

Challenges to Senior Professional Military Education. Observations from the Baltic Defence College

Eugeniusz Cieślak

Baltic Defence College, Riia 12, 51010 Tartu, Estonia

Correspondence: eugeniusz.cieslak@baltdefcol.org

Abstract

The paper discusses the main observations of the Higher Command Studies Course as a senior professional military education program at the Baltic Defence College, relating them to ongoing debates. It draws upon data from publicly available sources. The Higher Command Studies Course faces challenges similar to most of its Western counterparts. However, the unique ownership structure of the BALTDEFCOL, the curriculum of the course, and its faculty provide flexibility and responsiveness. These findings may be used to inform the debates on senior professional military education.

KEY WORDS: *Professional military education; PME; senior level; Baltic Defence College; BALTDEFCOL, Higher Command Studies Course*

Citation: Cieślak, E. (2024). Challenges to Senior Professional Military Education. Observations from the Baltic Defence College. In Proceedings of the Challenges to National Defence in Contemporary Geopolitical Situation, Brno, Czech Republic, 11-13 September 2024. ISSN 2538-8959. DOI 10.3849/cndcgs.2024.306.

1. Introduction

The 2018 National Defense Strategy instigated a contentious debate regarding professional military education within the United States, critically evaluating how well it could achieve its stated goals. In this recent discussion on professional military education, a spectrum of perspectives, opinions, and recommendations has been offered, all aimed at enhancing the quality of graduates' preparation for subsequent assignments, refining the scope and methods of educating officers at successive levels of development, and assessing student performance. Numerous stakeholders have engaged in discussions concerning the structure and effectiveness of military educational institutions. Many evaluations and suggestions have been put forth within these discussions, focusing on intricate aspects such as curriculum content, teaching methodologies, assessment techniques, and more. While much attention has been devoted to scrutinising the structure and efficacy of US military educational institutions, there exists a notable dearth of contemporary research on European equivalents, often relying on outdated sources. This study seeks to address this gap by critically examining the current landscape of senior professional military education and sharing relevant observations from experiences at the Baltic Defence College.

The ongoing debate pertains specifically to senior professional military education, which aims to equip senior officers and their civilian counterparts with the skills necessary for strategic-level responsibilities. Politicians and government officials cooperating with the military have acknowledged the complexity of challenges inherent at this level. In the United States, congressional representatives have noted a gap in professional military education, observing that while it effectively prepares officers for joint operations, it falls short in fostering cooperation at the strategic level with politicians who often lack historical context and cultural insight. While recent institutional efforts have been made to enhance the synergy between senior professional military education and lower-tier levels of education within individual branches of armed forces, tangible outcomes are likely to materialise only in the foreseeable future. The renewed emphasis on NATO's fundamental mission of collective defence and deterrence underscores the heightened significance of adequately preparing officers at all levels of professional military education. This imperative pertains to the quantity and quality of graduates at every tier of professional military education. Given the diminishing expertise in high-intensity warfare within Allied militaries over recent decades, a clear requirement exists to realign professional military education to address the evolving security environment more effectively. This necessity extends beyond the United States and encompasses all Allied nations in Europe.

This research employs a critical analysis of official documents, academic research, and ongoing debate surrounding senior professional military education. It seeks to bridge insights from this discourse with solutions implemented at the Baltic Defence College.

A key focus was comparing observations and recommendations from the Western educational community, particularly the U.S. military educational community, with those specific to the Baltic Defence College. The retrospective scope of this study is confined to the past decade, although earlier data was utilised to contextualise assessments related to the researched period. The research draws upon data extracted from publicly available documents, academic research, and inputs shared within communities of practice.

2. Institutional Perspectives on Professional Military Education in the United States

A critical assessment of the state of the U.S. PME in the National Defence Strategy 2018 took place just a few years after the U.S. Congress issued a report on the long-term transformation of the education system for the needs of joint forces. The Congressional report “Another Crossroads? Professional Military Education Two Decades After the Goldwater-Nichols Act and the Skelton Panel” assessed that the “PME system was still basically sound.” Nevertheless, some aspects of professional military education were identified as requiring improvement. The report pointed to two main areas: systemic and institutional issues. The first referred to the conceptual framework of education, the competencies and skills of graduates at various levels of education, and its role in shaping the professional development of officers. The report revealed, among other things, a lack of a complete correlation between obtaining a specific education and being assigned a respective military position. Cultivating strategists was considered unsatisfactory, and it was concluded that PME does not play a fundamental role in shaping strategists. The report noted progress regarding the qualitative content and delivery of the PME and improvements to rigour. The Subcommittee found that PME curricula adapt at differing but generally appropriate levels to new demands while retaining suitable emphases on the enduring subjects of history and strategy. The need for senior leaders to maintain ownership of PME was underlined (Committee on Armed Services, 2010). To sum up, it must be noted that the above report provided a balanced view of the PME's measurable achievements and identified potential areas for improvement.

