

# GNSI DECISION BRIEF



## Educate as You Operate: Developing National Security Practitioners for Strategic Competition

Written by:  
David P. Oakley, PhD  
David H. Ucko, PhD

February 7, 2024



UNIVERSITY of  
**SOUTH FLORIDA**  
Global and National Security Institute



## Educate as You Operate: Developing National Security Practitioners for Strategic Competition

### Introduction

Amid a “rapidly changing world,” shaped by “strategic competition” and “shared challenges,” the 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS) set out a U.S. vision for a global environment “that is free, open, secure, and prosperous.” Achieving this vision, it acknowledged, will “demand increased global cooperation,” not only across the United States Government but with its partners and allies.<sup>1</sup> In similar terms, the 2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS) recognized the novel threats of near-peer competitors and emphasized the need to work “seamlessly across warfighting domains, theaters, the spectrum of conflict, all instruments of U.S. national power and our networks of alliances and partners.” It seems the NDS and NSS authors believe good strategy is important, but integration is key to its implementation.

Against this urgent call for more integration and better orchestration of statecraft, the U.S. Government maintains a parochial and stove-piped approach to educating its national security practitioners. If the NSS and NDS are correct about the strategic environment and what is required to prevail, the current U.S. approach to national-security practitioner education needs a reassessment. To make matters worse, the needed fix is long overdue, but DoD and partner agencies have not answered the calls for reform.

Ideally, national security education would be overhauled to offer national security practitioners a wholly integrated, resourced, and authentic approach to instruction. Such a change would require fundamental cultural and structural change across several institutions and appears unlikely, or at least far off. In the near term, with proper vision and leadership, much can be achieved by working within the Pentagon’s existing professional military education (PME) system—particularly its mid-level and senior-level programs. This system currently presents the amplest opportunity for practitioner schooling in national security. It is a system that could be made more relevant to today’s security challenges by incorporating more diverse faculty and students—including from partner nations, and by broadening the focus beyond warfighting, which remains but one of the ways in which U.S. national security is threatened. At the same time, such reforms would need to retain PME’s central purpose—to equip practitioners with the skills necessary to plan and strategize against complex threats.

This Decision Brief discusses the challenges, possibilities, and recommendations of broadening PME for a new strategic era, without losing its intended purpose. On this basis, it also proposes bridging the gap between PME and civilian educational institu-

tions to extend the opportunity for relevant national security instruction. Pending a potentially broader overhaul of national security education, the Brief lays out how to proceed – for how to intellectually prepare the security practitioners of tomorrow.

### An Unhealthy Bifurcation

Whereas the Department of Defense (DoD) offers members of the armed forces a range of educational establishments which to attend, national security professionals outside the military must rely almost exclusively on civilian education through accredited universities. Civilian practitioners are therefore put in a separate category from military leaders, all of whom are educated and trained specifically for command and staff work. Such separation is harmful to the nurturing of national security practitioners.

Civilian academia can be a fantastic opportunity to broaden minds and nurture important attributes such as critical thinking and empathy, but it seldom offers practitioners the know-how necessary to translate such knowledge into strategic plans and action. Indeed, a crucial difference between (most) civilian institutions and the PME experience is the focus on understanding vs. doing. PME is largely vocational, in that it seeks (much like divinity or dentistry schools) to prepare students for the specific tasks of their trade. This often means instructing not just in theory and concepts but also in processes and procedure, based on trade-specific methodologies.

Most civilian education programs eschew this approach to education (really, it borders on training) because they are not in the business of preparing national security practitioners. Similarly, with very few exceptions, there is no civilian replica for the military’s doctrine, organization, institutionalized intellectual efforts, and operational templates to approach strategic competition in a systematic manner. This can easily deprive civilians of the campaigning mindset necessary to assess and respond strategically to emerging challenges.

