

The Indonesian Journal of Leadership, Policy and World Affairs



STRATEGIC REVIEW

www.sr-indonesia.com

JANUARY-MARCH 2016/VOLUME 6/NUMBER 1



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Rp 95.000

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Who are our ‘best of the best’?

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In the 21st century everything is interconnected. Through interconnectivity, most anyone can access information faster and with greater ease, in particular with technological advancements. Many developing nations have grown more rapidly than they otherwise would have because of globalization. Some are approaching par with developed nations, both economically and militarily. With their growing economies, these countries have been able to allocate more funding for military development – both hardware, which touches on weapons systems and platforms, and software, which focuses on human capital.

Indonesia is one of the countries that has enjoyed the benefits of globalization. As one of the world’s 10 largest economies, according to the World Bank, Indonesia has shown impressive economic growth, allowing it to quadruple its defense budget within the last decade. With its Minimum Essential Forces (MEF) expansion project, Indonesia is projected to modernize its military platforms by 2024. Jakarta has

purchased modern armaments and weapons systems, and has signed agreements on jointly developing additional weapons systems with a number of countries. Similarly, Indonesia is revamping its own national defense industry. Combined with an offset strategy that facilitates transfers of technology from partnering countries, Indonesia has started a new chapter in its military transformation.

Nevertheless, limitations remain in developing human capital within the Armed Forces. Although Indonesia established its own defense university in March 2009, the military continues to follow a conventional model in managing its human resources. This is a concern. Having to deal with a very dynamic environment in the 21st century, a military officer should be adaptive and versatile. Of course, this would complement the basic requirements of having a solid intellectual capability and consistent performance.

However, if we compare the Armed Forces with Indonesia's National Police, the promotion of police officers occurs about 18 months earlier than their military peers who graduate in the same year. This is particularly the case with middle-ranking personnel. In fact, the police also grant special promotions for officers who earn special achievements. Within the military, meanwhile, that same policy is rarely applied. This is due to the different parameters used by the two institutions. It is easier for police personnel because the institution can measure officer achievements by solved cases. One current Indonesian police general received a special rank promotion three times; for the military, that would be harder because there is no

quantitative measurement.

Yet, this should not stop the military trying to find an alternative parameter that could help identify exceptional achievements by its personnel, in particular officers, and expedite their rise up the ranks.

The militaries of developed countries have "fast-track" promotion systems. Singapore, for instance, identifies competent future military leaders from the very early stages of their careers. Starting from Officer Cadet School, prospective candidates are eligible for two prestigious scholarships: the Presidential Scholarship and the Singapore Armed Forces Overseas Scholarship. But only a handful of cadets are selected.

A good example of a scholarship recipient is Chan Chun Sing, a retired Singaporean

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Army general who received the Presidential Scholarship in 1988. This allowed him to study at the University of Cambridge in England and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the United States. He was later promoted

to chief of Singapore's Army when he was still in his early 40s. Chan, who is now a minister in the office of Singapore's prime minister, was one of many officers identified and "fast-tracked" through the ranks of the country's military.

The United States is another notable country that has implemented a fast-track

In Indonesia, the fast-track system was actually implemented during the late President Soeharto's New Order regime. Ironically, among those who benefitted from it was Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

system. Its own scheme is known as "below the zone" or "BZ." This system identifies a group of top-notch officers – at most a mere 10 percent of the total American military officer corps. To gain entry to this elite group, an officer must consistently demonstrate exceptional performance, not only in his or her respective field assignments, but also in academics. Standing out as a superior performer is mandatory.

In Indonesia, the fast-track system was actually implemented during the late President Soeharto's New Order regime. Ironically, among those who benefitted from it was Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who went on to become the country's first directly elected president, in

2004. Yudhoyono was the top graduate of the Indonesian Armed Forces Academy in 1973 and was personally awarded the prestigious Adhi Makayasa medal by Soeharto himself. Yudhoyono joined the Army Strategic Reserve and became an Airborne Battalion platoon commander. He did the US Army Ranger Course in Fort Benning, Georgia, in 1975 and later attended the US Army Command and General Staff College in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He earned a degree from Webster University, in the US state of Missouri, and later a doctorate from the Bogor Agricultural Institute. He was always promoted earlier than his peers due to his performance, and he went on to be a cabinet minister, politician and Indonesia's sixth president.