The conclusions of the congressional report remain in stark contrast with claims included in the 2018 National Defense Strategy. Its summary states that PME has “stagnated” and “focused more on exercising mandatory credit at the expense of lethality and ingenuity.” In the light of previous assessments of the Congress, the conclusions included in the national defence strategy seem excessively critical and characterised by the beliefs of the then Secretary of Defense. Although this first sentence resonated widely in military circles, the strategy also discussed other problems related to PME. It emphasised “intellectual leadership and military professionalism in the art and science of warfighting” (U.S. Department of Defense, 2018). One may speculate that the personal experience and preferences of the Secretary of Defense Gen. (ret.) James Mattis led to an emphasis in the strategy on the value of deepening knowledge of history. However, it put history on equal footing by embracing new technology and techniques to better prepare officers to counter competitors. Independence of action in warfighting concepts was praised as a prerequisite to lessen the impact of degraded/lost communications in combat. Finally, the 2018 National Defense Strategy highlighted the role of PME as a strategic asset to build trust and interoperability across the Joint Forces and with allied and partner forces. PME was viewed along with talent management, which was supposed to develop leaders competent in national-level decision-making. The strategy acknowledged that it would require broad revision of existing policies for talent management among the Armed Services. It listed, among other things, fellowships, civilian education, and assignments that increase understanding of interagency decision-making processes, as well as alliances and coalitions as possible ways to manage talent. The concerns voiced in the National Defense Strategy 2018 were reflected by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in their document “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,” which was published in May 2020 (Joint Chiefs of Staff, Vision, 2020).

2. The ongoing debate on the senior professional military education

Problems of professional military education have been discussed in recent decades by a relatively small group of researchers, usually directly associated with PME institutions. References to education are also present in publications and speeches of practitioners in the field of security and defence, including politicians, government officials and active or retired officers. In most cases, the debate revolved around the U.S. professional military education system and was mainly attended by U.S. specialists. A limited group of people with expressive views published subsequent articles in specialised military or academic periodicals, and the discussion revolved around traditional topics related to PME – the role of professional military education, model curricula, and delivery of educational programs. It required some effort to follow this debate as it was niche and low profile (Cieślak, 2018). The situation changed in 2018 when a critical assessment of U.S. military education in the newly published U.S. National Security Strategy reinvigorated a heated discussion on professional military education. The debate was important because it engaged a broad group associated with military education. What's more, the presented views, opinions, and assessments proposed detailed systemic and institutional solutions that were used in officer education or should, in the authors' opinion, be applied in professional military education. In addition to apparent emotions and views reflecting specific observations from a single PME institution, the debate has also offered more balanced views and broad general observations accumulated by interlocutors during their decades-long commitment to education (Andres, 2018). Two main narratives may be observed within the ongoing discussion on PME inspired by the critical assessments of its state in the National Defense Strategy 2018. The prevailing belief among a relatively wide group of specialists has been that, despite certain deficiencies and limitations, PME fulfilled its role in the professional preparation of officers and required some, but not fundamental, changes (Ellinger E. & Posard M. N., 2023). A smaller group of authors have formulated more radical

judgments. They believe that PME is not adapted to the needs of the armed forces and requires fundamental changes or even a revolution to become relevant again (Allen, 2019, Schultz, 2018).

