

Introduction

National defense management is essential for safeguarding a country's security, stability, and resilience against both internal and external threats. Recently, there has been growing interest in the role of youth in reinforcing national defense management, particularly their potential to contribute to security initiatives, technological advancements, and policy-making (MINDEF, 2020; Siregar & Hanita, 2020; Wansong, 2024; Alexander, 2017). As Malaysia confronts geopolitical uncertainties and evolving security challenges, understanding youth involvement in defense management is vital for maintaining long-term national security (Dahalan et al., 2023).

Globally, the engagement of youth in national defense has been studied in various contexts. Research in Western nations emphasizes the role of youth in cyber defense, military service, and crisis response (Apollo et al., 2022; Itsik, 2020; Sulaiman, 2022). In Southeast Asia, studies focus on youth-led security awareness programs, disaster response training, and participation in paramilitary organizations (Abdul Rahman, 2020; Bjarnegård et al., 2023; Sulaiman, 2022). However, there is limited research on how Malaysian youth specifically contribute to national defense management and the strategic policies that support their involvement.

Previous research has shown a willingness among non-Malay youths to join the armed forces (Dahalan et al., 2023). Additionally, the study examines the barriers and challenges that affect youth readiness and motivation to engage in national defense. Hence, there is a research gap in identifying the challenges that hinder youth participation in national defense management. Existing studies primarily discuss political and structural factors affecting defense policies (Yaakub et al., 2023), but limited studies address societal perceptions, economic barriers, and digital competencies among youth in Malaysia. This study seeks to fill this gap by identifying key obstacles and proposing policy recommendations to enhance youth integration into national defense strategies.

The key research questions guiding this study include: (1) What roles do Malaysian youth currently play in national defense management? (2) What challenges do they face in contributing effectively to defense-related initiatives? (3) What opportunities exist for enhancing their involvement in security and defense policymaking? Addressing these questions will provide valuable insights for policymakers, defense strategists, and academic scholars interested in youth engagement in national security. By addressing these gaps, this study aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the evolving role of youth in Malaysia's national defense management and provide strategic recommendations for enhancing their contribution in the future.

Literature Review

Youth Involvement in National Defense
The participation of youth in national defense has been extensively discussed in academic literature, highlighting their roles in both military and non-military domains. Traditional forms of youth involvement include conscription, voluntary enlistment, and participation in cadet programs. In many countries, youth engagement extends beyond military service to activities such as cybersecurity initiatives, counter-terrorism efforts, and community-based resilience programs.

In Malaysia, the National Service Training Program (PLKN) was initially launched to promote patriotism, discipline, and national security awareness among youth. Although the program faced financial and operational challenges leading to its temporary suspension, it has since been reinstated, reflecting a renewed commitment to strengthening youth participation in national defense. Youth are often referred to as the "heirs of the nation's leadership" and are crucial for achieving sustainable growth and national prosperity (Suhaimi & Abidin, 2022; Suhaimi, 2021; Suhaimi et al. 2016; Yeon et al, 2016). The reintroduction of PLKN, along with structured programs such as the Reserve Officers Training Unit (ROTU) or *Pasukan Latihan Pegawai Simpanan* (PALAPES), the Territorial Army Regiment (Wataniah), and the Officers Cadet Corps at Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia (UPNM), highlight the importance of youth engagement in military training and national defense preparedness. These programs serve as key platforms for equipping young individuals with the skills and mindset necessary to contribute effectively to the nation's security framework. By investing in these initiatives, Malaysia aims to cultivate a generation that is not only patriotic but also well-prepared to face the evolving security challenges of the future (Yeon et al., 2016)

Challenges in Youth Engagement in Defense Management
Despite various initiatives, several challenges hinder youth participation in national defense. Studies have identified barriers such as limited awareness, lack of structured training programs, and socio-economic constraints (Hussin, & Ismail, 2017). Furthermore, concerns about personal safety, career prospects, and inadequate incentives discourage youth from engaging in defense-related activities.

Another significant challenge is the gap between governmental policies and youth expectations. Research suggests that many defense policies do not effectively address youth aspirations and modern technological advancements, resulting in disengagement. The lack of interdisciplinary collaboration between defense agencies, educational institutions, and youth organizations further exacerbates this issue (Smith, 2018). Additionally, programs like PALAPES, Wataniah, and UPNM Officers Cadet training face issues such as funding limitations, inadequate promotion, and the difficulty of balancing military training with academic commitments.

Opportunities for Enhancing Youth Contribution to National Defense
Emerging trends highlight opportunities to enhance youth involvement in defense management. The integration of digital technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), cybersecurity, and drone technology, provides new avenues for youth participation. Cyber defense programs have gained traction, with many countries investing in youth-centered cybersecurity initiatives to protect national interests (Möller & Lindqvist, 2021).

Educational institutions play a critical role in fostering national security awareness (Ewing & Mathews, 2020). Th. Incorporating defense-related subjects into academic curricula and promoting leadership development programs can empower youth to contribute effectively to national defense. Additionally, public-private partnerships can bridge gaps by offering youth training programs and employment opportunities in defense-related industries. PALAPES, Wataniah, and UPNM's Officers Cadet training programs offer structured training that can be enhanced through stronger governmental support, strategic collaborations with defense agencies, and increased incentives for youth participation (Smith, 2018).

Comparative Perspectives on Youth and Defense Management

Comparative studies indicate that youth engagement in national defense varies across countries based on socio-political contexts and governmental strategies. For example, in Singapore, National Service is mandatory, ensuring structured youth involvement in defense (Chia, 2016). In contrast, European nations emphasize volunteer-based military service, with significant investments in youth-led community defense initiatives (Smith, 2018).

