Imagining the Human Dimension of Reforms
Leadership, Morale and Professional Military Education

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The Indian Armed Forces are confronting a volatile security environment, marked by nuclear-armed adversaries, grey-zone coercion, cyber/space threats and cognitive warfare, necessitating comprehensive reforms under the '2025 Year of Reforms' and '2023–2032 Decade of Transformation'. Presently, structural enhancements, such as tri-service integration and procurement improvements, are advancing; however, the human dimension of leadership, morale and Professional Military Education (PME) remains underexplored. This article critiques ad hoc leadership development, proposing adaptive and stewardship models trained via cross-attachments, multi-domain exercises and strategic think tanks. It connects morale's components (intrinsic, collective and institutional) with historical validations, recommending assessments, family support and Agniveer assimilation. The PME reforms advocate joint curricula, emphasising techno-warriors for Integrated Theatre Commands. It has always been man behind the machine which has mattered more than the machine itself.

Keywords: *Force Restructuring; Modernisation; Future Conflict Scenarios; Human Dimension; Adaptive and Stewardship Leadership; Morale; Professional Military Education*

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India is confronting a complex security landscape defined by numerous intersecting threat vectors. The country's geostrategic location and volatile geopolitical landscape is characterised by two adversarial nuclear-armed neighbours with whom it has gone to wars and major armed conflicts in the past. The geopolitical turmoil, including the wider conflict in the Middle East involving Iran, the United States (US), Israel and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, and recurrent security issues in Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Myanmar have added to the vulnerabilities being faced by the country on multiple fronts. Beyond the traditional threat of conventional conflicts along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the Line of Control (LoC) and the International Border, India is also confronting grey-zone warfare orchestrated by its primary adversaries.

Currently, India is among the top targeted nations in the world in the cyber domain, with state-sponsored actors systematically probing its critical infrastructure, financial systems, power grids and defence networks. Further, weaponisation of space through anti-satellite capabilities and positioning, navigation and timing (PNT) signal jamming is a threat to communication and navigation systems essential for military operations. Cognitive warfare through artificial intelligence (AI)-generated disinformation and coordinated influence campaigns represents a new frontier where adversaries seek to erode trust in state institutions, divide societies along fault lines and undermine civil–military cohesion. Comprehending the complexities of emerging threats, the Indian Armed Forces has accelerated the process of reforms to build essential capacity and improve combat effectiveness to address these threats on multiple fronts. The year 2025 was, thus, designated as the 'Year of Reforms'[1] by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the Indian Army committed to comprehensive modernisation and structural overhaul by declaring the period 2023–2032 as the 'Decade of Transformation'.[2]

For the armed forces to achieve their envisaged efficiency and capability, reforms must comprehensively address two major aspects: structural capacity and effectiveness of the human dimension. Structural capacity refers to the organisational frameworks, systems and resources that enable the armed forces to respond effectively to various threats. This includes different measures, such as redrawing command hierarchies, modernising equipment, enhancing technological capabilities and streamlining logistics and procurement processes. The effectiveness of the human dimension focuses on the development and empowerment of armed forces personnel. Central elements include leadership development, maintaining high morale, fostering a strong organisational culture and ensuring access to quality Professional

Military Education (PME). By emphasising these factors, reforms can create a resilient and motivated force that is prepared to adapt to new challenges and sustain operational effectiveness in diverse scenarios.

In the past few years, structural capacity has been improved through the establishment of tri-services organisations, integration of structures for operational functions, technological upgrades of weaponry and platforms and improvements to defence procurement procedures through the 'Make in India' initiative. However, the essential human factor of enhancing military capability has not been addressed adequately. Prioritising personnel development is essential to build a robust and responsive force which can respond effectively to emerging and evolving security challenges. This article examines the human factors of leadership, morale and PME in preparing the armed forces for future challenges. The importance of these factors for a future-ready force will be assessed, along with recommendations for ingraining these capabilities.

Future Conflict Scenarios Facing India

Conventional Conflicts along Northern and Western Borders

India must simultaneously prepare for three distinct and potentially overlapping conflict scenarios. The first category involves conventional conflicts defined by high-intensity operations along the northern and/or western fronts, fought under the threat of nuclear escalation. Such scenario requires precision, rapid response, joint coordination and the attainment of carefully selected objectives. Even though the 2020 Galwan clash with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the recent Operation Sindoor did not precipitate into full-blown conventional conflicts, there is probability of such incidents rapidly escalating into armed conflict in the future. To sustain operational superiority, forces must be battle-ready and capable of achieving precision effects with minimal lead time. Military operations need to be closely integrated with carefully calibrated strategic communications to clearly convey intentions to both adversaries and key international stakeholders.