There is a far-reaching consensus regarding the scope of teaching at respective levels of military education. Professional military education is generally delineated into precommissioning, primary, intermediate, and senior levels, as well as General Officers'/Flag Officers' education. Those consecutive levels are supposed to serve the development of officers along their professional developmental paths. Despite some minor national peculiarities, the first two levels focus on tactical proficiency; intermediate education covers operational aspects of warfare. At the same time, senior PME is meant to study strategic-level issues. General Officers'/Flag Officers' education usually covers short-term courses. Publicly available guidelines and policies on professional military education and educational programs contain requirements regarding teaching areas and often also teaching content (Joint Chiefs of Staff, Policy..., 2020). Other than some extreme views, one can see the desire to maintain the existing general framework for officer education at their respective levels. The subject of discussion is the proportions of educational content and the balance between history and the future. In the case of senior PME, the main effort is to prepare senior officers and their civilian counterparts to serve at the strategic levels, being ready to work within the national security and defence establishment (interagency environment) and in the international environment (allied and coalition partners). Therefore, most experts agree that curricula for senior PME should include a comprehensive study of the security environment, security and defence policy, and strategy. While developing junior officers contains a relatively significant portion of tactical and technical training, it shifts to more universal and academic skills later. Although some believe that senior officers should be preparing mainly for their first assignment after the respective senior PME programme, most experts favour universal education and the development of critical thinking skills. Some call even for a critical thinking spirit (Antrobus, S. & West, H., 2022). They believe senior PME should reinforce officers' and their civilian counterparts' critical thinking, research, and communication skills rather than exercising staff procedures. As senior PME is built on foundations laid by junior and intermediate education, there is a consensus that it should not repeat its curricula.

The ongoing debate on professional military education has seen lengthy disputes about its focus and scope. For senior PME, strategy is the primary and uncontested topic of study. This is not the case for the history of war and innovations competing for primacy. Some experts argue for more history in the PME curricula, while others point out that the professional military education system and curricula are already dominated by military history too heavily. Those overwhelmed by military history propose more focus on instilling creativity and devoting more time to economics, organisational and social psychology, computer science, geography, and other fields that can aid in preparing officers for the complex operational and strategic environment in which they will find themselves. Noticeably, while there are numerous suggestions on what to add to educational programs, it is less frequent to see meaningful suggestions on what to remove or limit in senior PME curricula. Even among practitioners, there is no complete agreement on the immediate utility of senior professional military education. Some of them support the orientation of curricula toward developing specific skills, which may be utilised immediately after graduation (Tornhill, 2018). This approach is focused on serving the first assignment after graduating from a senior PME program. A former U.S. Army War College commandant, Robert H. Scales, postulated in 2017 an exceptionally rigorous two-year program of case studies, regional staff rides, and on-force operational-level war games (Scales, 2017). He wanted to eliminate extraneous distractions dictated by the regular college curriculum. Their interlocutors, who stress the importance of broad education, warn that a short-sighted focus on skills immediately needed after graduation might harm critical and strategic thinking and other functional competencies later in the career. Such observation might be valid as, for most officers, the senior PME programme they attend might be the last formal education in their military career that can stretch for a decade or two afterward.

Active learning is the mantra in the ongoing discussion on professional military education. The need for case study-based education is advocated. However, there are differences in opinions on whether those case studies should be rooted in military history or future-oriented and tied to current security and defence developments. Many interlocutors call for exposing students to different forms of experiential learning. Some are very specific with the type of wargaming they propose, while others point to the need to use multiple forms of experiential learning. Those who propose board game wargaming across all schools (Lacy, 2019) are criticised by others who claim that one size fits all might be more harmful than helpful (Lee C. & Lewis B.). There is a clear understanding that wargaming has a place but is no panacea for military professional education, and various immersive programs might serve to achieve multiple learning objectives. The debate also stresses the importance of a holistic approach to the curricula of senior professional education programs and not viewing them as checklists for required activities.

Debating senior PME is often tied to capitalising on its graduates. There is an expectation that the graduates will be assigned planning assignments at strategic levels, and their primary responsibilities will include developing strategies and strategic operations plans. Senior PME is viewed as a way of creating future strategic leaders. Selection of candidates is elitist by design, and senior courses are available to a small percentage of the best officers and their civilian counterparts. Usually, candidates for senior PME represent approximately ten per cent of the cohort and are constituted of a group with professional and intellectual predispositions for promotion to higher positions at strategic levels. Advocates for increasing the elitism of senior PME point not only at requirements for candidate selection but also to academic rigour during studies and potential attrition of students. Although significant in some countries, the number of students in senior PME is proportional to the size of their armed forces and officer corps. Many researchers would like to see the attrition levels in senior PME programs comparable to the undergraduate programs at top civilian universities. They tend not to see a highly competitive selection process that serves the same purpose. Despite the apparent elitism of senior PME, it is not a guarantee of influential, growing

future strategic leaders and thinkers. Although education plays a vital role in that process, it must be considered as one of the enablers of achieving the desired outcome.