If PME emphasizes the professional development of future leaders, it can also betray a rigid and at times two-dimensional approach to education. Many PME programs end up developing technicians who may grasp strategy and planning but neglect the very socio-political environments where those constructs unfold. Grounded in a military culture of conformity and, even, anti-intellectualism, PME can at times seem self-referential and unhealthily centralized, both in design and in execution. Efforts to broaden PME to emphasize critical thinking, area stud-

ies, political economy, and other non-military considerations tend to meet resistance, because their addition comes at the expense of a “military focus” that, it is argued, should be the central concern of a war college. The unintended effect can be a profoundly apolitical - or, ironically, anti-Clausewitzian - understanding of warfare because it separates the military instrument from the socio-political environment it seeks to influence. Barriers to topics deemed “too civilian” have recently been raised further through the DoD’s growing concern with “lethality” and with regaining a war-fighting edge against near-peer competitors.

The bifurcation between professional and civilian education is as unnecessary as it is harmful. It stymies the creation of a nimble and strategic national security community, capable of the integrated and concerted action that our strategy documents say is needed. Practitioners involved with national security require an authentic educational experience that mirrors the very complexity and comprehensiveness of the challenges they are meant to address. For PME, this would imply far greater concentration on the strategic environment and its political, economic, and even cultural underpinnings, as this is the context in which the military trade will be plied. For civilian academia, it would mean equipping future practitioners with the skills and terminology to translate hard-earned knowledge into purposeful action, through a campaigning mindset and the ability to craft strategy.

### Educating for Strategic Competition

In 1946, recognizing the need for an integrated national security educational approach, the War Department Military Education Board recommended the establishment of a National Security University to educate military practitioners and diplomats.<sup>ii</sup>

“In addition to the Industrial College and National War College,

security environment,” the Department of Defense’s Quadrennial Defense Review stated that the Pentagon would “transform the National Defense University, the Department’s premier educational institution, into a true National Security University.” The action was “to support the educational needs of the broader U.S. national security profession,” open the classroom and curricula to the interagency, and enable a “unified U.S. Government approach to national security missions.”<sup>iv</sup> This was not the first call to change how U.S. national security professionals are educated, but much like other attempts at reform, it went nowhere.<sup>v</sup>

Today, the need for change is so urgent that we cannot wait for a new blueprint or holistic transformation. Instead, the proposal outlined below presents tested practices that could be implemented within present structures to foster greater interagency convergence as well as broader strategic competencies across government.

The proposal rests on three pillars aimed at intellectually developing the individual while preparing them to operate as part of an integrated team. The first pillar encompasses strategic thought, political theory, research methods, and critical thinking. This pillar borrows most comprehensively from the traditional civilian academic experience and is intended to produce graduates who analyze the world, can reason critically, generate new knowledge through research, and are familiar with the concepts and theories underpinning political action.

The second pillar, strategic assessment, is an intermediary between traditional academia and the war college experience, in that it trains students in how to evaluate threats and contexts for planning purposes. This professional understanding is often

#### **To achieve outcomes identified in the National Security Strategy, U.S. national security practitioners must:**

- 1) Have a full understanding of the strengths, limitations, and risks of military force
- 2) Maintain a comprehensive grasp of the relationships between the military and other elements of national power
- 3) Appreciate the socio-political dynamics in the strategic environment to include partners, allies, adversaries, and others
- 4) Appreciate how U.S. policy implementation might affect the strategic environment

#### **With these requirements in mind, we propose a professional model that:**

- 1) Retains the war college focus on technical skills-building for the crafting of strategy
- 2) Enhances political, societal, and economic analysis to broaden the fields of knowledge required to apply technical skills with meaning
- 3) Diversifies the classroom, meaning both students and faculty, to ensure integrated national-security learning, problem solving, and exposure.

the board proposed a joint administrative college, a joint intelligence college, and a Department of State college.”<sup>iii</sup> The vision was sound but not implemented, as all civilian institutions failed to make the cut. When the National Defense University was created in 1974, it included only two schools, both of which were predominantly geared toward military education.