The PLA force restructuring and modernisation has endowed it with capabilities to prosecute operations in an intelligentised and informatised domain. The growing asymmetry with the Indian Armed Forces, across the three services, is a cause of concern. India cannot realistically match China's defence budget or industrial production capacity in the near to medium term.[3] The strategic problem does not demand perfect parity but credible denial

capability and the capacity to impose unacceptable costs. India's response to the Doklam crisis in 2017 and the Galwan skirmishes in 2020 demonstrated the collective will of our nation to stand up to Chinese aggression and deter further escalation. Knowledge of fighting in high-altitude areas, psychological conditioning of deployed units and ability to concentrate forces in conflict zones have proved crucial in such scenarios. Future conflicts along the LAC are likely to be short and intense and will be fought at high altitudes, thereby demanding troops capable of operating under both cognitive strain and physical stress. Indeed, high altitude, extreme cold and hostile terrain create conditions where soldier resilience, leadership effectiveness and unit cohesion become decisive factors in deciding conflict outcomes.

Pakistan continues to use proxy actors to initiate terrorist attacks in India. Post the 2025 Pahalgam attack, India has declared that any terror attack emanating from Pakistan-based proxies would be constituted as an attack by the country itself and draw a suitable response. Targets would not be just limited to terror camps but also include military facilities in Pakistan.[4] This presents a scenario where terror attacks trigger large-scale conventional military conflicts. Pakistan's possession of tactical nuclear weapons and delivery systems, including Babur-3, a submarine-launched cruise missile with nuclear warhead, has fundamentally altered the escalation calculus. The strategic reality alters command and control (C2) demands at all levels of military hierarchy, forcing Indian leadership to operate with heightened precision, rigorous communication discipline and strategic clarity even when making tactical decisions.

Grey-Zone Warfare and Hybrid Actions

The second scenario involves grey-zone warfare and hybrid actions characterised by persistent, calibrated coercion, combining cyber operations, disinformation, proxy warfare, economic pressure and limited kinetic incidents, designed to achieve political objectives without triggering conventional conflicts. These activities, which are undertaken over a prolonged period, demand military forces operating under sustained ambiguity, that is, without clarity on whether each incident represents deliberate escalation or miscalculation. Such operations often extend for months or years without the psychological clarity that declared war provides, creating unique challenges for maintaining soldier morale and unit cohesion.

The Chinese strategy of winning without fighting is executed through grey-zone operations. The actions are calibrated across multiple domains to change narratives, establish new normals and test the adversary's resolve.

With India, over the years, China has indulged in cartographic aggression, assertion of sovereignty over disputed territories, issue of stapled visas for Indian citizens from Arunachal Pradesh, economic coercion through restrictive trade practices and efforts to isolate India in global bodies. Cyber espionage targeting Indian defence establishments and civilian infrastructure has also been in their grey-zone tool kit. In addition, salami-slicing tactics of incremental boundary shifts and infrastructure development in disputed areas gradually aimed at altering the strategic landscape are undertaken routinely.[5] Meanwhile, Pakistan sustains an extensive cross-border proxy network supporting terrorist groups; conducts information warfare (IW) to amplify grievances and delegitimise Indian state institutions; and maintains constant low-level violence through terror attacks.

Grey-zone operations succeed through cumulative attrition, progressive erosion of state legitimacy and targeting leader's will to resist. The armed forces must be capable of operating coherently under persistent ambiguity on whether each incident orchestrated by the adversary is a deliberate escalation, an accidental provocation or an intentional test of resolve. Suitable counters to provocations should integrate military responses with diplomatic messaging and strategic communication to prevent narratives that undermine India's established position. Political and military leadership must execute precision responses proportionate to specific provocations without escalating the overall conflict dynamic—a balance requiring institutional capacity, sophisticated judgement and situational awareness.

Cyber, Space and Cognitive Warfare

The third scenario involves cyber, cognitive and societal risks that arise from attacking targeted systems, weaponised disinformation and influence operations directed at undermining civil–military cohesion, troop morale and public legitimacy. Lately, India's critical infrastructure has become increasingly vulnerable to state-sponsored cyberattacks. Power grids, financial systems, communication networks, defence-related websites and other critical systems have been actively probed and targeted by Chinese and Pakistani agents. Furthermore, weaponisation of space through development of anti-satellite capabilities and Global Positioning System (GPS) jamming technologies threatens India's dependencies on space-based communication and navigation systems. Additionally, cognitive warfare, through AI-generated disinformation and coordinated influence campaign, targets societal cohesion and civil–military trust. Propagation of deepfakes and sophisticated influence operations also creates an environment where discerning truth

becomes increasingly difficult, creating opportunities for adversaries to shape perceptions and undermine national resolve.

The range of threat vectors outlined necessitates that the armed forces possess: advanced comprehension of cyberthreats; ability to integrate space situational awareness into operational planning; resilience against narrative manipulation and information campaigns; the capability to function under degraded communications and GPS conditions; and personnel at all levels equipped to identify and address cognitive threats. Integration of these requirements creates a fundamentally different military challenge than the conventional warfare of previous eras, demanding different training philosophy, different leadership selection criteria and a reinvigorated PME framework for holistic officer development.