There are strong opinions on who should teach the senior PME programmes. Many authors stress that the faculty that is expert in teaching curriculum should be developed and cultivated. This proposal is often contrasted with a stark conclusion that the faculty of many PME institutions is inadequate, ossified, has little academic recognition, and is not diverse enough. There is a desire for a greater diversity of thought in the PME faculty. Some observe that civilian faculty should not consist predominantly of military historians and some political scientists, but it should embrace more teachers of economy, organisational and social psychology, computer science or geography to prepare the graduates better for operating in complex strategic environments. For PME programs involving many students, there is a concern about using “underqualified military instructors to deliver a standardised curriculum design, simple evaluation metrics and other tools of the education industry” (Lowther & Mitchell, 2020).

The ongoing debate on professional military education touches upon numerous other topics. The literature review of the best practice principles for professional military education compiled by Goode in 2019 points to critical thinking, endemic openness, the need for diversity, curriculum design, assessment design and administration. Additionally, Goode reviews best practices of institutional self-assessment, establishing alumni networks, building online communities of practice, as well as seeking regular feedback from students. The discussion on the best practices for professional military education also touches upon incorporating more variety in assessment tasks, using a portfolio approach to demonstrate students' progression through the program and distance learning modules before the face-to-face course, and reflecting on the academic rigour of programs, which everyone passes (Goode, 2019). While these are valuable topics, the limited scope of the paper precludes them from being covered in more detail.

3. Observations from the Baltic Defence College

The philosophy of senior Professional Military Education offered at the Baltic Defence College is rooted in the College's origins. The school was established in 1999 by three Framework Nations, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, to prepare their newly established militaries to adopt Western standards and be ready to operate alongside NATO and Allies. Initial training and education delivered by BALTDEFCOL focused on the tactical level. However, it became soon apparent that a strategic-level professional military education program was needed to meet the Framework Nations' requirements. Initially, such education was provided during the Colonels Course. However, it was for military officers only and focused on preparing them for assignments within national defence ministries and military headquarters. Opening the course to civil servants from ministries of defence and foreign affairs and extending the scope of the course beyond national requirements paved the way to establishing the Higher Command Studies Course. The HCSC was inaugurated in 2004 to educate senior military officers and government officials on the challenges of adapting national, Allied, and European defence institutions (Corum, 2012). The course was meant to prepare its students to participate in the full spectrum of twenty-first-century operations. The underpinning philosophy of the course was to prepare the Baltic States' armed forces to make effective contributions to international efforts to face the strategic security challenges. The HCSC was to ensure that the defence leadership of the Baltic States would comprehend the requirements for the transformation of their defence establishments and be ready to lead significant defence development programs. At the same time, the course graduates were prepared to serve in NATO headquarters and the European Union institutions as the Baltic States had joined both organisations. Such an approach attracted international interest in the course, and the number of states sending their students to HCSC started growing immediately after its establishment (Corum & Johanson, 2019). The course is half a year-long, although there were some efforts in the past to extend it to one year, similar to most of the Western war college programs (Corum, 2012). By June 2024, the BALTDEFCOL delivered twenty iterations of the course. Overall, three hundred thirty-nine students from thirty-four countries have graduated from the Higher Command Studies Course (BALTDEFCOL, 2024). The path of evolution the Higher Command Studies Course has undergone is now followed by Ukrainian senior PME programs (Salkutsan S. & Stolberg A., 2022).

While the wording of the aim of the Higher Command Studies Course has changed over time, the essence remains the same. The course aims to prepare senior military officers and civilian government officials from the Framework Nations, as well as their Allies and Partners, for executive responsibilities at strategic levels both nationally and within the international community. In contrast to national war colleges or their equivalents, the HCSC tries to serve a more significant number of states and their militaries. First, the Baltic States' major senior professional education program fosters multilateral security and defence cooperation between Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. At the same time, it aims to introduce the Baltic States' security and defence concerns to Allies and Partners by contributing to developing regional expertise by their respective senior officers and civil servants. In practical terms, HCSC prepares senior military officers and civilian governmental officials of at least ten nations annually for strategic-level assignments. It applies to Allies contributing to NATO's enhanced forward presence in the Baltic States and other states with regional security interests. HCSC continues to support Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, helping them develop strategic-level leaders (Šiuparis, 2024).

