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Strategies and Challenges of Developing Leaders for a Modern Day Armed Forces

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Abstract

In an age of rapid technological advancement and fluid nature of contemporary security environment, developing agile, ethically tuned and professionally sound military leaders has become a strategically imperative for modern day armed forces globally. This article presents a comprehensive analysis on the paradigm shift in developing military leader's arguing that operational success in contemporary volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) security environments gratifies a decisive move from industrial age, hierarchical command models toward cohesive and adaptive leadership development frameworks. These frameworks must combine continuous academic education, deliberate experiential learning, structured mentorship program and technology enabled training modules synergistically. The argument based analysis identifies resolute institutional challenges which includes doctrinal aspects, cultural inertia, and existing disparities in the defence resources. Fundamentally, it employs a qualitative, multi method research design to analyze the strategies and challenges in developing military leaders for modern day armed forces. It concludes with targeted, evidence based recommendations emphasizing the need for self-motivated, ethically sound curriculum and progressive spirited learnings with particular focuses in the militaries from the South Asian countries.

Keywords

Military Leadership, Adaptive Leadership, Leader Development, Armed Forces, Defense Education, Hybrid Warfare, VUCA

Introduction

Military leaders and leadership form the fundamental pillars of armed forces. It is mostly defined by the ability to guide, inspire and command personnel in pursuit of

mission success under the conditions of risk, complexity and uncertainty. It is also understood as a function of character, competence and the capacity to inspire and direct others toward a common goal. Historically, military success was attributed to the courage and tactical acumen of the commanders at different levels of military hierarchy. However, the character of conflict in the twenty-first century has fundamentally altered the leadership style and art. Modern day battlespaces are multidimensional, encompassing not only the physical domain but also the interconnected digital, cognitive and moral spheres (Kılıç & Çelmeli, 2014). These environments are mostly characterized by asymmetric nature of operational environments, urban insurrections, information warfare and the inescapable integration of technology. Thus, the traditional military merits of discipline and authority must now be integrated with scholarly agility, emotional intelligence, cross-cultural competence and the capacity for ethical decentralized decision-making in the military leadership.

This progression assists a parallel and systemic transformation in the practices of developing modern day military leaders. It is insufficient to train officers only in conventional tactics, techniques, procedures and the command control functions. They must be systematically educated as strategic thinkers, ethical guides and adaptive problem solvers capable of operating independently within a diverse operational environment as per the commander's intent (Kirchner & Akdere, 2017). This article provides a rigorous examination of this critical shift in the development of military leaders. This article analyses the fundamental strategies supporting modern military leadership development process explores institutional and human challenges that impede progress and offers pragmatic evidence based recommendations. While informed by global doctrinal trends, the discussion maintains a focused relevance on South Asian militaries, where militaries are navigating complex relationship between modern operational necessities and deep rooted institutional traditions.

Literature Review

The contemporary military learning conceptualizes leadership development not as an isolated event but as a continuous enduring process of "being, becoming and belonging" (Díez, Martínez-Morán, & Aurrekoetxea-Casaus, 2023). It is accepted that the rigid command centric models of the past are inadequate to train and develop leaders for today's complex operational environments. The academic focus in military learning process has shifted decisively towards adaptive leadership frameworks that prioritizes critical thinking, ethical reasoning, intercultural skills, and psychological resilience (Kirchner & Akdere, 2017; NATO, 2022).

The research emphasizes that the effective military leadership development upsurges from a synergistic and scientific system. The formal military education provides an essential theoretical and ethical foundation for modern day military leaders. The experiential learning through realistic exercises, simulations and operational deployments shapes real competence and decision-making under difficult circumstances. The mentorship culture or the process facilitates the transfer of tacit knowledge and shapes professional identity and ethical judgment (Khamkhong, 2020). When these elements are aligned with an organization's strategic goals, they create a powerful apparatus in educating leaders who can thrive during uncertainty (Ananthan, 2019). This integrated approach is a direct response to the empirically observed realities of modern conflict, which is increasingly driven by the technological advancements, culturally nuanced and psychologically demanding. The literature also identifies persistent hurdles such as the doctrinal alterations by technological progression and creating a capability gap (Holota & Tytkovskyi, 2023). The high-tempo operations exert extraordinary cognitive and moral stress on leaders (Díez et al., 2023) and traditional hierarchical cultures can resist the decentralizing ethos required for adaptive mission-command philosophies (Kılıç & Çelmeli, 2014).