Essential Pillars of Human Dimension for Military Efficacy: Requirement of Reforms and Recommendations

India's defence reforms over the past two decades have addressed many important dimensions of military modernisation. Organisational reviews following the 1999 Kargil conflict led to recommendations for structural changes, including the establishment of Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff (HQ IDS) for tri-services coordination.[6] Later, the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) was established, with the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) appointed as its head and bestowed with secretarial powers. A large portion of the MoD's charter was delegated to the DMA.[7] The intelligence-sharing mechanism was further reinforced with the establishment of Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) and Multi-Agency Centre (MAC). In addition, defence manufacturing and aerospace were identified as key pillars under the Make in India initiative, rolled out in 2015, to boost indigenous manufacturing capability. Ordnance factories were corporatised to align their manufacturing processes and work culture to industry standards, thereby ushering in higher efficiency and productivity. Simultaneously, reforms in defence procurement sought to compress acquisition timelines and encourage private participation.

Despite these efforts, the critical aspect of human dimension—with its three essential pillars of leadership, morale across forces and PME—received insufficient attention. Leadership development occurs predominantly through operational experience rather than systematic, evidence-based pedagogy. The absence of structured, research-driven leadership development programme points to leadership skills being cultivated in an ad hoc manner, potentially leading to inconsistencies in decision-making and command effectiveness.

Morale management is frequently treated as a passive command function, with unit morale taken for granted as an inherent trait instead of being a dynamic condition requiring active management. This perspective underestimates the foundational role that morale plays in sustaining operational readiness, unit cohesion and the will to endure prolonged challenges on and off the battlefield. The PME curricula too made incremental improvements over the years, but the programmes have remained anchored in legacy frameworks with a predominant focus on conventional warfare and platform-specific knowledge. Resultantly, there is insufficient emphasis on fostering strategic cognition and systems thinking among officers and personnel.

Developing Leadership Component of the Armed Forces

Tactical Level

The employment of units and formations up to division-sized forces in operations is in the tactical domain. Officers up to the rank of Colonel make up the bulk of the officer cadre in tactical warfighting. Leadership development of this category proceeds with structured arm-specific and all-arms courses conducted at various 'Category A' institutes. Similar courses are conducted for the Indian Navy (IN) and the Indian Air Force (IAF) officers at their respective training institutions. The focus is on arm-specific and combined arms employment in conventional and sub-conventional operations based on templates formulated without accounting for formation specificities.[8] The rationale is that an officer will be able to apply the concept learnt based on operational realities of the formation he is serving in. Due to limited course duration, the focus is on concepts being taught, with very little innovative application for out-of-the-box solutions.

The tendency of student officers to apply concepts learnt during formation exercises they participated in, or previous course knowledge, further limits the learning outcomes. Undue focus on grading based on marks obtained in exercises and written exams further accentuates the issue. While courses like Junior Command (JC) focus on tactical warfighting with very limited focus on leadership development, the Senior Command (SC) course, attended by Lieutenant Colonels, also has tactics as the major component. Command guidance and administrative aspects form the other blocks restricting duration on leadership aspects. Higher Command (HC) and equivalent courses focus on larger aspects of warfighting and national capacity. Initial steps are being taken in Category A training establishments to include case studies discussing development of tactical leadership to handle units and formations

in emerging threat environments while drawing comparative lessons from conflict regions.

Operational Level

Leadership at operational level should be conversant with integrated employment of all Services for joint warfighting. The intricacies involved in optimum utilisation of the service component for a particular phase of campaign should be well understood by commanders and supporting staff. However, other than a combined six-week Joint Capsule (JOCAP) at the end of HC equivalent courses of the three services, there is no structured training for leadership development in a joint environment.

Strategic Level

The development of strategic leadership in the Indian Armed Forces is primarily undertaken by the National Defence College (NDC), New Delhi, where selected Brigadier or equivalent rank officers undergo a year-long course in strategic leadership to recognise the national capacity in various domains and understand structures to handle various national contingencies. The course focuses on national security policy, grand strategy, geopolitical analysis and defence resource management, grooming officers for positions as formation commanders and strategic planners. The course is structured for higher leadership of the armed forces, but some of the major deficiencies are:

1. *Limited vacancies*: Only selected officers attend the course and a vast majority of officers from the three services on important appointments do not qualify for the course.
2. *Limited integration of technology foresight into strategic planning*: Strategic planning for force modernisation tends to respond to technological developments as they arise, rather than proactively forecasting and preparing for significant shifts in technology.
3. *Weak integration of cognitive and information domains*: Strategic planning continues to concentrate largely on kinetic and cyber domains. The roles of cognitive warfare, narrative dominance and strategic communication in influencing outcomes are not sufficiently acknowledged within institutional processes for developing strategic leadership. Currently, strategic leaders lack comprehensive frameworks to effectively incorporate cognitive domain objectives into grand strategy.
4. *Leadership and strategy studies*: The NDC curriculum is structured around six major study areas: socio-political study of India; economy and science and technology; international security environment; study of global

issues; India's strategic neighbourhood; and strategies and structures for national security. Leadership part should be included in these studies, preferably cojoined in 'strategies and structures for national security', as has been done at the Royal College of Defence Studies (the United Kingdom).[9]

Mitigation Measures: Leadership for Future

To ensure that leadership at all levels of the armed forces is well prepared to meet future challenges, the following measures are recommended:

