

# Promotion System in the Army: Dealing with Peacetime Atrophy

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## Introduction

The *raison d'être* of any Army is to fight and win wars. Combat, therefore, is the acid test of the Army. Armies are primarily meant for external defence of the realm – to secure it against aggression from inimical countries. To safeguard the vital national or economic interests, armies may also be called upon to operate in Out of Area Contingencies. Increasingly, however, armies are being engaged in Low Intensity Conflict situations like countering tribal insurgencies or suppressing violent terrorist movements within the country's borders. Service may also entail long periods of peace, wherein the army is not engaged in active operations. These periods of peace are utilized to rest and refit armies and prepare and train them for the next conflict. In practice, however, it has been found that a peacetime army tends to atrophy and lose its war fighting orientation. It develops a lopsided emphasis on peacetime routine, spit and polish. In fact, a wartime army may well be the very anti-thesis of a peacetime army. Years of non-use of the military

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success on the battlefield. It is therefore vital for any army to nurture its leadership talent, to identify it early on and develop its knowledge and skills; and equip them to shoulder higher command and staff responsibilities.

The Indian Army had inherited highly functional and effective training methodologies and systems for developing its military leadership. The Indian Junior Military Leadership has always been of a very high calibre. India inherited the Regimental System from the British and it has continued to produce motivated and well bonded units that are effectively led and managed. The Career Management System in the Indian Army is driven primarily by the Annual Confidential Reports (ACR) rendered on the officers. This carries out a qualitative evaluation of the officers' performance and potential on a nine-point rating scale. Various qualities are tested out and rated on a scale of 1 to 9. The ACR also includes a pen picture and recommendations for promotion and future employment. By and large, this system has worked well and thrown up a reasonably competent leadership at all levels. This leadership – especially the junior leadership, has performed effectively in all wars since independence. In 1947-48, the Indian Army was fresh out of the Second World War and performed brilliantly in J&K and Hyderabad. However, a long decade of peace, thereafter, served to corrode its combat ethos. A pacific civilian leadership mistrusted the Army, as the last outpost of the Raj. The coup in Pakistan heightened this mistrust and the Army was downgraded in the warrant of precedence. Direct interface between the political authority and senior military

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leadership was largely eliminated. The emphasis on soft power had a fairly debilitating influence on the Army. It was starved of resources and outspoken, but professional officers were sidelined in favour of those deemed more pliant. The rising star of the Army before 1962 was a politically connected General from the Army Service Corps, who seemed all set to become the Chief of the Army. A general from the Supply Corps becoming the Chief would have been unheard of in any Army. It only highlighted the state of affairs and the canker that had set in the vitals of peacetime Army of the 1962 era. This subsequently bred the disaster of the 1962 War with China, where the Indian army suffered an uncalled for humiliation.

**The Era of Professionalism:** However, 1962 was a great blessing in disguise. It provided a major challenge from the environment. It led to a massive expansion and modernization of the Indian Army. Pakistan panicked and launched the 1965 War to seize Kashmir by force to press home its relative edge in major weapon systems, while it lasted. Gen J N Chaudhary is credited with turning the demoralized Indian Army around. He was a combat veteran, who had successfully led the Hyderabad

and Goa operations. Lt Gen Harbaksh Singh was another combat veteran, who led the Western Command in 1965 and did very well. Pakistan was forced to recoil from Kashmir and its First Armoured Division was badly mauled. The post 1965 Indian Army saw a series of combat veterans rise to the top. These included the charismatic and brilliant Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw, who led the Army to its greatest victory in historical terms. There were good theatre commanders like Lt Gen J S Aurora of Eastern Command; his brilliant Chief of Staff Gen JFR Jacob (the Strategic Mastermind); and Lt Gen Inder Gill, the DGMO. There were brilliant Field Commanders like Lt Gen Sagat Singh; Lt Gen Raina; Maj Gen Krishnarao; Lachman Singh Lehel; Gandharv Nagra and many others. This was the peak era of professionalism in this Army. The acid test of combat threw up excellent field commanders and military leaders, who were world class. A combat experienced military leadership was thrown up by virtue of its task accomplishment on the battlefield; and proven functional excellence at war fighting.

Gen Krishnarao (of Bangladesh War fame) became the Army Chief and mentored brilliant and talented officers like Gen K Sundarjee; Lt Gens Chibber and Hanut Singh, who led the mechanization of the Indian Army; and later oversaw its Out of Area involvements in Sri Lanka and Maldives; and also quelled tribal insurgencies in the North East and a vicious terrorist movement in the Punjab. Then came Pakistan's Proxy War in J&K, which threw up good field commanders like Gen Padmanabhan and Lt Gen Rustom Nanavaty and a whole crop of fairly effective Battalion, Brigade and Divisional Commanders. The Indian Military leadership did well in the Kargil War and the Junior Leadership was particularly inspiring.