Malaysia can adopt best practices from these models by integrating structured training, digital defense programs, and policy reforms that align with youth aspirations. Lessons from international case studies suggest that increasing youth representation in defense policymaking and providing incentives for participation can enhance engagement. Strengthening PALAPES, Wataniah, and UPNM Officers Cadet training programs by incorporating advanced military technologies, leadership training, and cross-border defense collaborations can enhance their impact and effectiveness.

Research Gaps

While existing studies highlight various aspects of youth engagement in national defense, there is a lack of comprehensive research examining the specific challenges and opportunities in the Malaysian context. Limited empirical studies assess the effectiveness of past youth defense programs, and there is insufficient research on how digital transformation influences youth participation in security initiatives. Additionally, the role of PALAPES, Wataniah, and UPNM Officers Cadet training in Malaysia's national defense strategy remains underexplored. This review underscores the need for further research on youth-centric defense policies that integrate modern technological advancements and socio-political considerations.

Discussion

The role of youth in national defense management is crucial for sustaining national security frameworks. By addressing challenges and leveraging opportunities, it is not only strengthening national defense but also cultivating a more security-conscious and resilient generation. A comprehensive approach that combines policy improvements, educational support, and technological advancements is essential to maximize the potential of youth in national defense.

The Evolving Role of Youth in National Defense Management

Youth are playing an increasingly role in national defense, especially within modern security frameworks that emphasize comprehensive defense strategies. Their involvement in various defense programs enhances their leadership skills, national identity, and readiness to respond to security challenges (UNESCO, 2019; Ministry of Defence, Malaysia, 2021; Kamarudin, 2022). While military training programs and voluntary defense initiatives are in place, there is

a need for further enhancement to structure these efforts more effectively and maximize their impact.

Contributions of Youth to National Defense

The integration of youth in national defense initiatives has yielded several positive outcomes. Youth involvement in structured defense programs fosters resilience and preparedness, ensuring a generation equipped with essential security and crisis-management skills. The younger generation's proficiency with modern technology can significantly contribute to cyber defense, intelligence gathering, and strategic decision-making in national security. Additionally, youth participation in community-based defense programs strengthens local security networks and promotes civic responsibility (UNESCO, 2020).

Challenges Hindering Youth Participation

Despite these contributions, several challenges hinder effective youth engagement in national defense. Many young individuals are unaware of existing defense initiatives or perceive them as irrelevant to their career aspirations, leading to a lack of awareness and motivation. Insufficient funding, outdated training methods, and inadequate infrastructure limit the effectiveness of youth-focused defense programs (Chong & Abdullah, 2017). Furthermore, for many youth participants, balancing academic or professional responsibilities with defense training can be a significant obstacle.

Opportunities for Enhancing Youth Involvement

To optimize youth engagement in national defense management, several strategies should be considered. Leveraging digital platforms, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality can enhance training experience and make defense programs more appealing to younger generations (Wendling & Thierfeldt, 2019). Collaborating with educational institutions to integrate defense-related courses and training can improve participation rates and awareness. Additionally, governments should consider policy reforms that incentivize youth participation in defense initiatives, such as offering academic credits, employment advantages, or financial support for participants (Jones & Smith, 2019).

Comparative Insights from Global Practices

Several countries have successfully implemented youth defense programs that Malaysia can learn from. Singapore's National Service Model is a structured conscription program that integrates defense training with personal and professional development. South Korea's ROTC Program is a highly developed reserve officers' training program that prepares youth for leadership roles in the military and national security sectors. Sweden's Total Defense Concept is a holistic approach to national security that includes civilian training in crisis management and military readiness.

Limitations and Strengths

This study has several limitations and strengths. Existing literature on youth participation in defense is fragmented, making it challenging to draw comprehensive conclusions. Differences in defense policies across nations create difficulties in forming a universal framework for youth engagement. Additionally, many studies only assess short-term impacts of youth involvement, without evaluating long-term contributions to national security. However, this review consolidates findings from multiple sources, providing a broad perspective on youth engagement in defense. It offers actionable recommendations that policymakers and defense

institutions can use to enhance youth participation. By examining global practices, the paper provides insights that can help improve national defense programs.

Future Applications and Recommendations
Governments should develop structured policies that facilitate greater youth involvement in national defense. Future programs should incorporate cutting-edge defense technologies and hybrid learning methodologies to make training more effective. Higher education institutions can play a critical role in fostering awareness and providing opportunities for youth to engage in national security initiatives. While future research should focus on examining the long-term impact of youth participation in defense programs on national security. Exploring how emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual simulations can be integrated into defense training is also crucial. Additionally, investigating how different cultural and social factors influence youth participation in national defense initiatives can provide valuable insights.

Conclusion
This review has examined the role of youth in strengthening national defense management in Malaysia, highlighting both the challenges and opportunities for greater participation. The findings indicate that while youth engagement in defense-related initiatives plays a critical role in national security, several barriers, such as limited awareness, outdated training methods, and policy gaps, hinder their full involvement. Hence, a well-structured, multi-stakeholder approach—combining policy reforms, technological advancements, and institutional collaborations—is essential to maximize the role of youth in Malaysia's national defense management. Addressing the identified challenges and leveraging emerging opportunities will be key to strengthening national security through youth participation. Future studies should conduct longitudinal research on youth engagement trends, analyze the effectiveness of different training approaches, and explore the sociocultural factors influencing youth participation in defense.

Acknowledgements

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