1. *Cross-attachment of officers*: The present format of cross-attachment between the infantry, armoured and mechanised infantry officers should be extended to officers of other arms, like artillery, army air defence, engineers and signals. Options to attach officers to other services units, such as IAF squadrons and IN ships, should also be explored, albeit for a shorter duration of 4–6 months. Cross-staffing of officers at command HQ and above in the services has already commenced. It should be further implemented up to corps HQ and bigger IAF and IN bases.
2. *Establish standardised tactical competency frameworks*: The HQ IDS should develop and circulate standards for tactical competency aligned with the multi-domain operational environment at sub-unit, unit and formation levels in the army and equivalent in the other two Services. These standards should mandate performance-based assessments, with training calendars synchronised across all operational commands.
3. *Multi-domain operations (MDO) planning cells*: Operationalise MDO planning cells at corps HQ and upwards, staffed with representatives to coordinate air, electronic warfare (EW), cyberwarfare and information operations. The naval component can be added to associated formations based on operational tasking. The MDO command post exercises (CPXs), with real-time integration of space, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) data and effects of cyber, EW and information operations, should be conducted alongside the corps war games; and these should be rehearsed again during exercises with troops (EWTs). The ability of formations and units to operate in an information and tech-denied environment should be rehearsed in all exercises.
4. *Integrate strategic communication and civil–military fusion into operational education*: Develop mandatory modules on strategic communication, civil–military fusion in hybrid warfare environment, media engagements during operations and whole-of-government planning at HC and

equivalent courses. Invite specialists from civil administration, intelligence services and strategic communication domains to conduct seminars and workshops within PME programmes.

5. *Establish an 'Institute of Strategic Transformation' under the MoD*: Create a dedicated think tank focused on strategic organisational change within the armed forces, examining barriers to transformation, institutional resistance patterns and change management methodologies. This institute should support the DMA by providing research-based guidance on transformational initiatives, like force restructuring, force rebalancing and theaterisation.
6. *Bi/tri-service war games and exercises*: All war games and EWTs above divisional level and equivalent should be organised as bi/tri-service training events. Officers from affiliated units of the IAF and the IN, as well as staff officers from corresponding HQ, should participate in validating the operational plans of respective services. Concerns should be addressed when operational plans are found to be inconsistent with specific service requirements.

Leadership Models for Future

The traditional hierarchical model of leadership being practiced in the armed forces relies on paternalistic leadership model where regimental ethos forms the anchor. This encourages micromanagement and refers to past precedence for finding solutions to operational and administrative problems. The Indian Armed Forces must graduate to a mix of adaptive leadership and stewardship leadership models at all levels to meet the challenges of modern-day battlefield.

Adaptive Leadership Model

The concept was pioneered by Ron Heifetz in the seminal work, *Leadership without Easy Answers*, for corporates. It holds significant value for the armed forces in tackling challenges induced due to disruptive technologies and emergent threats. Adaptive leadership refers to leading the outfit to tackle complex and unprecedented challenges in the absence of clear-cut doctrines, standard operating procedures (SOPs) and past precedence. It distinguishes between 'technical problems' (which can be solved by authority and existing SOPs) and 'adaptive challenges' (which require new learning, innovation and behavioural change from the entire formation).[10] Adaptive leadership is the engine of change essential for breaking silos, integrating technology and

fighting in multi-domain ambiguity. The key characteristics of adaptive leadership are:

1. *Thriving in chaos*: Adaptive leadership model is specifically designed for the 'fog of war'. Unlike traditional command capabilities that rely on prediction and control, adaptive leadership relies on sensing, responding and evolving in real time. Requirement of C2 resilience in our formations and units during prosecution of operations would be adequately met with this model.
2. *The 'balcony' perspective*: The leader mentally detaches from the immediate situation to observe broader patterns, thus identifying systemic issues rather than reacting to symptoms.
3. *Regulating distress*: The leader maintains a 'productive zone of disequilibrium', keeping the pressure on the unit high enough to motivate change and alertness, but low enough to prevent panic or breakdown.
4. *Giving the work back*: It rejects the 'Great Man' theory where the Commander has all the answers. Instead, it pushes the responsibility for problem-solving down to the lowest tactical level, encouraging mission command and empowering those closest to the threat to innovate.

Stewardship Leadership Model

This is an ethical and organisational governance model where leaders view themselves not as custodians of power or authority, but as trustees responsible for long-term health, values and survival of the institution.[11] In the military context, it is the profound recognition that the armed forces do not belong to the current generation of commanders; instead, they are holding it in trust for the next generation of soldiers and the nation. The framework of stewardship has nine dimensions: personal mastery; personal vision; mentoring; valuing diversity; shared vision; risk-taking and experimentation; vulnerability and maturity; raising awareness; and delivering results.[12] Contextualising it to military requirements brings out the following key characteristics:

1. *Service before self*: It demands the suppression of personal ambition (careerism) in favour of what is best for the institution and the country. The Chetwode motto of 'Safety, Honour and Welfare' of the country and the men always comes before the leader's own ease, providing the guiding light for leadership behaviour.
2. *Intergenerational responsibility*: A steward leader does not just focus on winning today's battle but also on ensuring that the armed forces can win future battles. This involves mentoring subordinates, preserving

institutional wisdom, investing in capability building and protecting resources.
3. *Accountability without control*: It relies on partnership rather than patriarchy. Stewards create a culture of ownership where every soldier feels responsible for the unit's success, fostering intrinsic discipline rather than compliance through fear.
4. *Moral compass*: It is bedrock of the 'profession of arms'. Stewardship ensures that despite the violence of war, the force maintains its moral legitimacy and humanitarian values.