Methodology

This research based article basically employs a qualitative, multi-method research design to analyze the strategies and challenges in developing military leaders for modern day armed forces. The methodology adopted for this article is structured as follows;

- **Document Analysis.** A comprehensive and systematic review of academic literatures from doctrinal publications, policy documents and official reports from military institutions such as NATO, United States (U.S.) Department of Defense and South Asian armed forces were conceded. This provided the theoretical and doctrinal foundation for developing an understanding on the paradigm shift in leadership development in modern armies.
- **Comparative Case Study Analysis.** Three in-depth case studies were conceptualized, constructed and analyzed on NATO, United States (U.S.) Armed Forces and South Asian militaries such as militaries from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. These cases were selected to represent a spectrum of organizational contexts, multinational coalitions, technologically advanced national force and regional forces balancing tradition and modernization. The analysis mostly focused on identifying implemented strategies, institutional adaptations and persistent challenges.

- **Synthesis and Thematic Analysis.** The findings from the literature review and case studies were synthesized to identify the primary themes, convergent strategies and the common institutional barriers. This process allowed for the development of evidence based recommendations tailored to different military contexts with particular attention to the unique constraints and opportunities in South Asia.

The methodological approach applied to develop this article ensures a comprehensive, evidence based exploration that bridges theoretical frameworks with practical implementation across various militaries around the globe.

Military Leaders and Leadership

Military leaders are the individuals entrusted with command responsibility and authority to guide, influence and inspire personnel within the armed forces toward achieving operational objectives and maintaining organizational integrity. The effective military leadership excels with positional authority, encompassing a complex blend of character, professional competence, ethical grounding and the ability to make sound decisions under pressure (Gerras, Wong, & Allen, 2008). In the context of contemporary armed forces, leadership is recognized not as a static trait but as a dynamic, relational process of being, becoming and belonging. Where leaders are continuously developed through experience, mentorship and education (Díez, Martínez-Morán, & Aurrekoetxea-Casaus, 2023). This approach is essential for navigating the multifaceted challenges of modern warfare, which demands leaders who are not only tactically proficient but also ethically resilient, cross-culturally competent and capable of empowered, decentralized decision-making within volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environments (Kirchner & Akdere, 2017). Thus, military leadership constitutes the essential human framework that binds strategy, operations and personnel into a cohesive and effective force.

The Paradigm Shift in Development of Military Leaders

The classical military model characterized by ancient structures like the Prussian General Staff system emphasized top down command control approach, disciplined and meticulous systemic compliance. In contrast, modern-day military operations together with mission-command philosophies necessitate leaders who can exercise disciplined initiative, empower subordinate decision-making and adaptive to fluid situations (Kirchner & Akdere, 2017). The modern-day frameworks also conceptualize military leadership as a dynamic composite of mutually dependent competencies.

The present day framework for leadership development in military is fundamentally built upon a triangle of interdependent core competencies such as characters and values, cognitive and agility and interpersonal and social skills. These competencies together form the foundation of an adaptive and professionally effective military officers. Most prominently, the realm of character and values serves as moral/ethical foundations for the military leaders. This encompasses more than simple rule-following. It is built upon untiring personal and professional integrity, selfless service ethos and a deep commitment to the ethical standards of the military profession (Gerras, Wong, & Allen, 2008). The cognitive and mental agility required to navigate the modern-day multifaceted battlefield to supplement this ethical opportunity. These involve the capacity for critical and systemic thinking, allowing leaders to dissect ambiguous problems, identify root causes and make sound decisions. The effective leadership is genuinely human reliant on strong interpersonal and social skills. This set of abilities rooted in genuine empathy and clear communication, which is essential for building team cohesion, maintaining morale and managing diverse human capital. Therefore, modern leader development process with in the armed forces cannot focus on one domain in isolation. It must be a holistic endeavor that systematically strengthens the military leader's ethical core, sharpens their mind, cultivates their ability to connect and inspire people. This approach principally focuses on the following aspects to train the military leaders at different levels.

