



Faulty Manpower Policy in Indian Armed Forces: Time for Action



Rumel Dahiya

Brig. Rumel Dahiya, SM (Retd.) is Advisor (Net Assessment & Defence Studies) at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi

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Summary

Faulty promotion policies and the unsatisfactory professional education of the officer corps deprive Indian military officers of the opportunity to master strategy and develop capacities for handling high level issues. Mainly because of this deficiency the military leadership in India remains out of loop of defence and security policy making - a common complaint among armed forces and security analysts.

There is a common refrain amongst India's security analysts and armed forces officers that the military is kept out of the loop on defence and security policy formulation. It is believed that security policy has been hijacked by the foreign service and/or intelligence community with very little inputs from the service headquarters. The latter are consulted by the ministry of defence (MoD) but their views and concerns are edited before being presented to decision makers, by a generalist bureaucracy at the MoD. Hence the assessments and recommendations of the services headquarters are seldom reflected in the policy outcomes. On the other hand, bureaucrats, the foreign service and the intelligence community have direct channels of communication with the highest authority in the country either in their own capacity or through the National Security Council Secretariat. It is also lamented that even in decisions related to the strategic weapons programme it is the scientific community which exercises disproportionate influence. Some analysts go to the extent of postulating that India's pacifist security policy is an outcome of the absence of dialogue between the political leadership and the military leaders. There is more than a grain of truth in this line of thinking.

There is an alternate view expressed by those with practical experience of the process of decision making at the highest level. It is pointed out by them that the service chiefs are often called to the meetings of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) and are given a patient hearing whenever there is a discussion on defence and security related issues. Besides, the service chiefs command a great degree of autonomy in operational and administrative matters pertaining to their respective services. This mechanism, however, does not compensate for the lack of direction as well as organisational gaps, the absence of politically vetted contingency plans and clearly stated current strategic objectives which - all agree - are missing.

The net result is that there is very little 'jointness' in operational planning, equipment priorities, logistics, command and control and interoperability. But there is yet another facet which is not commented upon and which has a direct bearing on the absence of dialogue. This has to do with faulty promotion policies and inadequate emphasis on professional education of the officer corps. These two processes deprive Indian military officers of the opportunity to master strategy and develop capacity for handling higher level issues. Mainly because of this deficiency the military leadership in India remains out of loop in the formulation of defence and security policies in India.

A comparative chart of promotions received by some well known military leaders is given below to illustrate the point.

	Commissioned in Year	Maj. Gen. in Year	Lt. Gen. in Year	General in Year	Civil Education while in service (other than that earned as part of professional courses)
Collin Powell (USA)	1958	1983 25 years	1986 28 years	1989 31 years	MBA at George Washington University
David Petraeus (USA)	1974	2003 29 years	2004 30 years	2007 33 years	Ph.D. in International Relations & Assistant Professor of International Relations at the U.S. Military Academy
Sir Richard Dannatt (UK)	1971	1999 28 years	2002 31 years	2005 34 years	Degree in Economic History from Durham University
Pervez Musharraf (Pakistan)	1964	1991 27 years	1995 31 years	1998 34 years	Nil
Ashfaq Parvez Kayani (Pakistan)	1971	1998 27 years	2003 32 years	2007 36 years	Nil
J.J. Singh (India)	1964	1996 32 years	2000 36 years	2005 41 years	Nil
V.K. Singh (India)	1970	2004 32 years	2006 36 years	2010 40 years	Nil
X (India)	1975	2008 33 years	2011 36 years	--	Nil

The comparison with generals in the US army may not be valid because whereas the vacancies in the Indian armed forces are fixed, in the US the statutory limits can be relaxed by the secretary of defence or the president. The comparison with generals in Pakistan may also not be valid because chiefs and military officers in Pakistan have had greater opportunities for appointments outside the military because of their uneven tenure. However, it is clear from the table above that, in India, general officers get very late

promotions. Most of their service period is spent at the execution and supervisory level (up to brigadier) and very little time is spent at the directional level. Consequently, they get little experience of functioning at the directional level. Another major lacuna that affects the military is that commanders at brigade and higher levels have short tenures - sometimes only of 12 months, even in counter insurgency operational areas. Thus they have hardly any time to influence their command through personal interaction or follow through a well thought out policy.