Defining adaptive and stewardship leadership is intellectually satisfying but operationally meaningless unless the PME architecture systematically teaches these models. Adaptive leaders cannot be created through osmosis or regimental tradition alone. They must be nurtured through curricula, war-gaming methodologies and faculty who understand both military science and behavioural psychology. The Indian Defence Forces need an optimum mix of both models in tactical and operational leadership to meet the competing demands of centralised joint integration and decentralised mission command in the backdrop of tech-led multi-domain warfare being witnessed in conflicts around the globe.

Morale as an Important Battle-winning Factor

The Webster dictionary defines morale as 'the state of the spirits of an individual or group as shown by confidence, cheerfulness, discipline and willingness to perform assigned tasks.' As per a study undertaken by the US Army Research Institute, morale was found to be a sum of three major components, namely, motivation, satisfaction and group cohesion.[13] In the context of the Indian Armed Forces, morale can be defined as the psychological state of individual soldiers and cohesive units characterised by:
1. *Collective will*: The shared determination and resolve to accomplish the mission, even under conditions of danger, fatigue and uncertainty.
2. *Belief in purpose*: The internalised conviction that the cause is just, the mission is achievable and sacrifice (if required) serves a higher national purpose.
3. *Esprit de corps*: The intangible bond of mutual trust, camaraderie and shared identity that transforms individuals into a functioning collective.
4. *Psychological resilience*: The capacity to maintain cognitive and emotional functioning under stress, maintaining decision-making clarity amidst chaos, fear and incomplete information.

5. *Willingness to sacrifice*: The moral readiness to subordinate personal survival and comfort to the collective mission.

Military history is replete with examples of numerically and technologically inferior forces achieving stunning military successes through superior morale, cohesion and inspiring leadership. The Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC between the Greeks and the Spartans, the Battle of Saragarhi in 1897 and the Battle of Longewala in 1971, all demonstrate that armies do not just fight with 'arms', but also with the psychological determination, unit cohesion and collective will embodied in their soldiers and officers. The human dimension of morale as a battle-winning factor will continue to reign supreme in battlefields of future.

Building Blocks of Military Morale

Military morale is not a monolithic construct but operates through three interlocking mechanisms.

Intrinsic Morale

This operates within the soldier's psychological framework and comprises the following factors:

1. *Moral courage*: The internalised capacity to act rightly despite fear. Cultivated through character education, ethical leadership and the lived experience of a unit that prioritises honour over self-preservation.
2. *Discipline*: It does not mean mere obedience to rules, but the will to maintain composure, follow procedures and support unit cohesion when instinct demands survival and flight.
3. *Individual resilience*: The soldier's capacity to overcome fatigue, pain and trauma through mental toughness cultivated through training and preparation.

Collective Morale

It is a well-known fact that soldiers do not primarily fight for abstract patriotism or ideological conviction. They fight for their *paltan*, their leaders and the men beside them.[14] Major factors include:

1. *Horizontal bonding*: Trust, camaraderie and mutual interdependence among peers (soldiers of equivalent rank who share danger).
2. *Vertical communication*: The quality of superior–subordinate relationship, characterised by respect for the competence, concern and quality of leadership.

3. *Unit identity*: The shared identity with the regiment, the battalion and the company, reinforced through symbols, shared experiences and collective pride in unit traditions.
4. *Regimental cohesion*: Deep regimental pride and identity are irreplaceable morale accelerators. The regimental system cohesion-building mechanisms should be preserved even when transitioning to theatre-based commands. Technology and jointness should augment, not replace, regimental identity.
5. *Leader development*: Train officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) in empathetic leadership, as well as the ability to communicate decisively (crucial for authority), while demonstrating genuine care for soldier welfare. It is autocratic in execution but stewardship in intention.[15]

Institutional Morale

To maintain high morale in units and formations deployed in operations high institutional support is required. The major factors are as follows:

1. *Logistics and supply*: A soldier's confidence in leadership collapses if ammunition runs short, rations are stale or medical facilities are absent. Logistics is not merely operational necessity; it is a morale statement: 'The institution values us enough to sustain us.'
2. *Family care and communication*: Soldiers whose families are cared for and supported can focus on operational tasks without worrying about their well-being. Worries of home and family struggles have been a reason for psychological stress in soldiers.
3. *Recognition and reward*: Public recognition of sacrifice and achievement powerfully sustains morale. Ceremonies, gallantry awards and public acknowledgement of service create the narrative that sacrifice is seen, honoured and valued.
4. *Medical and psychological support*: In the aftermath of major operations, many soldiers suffer physical injuries and psychological trauma. Access to medical and psychological support assures soldiers about institutional care even when they are not medically fit to serve.
5. *Support for invalidated soldiers and families*: Financial support in the form of liberalised pensions, education of children, as well as tailor-made job opportunities for soldiers boarded out on medical grounds and family members of soldiers killed on duty strengthens the belief of serving soldiers that the organisation cares for its own even after they are no longer in service.[16]

Measures to Sustain Morale

Different measures are required to sustain morale at different levels. Some recommended measures at tactical, operational and strategic levels are given next.