The competencies and skills honed through the Higher Command Studies Course do not differ from those developed by other Western senior professional military programmes. The programme aims to develop critical and strategic thinking, effective communication skills, and leadership traits needed for service within interagency and multinational environments. The learning objectives of the HCSC envision developing graduates who can assess critical drivers and trends in the evolving security environment and appraise their implications for the security and defence of the Euro-Atlantic community, the Baltic

Sea Region, and the Baltic States. The course graduates are supposed to be prepared to contribute to developing and implementing defence policies, strategies, plans, and management decisions to achieve national and Allied strategic objectives. Leadership competencies constitute an essential part of the course learning objectives. The HCSC curriculum is designed to help develop “creative, proactive, and agile leaders prepared for executive responsibilities at the strategic level in interagency, national, and international environments, demonstrating the traits essential to the profession of arms”. Graduates of the HCSC are also expected to be able to formulate and communicate solutions to complex security, defence, strategic leadership, and high command problems using critical thinking and practical communication skills (HCSC 2024 Course Plan, 2023).

The HCSC curriculum has been designed as a modular one. It comprises seven discrete and sequential core modules. The course starts with a preparatory module focused on academic foundations. The first two modules of the course deal with the security environment and Russia, serving as an introduction and providing a broader context to further parts of the curriculum. A module on strategic leadership follows them. The second part of the curriculum introduces students to defence policy and strategy development, defence management and strategic operations planning. The final module of the course discusses strengthening deterrence and defence. It culminates the curriculum and allows students to utilise knowledge and skills accumulated throughout the course. HCSC students can choose from fourteen spring semester electives covering various security, defence and management topics (HCSC 2025 Course Plan, 2024). While all elective programmes are open to all BALTDEFCOL students, “the Strategic Decision Making in NATO” elective has been created to prepare HCSC graduates for their prospective assignments at NATO HQ. The core modules are open to external participation from the military organisations of the Framework Nations and Allies. In recent years, the module on Russia attracted the involvement of the Joint Warfare Centre officers and some allied senior officers. An individual research project complements the core modules. It focuses on preparing a research report on a timely security and defence-related topic deemed necessary for the Framework Nations or students’ sending nations. The HCSC curriculum includes two study trips: the International Study Trip outside the Baltic States and the Baltic Defence Study Trip, which visits Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania’s capitals. The International Study Trip combine the annual visits to NATO HQ, the European Union Military staff, and the Belgian Defence Staff with a visit to one of the Allied and Partner states. The planning cycle envisages three categories of states: a major ally, an ally in the Wider Baltic Sea Region, and a partner. These broad categories of states are visited rotationally to build comprehensive awareness of the security environment among the HCSC students’ cohort and faculty (BALTDEFCOL Development Plan, 2024). The core modules are delivered in residence. However, depending on the circumstances, a part of the curriculum may be offered through distance and blended learning using MS Teams and other advanced distributed learning platforms. Such learning proved its value during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it serves to reach valuable speakers who cannot come to Tartu and teach in person. MS Teams allows the College Faculty to follow some of the HCSC lectures. It is also used by the course students who are absent from the class to follow the lectures and participate in seminar discussions and group activities.

The course adheres to the standard methodology adopted by other senior PME courses. While lectures introduce new themes, seminar discussions and group activities allow for in-depth treatment of specific topics. The course strives to remain future-oriented, while contemporary history often serves as a reference to the discussion on developments in security and defence. The educational philosophy emphasises adult, student-centric learning that demands active learning. Each week consists of twenty-seven contact hours of educational activities and seventeen hours of students’ preparations. Additional individual study days are included in the curriculum to ensure sufficient time for students’ independent research. Summative and continuous assessment is used for the core modules. Students must write a policy paper or similar written assignment for every module. Module group activity ends with a group presentation of a solution to a problem given to a syndicate of students. Usually, the class is divided into three syndicates for group activities, and each syndicate’s members and leaders rotate among the course modules. This allows every student of HCSC to lead an international syndicate and be exposed to different national perspectives during every group activity. Each group activity is supported by senior subject matter experts whose core expertise is tied to the respective module. Subject Matter Experts supporting HCSC in recent years included, among others, former ministers and vice ministers of defence, high-level military intelligence specialists and defence policy and management experts. The module coordinator and the course senior mentor continuously assess students’ contributions to achieving module learning outcomes. It is based on observation of the quality of the student’s interventions, their team leadership and specific contributions to group learning.

