

# Senior Leadership in the Indian Army: Time for Introspection and Rebuilding

---

Philip Campose

Military leadership is a combination of the ability ‘to win wars’ (or, in peace-time, to achieve favourable outcomes in operations other than war [OOTW]) and, the ability to look after its men. Whereas these abilities may be imbibed progressively by the military officer during his three to four decade-long career, it is an oft-repeated perception that the Indian Army officers generally lacks a strategic culture, which becomes increasingly important as they rise up in service and hold operational responsibilities at the senior level. Further, it is alleged that, as a consequence of this deficiency, many operational problems which are of ‘strategic’ magnitude are dealt with tactically—resulting in, at best, only short-term gains or effects. Is this a mistaken perception or is it factual—and if so, is it caused by inadequacies in the way we expose and train the Army leadership, especially our middle level and senior officers?

This issue has to be viewed against the backdrop of a globalised media environment where even a small tactical action, military or otherwise, could have strategic repercussions. How does the Army ensure that its policies and actions not only result in tactical gains but also contribute

---

Lieutenant General **Philip Campose** (Retd) is the former Vice Chief of Army Staff of the Indian Army and Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Land Warfare Studies, New Delhi.

towards achievement of strategic objectives, in keeping with the country's long-term security interests? For this reason, the strategic exposure and training for today's Army leadership has to start very early, possibly at the pre-commissioning stage itself, and thereafter, continue throughout his career span. Unless we do so, the complexity of our military organisation, role and tasking is likely to elude our senior officers as they grow up through the service. It also needs attention whether the Army's promotion system only rewards those who conform to the opinion of their superiors or is it also willing to reward those who dare to question the actions and failings of our policies? Unless we are able to address these perceived inadequacies, we may be unable to deter our potential adversaries and come up with winning outcomes in operational situations that we face from time-to-time, and may face in the future.

Military leadership is a combination of the ability 'to win wars' (or, in peace-time, to achieve favourable outcomes in operations other than war [OOTW]) and, the ability to look after its men.

### **Internal Security Example: Strategy of Restraint Versus Tactics of Robustness**

An example of this shortfall that is cited in the Army's current sub-conventional operational environment is the growing calls for increasing the scope of use of lethal force in the on-going counter-militancy and counter-insurgency campaigns, as compared to the 'winning hearts and minds' strategy. Though the Indian Army's ethos, culture and value system have generally ensured that 'use of force' in internal security situations is carefully controlled through the implementation of calibrated policies and well-moderated 'rules of engagement', yet, there are many today who increasingly question this 'weak approach' and would prefer more 'robust' internal security policies on the lines of Pakistan, Israel, or even China. There was a time not long

Indian Army officers generally lacks a strategic culture, which becomes increasingly important as they rise up in service and hold operational responsibilities at the senior level.

ago when, as part of its ‘iron fist and velvet glove’ sub-conventional operations doctrine (which Indian Army held out as a beacon to other counter-insurgency forces), in certain situations, our troops were even willing to let a local militant escape during operations (‘to be dealt with on another day’), to avoid ‘collateral damage’ in the form of casualties to innocent civilians. On the other hand, today, even senior Army veterans increasingly join the clarion call for more violent retribution in sub-conventional conflict situations.

There can be no doubt that, legally, J&K is an integral part of India and that our strategic intent there is to have the majority of population of the Kashmir Valley to agree willingly and emotionally with that formulation—something that we have largely ensured in the 70 years since India’s independence, except for a brief period in the early 1990s. That is the essence of the approach articulated by one of our most accomplished military commanders, who was till recently the Northern Army Commander, in his post-retirement interview that appeared in the *Indian Express* on 19 February 2017. But, on the other hand, there are some who appear to be veering towards the view that a solution can come about in the current circumstances only by undertaking more heavy handed actions by the security forces at the tactical and operational levels. That brings us to the question—Will the change in approach contribute to strategic gains, or take us further away from it? Needless to emphasise, and military leadership needs to take the correct call on the matter in keeping with India’s long-term strategic interests.