Tactical Level

Sustenance of morale in units, squadrons, ships and formations up to divisional level and bases are as follows:

1. *Unit/sub-unit cohesion*: Commanders at all levels should know every soldier by name, his family situation and psychological state. He should also know the skill set of the soldier and employ him accordingly.
2. *Mission clarity*: Each soldier should understand the importance of the unit task/mission and how his specific role contributes to the overall success of the operation/battle.
3. *Trust in leadership*: Soldiers willingly follow orders when they have faith in the leader's competence and care. Leaders must understand the psychological dimensions of tactical leadership.
4. *Morale assessment*: Conduct morale assessment in units to evaluate the soldier's perception of leadership, as well as his own role in mission accomplishment and unit cohesion.

Operational Level

For sustenance of morale at operational level, following measures should be undertaken:

1. *Campaign purpose*: Officers must understand the operational objectives, the strategic intent and how the planned operation serves national interest.
2. *Professional mastery*: Operational leaders should be adept at the intellectual challenge of campaign planning, multi-domain coordination and problem-solving at scale. Their command would willingly follow difficult orders when they recognise operational brilliance of the commander. Operational leadership councils should be established for commanders to regularly convene and discuss doctrine, lessons learned and measures to meet the emerging operational challenges. This will build intellectual community and shared purpose.
3. *Institutional recognition*: Successful operational commanders should be recognised through suitable awards, command opportunities and higher leadership roles for their exceptional leadership and professional excellence.

Strategic Level

At the apex level, morale of the units and formations is sustained through the following measures:

1. *Transformational leadership*: Strategic leaders articulate a compelling vision of the institution's future that inspires deep commitment. Seminars on strategic issues should be held where senior leadership can outline their vision on transformation and modernisation of the armed forces into a world-class military. Information dissemination up to unit level on the outcomes of such high-level discussions should be ensured.
2. *Ethical leadership*: Strategic leaders model the ethical standards, moral courage and institutional loyalty that define the profession of arms. Their conduct should always be beyond reproach.
3. *Legacy building*: Strategic leaders make decisions that prioritise long-term health of the institution over short-term personal advancement. Senior leaders should groom their successors adequately to ensure continued and hassle-free growth and combat efficiency of the organisation.
4. *Development contours and organisational changes*: Organisational development contours, finalised through rigorous diligence, should be progressed systematically. Structural modifications should only be introduced after suggested models, duly vetted in exercises, have stabilised. Personality-driven organisational changes and restructuring are best avoided.

Sustaining Morale in MDO Environment

Maintaining morale in MDO environment is challenging as technology broadens battlespace but can undermine human cohesion that traditional combat relied upon. Soldiers may be physically separated yet digitally connected, or in physical proximity but isolated by EW and information blockades. To preserve morale, leaders must foster distributed cohesion through secure communication and emphasise everyone's role and its importance to the mission, especially for remote operators, like drone pilots and cyber specialists. Sustenance of morale also hinges on empowering decentralised units, ensuring robust connectivity and logistics, providing realistic training for increased autonomy, fostering a strong sense of purpose, shared understanding through clear mission command and cohesive joint integration. Given MDO's rapid pace, pervasiveness and high cognitive demands, a 'cognitive resilience' approach is essential to help personnel manage stress from fast, rapidly changing, incomplete or manipulated information. Ultimately, confidence in interconnected support across space, cyber and air domains will replace proximity as the foundation of morale.

Sustaining Morale in Agniveers

Recruitment of Agniveers represents the single-most significant disruption to the traditional human dimension framework discussed in this article. Agniveers cannot benefit from career progression, family integration and long-term stewardship that sustain morale in regular soldiers. Instead, leaders must reimagine morale sustainment for a hybrid force where only 25 per cent of soldiers are to be retained after the four-year period. Assimilation systems must be developed to ingrain unit ethos in Agniveers within months. Skills and vocational training should be imparted to enhance their value while being released from service.[17]

Professional Military Education (PME)

The PME lays the foundation of intellectual component of warrior culture and propels military leaders towards professional mastery, a state that changes as individuals continue to gain knowledge and broaden horizon.[18] In conformity with the transformation of the Indian Armed Forces, PME will be the crucible where the 'generalist' officer of the past must be transformed into a 'techno-warrior' and 'joint leader' of the future. The PME architecture must evolve to support the Integrated Theatre Command (ITC) structures rolled out in future and ensure that the officers are intellectually equipped for multi-domain, cognitive and grey-zone warfare.