The situation is most dire in the army, though it is considerably better in the air force and navy. Whereas army officers commissioned in 1978 will now start getting promoted to the rank of major general, officers of 1981 seniority in the air force and of 1982 seniority in the navy have already started getting promoted to equivalent ranks. Similarly, whereas officers of 1975 seniority in the army have recently been approved for promotion to the rank of lieutenant general, in the air force and the navy officers of the 1976 and 1978 batches are being promoted to the rank of air marshal and vice admiral respectively.

Officers in the armed forces feel that the government, particularly the bureaucracy, delays approval of the results of the promotion boards even when vacancies exist in higher ranks. They point out that the civil services get their promotions well in time and that their promotions are so much faster. The counter view is that the services keep changing their promotion policies so often and that in some cases the recommendations of the promotion boards are subjective, which leads to delays in approving the promotion board results. The case of navy is quoted to buttress this argument: wherein the deep selection at the level of captains ensures faster promotion to subsequent higher levels and the promotion boards are generally more objective, resulting in early approval of the promotion board recommendations. Both the views have some merit. In case of the navy the promotion board screening can be done speedily since the number of officers screened for promotions is much less due to the smaller cadre strength overall. Also, due to the larger number of positions at higher levels in proportion to overall cadre strength, promotions in the navy tend to be faster. It is not possible to create additional high levels positions in the army because it can create structural and functional distortions in the system.

This problem of delayed promotions and inadequate exposure at the directional level is compounded by the fact that, besides the professional courses, the officers in India's armed forces rarely undertake studies at universities or carry out research with think tanks. The provision for study leave exists but very few officers utilise it optimally. Thus they are not exposed to any other discipline or line of thinking which could prepare them for security policy formulation. While not all officers can be spared to undertake studies outside the forces, it is imperative that the course content at professional courses like National Defence College, higher command and higher defence management can be made more relevant and exhaustive and performance appraisal more rigorous.

Undoubtedly, military officers in India perform their military duties professionally and efficiently but they often lack the capacity to understand the political and diplomatic nuances of security policy formulation. As a result the decision makers do not find it necessary to afford them a larger role in policy making. Information available in the public domain would make it clear that military officers in most advanced countries do not only get an opportunity for education beyond professional courses but also get greater exposure in the ministries of defence, the National Security Councils, in think tanks and other institutions which prepare them for formulating defence and security policies. Obviously not all officers can be given outside exposure but those at middle levels with high potential for growth can be identified and groomed. Such exposure will enhance their understanding of constitutional, socio-political, economic and diplomatic issues and adequately prepare them for higher ranks.

The service chiefs are sometimes unfairly criticised for airing their views on security issues in public. It happens partly because they express themselves truthfully albeit bluntly, without thinking through the likely interpretation of their pronouncements by others, and partly because traditionally in India the parameters of civil military relations are not well defined. Moreover it seems that the discourse on policy issues has unfortunately shifted to the media.

It is time that the services realise that at least a part of the solution to the perceived and real neglect of the military brass in defence and security policy formulation lies within. If this is addressed then it will be difficult for policy makers to ignore the competence and suitability of the military leadership for participating in decision making. There is an immediate need to reduce the age of promotion to the brigadier and higher ranks in the army through a thorough selection at every level. This will cause some disquiet amongst the officers initially since the rate of supersession will go up but it is necessary to do so in the interests of the service. The superseded officers will have to be afforded opportunity to prepare themselves for an alternate career in the civilian sphere.

The age profile of commanding officers has come down substantially. Now is the time to gradually reduce the age profile of commanders at higher levels and to afford them longer command tenures. Simultaneously, there is a need to encourage more officers to opt for serious studies in various disciplines in universities, apply for fellowships in think tanks and push for appointments in the ministries of defence, home and external affairs besides the National Security Council Secretariat.

All headquarters above brigade level are overstuffed. There is a need to reduce the number of officers at these headquarters and improve their efficiency through better management and capacity building. A large number of officers thus released must be put through a suitably designed programme of professional education. This will also help in preparing officers for a suitable second career unlike at present wherein senior officers go around seeking jobs that are much lower than their status and experience.