A contextual comparison would be that of Pakistan’s short-sighted twin policies of training ‘jehadis’ for cross-border terror attacks against India and Afghanistan, while also using its military for perpetrating excessive violence against its own terrorists—who are now threatening the very viability of the Pakistani nation state. Thus, an important question that needs to be asked is: Will not mirror imaging Pakistan’s short-sighted internal security policies also have long-term ill effects for us, as has happened (and is likely to worsen) in case of Pakistan. And for those who think that the Han-isation of Tibet and the ruthless killing of dissent in Xinjiang are worthy of emulation by India, are they fully able to predict

as to what long-term effects such actions will have on the situation even in an authoritarian nation like China? All this makes it very important for the Indian military leadership to develop a strategic culture whereby our officers are able to analyse and correctly predict the long-term strategic effects of their actions, both in the domestic and global context.

Domestically, the Army is 'the instrument of last resort' in internal security situations. However, occasionally, it is the first to respond in such situations, because of its inherent capabilities, ethos and effectiveness, especially during humanitarian disasters, both natural and man-made. In the context of our pluralistic, multi-cultural society, the Army plays a pivotal role in preserving the unity and integrity of our nation in keeping with the tenets of our Constitution. Thus, it is very important that every Army officer, especially those who show potential for higher leadership, are progressively provided the requisite exposure, professional skills, and strategic vision which will enable them to carry out their roles and responsibilities efficiently, in the true spirit of our remarkable Constitution.

Globally, the Indian Army must be perceived as one whose members strictly follow universal standards of human rights and 'honourable' norms of military conduct. In a globalised system, where the flow of information is swift, any misdemeanour at the lower levels can result in moral opprobrium and loss of face for the country and the Army. The fact that the Indian Army enjoys an impeccable reputation in the United Nations peacekeeping missions bears testimony to the Indian Army's humanitarian approach and moderate application of 'rules of engagement' while dealing with internal security problems in various conflict areas of the world.

### **Requirement: Training, Exposure, and Expertise**

It is a widely known that the Indian Army is essentially meant to deter wars, by developing and projecting a capability to wage land wars successfully, in concert with the Air Force and Navy. This implies the need for the right combination of training, exposure, and expertise in commanders at every level of operational responsibility. Thus, it is obvious that the Army

leadership, more so the senior commanders (at level of brigades, divisions, corps, and field armies) need to develop certain ‘war winning’ skills (or equivalent qualities) and capabilities for achieving favourable outcomes even in OOTW by the time they are assigned these important ‘command responsibilities’. For example, with regard to experience, if an officer is to be assigned command of an operational corps in the west, north or north-east, he should have commanded, at the very minimum, a brigade in the same operational environment. Similarly, with regard to course qualifications, every brigade commander should be ‘passed staff college’ (PSC), every divisional commander should be Higher Command (HC) or Higher Defence Management course (HDMC) qualified and every corps commander must be National Defence College (NDC) qualified. All senior commanders should have foreign exposure—a professional course or a posting. And ideally, every officer should have ‘joint services’ exposure by the time he comes up for ‘General Officer’ rank. In case the Indian military system is unable to find the right combination of experience and expertise while selecting operational commanders, it is indicative of deficiencies in our existing promotion, posting and training system—which need to be addressed on priority.

### **Existing System of Training and Exposure in the Army**

There are four stages at which the Army is able to provide institutionalised training for officers, namely, the pre-commission, juniors, middle, and senior levels. Though the basic requirement at each level is to provide the requisite skills for the current as well as next two levels of command functioning, it is becoming increasingly important that officers are provided training and exposure to the strategic level from the early stages itself. So, what is the training and exposure to be provided at each stage?

- **First, at the pre-commission stage:** This stage of training provides the officer cadet individual skills in tactical field craft, ‘skill-at-arms’ and unit administration as well as leadership exposure to the kind of challenges that he would face up to the level of infantry platoon commander, i.e. the rank of Captain. Today, all officers, without exception, have to serve in operational situations at the initial

stages itself, even if he is commissioned into the services, i.e. the army supply corps, army ordnance corps, or the electrical and mechanical engineers. Thus, it is ensured that the Young Officers (YOs) who pass out from the pre-commission academies are battle ready for operating as platoon commanders in counter-militancy or counter-insurgency operations straightaway, after mandatory operational orientation. Thus, considering the fact that actions of military commanders even

Military academies must use the medium of case studies of actual operational incidents and events to provide maximum exposure to real life situations that the young leader may face even in the early stages.

at the lowest rung of the leadership hierarchy could have strategic effect, it is important that the officers are provided the required knowledge about the socio-political-security situation in low intensity conflict (LIC) areas in the country at the academy itself. Military academies must use the medium of case studies of actual operational incidents and events to provide maximum exposure to real-life situations that the young leader may face even in the early stages.

