

Professional Military Education and National Defense Strategy

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Dr. Robert E Schmidle Jr. LtGen USMC (ret)

Professor of Practice, School of Politics and Global Studies

Arizona State University

The views I express in this testimony are my own and should not be construed as representing any official position of Arizona State University

I want to thank Chairwoman Speier, Ranking Member Gallagher and the other members of the subcommittee for the opportunity to address the pertinent issue of Professional Military Education and National Defense Strategy. In this statement I will articulate the problem facing our nation today, which makes this issue so timely. Then I present the challenges encountered in trying to address that problem. Next, I illuminate the considerations we should bear in mind as we propose to address the relationship between Professional Military Education and National Defense Strategy. Finally, I suggest some potential initiatives for implementation that would have a positive, near term effect on making Professional Military Education more relevant to National Defense Strategy.

Problem

The last time the Congress addressed Professional Military Education the Soviet Union was rapidly deconstructing and no peer or even a near peer adversary was lurking on the horizon. Today the landscape is far different with a rising China declaring itself an existential threat to the influence, if not the integrity, of the United States. The imperative to link the education of senior officers and civilians to a National Defense Strategy has never been more pressing. This linkage is critical if we are to create operational end-states that support and enable stated strategic/political end-states in future conflicts. The U.S. has historically demonstrated an unmatched ability to achieve tactical victories on the ground. However, those victories have not always been the ways and means coincident with and enabling, the political goals of whatever conflict was being prosecuted. The difficult task of translating tactical success into desired

strategic results remains an enduring challenge. It is one which requires a truly symbiotic relationship between civilian and military leadership. Producing the next generation of strategic military leaders who understand this relationship and who can design and execute military operations to achieve strategic success is the fundamental issue that must be addressed today.

Challenges

As we wrestle with this problem the first and most important task is to answer the question: “What does the nation need and want from senior officers and civilians?” Answering this question is made timelier by the confrontational threat from China. To deal effectively with China, which has clear hegemonic designs, the nation needs senior officers who are critical thinkers. Their creativity and innovation are essential to keeping the U.S. ahead of the adversary’s developing military capabilities. Those officers will have a solid historical grounding in operational and strategic matters relating to both China and the United States. Additionally, but no less important, they will have a deep understanding and appreciation for traditional civil - military relations and the processes of government. Ultimately, those senior officers and civilians are also the nation’s bulwark against the disruptive effects of events that are a ‘strategic surprise.’ They will help mitigate against surprise because they understand the motivations and perspectives of the U.S. as well as they understand those of the adversary. The challenge confronting this subcommittee is how to best develop those future strategic leaders.

Professional Military Education should be about more than just the accumulation of knowledge, it should be about the demonstrated application of knowledge through rigorous wargaming. The time spent in resident education programs should foster repeated iterations of

wargames where execution is informed by theory. Senior level professional military education is also a venue in which an objective evaluation of an officer's potential for strategic leadership is possible. Identifying those exceptional leaders should be a mission of senior level education.

The challenges presented here are also tied to other related issues, evident in the following questions. First, while there are many important topics that could be taught at professional education institutions, who decides what are the most important topics? Furthermore, who decides which important topics will not be taught in the core curriculum but would be available only in elective courses? Second, to what extent can strategic creativity and operational innovation be curated in senior officers? And how is that best accomplished? Answering these questions is the fundamental first step in constructing a comprehensive plan for developing future strategic leaders.

Another consideration in addressing the challenge(s) that I am articulating, is exploring the relationship between Professional Military Education and the Service's Personnel policies. For example, if professional education is critical to sustaining a strategic and operational advantage over our adversaries then how do we incentivize the best and brightest active duty officers to teach in the War Colleges? Having the finest, world class faculty in a professional military education institution is an imperative to meeting emerging challenges. However, that generally occurs only episodically or by serendipity because of current personnel policies and promotion system priorities. There is a need to direct change so that the most capable officers are serving as faculty and that service is a path to operational command and promotion. These changes will likely require legislation to be widely and enduringly implemented, similar to the legislation that mandated serving in a Joint billet as a prerequisite for promotion to General Officer. That

legislation caused an immediate and noticeable change in officer career patterns. The U.S. military is, in fact, a more lethal and effective Joint force because of that mandate. Along with senior officers, senior Department of Defense and Intelligence Community career civilians should also have the same professional education opportunities and be encouraged and incentivized to attend resident programs. The threat from China and the myriad potential options to deal with aggressive Chinese behavior requires not just domain or Service specific knowledge but knowledge gained through the collaboration of the best minds in the U.S. government. Operationally this means not simply synchronizing different capabilities but the nuanced integration of those capabilities to a level of interdependence unknown and unrealized by any other military. That collaboration can be nurtured and developed through the rigorous wargaming of current and future scenarios.