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### **Post Pokhran: The Second Era of Extended Peace**

Post Pokhran (1998), an unfortunate impression seems to have gained currency that war or conventional conflict is no longer a viable policy option. That precisely was the deep-rooted mindset of the pacific civilian leadership of the 1950s and early 1960s era. They refused to recognize that serious local military conflicts could erupt on our borders. Nuclear war they felt, had made war impossible. This was the trenchant civilian mindset that scoffed at the very idea of a War with China. It refused to let the Army prepare for one. Its faith in personalized diplomacy was supreme. This had a highly debilitating impact on the Indian Army. The entire combat experienced leadership of World War-II and J&K was largely wasted out or sidelined. We saw the strange phenomenon of an Officer from the Service Corps (who had not heard a shot being fired in anger), aspiring to become the Chief as purely extraneous considerations of civilian patronage. That was the lowest point of this Army.

What has been the impact of this second long era of peace on our military leadership, promotion system and organizational health and values? The current Army Chief on taking over specifically lamented the state of the Army's organizational health and promised to restore its value system and ethos.

**Impact on the Promotional System:** Long eras of peace lead to a rust and corrosion of the instruments of war fighting. Preserving the essential combat ethos of the Army through such spells is a major challenge. Combat provides the acid test of functional effectiveness and combat and combat performance appraisal. Unfit Commanders are swiftly weeded out because the performance parameters in combat are highly visible, stringent, objective and easily measurable, in terms of end results. Peacetime environments lead to high degrees of subjectivity and a distortion of values. Normally, hard and realistic training acts as a substitute to war in peacetime. Unfortunately, some years back, some very senior commanders aired the view that this Army was overstrained and overextended in Counter Insurgency and Counter Terrorist Operations and needed rest! They went

ahead and reduced the periodicity and scale of military exercises in peace stations. This has led to the following anomalies/distortions:-

- There is a strange tendency to inflate/overrate reports of officers posted in peace stations. Almost every officer in a peace station is rated above average and many are outstanding. What are the objective conditions that permit such an inflated performance appraisal in a peacetime environment? What are the practical challenges and difficulties that the officers face here and must measure up against? There is a tendency towards an exaggerated emphasis on peacetime spit and polish and event management/hospitality related chores, as the only measurable indices of performance. This can lead to a distortion of basic values and combat ethos.
- Another component of the Army is however, engaged in continual Low Intensity Conflict in J&K and the North East. One would have thought that the bulk of good leadership would be thrown up from this component which is being tested under live combat conditions. Strangely, the result of most recent promotion boards show the bulk of these officers falling by the way side in their competition with peers in plush peace postings.

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- The clearest objective evaluation environment is in such combat situations. Here officers are being increasingly pilloried over the issue of Human Rights (generally of terrorists). An orchestrated media campaign is seeking to demonise the Army and there is an outcry for the removal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), which provides the basic legal cover for such operations. The level of stress in such environments is rising due to these negative public perceptions being generated by the media.

- Very fortunately for us, the current Chief is a combat veteran, who has risen from this realistic conflict environment. He is well experienced in conventional combat and Low Intensity Conflict operations. He has taken meaningful steps to stem the rot. One of his first steps on taking charge was to ask for a review of the Army's promotion system that had been revised in his predecessor's tenure, due to negative feedback from the environment. The primary need that has been keenly felt is to nurture combat experience; to identify and mentor promising combat leaders early on, who can win the country's wars. The argument against providing a

combat edge or promotional advantage to officers with combat experience is primarily one of the management. The MS Branch feels it cannot assure every officer a combat tenure. Hence in the interest of equity, the old promotion system put an officer posted to the Siachen Glacier, J&K or Manipur on par with an officer posted to Delhi and Pune. This totally subverts the combat ethos of the Army. What was worse was the kind of reverse discrimination exhibited against combat veterans in the previous dispensations. Inflated reporting in peace stations led to discrimination against officers posted in combat areas – where so much can go wrong.

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### **Some Lessons from the US Army**

The US Army is heavily engaged in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. It gives the greatest respect to combat veterans. Some years back, Brig McMaster, a talented

American Officer, who had done well in the field in Iraq, was not promoted. It led to an outcry in the US Army. A special board was held and this anomaly was set right.

**Act of US Parliament:** US Military promotions are governed by law. These were covered by Title 10 of the United States Code. This was supported later by the Defense Officers Personnel Management Act (DOPMA) on 13 September 1981. This act was further amended to overcome some unintended anomalies in 1984. This has again been updated on 25 February 2005 in Gen Schoomaker's tenure in terms of Army Regulation No. 8-29.

**Uniformity of Promotion Rules and Procedures between Services:** The US Act enforces uniformity in promotion rules and procedures between the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps. We need to enact a similar uniform procedure (with minor variations for technical/job specific requirements).

**Joint Operations Staff:** The US Act seeks to enforce jointness by ensuring that the rate of promotion of officers on Joint Staffs is kept the same as in the Single service HQs/Environments.