- **Second, at the junior level:** This stage of training provides the YO the knowledge that he needs to function effectively up to the company commander level, or its equivalent at the rank of Major, the squadron commander (for the armoured corps) or the battery commander (for the artillery and air defence). This phase starts with the YOs course and is followed thereafter by an array of technical and specialised courses to teach the YOs about the equipment and leadership skills that are peculiar to their own arm (infantry, armoured corps, artillery, air defence, engineers, signals or intelligence corps) or service (in addition to earlier mentioned entities, the medical corps and veterinary corps are also a part of the services). The junior level training stage culminates with the 'junior command' (JC) course—a common course for all arms and services which may be substantiated by

separate company command level specialist courses conducted for the arms and services other than infantry. No doubt, this is the level which also hones the leadership skills of the junior leaders, who are required to lead from the front in the counter-terrorism/militancy/insurgency operations which are on-going in J&K and the north-east. Hence, other than focusing on tactical skills at this crucial ‘battle-winning’ level of operations (with focus on small team ‘surgical’ operations—calibrated use of force—people friendly initiatives), there is also a need to broadly expose the junior officers to the strategic context of the operations. For example, the junior officer must understand the potential damage that can be caused by indiscriminate opening of fire in operational situations, which results in casualties to innocent civilians.

- **Third, at the middle level:** This phase commences with the preparatory course for undertaking the ‘staff college’ examination, followed by the course itself. If the officer is selected for the staff course, he is put through a rigorous one-year dose of focused training at Wellington, south India, in the form of both; Army-specific training and joint-operations training, the latter in the company of officers from the Air Force and Navy. Thereafter, all officers who are likely to be promoted to the rank of Colonel for taking over responsibilities of Commanding Officer of an army unit (battalion or regiment of his arm or service) are put through the ‘senior command (SC)’ course to prepare them for their unit command functions. Normally, officers from the other arms and services are additionally put through unit commanders’ courses to strengthen their technical and specialist acumen related to their tasks. This is an important and decisive stage of training because the command performance of officers is the most important criteria for selecting officers for promotion thereafter as senior leaders of the Army. This is also a stage where the Army officer requires to understand the broad strategic context of military operations at the unit and formation level. The officer must also be encouraged to research, to question and to articulate clearly and precisely. A

significant number of officers are provided foreign exposure at this stage by assigning them for foreign courses as well as the United Nations peacekeeping missions.

- **Fourth, at the senior level of Army leadership:** The officers for promotion to the next levels are generally identified on the basis of their performance as commanding officers and put through consolidated training programmes, namely, the Higher Command, Higher Defence Management Course, National Defence Academy for Colonels. Officers from the Air Force and Navy also take part in these courses. All Army officers who attend these courses are posted thereafter to operational or administrative staff appointments at higher headquarters, and subsequently, those from the combat arms are promoted to command higher formations. It is important, therefore, that all these officers are provided appropriate exposure and training at the strategic level during these courses. Currently, there are gaps in the operational exposure provided to officers attending the HDMC course, which needs to be addressed appropriately. The next and final level of institutionalised training provided to officers is the year-long training programme for select officers at the Brigadier level at the NDC. Here, the focus is at the strategic level and many of the participants on this course are from the Air Force, Navy, Police, civil services, and foreign defence forces. Some officers are also provided exposure through participation in the parallelly conducted Advanced Professional Programme in Public Administration (APPPA)—the civil services oriented programme conducted at the Indian Institute of Public Administration in Delhi. Next, at the general officer level, select officers are detailed to attend a week-long joint strategic workshop called the ‘Core Programme’, where a dose of strategic exposure is provided to a limited number of officers, who are likely to be assigned senior positions at the highest levels of leadership in the Indian Army. This is also the phase where some numerous officers are provided foreign exposure through participation in courses or workshops in foreign military academies, or assigned

to command or senior staff appointments in the United Nations peacekeeping missions, thus enhancing their strategic exposure in a broader international framework. It is incumbent that, at this level, some officers must be assigned to departments of the Government of India, especially under the defence, foreign and home ministries. A substantial number of officers must also be sent on deputation or 'study leave' to the think-tanks in Delhi to research on subjects of specific interest to the Army.