- **Formal Education.** The present-day military institutions have expanded their curriculum to educate their leaders far beyond traditional warfighting functions. The institutions like the United States (US) Military Academy at West Point and the Indian National Defence Academy now mandated to focus in depth studies in ethics, international relations, cyber security/defence strategy along with regional studies to build strategic awareness and ethical resilience (Norwegian Armed Forces, 2021). That has ultimately modernized the systems of providing formal educations to their military leaders.
- **Experiential Learning.** The most of the military in a modern day context also focuses on experimental learning. This is where the theoretical knowledge confronts the friction of reality that military leaders mostly faces. The large scale multinational exercises (e.g., NATO's Trident Juncture) provide irreplaceable experience in coalition interoperability and high pressure command control. Additionally, the advanced simulations and war gaming offer a risk managed environment for repetitive decision making. The empirical data underscores their values. The United States (US) army study found that officers trained with high

fidelity simulation tools demonstrated an almost 24% improvement in adaptive decision making as compared to those of reliant on traditional lecture based learning approaches (Hill, 2025).

- **Structured Mentorship.** The modern day military institutions also follow the structured mentorship to provides the vital human link for transferring tacit knowledge, contextualizing experience and modeling professional identity as part of the military leadership development. It essentially moves beyond ad-hoc advice to become a deliberate developmental tool (Khamkhong, 2020). This approach has proven effective significantly to shape up the mindset of the military leaders within their institutions.
- **Technology Embedded Training.** The military leaders must be prepared to operate within a web of digital systems, artificial intelligence enabled analytics and cyber security apparatus. The training designed for military leaders must integrate these tools to ensure technological proficiency complements human judgment. Additionally, the initiatives like the United States Army's Synthetic Training Environment (STE) are also pioneering this incorporation, creating immersive in the collective trainings (Hill, 2025). The technology embedded training approach has significantly contributed enhancing professional competencies, military decision making and eased the command control functions

Challenges in the Development of Military Leaders

The integrated framework of formal education, experiential learning, mentorship and technology enabled training offers robust outline for developing adaptive military leaders. Its effective implementation is mostly decelerated by series of persistent and deep rooted institutional challenges with in the military institutions. These obstacles are residing at the intersection of growing technological advancement, human psychology and the institutional culture forming barriers on translating doctrinal aspects into pragmatic operational realities. Hence, it is paramount that the following key issues that must be deliberately discussed to close the gap between leadership developmental approaches and the institutional operational effectiveness with in the armed forces of the day.

- **The Doctrinal and Technological Gap.** It is one of the important aspect that need due considerations when we argue on the challenges in developing professional and competent military leaders. The exponential pace of change in domains like artificial intelligence (AI), autonomous systems and the cyber capabilities dependably outpaces the slower and deliberate cycles of doctrinal

development and organizational adaptation. These differences leave the leaders theoretically and tactically unprepared for emergent novel threats. Moreover, the military officers operating with yesterday's doctrine against tomorrow's challenges (Holota & Tytkovskyi, 2023) remain pragmatically inefficient.

- **Psychological and Moral Resilience.** Another key issue that has emerged is the contemporary operating environment which imposes an unprecedented cognitive load and moral pressure through information saturation, ambiguous threats and complex ethical dilemmas within the operational environment of armed forces. The research also confirms the elevated rates of cognitive fatigue and moral injury among armed forces personnel, transforming comprehensive resilience training which integrates stress inoculation, mindfulness practices, and structured ethical decision-making drills from a peripheral wellness concern into a core operational necessity for sustaining leader effectiveness (Díez et al., 2023).
- **Cultural and Institutional Inertia.** The progress in the development of military leader is often stalled by cultural and institutional inertia. Many military organizations are built upon deeply rooted hierarchical cultures that traditionally lead uniformity, predictability and centralized control. These cultural foundations can actively resist the necessary shift toward empowered subordinate decision-making, a tolerance for constructive failure in training environments and the decentralized agility that defines adaptive leadership, creating a fundamental internal tension between tradition and transformation (Kılıç & Çelmeli, 2014).
- **Cross Cultural Competence as a Core Skill.** Moving from aspiration to execution necessitates the identification of cross-cultural competence as a core skill for the leaders of modern day armed forces. In an era defined by multinational coalitions and complex mandates for peacekeeping, the cultural intelligence is a decisive and considered as a force multiplier. The NATO (2022) data indicates the structured cross cultural training can improve conflict resolution speed up multinational teams by 40%, translating directly into enhanced mission agility and operational success. Therefore, these enduring challenges are not mere cross-references to development strategy but central, human centric factors to determine ultimate success or failure of nurturing the next generation military leaders within the armed forces.