Considerations

The recently released Joint Chiefs of Staff Vision and Guidance for Professional Military Education & Talent Management, dated May 2020 articulates what the Chairman and the Service Chiefs believe to be the road ahead for Joint Professional Military Education. While the document covers many important issues, it is ultimately up to the individual Services to support these reforms in their budgets and in their personnel policies. However, all too often professional military education has been a “bill payer” for other programs. The true test of the influence of this document will be determined in its execution over multiple Future Year Defense Programs - the devil really is in the details.

Another issue for consideration is determining the content of the curriculum of senior Service schools. That content, evident in the individual courses is generally created by course directors, most of whom do not teach the subjects themselves. This may be done as part of a drive toward standardization of instruction and for that is to be commended. However, it can also be constricting; reflectively biased toward a particular institutional or Service point of view. For example, take the case study methodology used to present a historical operation. In many instances the conventional focus is on discovering the exploitable vulnerabilities of the adversary, generally in the domain most familiar to the creator(s) of the course. While this is a necessary part of any case study, it is not sufficient to fully understand the relevance of actions taken by either side. In order for that case study to be an effective heuristic at the senior service school level, it must include a discussion of not just what happened but why it happened and how the event was influenced by the interface of civilian (political) and military (operational) concerns. These concerns are best addressed by a high-quality faculty who are not limited by narrow academic disciplines or Service domain expertise. Those same faculty should be empowered to create the content of the courses they teach and must, of course, be up to the task of guiding the students through the nuances of civil-military relations.

As I have called out previously, the most powerful teaching tool at senior level schools is wargaming. This is not a BOGSAT (Bunch of Guys/Gals Sitting Around a Table) but a serious, disciplined and realistic approach, which explores the practical application of a theory of victory. Wargames also provide an opportunity for senior faculty to evaluate students under the stress of decision-making in front of their peers. Previously, those students were most likely accustomed to having their staff accept their orders without question because of their rank and

or billet. Now, having their decisions subject to faculty and peer review will sharpen their critical thinking skills by illuminating and articulating alternatives. Importantly, these wargames should be as much about critiquing the blue (friendly) forces as celebrating the discovery of red (adversary) weaknesses. As difficult and uncomfortable as self-criticism maybe, it is an essential step in increasing the effectiveness of decision-making under stress.

An example of successful and influential wargaming at the senior Service school level is the development of “War Plan Orange.” This was the plan for the U.S. Navy’s war at sea against Japan in World War II. “War Plan Orange” was created and subsequently refined through an elaborate series of wargames conducted over many years at the Naval War College. Of note, the premise of the wargame, that Japan would attack and conquer islands across the Pacific Ocean was, at the time, unthinkable. That is, however, a characteristic of the most effective wargames – forcing the participants to think the unthinkable. For example, it would be germane once again, to closely examine the considerations for deterring and/or responding to an adversary’s use of tactical nuclear weapons. Lastly, wargames conducted in the senior Service schools, to be most useful, should include not only military officers and career civilians but political appointees and Members of Congress.

Initiatives

The most significant and far reaching action would be the creation of a Congressional Commission to investigate the state of Professional Military Education and its impact on the National Defense Strategy. Similar to the Cyberspace Solarium Commission, the goal would be to make recommendations for change and initiate legislation to ensure that identified reforms

are in fact, implemented. Quite simply, Professional Military Education needs an advocate(s) in Congress.

In light of the implications of continued Chinese military expansion and increasingly bellicose actions, creating a “China Hands” program should be examined. Those selected for the program would consist of military officers and civilians committed to a career studying all things China. They would gain a deeper understanding of not just the military and political issues but the language, history, economics and culture of China as well. The intent is to gain a high level of institutional knowledge, similar to that developed by the Department of Defense about the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The China Hands would focus on making recommendations directly to Department of Defense and Congressional leadership about potential near-term and long-term strategies. Importantly, possessing expertise on China is only part of what is required. The China Hands must also have a clear and direct path, free from the inevitable bureaucracy, to senior leaders.

In order to provide the necessary oversight and insure the Department of Defense is committed to professional education, a Senate Confirmed Chief Learning Officer for the Office of Secretary of Defense and the Department of Defense could be created. The office would be resourced from the staff and budget of the Joint Staff J-7 and the Office of Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. That exercise in itself, creating a newly empowered office from existing structure, would demonstrate an appropriate level of commitment to Professional Military Education. It would also provide the opportunity for creating direct, structural connections for collaborating and consequently developing a National Defense Strategy.