**Below the Zone (132) or Accelerated Promotion:** The US Army has a system of Below the Zone Promotion to allow accelerated promotion for outstanding officers who have demonstrated performance and indeed potential clearly superior to those who would otherwise be promoted. This applies only to Majors, Lt Cols or Col ranks and is primarily meant for recognizing good combat performance. By law, the number of officers recommended for BZ promotion cannot exceed 10%. In actual fact, this is being kept between 5 to 7.5%. However by law, the secretary of defense could increase this upto 15%. The whole aim is to identify good combat leaders/ war fighters early on and give them accelerated promotion. This enables the officers of exceptional ability to advance quickly to move to responsible positions and also gives the officers an incentive to perform at their highest potential. It is strange why the Indian Army not only refuses to give good combat leaders a promotional edge/

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accelerated promotion, but in effect (in the earlier dispensations) had begun discriminating against officers serving in such combat assignments, by willy-nilly accepting an inflationary reposting trend for officers in peace stations. The disastrous effects of such a policy on morale and combat motivation can well be imagined.

The primary purpose of Armies is to fight and win wars and officers who show promise in the battlefield must be identified, and nurtured from as early as possible. Soldiers like Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw, Gen Timmy Thimayya, Lt Gen Bhagat

and Lt Gen JFR Jacob had fought battles and suffered wounds as young officers. That is why they proved to be such good senior commanders and did well as war leaders. Officers who are very good at event management/hospitality chores should be permitted to migrate to the hotel Industry. They cannot shirk combat and then demand to be promoted to the highest level on the plea that it is not their fault that they were not given an opportunity to go to the battlefield! Once accelerated promotion is linked to good combat performance, aspiring officers will volunteer for the Rashtriya Rifles (these are almost 6 Divisions worth), the Siachen Glacier or the Special Forces to gain such experience, which will be useful to them, the Army and their country.

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- It must meet Army branch/functional area and grade requirements.
- It must provide career incentives.
- The US system seeks to promote officers based on a “whole person concept” and potential to serve in the next grade.
- It should equally identify and eliminate ineffective officers or those that show any signs of moral turpitude or physical cowardice in the field of battle.

The US Army Promotion Boards look at the following factors:-

- Performance
- Embodiment of Army values
- Professional Attribute and Ethos
- Integrity and Character
- *Assignment History and Professional Development* (This criteria is designed to take care of the peace area specialists, who avoid field service and then clamour for equity on the plea that they never got a chance to show their mettle.)
- Military bearing and physical fitness

Specialists have significant role and responsibility in the Army. Instead of a single traditionally accepted career pattern, multiple paths for advancement must exist and the Army recognizes divergent service needs and individual capacities.

- Attitude, dedication to service
- Military and Civilian education and training
- *Concern for Soldiers and Families* Every US Army selection Board receives a Memorandum of Instructions from the secretary of the Army providing guidance for the selection process. Copies of these memorandums are released to the officers/corps following approval and public release of the board results. Specialists have significant role and responsibility in the Army. Instead of a single traditionally accepted career pattern, multiple paths for advancement must exist and the Army recognizes divergent service needs and individual capacities.

**Officer Evaluation System:**The Indian system is heavily weighted in favour of the ACR. Though this

is a quantified tool, it is open to aberrations like inflation in reporting for the sake of keeping a happy team – especially in peace station environments and also for negative personal biases. There is a need to give weightage to factors which are seen by the environment as objective – e.g. Combat performance (not necessarily awards, but mission accomplishment) and Course ratings. The US Army Officer evaluation System (OES) identifies the officers most qualified for advancement and assignment to position of increased responsibility. Officers are evaluated on their performance and potential through the following:-

- Duty Evaluation
- School Evaluation
- HQ DA Evaluation

**Duty Evaluation:** The organizational duty evaluation involves personal knowledge of situations surrounding a particular environment for a specified period of time. This need is met by the ACR in our Army.

**HQ DA (Department of Army):** This is accomplished by an “after the fact” assessment of a series of reports on performance over a variety of duty positions and covers the officer’s entire career. This not only includes Central Selection Boards of the Army, but also the PERSCOM (Personnel Commands) Officer Management Assessment. This internal assessment is deemed as subjective in the Indian army. This could embody the spoken reputation of the officer and be a criterion for consideration. All appointments to Brigadier and above are

confirmed by the US Senate and a mandatory requirement is, atleast one tenure in a “Joint assignment”.

## Recommendations

- The Indian Officer Evaluation System must identify and nurture talent displayed in combat. Towards that end it could go for accelerated promotion for Majors, Lt Cols and Cols, who put up excellent performances on the battlefield. This should be limited to below 10 percent.
- The Initial SSB Procedure involves clinical, psychological testing and forms a valuable input. This initial report and merit list must be given a basic weightage.
- Schools of Instruction (Important Career Courses) must carry additional weightage for promotion as this is an objective and universally accepted parameter of worth.
- Inflationary reporting in peace stations must be ruthlessly curbed.
- Joint appointments/Experience must be encouraged.
- Uniformity of Procedures must be ensured within the services. 

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