### **The Requirement of Expertise for Higher Command Functions**

Expertise, which is essential for assignments in command of Army formations is based on experience (and its duration) in the various types of warfare, terrain and the level of operations, as follows:

- *Type of warfare*—Plains/mechanised warfare, mountain warfare, counter-militancy (J&K), counter-insurgency (north-east—Assam/Manipur).
- *Terrain*—Plains of western borders (riverine/semi-desert/desert), hills along the western borders (J&K), mountainous along China borders (northern/north-eastern), and jungles (north east).
- *Level of operations*—Brigade, division, corps, field army.
- *Type of formation*—Infantry, armoured, mechanised, artillery. Air defence, independent, etc.

For selection for command of a formation, ideally, the officer should have commanded a formation of the same type, one level lower, in the same type of operation and terrain. If not, he should have commanded at least two levels lower in the same type of operation and terrain. This implies that if an officer is to be selected for command of an armoured division in the deserts, he should have commanded an armoured brigade in the deserts or semi-deserts. If not, he should have commanded an armoured regiment in the deserts or semi-desert terrain. Similarly, if an infantry officer has to be selected for commanding a pivot corps on the western border, he should have commanded a division or brigade in the same sector or any other pivot corps on the western border. Any officer

selected for command of a particular field Army should have commanded at least two levels lower in the same type of operation and terrain.

Normally, an infantry officer should not be assigned command of an armoured brigade or division. Similarly, an armoured corps officer should not be assigned command of a high altitude, counter-militancy or counter-insurgency formation. A mechanised infantry officer is capable of commanding both armoured and infantry formations, but he must meet the experience criteria in the same type of operation and terrain. Artillery, air defence, and engineer officers should be assigned for command of Army formations (general cadre) only after suitable vetting in command at unit or brigade level.

Further, the system must ensure that a formation commander, during his tenure, must conduct at least one operational exercise or war game for his subordinate commanders, and also, must participate in at least one higher level war game. He must also supervise formation war games, one level lower. Tenures in command of higher formations have been reduced gradually over the years due to aspirational compulsions. Hence, formation commanders move out from their command functions after a year, and at times, without even completing that period. Ideally, a tenure in command of an Army formation should be 2 years. In case that is not possible at this point due to problems of career management, it should be aimed to provide at least 18 months of tenure. If the earlier mentioned criteria are not met, it would result in serious shortfalls in experience and expertise, which are so crucial for command functions in the Army.

Normally, an infantry officer should not be assigned command of an armoured brigade or division. Similarly, an armoured corps officer should not be assigned command of a high altitude, counter militancy or counter insurgency formation. A mechanised infantry officer is capable of commanding both armoured and infantry formations, but he must meet the experience criteria.

The current system of providing structured as well as non-structured training, exposure, and expertise to senior Army officers, as explained earlier, is definitely inadequate when one considers the outcome, in terms of the number of insufficiently exposed or trained senior officers that are generated by this system.

### **Where does the Existing System Fall Short?**

The current system of providing structured as well as non-structured training, exposure, and expertise to senior Army officers, as explained earlier, is definitely inadequate when one considers the outcome, in terms of the number of insufficiently exposed or trained senior officers that are generated by this system. The problem majorly lies in existing capacity constraints for structured training of senior officers. Besides, there are many areas where the Army needs to improve extant rules and policies so as to ensure that officers who hold senior operational positions are mandatorily provided the requisite experience and expertise for their assigned responsibilities. Otherwise, we will have too many instances of senior commanders 'learning on the job' instead of being in a more advantageous position of 'directing and teaching on the job'. Also, the system of Army promotions needs a major overhaul. 'Merit' for promotion to senior ranks must primarily be determined by the power to analyse and visualise strategic outcomes rather than just by conforming to existing (read archaic) policies and 'loyally' following orders of their superiors. Officers must be able to contribute tangibly towards military operations and plans, as well as the health and dynamism of the organisation.

The system of Army promotions needs a major overhaul. 'Merit' for promotion to senior ranks must primarily be determined by the power to analyse and visualise strategic outcomes rather than just by conforming to existing (read archaic) policies and 'loyally' following orders of their superiors.