The present PME structures are more hierarchical and service oriented with limited joint content. For instance, training syllabi at middle-level professional institutes, like the Defence Services Staff College (DSSC), majorly focus on service-specific aspects with limited joint content. At the senior level, syllabi at the College of Defence Management are more attuned to management subjects with strategic overhang, while respective service war colleges focus on their service-specific teachings along with aspects of national security and military strategy. The NDC, being the highest institute of joint learning, majorly focuses on strategic and national policy-related subjects. The analysis of course curriculum at all levels reveals that the focus on warfighting and employment of service components in a battlefield during campaigns is largely service specific, while certain subjects, like strategy and policy aspects, have been kept in joint domain. The strength of the present model is as follows:

1. *Combat-proven tactical excellence*: Service-specific PME has produced officers and soldiers capable of undertaking sustained conventional, sub-conventional and hybrid operations in diverse terrain.

2. *Regimental cohesion*: The deep integration of PME with the regimental system creates unit cohesion, esprit de corps, mastery over weapon platforms and its employment, proving invaluable in high-intensity operations.
3. *Established doctrinal frameworks*: War colleges of respective services have generated doctrinal thought on land, air and maritime operations, and their integrated employment in joint operations, providing intellectual coherence to military operations.

Deficiencies in Present PME Model

The emergent threats have forced a rethink on curating PME to train officers and troops in meeting it. The disruptive effect of drones, EW, AI and machine learning must be factored in to design specific course content so that these are ab initio included in battle planning and not treated as an adjunct to standard plans formulated. The major aspects are listed next:

1. *Jointness deficit*: Due to lack of joint training at tactical levels, insufficient joint structures and core competencies for joint operations, optimal joint application of force is difficult.[19] The impending operationalisation of ITCs demands officers who conceptualise jointness not as an additional skill but as their primary professional identity. Joint PME should commence from the entry point itself.
2. *Technology integration lag*: The gap between technology acquisition and its utilsation remains a critical deficiency. Syllabus updation has been undertaken in most training institutes, but integration with existing warfighting techniques has been sporadic. Multi-domain warfare operates at machine-speed decision cycles. Officers educated in static doctrine and conventional warfighting skills will be unable to adapt to battlespace dynamics shaped by AI-assisted targeting, autonomous systems and real-time space-based ISR integration, as witnessed during Azerbaijan–Armenia conflict of 2020.
3. *Doctrine–technology gap*: The Indian Army's 'Land Warfare Doctrine' (2018) is now in its eighth year without formal revision. While the Doctrine and Strategy Seminar held at the Army War College provides intellectual forum for discussing emergent technologies and its ramification on warfighting, the doctrinal incorporation remains problematic. The joint doctrine for MDO was released in 2025, giving clarity on integrating space, cyber and cognitive domain effects into campaign planning.[20] The doctrinal guidance must be now incorporated in curating syllabus for MDO under PME institutes.

4. *Adaptive learning deficit*: The assessment criteria in PME remain oriented towards 'zero-error' planning, rewarding compliance and risk avoidance over adaptive innovation. War gaming and simulations are primarily designed to validate existing operational plans, rather than explore novel concepts or prepare for unprecedented scenarios. Assessment rubrics emphasise perfect execution rather than rapid adaptation when plans fail. In environments characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA), no plan survives first contact. Officers must be educated to 'fail fast, learn faster', adapting doctrine and tactics on the fly. Current assessment systems penalise this adaptive mindset.
5. *Strategic communication and IW*: Both these aspects are crucial components of fighting and winning wars. The achievements of battlefields must be pushed into the cognitive space of wider audience faster than the enemy. This was amply evident during Operation Sindoor as well. Yet, the coverage of these aspects is limited under the PME umbrella even in HC and equivalent courses. Specialist tri-services courses should be curated to train officers in strategic communication and IW aspects. Specific capsules for randomly selected officers in service-specific institutes, like Information Warfare Wing of the Army War College, will have limited utility.

Recommendations for PME Transformation

1. *Revision of Joint Training Doctrine*. The first Joint Training Doctrine was released in 2017. It underlined the need to systematically prepare for war throughout the spectrum of conflict (nuclear, conventional and sub-conventional) with domains of space, cyberspace and electromagnetic active, besides special operations in support of military operations, in pursuance of building an integrated warfighting machinery, maintaining credible nuclear deterrence and guarding against unconventional threats.[21] Currently, the doctrine needs a relook and revision to incorporate lessons of recent conflicts, starting from 2020 Azerbaijan–Armenia War to Operation Sindoor and ongoing conflicts. Inclusion of improved potency of disruptive systems will enable incorporation of crucial aspects for joint training of all three services.
2. *Nominate Armed Forces Training Institute (AFTI) for training on niche technologies*: Based on the present institutional capability of various service-specific training institutes, selected ones can be nominated for conducting specialist tri-services courses for drone warfare, cyberwarfare, EW, AI, autonomous technologies and machine learning. The course

curriculum should be curated to focus on integration of these niche technologies into modern warfighting.

