

Politicking by the Army Chief

What is the issue?

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- Army Chief Bipin Rawat has been making political statements.
- These out of the ordinary conduct at the top levels of the defence forces is not good for preserving the institution's neutrality.

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What were the comments made by the Army chief?

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- India's service chiefs have a long and healthy tradition of keeping away from politics in their public comments.
- In contrast, Mr. Rawat has been vocal on politically sensitive issues like - religious identity, demographics, and India's relations with its neighbours.
- Mr. Rawat's recently made comments about an "inversion in demographics" and a "planned migration" from Bangladesh into the Northeast.
- He said that part of the Bangladeshi influx into India is driven by economic considerations, but some are pushed through as migrants to wage a proxy war.
- He also alleged that this proxy war strategy was being supported and encouraged by China and Pakistan.
- This string of comments could potentially hit at the core of the institutional neutrality that the services have cherished.

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Why is it important to keep the army neutral?

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- Self-restraint in public commentary has helped in serving both Indian democracy and the military well over the years.
- This is one of the reasons for India having successfully avoided military coups/rebellions unlike other countries in the neighbourhood.
- This has also allowed the Army to maintain its professionalism and neutrality even during tasks such as communally polarising riot control operations.
- This arrangement has also inhibited governments from bidding the Army to do their politically expedient tasks.
- To maintain this neutral balance, it is important that the higher echelons of the defence forces resist from commenting on foreign policy and politics.

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What are the risky fallouts of such loose commentary?

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- Comments coming from the defence chief have a greater impact in escalating hostilities with neighbouring rivals than from that of politicians.
- It also risks reactions from home, which have already come in the form of a sharp response from the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF).
- AIUDF has charged Mr Rawat with straying away from his constitutional remit, a dialogue if furthered could potentially ruin army's shield of neutrality.
- Notably, the latest comments aren't Mr. Rawat 1st ones, and he has been stirring this "hornet's nest" ever since he assumed office at various forums.
- As these developments risk reducing the army's stature from being a state organ to that of a political organ, a course correction is direly needed.

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Source: The Hindu

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