More recently, however, the Indonesian Armed Forces has halted its accelerated promotion program, due to certain "internal considerations." This is a mistake, and the military should revise its fast-track program. Facing global competition, in particular in the military sector, requires more competent and productive human resources. Officers who demonstrate exceptional and extraordinary performance, both operationally and academically, must have the opportunity for accelerated promotion.

In addition, it would be fair to give these selected officers a chance to study at prestigious universities around the world that can prepare them as future military – and civilian – leaders, such as Harvard, Oxford and Stanford.

To appreciate the necessity of a fast-track scheme within the realities of Indonesia's



present military system, one should compare an officer who works nearly 16 hours a day with another officer who serves only eight hours a day. Most superiors give their most competent and exceptional officers, who may be classified as potential fast-track material, more of a workload than their peers. Yet in the current system there is no distinction in measuring performance. Both the officer who works 16 hours a day and the officer who serves only eight have the same time frame for their promotions. This is unfair to those officers who work harder than their colleagues.

Indeed, if the Indonesian Armed Forces chooses to implement a fast-track scheme, there should be a fair and comprehensive mechanism that can measure any exceptional and extraordinary achievement, as well as the performance of individual officers. Those who graduate in the top 10 percent at the military academy could have the privilege of moving forward on an accelerated track. Nonetheless, should there be any indication of poor performance or lack of integrity, sanctions and punishment must also be applied fairly. This means they would go back to the regular track.

Meanwhile, if there is an officer who did not graduate from the academy in the top 10

percent, but does something extraordinary, he or she should be considered for the fast-track scheme. Of course, once this individual is identified, consistent achievement and performance must be maintained to remain in the top 10 percent, similar to the US military's BZ scheme. Otherwise, the officer will also return to the regular scheme.

So, the fast-track system should be dynamic and adaptive. Those who consistently perform exceptionally will always get the privilege to earn more rewards. Domestic or international achievement may help officers attain accelerated promotion. If regular promotion may take three years, the fast-track officers could get their rank promotion within two or two-and-a-half years. Such incentives would stimulate a more constructive and fair competition among officers. It would also encourage a more productive system in which officers actually demonstrate their best.

This scheme would require the Indonesian Armed Forces to formulate policy and set criteria for prospective candidates for the fast-track list. If they perform continuously above standards, they may get early rank promotion several times before they would be eligible for promotion as a flag officer on the regular track.

Officers who demonstrate exceptional and extraordinary performance, both operationally and academically, must have the opportunity for accelerated promotion.

The Indonesian Armed Forces, clearly, needs a fast-track system to transform itself into a modern organization.

This means fast-trackers could become a flag officer between three and six years earlier than their peers. Having accelerated promotion on this schedule would definitely distinguish them from their classmates. In fact, they may also get a promotion earlier than regular-track senior officers.

Should the Indonesian Armed Forces have the opportunity to produce such officers it may be able to cultivate a pool of young future leaders who are more capable, both operationally and academically, as well as productive and energetic. Furthermore, if the officer is competent enough to pursue a higher degree such as a doctorate, it would benefit the Armed Forces as a whole. Given that it has to interact with international military counterparts from around the world, Indonesia's military must have credible human capital. For example, the United States military conducts more training exercises with Indonesia than it does with any other country, according to Robert O Blake Jr, the US ambassador to Indonesia.

Certainly, reintroducing a fast-track scheme within the Indonesian Armed Forces would not be easy. There could be resistance, especially among those threatened by fast-track officers who are much younger and better educated. This is natural; there will be winners and losers. But fair competition will hopefully encourage the Indonesian military to continuously assess and put forward

prospective future leaders.

The military needs advance planning to reintroduce a fast-track program. First, it should integrate all its database systems to help identify potential candidates. Second, it should develop a 360-degree assessment that involves not only superiors, but also peers and subordinates who work in the same branches as potential candidates. Third, it must have a preparatory English program as well as any other required programs so candidates are prepared. Fourth, it should publicize the fast-track scheme to all Indonesian military personnel, in particular officers. Fifth, it should continuously reassess potential candidates and their accomplishments, both operationally and academically. Sixth, it should provide a fair chance for those who are not listed as fast-track officers. Seventh, it should constantly improve the system by benchmarking it against other countries.

The Indonesian Armed Forces, clearly, needs a fast-track system to transform itself into a modern organization. Sophisticated weapons systems and platforms are one thing, but human capital will determine success as the military attempts to reform as part of Indonesia's overall democratic progression. It's time for the military to standardize a fast-track scheme that will create actual internal competition, in order to push forward the best officers to one day lead. True leadership within the top levels of the military is essential for this to have any chance. 🍀