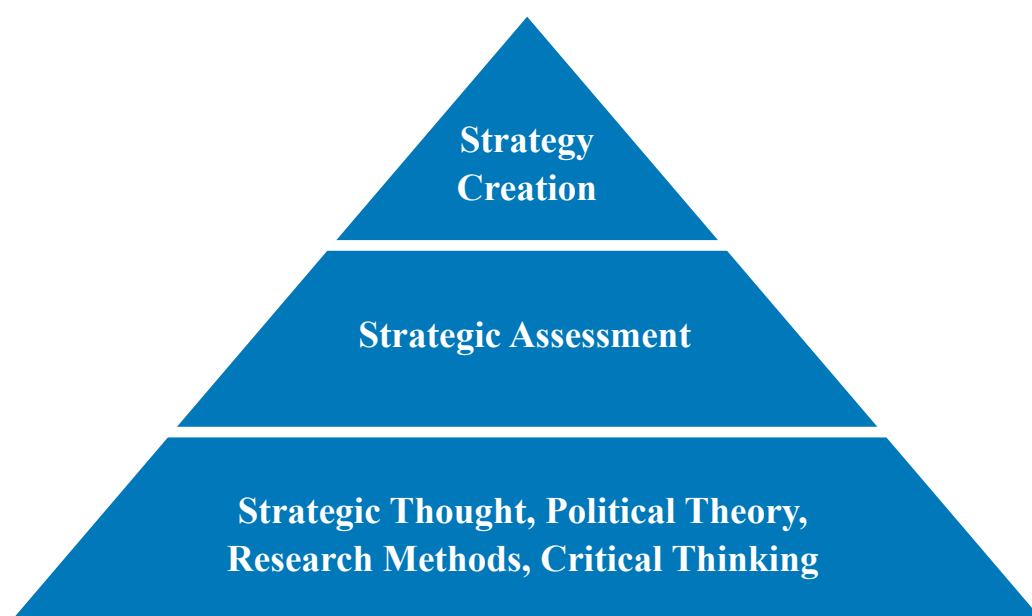
In 2006, in recognition of “the complexity of the 21st century

displayed in the form of a collective strategic appraisal and serves as the baseline for any strategy-making. By teaching professional methods of analysis, practitioners are equipped to instrumentalize research and knowledge into a product that is explicitly intended for interagency planning. It distinguishes between knowledge for the sake of knowledge and the knowledge required to design and take purposeful action. The third pillar concerns the ability to create and present

strategies, to plan collaboratively, and to apply a campaigning mindset to complex problems. This pillar is the acme of the practitioner’s education – it is what allows for concerted action – but it also relies on the foundations provided in the first two pillars. The critical analysis of the world and evaluation of a threat or challenge provide, in concert with professional training, the ability to craft strategy accordingly. To engage in such education alongside a diverse group of U.S. national security professionals, allies, and partners would further sensitize practitioners to the existence of different perspectives, create bonds between disparate communities, and empower such networks with a sufficiently common language. This is how you build a national security corps capable of integrated analysis and action.<sup>vi</sup>

opportunities are necessary, they are insufficient to nurture the “critical thinking” professional that the strategic environment demands. An arc of educational opportunities should therefore be incorporated into individual and organizational developmental plans, to foster the shared understanding and nurture the intellectual attributes originally sown in the classroom.<sup>vii</sup> Clearly, practitioners cannot remain in formal year-long educational programs in perpetuity, but much can be achieved through shorter-duration courses, virtual programming, and reach-back opportunities to alma maters.

The third recommendation, which can help achieve the first two, is to increase collaboration between PME, government organizations, and civilian academia. This can occur through PME broadening opportunities at civilian schools, collaborative



### Final Recommendations

Three final recommendations are worth mentioning as decision-makers consider how to approach national security education from a broader theoretical view. The first recommendation is to diversify the classroom – faculty and students. If the curriculum aims to bridge traditional academia with skill-based aspects of professional education, it is imperative for faculty to be similarly flexible and well versed. To “learn as we operate,” it is similarly crucial that students represent all relevant agencies involved in national security, a field that today extends far beyond just the military and intelligence services. Finally, as emphasized in America’s various strategic documents, America cannot address its security threats alone. It must build bonds with the allies and partner nations it will be operating alongside in the field. The key theme here is to produce, in the classroom, the eclecticism and diversity that students will confront as practitioners.