3. *Establish failure laboratories for adaptive learning*: In multi-domain, high-velocity warfare, adaptability is a force and PME must cultivate this trait. Transform PME assessment criteria from 'zero error' (compliance based) to 'adaptive recovery' (resilience based), grading officers on their ability to adapt when plans fail. Present war-gaming methodology validates existing plans; future war gaming must explore failure modes and adaptive responses. Course curriculum must be modified to incorporate adaptive learning in all PME training institutions. Adaptive success stories must be disseminated to subsequent courses to shift organisational culture towards calculated risk-taking.
4. *Recruitment of civilian faculty for niche fields*: Civilian faculty specialising in niche fields will be able to bring in peer-reviewed latest developments in course curriculum, synchronising it with technological and security advancements. Present model of civilian specialists conducting specific lectures and short capsules limits understanding to the concept at best. Its application in real-time combat situations requires deeper knowledge and focused handholding during conduct of the course.
5. *Operationalise tri-service war gaming as core PME activity*: Make joint multi-domain war gaming a cornerstone of operational PME, not an occasional exercise. Select one of the major war colleges, such as the AFTI, to conduct tri-services war games and equip it with required hardware, like high-fidelity simulation capabilities modelling simultaneous operations across land, sea, air, space, cyber and cognitive domains, real-time integration of space-based ISR data, cyber effects and information operations. Publish war-gaming results as 'strategic insights' feeding into doctrine refinement. Simultaneously, all formations equivalent to corps and above should conduct MDO war games with the participation of other services to refine operational plans.
6. *Integrate self-directed learning into PME framework*: Establish structured self-learning mechanisms enabling officers to deepen knowledge between institutional courses. A start has been made in this regard by the launch of Project Eklavya and e-Granthalaya. Project Eklavya of the Indian Army, a cutting-edge online learning platform launched in November 2024, represents a step towards modernised PME delivery. Meanwhile, e-Granthalaya, launched by the Raksha Mantri in September 2024, is a flagship knowledge-sharing online platform for tri-services, acting as collaborative institutional database as well as single online repository of

knowledge and study material of the tri-services.[22] These platforms can be further advanced by encouraging officers to undergo various online professional courses where they have access to course content, online teaching modules and assessments. Integration of self-learning progress into performance appraisals will make professional reading a career imperative.

PME Enabling Structural Transformation

Implementation of theatre commands will require officers who think jointly and not in service silos, have technology fluency and innovate to find solutions in MDO environment without being legacy bound. Adaptive thinkers and technologically adept officers will be able to usher in planned structural reforms of the armed forces in the forthcoming decade. Table 1 depicts alignment points of reform initiative in conformity to the PME planned.

Table 1 Linkages between Reform Initiative and PME

Reform Initiative	PME Requirement	How PME Enables It
Integrated Theatre Commands (ITCs).	Joint PME.	Officers educated in jointness from entry level can staff ITCs with joint mindset; no service silos.
Multi-domain warfare doctrine.	Officers adept in space, cyber and cognitive integration.	Officers trained in niche specialisation tracks can plan and execute MDO.
Technology absorption (drones, AI, machine learning).	Technology-fluent leaders, not just tech users.	Officers educated in technological implications can adapt tactics and doctrines for new platforms. Suitable tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) can be formulated.
Readiness for brief, intense wars.	Adaptive, fast decision leaders.	Adaptive thinking: Officers trained in 'failure laboratories' can make rapid decisions under uncertainty and high tempo.
Atmanirbhar Bharat (indigenous platforms and systems).	Leaders understand defence industrial ecosystems.	Officers exposed to defence research and development, manufacturing and supply chain understand pathways to faster indigenisation process.

Source: Author.

The PME is not just a training function; it is a strategic transformation lever of equal importance to structural reorganisation. Lieutenant Colonels and Colonels of today will be formation commanders and equivalent in a decade's time. Similarly, Majors and equivalent would be commanding officers or important staff officers in formation HQ by 2032. Unless they are now exposed to structured curriculum incorporating jointness and technological advancements, their orientation at higher ranks in crucial appointments will be confined to legacy warfighting methods and service-specific aspects despite the structural changes in organisation.

Conclusion

Machines don't win wars; People do

The '2025 Year of Reforms' and the 'Decade of Transformation' will be judged not by the number of theatre commands established, platforms acquired or technologies absorbed, but by a single metric: did the Indian Armed Forces develop leaders capable of winning wars in the age of AI, multi-domain threats and cognitive warfare?

This article has examined three interconnected human dimensions of transformation:

1. *Leadership*: Moving from C2 (paternalistic) to mission-command (stewardship–adaptive) models that empower junior leaders to decide in the fog of war.
2. *PME*: Transforming PME from a training function into a strategic lever that produces joint thinkers, technology-fluent officers and adaptive intellects capable of commanding units, formations and tenanting important staff functions a decade ahead.
3. *Morale*: Recognising that psychological cohesion, belief in purpose and trust in leadership are measurable, manageable variables, not intangibles that determine whether soldiers continue fighting when casualty rates climb.

Together, these reforms constitute a human dimension strategy for future readiness. Without this strategy, the armed forces risk acquiring brilliant platforms but being led by yesterday's soldiers. The window to make this transformation is now, 2027–2032.

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