Fielding the Finest Army Chief

When the government appointed General Bipin Rawat as the new Army Chief, it triggered widespread debate as two of Gen. Rawat's seniors were superseded in the selection.

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Importance to Seniority and merit:

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- People within and outside the armed forces are concerned that the time-tested principle of seniority should not be overlooked unless merit is overwhelmingly in favour of an officer lower down in the hierarchy.
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- The tricky issue here is, how does the government weigh merit without playing favourites?
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- An apolitical ethos of the services has been one of the strongest pillars of our democracy.
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- Any possibility of senior commanders currying favour with the political leadership would therefore be fraught with grave risks for the nation and its military.
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What is the importance of Army Commanders?

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- The appointment of Army Commanders has a direct bearing on the selection of the Chief, as service chiefs are selected from amongst them.
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- The changing nature of war today covers a spectrum of conflict — nuclear, information, cyber, space, etc.
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- It is inevitable, therefore, that the Indian armed forces are going through phenomenal changes in terms of modernisation of weapons, combat systems,

and strategic application of military power.
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- The Army Commander’s role in this entire gambit is pivotal.
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- Besides commanding all the forces across the whole of Jammu and Kashmir, Rajasthan, the Northeast, and other places, Army Commanders also participate in national-level decision-making over strategic, operational, training, equipment, personnel administration and logistic and financial issues. This is a huge set of responsibilities.
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What are the present criteria to select the chief?

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- There are two criteria to be fulfilled to be elevated to the position of Army Commander: an excellent command of a corps, the highest operational formation, and, in the interest of meaningful stability and continuity in this key appointment, eligible candidates must have **two years of residual service** before appointment (more or less similar criteria apply to the other two services).
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- With these criteria being satisfied, Army Commanders are nominated in **the order of seniority**.
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- At any given time, there could be approximately 14 incumbent corps commanders and approximately five or six more who may have just moved out of their command and who would also be considered to fill vacancies of four or five Army Commanders annually. This would result in only the best being selected.
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- Till now, the mandatory requirement of two years of service and seniority at the time of vacancy has resulted in routine elevations to the appointment of Army Commander, merit not being considered.
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- The logic was that all officers who had reached that level were considered competent and there was no need to introduce unnecessary competition among them.
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Need for reform:

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- The existing policy is therefore anomalous, wherein for promotion to this level the primary criterion is not merit unlike for all other ranks. Henceforth, the selection of Army Commanders must be made only through deep selection.
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- We could consider reducing the stipulation of tenancy of **two years to 18 months** (it is already one and a half years in the Air Force and one year in the Navy) to widen the number of eligible candidates.
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- As regards the selection process, the three service chiefs (four when a Chief of Defence Staff or permanent Chairman of Chief of Staff Committee is introduced) could constitute the selection board, with the chief of the service concerned presiding.
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- A final recommendation could then be sent to the government for approval, as in the cases of select ranks.
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- Some other suggestions, such as selection by a triumvirate comprising the Prime Minister, Chief Justice of India and Leader of the Opposition are not relevant in a system so conditioned by exclusive military insight and stringent professional scrutiny at every stage.
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