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STRATEGIC ADVISORS GROUP

Deploying Knowledge: The Reform and Modernization of NATO Defense Education

NATO must do more with less. The only way this can work is to exercise our intellects and brainpower. That leads to the absolute need for a continuous learning process in which knowledge and understanding are the goals. The complexity of the strategic environment demands no less. This applies to all ranks and services.

While we spend on education and training and often confuse the two, the fact is that much of this effort is not coordinated or integrated. If we are to achieve a “brains-based” approach to solving our key problems and challenges, we must invent a process and environment of continuous learning and education with knowledge and understanding as the goals. New knowledge communities will emerge both within and beyond the Alliance. NATO must exploit these communities in pursuit of cutting-edge education and effect.

This issue brief lays out how to proceed.

Impetus

NATO must be on the front-edge of the revolution in learning and the new Strategic Concept must embrace that mission for the Alliance. NATO militaries face an extensive and growing task list. However, given the financial constraints faced by NATO nations, significant additional funding for extra personnel or equipment is unlikely. Therefore, **new, innovative and cost-effective approaches to military and security effectiveness must be sought in which a new breed of thinking soldier and officer-scholar will interact to use knowledge both as a weapon and a shield.** This will demand and require a revolution in thinking and defense education. NATO must be at the heart of that revolution. Indeed, defense education

The Strategic Advisors Group

To tackle the tough issues facing NATO and the transatlantic community, the Atlantic Council created the Strategic Advisors Group (SAG). Co-chaired by Atlantic Council Chairman Senator Chuck Hagel and Airbus CEO Tom Enders, the SAG is comprised of North American and European preeminent defense experts. Founded in 2007 by then-Atlantic Council Chairman General James L. Jones, General Brent Scowcroft, and Fred Kempe, the SAG provides timely insights and analysis to policymakers and the public on strategic issues in the transatlantic security partnership through issuing policy briefs and reports, hosting strategy sessions for senior civilian and military officials and providing informal expert advice to decision-makers.

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is the great un-mined treasure of NATO effectiveness with defense academies offering rich veins of knowledge yet to be properly exploited.

Therefore, central to the Strategic Concept must be a commitment to strengthen the collective knowledge base of the Alliance through modernized defense education, which if used properly, can act as a force enabler and effects multiplier.

To that end, the new Strategic Concept should encourage NATO to create a group of innovator academies built on and around the NATO Defense College (NDC) (see box on next page) to consider how best to modernize programs, curricula and exploit e-learning as part of a new life-long learning ethos.

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NATO Defense College (NDC) First envisioned by former SACEUR General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the NATO Defense College was created in 1951 to contribute to the effectiveness and cohesion of the Alliance, foster strategic thinking on political-military matters, and serve as a major center of education, study and research.

The need is pressing. The revolutionary change evident in both the international system and society is normally only associated with war. Any such revolution forces choices to be made. **Unfortunately, although NATO allies are at war, they retain a peacetime mindset.** Consequently, there is a very real danger that obsolescence will overwhelm them.

Moreover, the social base upon which armed forces rely is undergoing profound change. With efficiency often given higher importance than effectiveness, the preservation of institutions is too often placed before proper consideration of their role as enablers of effect. For NATO, defense education is pivotal, but to modernize the knowledge base (critical to future effect) **the Alliance will need to stand against a tide in which process is placed above strategy.** Change will thus require placing the defense learner at the heart of outcomes and effect in the field above effect in the classroom. This will demand new commitments from defense and military leaderships often too busy with the here-and-now to invest properly in the future – that after all is the purpose of the Strategic Concept process and defense education should thus be at its core.

Central to the future of defense education will be a new career-long contract between NATO and its nations and educators and defense learners in support of e-learning and learning programs designed as enablers of NATO-deployed personnel. To that end, NATO must forge a new international consensus on four essential elements of defense education: knowledge, learning, technology and the education of future leaders.

Knowledge

Empowering the Learner. The generation and transfer of relevant knowledge will be critical. NATO defense education should thus be founded on a simple principle – ensuring the learner knows and understands all that is needed at every level of command to be mission effective. To that end, such innovation will require a reversal of the educator-learner relationship by affording leadership to the latter. Academies should provide a safe learning environment in which risks can be taken to refine intellectual curiosity into cutting-edge effect and in which knowledge produces creativity.

Exploiting Research. Central to a learner-centric approach is the strengthening of research skills. Equally, effective research will be vital as a means to generate and act upon the environmental and technical factors crucial to mission success. This will be particularly important in hybrid warfare in which understanding historical, cultural and political context is a key enabler of mission success. NATO must better exploit mission-relevant research from across the Alliance.