### **Future Road Map and Concluding Observations**

The Indian Army, as the largest and most powerful component of the Indian Armed Forces, will have to remain ready and relevant in

the current and future context to carry out its primary role of military deterrence of potential adversaries and protecting the territorial integrity of the country. The leadership of the Indian Army should be made fully aware of the evolving nature and manifestations of military threats—tactical, operational, technological, informational, and strategic—and be prepared to deal with them appropriately, with long-term strategic effects. Recommended actions towards qualitative development of the senior leadership of the Indian Army in this context are as follows:

- Strategic context and content must be inserted/enhanced at all levels of officer training in the Army, starting with pre-commission training at the military academies. Syllabi at the pre-commission academies as well as the Junior, Senior, Higher Command and Defence Services Staff Colleges courses (and their equivalents) must be reviewed to introduce/enhance the strategic content and build up a strategic culture among officers of the Indian Army.
- Leadership capsule must be included in all courses with a view to improve leadership traits among all officers. Case studies at various levels of command functions must be included in these capsules so that lessons once learnt should not have to be learnt again and again.
- Capacities of all senior leadership courses, viz., HC, HDMC, NDC and equivalent, must be enhanced to ensure that all officers likely to be promoted to command of higher formations attend structured training and exposure appropriately. All officers selected for command of brigades must have done the Defence Services Staff Course. All divisional commanders must have attended HC/HDMC and all corps commanders must have attended NDC or equivalent. Selection policies of these courses must be closely aligned to the promotion policy of the Army to ensure that this criterion is met. Syllabi of these courses must be reviewed to ensure that the objectives of requisite operational/strategic exposure are met. The syllabus of the HDMC course needs special review in this regard.

Officers of the ranks of Colonels and above must be encouraged to carry out research and write theses on subjects that would be of interest and significance to the Army.

- Officers of the ranks of Colonels and above must be encouraged to carry out research and write theses on subjects that would be of interest and significance to the Army. Study leave vacancies at organisations like Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS) must be enhanced to provide opportunities in this regard for many more officers who have the potential to rise to senior ranks in the Army. CLAWS must be expanded to be able to cater to this requirement.
- All senior/potential senior officers must be provided 'strategic' exposure by posting to assignments in the Perspective Planning or Military Operations directorates at Integrated Headquarters of Ministry of Defence (Army or IDS) at New Delhi or the Doctrine Branch at Army Training Command (ARTRAC), Shimla.
- All Corps Commanders/potential Army Commanders must attend the Core Programme conducted annually for potential C-in-Cs. Nomination process must be streamlined and vacancies must be enhanced accordingly. As per current data, not even half the numbers are attending this programme.
- All Corps Commanders/potential Army Commanders must be provided requisite foreign exposure. Where relevant, they must visit neighbouring countries, especially those opposite their areas of responsibility (AORs).
- All Division, Corps, and Command Headquarters must be encouraged to organise and attend guest lectures periodically on subjects of strategic interest. These could also be conducted alongside the periodic formation commanders' conference or other formation events.
- Military Secretary's Branch at Army Headquarters must ensure that all senior officers are provided rounded exposure to all theatres of deployment of the Indian Army. Officers should be specially selected for command of higher formations, based on their specific areas of experience and expertise and not just on a 'first come first serve' basis.

- Once approved for promotion at higher levels, prior expertise and experience at the appropriate level in the required type of warfare and terrain must be the most important criteria for selection of officers for command functions. A system of minimum essential duration in command of army formations, combined with an imaginative policy for providing/gaining minimum essential experience in such assignments, through participation in operational events, war games and exercises, needs to be formalised and strictly implemented. The limited duration of command assignments in the existing system results in many officers perceiving such assignments purely through the lens of 'ticket punching' for their next promotion whereby officers start speculating about their next posting even before getting to know their current assignment. Such a shortcoming needs to be avoided.

The fact that no conventional wars have been fought by the Indian Army since the full-fledged Indo-Pak war of 1971 (and the limited Kargil war of 1999) does not imply that such wars will not be fought in the future. The advent of nuclear weapons in the security environment of the South Asian sub-continent have, no doubt, brought in a measure of 'strategic stability', in that, the space for conventional wars appears somewhat reduced. Nonetheless, India's threat paradigm—currently consisting of continuing territorial disputes with two nuclear armed neighbours, proxy war, nuclear coercion, cross-border terror attacks from across western borders, the transgressions across the undemarcated and unstable northern borders, and efforts at strategic containment of India through construction of dual-use infrastructure among India's immediate neighbours by the northern adversary is still evolving and provide the potential for triggering of limited conflicts, for which we will have to remain well-prepared perpetually. The senior leadership of the Indian Army needs to be trained and exposed appropriately at every stage to be able to carry out their assigned operational responsibilities in the complex domestic, regional, and global environment which is constantly evolving. Failure to do so can have serious repercussions, with long-term adverse effects on our security environment.