Case Studies on NATO, US Army and South Asian Militaries

Now moving from the theoretical paradigm to the pragmatic realm of officer training of the modern army, it is obvious that the true test of leadership development lies in the operational success or the failures they have achieved in different operational environment. The following case studies show how different organizations like NATO, United States (US) army and South Asian militaries are developing their military leaders to face the modern day multifaceted battlefield challenges. This assessment helps us to understand the practical hurdles, creative solutions and the important lessons learned.

- **North Atlantic Treaty Organizations (NATO).** The military leadership development in NATO's is explicitly engineered for multinational operations. This approach systematically blends formal education at institutions like the NATO Defense College with large scale, multi-domain military exercises and sophisticated simulations. A rigorous culture of after action review with lessons learned typically institutionalizes learning through these exercises. This integrated system consistently produces the officers proficient in mission command, cross-cultural collaboration and navigating complex, allied command structures (NATO, 2022) when deployed in complex operational environments.
- **United States (US) Armed Forces.** The United States (U.S) armed force's mission command philosophy is the doctrinal example of adaptive leadership. It demands agility and accountability at all echelons by decentralizing authority and empowering subordinate initiative within a clear commander's intent. In addition, the officer development supports this through a "Bend-Don't-Break" system linking professional military education (PME). The rigorous rotational training at combat training centers and advanced simulations, yielding leaders recognized for initiative and decision-making (Kirchner & Akdere, 2017) while they are deployed at complex operational environment.
- **South Asian Militaries.** The armed forces in South Asia including those of India, Pakistan and Nepal are crafting the context sensitive hybrid models to nurture leader of the respective armed forces. They deliberately retain the strengths of hierarchical discipline, unit cohesion and values based leadership while incrementally integrating adaptive training modules, expanding professional military education (PME) curriculum and leveraging United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations for multinational deployment experiences (Khamkhong, 2020). The primary pathway involves maximizing

regional exercises for experiential learning while working to overcome significant resource constraints and gradually integrate the advanced simulation technologies (Holota & Tytkovskyi, 2023) in their training module.

Discussions and Analysis

The findings from the literature review and case study analysis highlight a fundamental tension observed at the heart of modern military leader development approach. The imperative to nurture adaptive, decentralized and ethically autonomous leaders within armed forces are often defined by hierarchy, tradition and centralized control. The proposed integrated framework combining formal education, experiential learning, mentorship and technology provides a coherent blueprint for this transformation. However, as the case studies illustrate, its implementation is neither uniform nor straightforward.

The success of NATO and the United States (U.S.) Armed Forces in fostering adaptive leadership stems from a conscious doctrinal alignment supported by substantial investment in enabling technologies and a cultural willingness to delegate authority and learning from replicated and real failures. Their challenges lie less in conceptual acceptance and more in the relentless pace of technological change and the psychological toll of modern day military operations. In contrast, the South Asian case reveals more multifaceted concession. While the strategic need for adaptive leaders is recognized, development is a gradual and follows hybrid process. These militaries are mostly leveraging low cost and high impact opportunities such as; UN peacekeeping and regional exercises for experiential learning. This suggests that for many militaries, the path forward is not a wholesale adoption of a foreign model, but a deliberate, context sensitive integration of adaptive principles into existing cultural and institutional frameworks.