Learning

Clarity of Education Focus. Challenges abound for the defense educator not least because there is little or no intellectual consensus as to the core role of defense education. NATO can help to correct that. However, there is a self-evident need for clarity about the learning outcomes sought with an emphasis on creating expanded opportunities for learning success. That will require a deeper working knowledge of technical fundamentals and developing skills that lead to the creation of new education products and systems all devoted to creating officers able to cope with the pressures of hybrid war.

Output-based Education. Output-based education is standard in the business world and NATO must seek to exploit such experience. For example, medical education emphasizes output with individuals being assessed after each year of development. This education is supported by a far flatter command hierarchy in which teams of professionals deliver relevant results in an often uncertain environment similar in certain important respects to NATO operations.

Security Education. NATO defense education must also be placed within a broad security context. This will enable both NATO defense education and defense academies to pass the critical test of relevancy which will doubtless become more severe. “Clients” would be drawn from beyond the traditional pool and reach out to all those in the “food chain” of security, as well as partners in government and industry. NATO defense academies must thus become learning machines designed to act as the nexus of broad security knowledge transfer to all security stakeholders, including police forces, government, relevant civilian organizations and industry. In other words, this effort must embrace all those involved in NATO’s core business – the deliverance of stability through security.

The Value of Enduring Learning. Life-long learning will need to be reinforced by a concept of “enduring learning” across the Alliance. Only then will sound metrics be established for both NATO defense educators and learners across the Alliance given the specific need to enhance the effect and utility of forces in pursuit of mission success.

Technology

The Utility of Technology. Technology will be essential for effective distance defense learning. Indeed, e-learning is as much a part of the future as the classroom. To that end, a much better understanding is needed by both educator and learner as to the utility, possibility and, indeed, limits of technology. NATO needs to be on the front-edge of this revolution. In preparing for the future, the Alliance should also consider cultural and generational views of technology in defense education. It will doubtless be easier for younger generations (Generations Y and Z) to exploit technology as a conduit and interface with information.

Exploiting the Information Environment. The 21st century information revolution will be a defining feature of the age. The challenge for the defense educator will thus be how best to utilize technology. Indeed, NATO defense educators must be encouraged, tasked and skilled to best exploit technologies. Moreover, the Alliance should encourage the new knowledge communities that technology will promote and which will in turn reinforce life-long learning through improved distance learning and enhanced choice and control for the learner.

Creating a Virtual Alliance-wide Single Site. In a new technological and information domain, the utility of single-site defense learning centers in life-long learning is questionable. NATO is in a unique position to bring together best practices from across the Alliance to create a virtual education site based on and built around the NATO Defense College. This will at the very least assist defense educators and learners across the Alliance to better understand the technologies needed to master the new learning and offer new, innovative programs and curricula with the College acting as an information broker to meet the challenge of front-line focused, life-long learning.

The Value of Personal Interaction. Technology also has its limits. Indeed, while technology will doubtless prove useful for learning skills and promoting realistic simulation, it must also be seen for what it is: an enabler and not an end in itself. Knowledge content through sound academic programs must remain central to the ethos of defense education and NATO must re-state its commitment to modernize such efforts to recruit the quality people able to afford the end-user the knowledge and skills vital to mission success.

Educating Future Leaders

Promoting Leadership. One of the central tenets of sound military leadership is an ability to make a good decision reflectively. Thus, military professionals need abstract as well as practical knowledge if they are to be equipped for dealing with complex contingencies. In a sense, the task of the defense educator is to develop the post-modern warrior. NATO must embrace such a role.

NATO Education Standards. The focus on military art must be maintained so that a balance is struck between knowledge, invention and convention in the future military leader. NATO should encourage defense educators to further balance the traditional role of defense academies as thermostats of conformity with much greater consideration given to equip officers to think under pressure. Again, the focus must be the needs of the end-user.

NATO Centers of Excellence. NATO defense academies must thus become centers of excellence based on a new set of NATO education standards designed to promote and create the conditions for high-quality inquiry by offering multiple perspectives. These academies must be open to the uncertain nature of what is divergent knowledge, for only such openness will promote experimentation.

Extending the Military-Academic Partnership. If NATO defense education is to act as an intellectual force multiplier, the military-academic partnership must be further extended. One very obvious lacuna is the absence of strategy education at the two, three and four-star level. Understanding strategy is critical if NATO militaries and future leaders are to move away from management and back to leadership.

The Way Ahead

Building an Alliance-wide shared knowledge base is the first step. Indeed, such a knowledge base is itself central to the STRATCON 2010 mission. Such a step would break down the stovepipes that too often exist between those in government charged with delivering security by creating a single intellectual domain. Such reform is urgently needed. The current approach to defense education is often inflexible with defense establishments locked into fixed requirements over time with outdated programs and people.

The new Strategic Concept has an opportunity to promote the modernization of the Alliance through education in a manner that is both effective and cost-effective, the twin-headed mantra of NATO's post-modern realm.

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