The second recommendation is to prioritize life-long education and move away from the “episodic approach.” Education should not be viewed merely as individual credentialing experiences that occur every few years. Although formal educational

conferences, joint research projects, or the involvement of scholars in wargames and planning sessions. Recurring collaboration will introduce practitioners to greater diversity and varied perspectives--crucial experiences for practitioners who will be asked to make sense of complex, dynamic, and unfamiliar environments. Partnering with civilian academia will also provide the necessary resources to move the military away from the “episodic” educational approach its leaders criticize.<sup>viii</sup>

## Decision Points

- What attributes should a security practitioner have to operate in a “strategic competition” environment? How can these attributes be developed and nurtured?
- How can DoD adapt its educational approach to produce the type of practitioner that its documents say is required for the current security environment?
- Is it time for increased educational collaboration with other USG agencies, US civilian universities, and international universities? If so, how can this collaboration be achieved?
- How can the DoD resolve its “episodic” education issue to nurture the type of national security professional it requires?

---

**Dr. David Oakley**, Academic Director, Global and National Security Institute  
**Dr. David H. Ucko**, Professor at National Defense University’s College of International Security Affairs and Non-Resident Senior Fellow, Global and National Security Institute

### Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Sarah Brown, Jim Cardoso, Arman Mahmoudian, and Heather Ward for their expert review and editing of this manuscript.

### Disclaimer:

This document was prepared by the Global and National Security Institute (GNSI) at the University of South Florida (USF). GNSI Decision Briefs aim to inform the reader on a particular policy issue to enhance decision-making while proposing the questions policymakers need to address. The analysis and views presented here belong to the author(s) and do not represent the views of the Department of Defense or its components or the USF administration or its components.

---

<sup>i</sup> Joseph R. Biden Jr., National Security Strategy (Washington, D.C: White House, October 2022), 1-16, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

<sup>ii</sup> Doug Orsi, “Looking Back for the Future of Joint PME,” War Room, April 21, 2023, accessed on January 22, 2024, <https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/articles/post-war-pme/>; Report of War Department Military Education Board on Educational System for Officers of the Army (Washington, D.C: War Department, May 1946), 27, <https://cgsc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p4013coll11/id/1266>.

<sup>iii</sup> John Yaeger, “The Origins of Joint Professional Military Education,” JFQ 37 (2005), 79.

<sup>iv</sup> Department of Defense, Quadrennial Defense Review Report, (Washington, DC: Pentagon, February 2006), 79, <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/quadrrennial/QDR2006.pdf?ver=2014-06-25-111017-150>.

<sup>v</sup> Kristy N. Kamarck, “Goldwater-Nichols and the Evolution of Officer JPME,” Congressional Research Service, January 13, 2016, accessed on January 24, 2024, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44340>; George W. Bush, White House, Executive Order 13434: National Security Professional Development (Washington, D.C.: May 17, 2007), <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-13434-national-security-professional-development>. For example, Goldwater-Nichols required Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) to improve joint interoperability and EO13434: required “the national strategy shall set forth a framework that will provide security professionals access to integrated education, training, and professional experience and thereby improve their capability to safeguard the security of the Nation.” In both instances, policymakers were trying to adapt education to better prepare practitioners for the strategic environment.

<sup>vi</sup> Department of Defense, Joint Publication 5-0: Joint Planning, (Washington, DC: Pentagon, December 2020), xiii and IV-1. JP 5-0 lists “Adaptive and Flexible” as one of the “principles of planning” and states that “Planning is an adaptive process that occurs in a networked, collaborative environment.” JP 5-0 also acknowledges the importance of broad perspectives to gain a fuller appreciation and the necessity of collaboration to achieve it.

<sup>vii</sup> “Want ‘Strategically Minded Warfighters?’ Then Make ‘Intellectualism’ a Military Value” (co-authored with Mike Obadal), InterPopulum: Journal of Irregular Warfare and Special Operations. Pending.

<sup>viii</sup> The Joint Chiefs of Staff, Developing Today’s Joint Officers for Tomorrow’s Ways of War: The Joint Chiefs of Staff Vision and Guidance for Professional Military Education & Talent Management, [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/education/jcs\\_pme\\_tm\\_vision.pdf?ver=2020-05-15-102429-817](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/education/jcs_pme_tm_vision.pdf?ver=2020-05-15-102429-817) (accessed November 10, 2022).