Implications

The research based findings of this article yield significant implications for military theory, policy and institutional practices pointing toward necessary progressions in how armed forces conceptualize and cultivate leadership development approaches.

- **Implications for Leadership Theory and Doctrine.** The study reinforces that adaptive leadership must be theoretically re-conceptualized as a holistic construct integrating character, cognitive agility and interpersonal skill (Gerras, Wong, & Allen, 2008; Kılıç & Çelmeli, 2014). This implies a doctrinal shift away from purely top-down command models toward mission command philosophies that empower decentralized initiative. The military doctrine must

formally evolve to reflect leadership as a dynamic developmental process is a continuous state of “becoming” rather than a fixed rank based attribute (Díez et al., 2023).

- **Implications for Institutional Policy and Resource Allocation.** The analysis carries direct implications for institutional policy, particularly regarding resource prioritization and programme design with particular focuses on the following.
 - **Dynamic Curriculum Development.** The rapid obsolescence of knowledge in fields like artificial intelligence (AI) and cyber warfare implies that leadership curricula cannot be static. The policy must mandate regular reviews and updates to ensure technical training is consistently coupled with ethical and strategic reasoning and closing the persistent doctrinal/technological gap (Holota & Tytkovskyi, 2023).
 - **Investment in Accessible Simulation Technologies.** The proven efficacy of simulation based training, as demonstrated by the United States (U.S.) Army’s Synthetic Training Environment (Hill, 2025), implies a strategic policy imperative. The institutions, especially those with budgetary constraints, should prioritize acquiring or developing scalable, cost-effective simulation tools to democratize high-quality experiential learning and mitigate operational readiness disparities.
 - **Formalization of Mentorship Programmes.** Given the critical role of mentorship in transferring tacit knowledge and shaping professional identity (Khamkhong, 2020), policy should institutionalize structured mentorship frameworks that pair junior and senior officers across career stages and moving beyond informal or ad-hoc guidance.
- **Implications for Training and Leader Development Practices.** At the practical level of training module implementation, the findings highlight several necessary innovations on the followings;
 - **Integration of Resilience and Ethical Drills.** The documented psychological and moral pressures of modern operations (Díez et al., 2023) imply that resilience training- encompassing stress inoculation, mindfulness and structured ethical decision-making under pressure must be embedded as a core mandatory component of all leader development programmes.

- **Standardization of Cross Cultural Competence.** As the multinational operations becoming the norm, NATO data showing that cross-cultural training can improve team effectiveness by up to 40% (NATO, 2022) implies that such competence must be operationalized. The training in cultural intelligence, language skills and intercultural communication should be standardized and linked with the career progression pathways.
- **Adoption of Data Driven Assessment Systems.** The complexity of measuring leadership growth implies that development systems must become more empirical. The implementation of robust mechanisms to collect and analyze performance data from exercises, simulations and real world missions is essential for providing objective feedback and enabling the continuous refinement of training methodologies.

The above mentioned implications collectively chart a progression toward a more agile, empirically grounded and ethically conscious culture of military leadership development approach. By embracing these guidelines, modern armed forces can systematically cultivate their leaders who possess not only the skills to counter contemporary threats but also the adaptive capacity and moral courage to navigate the unforeseen challenges that are likely to emerge in future.

Conclusion

Military leadership development process in a modern day armed forces had positioned itself at a critical stage and evolving dynamically day by day. The future operational environment demands a new leader who is a strategic thinker, an ethical monitor, a cross cultural communicator, an agile adapter and traditional tactical expert. The process of developing these multifaceted competencies requires a deliberate and systemic overhaul of military leader's developmental frameworks.

The evidence reliably validates that successful military leadership development frameworks are the one which continuously integrate rigorous academic education, realistic experiential learning, structured mentorship and cutting edge technological apparatuses. This counterfeits the officers who are cognitively sharp, psychologically resilient and ethically grounded. The global standards provided roadmap precisely advocate the effective implementation of context sensitive leadership development framework particularly for the regions like South Asia. It necessitates a balance thoughtfully respecting enduring cultural and doctrinal traditions while courageously integrating the transformations mandated by modern day hybrid and technologically influenced battlefield environment.

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