

# THE STRAITS TIMES

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## Week's Top Letter #2: Get perspectives of those who have served NS



Officer cadets braving the rain during the officer commissioning parade at Safti Military Institute. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG

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The perspective that it is deleterious if Singaporeans raise questions about the national service policy seems short-sighted and further disregards the absence of substantive engagement with servicemen and the general public (Through the pain, do not send wrong signals about NS, Feb 5).

It also underestimates the value of rigorous discourse over the need for NS and the principles of defence and deterrence, which justify the need for conscription in Singapore.

Instead of being anchored by unchallenged assumptions of its importance, the institution of NS is perhaps best strengthened when it is constantly questioned and challenged by Singaporeans.

Notwithstanding the fact that the Committee to Strengthen NS was set up almost six years ago, there has been little to no discussion on whether NS is needed in the first place, and issues of representation - especially in terms of the national servicemen who attended - are likely to persist.

Even if a survey showed that 98.4 per cent of Singaporeans agree that NS is necessary, it does not mean that every NSF would have had a positive experience across his two years of service, or that there are no areas for improvement.

Having a regular space for NSFs or NSmen to safely air their grievances and provide feedback can be productive, if the views gathered translate into operational or even policy changes.

In other words, a false dichotomy exists in terms of how we approach the conversations around NS, and we should not be too eager to police these conversations too.

Also, if it is hypothesised that "it will be difficult to find the right balance during implementation" of safety and military training standards, then maybe the strategy should be to aggregate the first-hand, day-to-day experiences of men and commanders.

Does the fault always lie with the men on the ground, or are there blind spots that commanders, who may not have gone through the same training demands or regimentation as their men, are not cognisant of?

How do men and commanders perceive these aforementioned training standards? What do they find ineffective, onerous, or even counterproductive? How safe do they feel for the more dangerous exercises or missions?

Without a deeper examination of the issues from the perspectives of those who serve, any developments which follow will not result in meaningful progress.

**Kwan Jin Yao**

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