While national regulations vary, senior professional military education programs (also named Level 4 courses), which are in most cases the war colleges and their equivalents, accept senior military officers with ranks of Lieutenant Colonels and Colonels along with their civilian counterparts from ministries of defence, ministries of foreign affairs, and security and defence-related institutions. For national war colleges, this is defined by respective personnel management policies. In the case of international senior PME institutions such as the BALTDEFCOL, there is broad agreement among the Framework Nations about admission criteria to the Higher Command Studies Course. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania agreed on the number of slots for each country and declared a percentage of military and civilian students. In most cases, admission to the course requires completion of the Level 3 course (command and staff college or its equivalent), notable service experience, strong potential for promotion, and adequate English skills. These requirements are communicated to Allied and Partner nations in the invitations to nominate students for the HCSC. Out of approximately twenty-five students annually, less than half is for the Framework Nations, while the rest is offered to Partner Nations and Allies. The gender balance and civil-military mix vary over the years. Still, it is more or less maintained to ensure the diversity of the students’

body and potential for peer learning. HCSC remains highly international, representing more than twelve nations in each course (Johanson, 2024).

As the graduates of the HCSC come from so many nations, the BALTDEFCOL has no absolute control over how their military or civil servant careers are shaped. The Framework Nations assign HCSC graduates top military positions, and their civilian counterparts are promoted to higher level responsibilities within the civil servants' communities both nationally and within NATO and the European Union. Depending on national personnel policies, the Allies and Partners consider HCSC a prerequisite to be promoted to Colonels or Brigadier Generals. Some nations decide to send students to get better insight into regional security and defence. For those nations, graduating from the HCSC does not translate into promotion. It helps the graduates be assigned within the region as defence attaches or at military headquarters involved in NATO's enhanced Forward Presence. Some nations, for example, Slovenia, demand HCSC graduates to complement their education at the national Level 4 course. For partner countries, sending candidates who previously graduated from the BALTDEFCOL Joint Command and General Staff Course is frequent. Depending on the nation, graduates may immediately and directly capitalise on their participation in the Higher Command Studies Course or benefit from it in later stages of their careers.

One of the central topics in the ongoing debate on senior professional education is faculty. Close cooperation with civilian institutions was always viewed as a prerequisite for quality military education at the college (Corum, 2012). Therefore, the decisions taken in the early years of the HCSC resulted in external speakers teaching a significant portion of the curriculum. However, the college has an academic faculty that provides for the continuity of its educational approach and teaches part of the course curricula to degrees varying for respective courses. For the Higher Command Studies Course, college faculty acts as module coordinators and research project advisers, and, in most cases, they teach introductory topics to the modules and issues tied to their research focus and lead seminar discussions and group activities. The HCSC tries to balance academics, think tanks and practitioners' perspectives. Such an approach exposes students to a broader spectrum of opinions and narratives. Leading researchers offer in-depth knowledge about the theoretical framework of studies for respective topics. They also honestly review academic and political discourse on specific security and defence problems. The course benefits significantly from support from institutional speakers. Top-level military and governmental or institutional officials bring up-to-date insights and real-life challenges. Former top military and politicians add long-term insights that transcend the official narratives. A 360-degree approach translates into a geographical and institutional balance of the speakers. The Baltic States' perspectives are confronted with Western, Nordic and Southern ones. NATO and national insights are complemented by those of the European Union and multilateral security and defence cooperation formats. Busy schedules of top-level speakers make their availability challenging and require considerable early planning and coordination efforts. Nevertheless, the efforts pay off well when considering the final results.

As a relatively small course, the HCSC benefits significantly from students' feedback. The formal feedback system supports quality control efforts and includes weekly, module and course feedback. The solutions adopted at the BALTDEFCOL do not differ significantly from those used by other senior PME courses. However, because of a small number of students and college cohesion, around ninety per cent of the HCSC students regularly provided weekly and module feedback. At the end of the course, each student provides formal feedback. The feedback system is supported by the course director's counselling sessions that help address students' concerns and facilitate their performance review. In addition, the class prepares for the end of the course after an action review, presenting their findings to the College's leadership and faculty. Many students offer not only their assessments but also provide actionable solutions. This helps validate specific portions of the curriculum, assess guest speakers, and improve the organisation of the modules and the course. The BALTDEFCOL reaches out to the HCSC graduates and their superiors regularly, asking about the relevance and usefulness of their educational experience. The results of this questionnaire are used for the educational requirements seminars held every three years with the Framework Nations to discuss long-term changes to the HCSC curriculum.

4. Conclusions

The paper attempts to bridge insights from the ongoing debate on senior professional military education with solutions implemented at the Baltic Defence College's Higher Command Studies Course. It compares observations and recommendations from the Western educational community, particularly the U.S. military educational community, with those specific to the Baltic Defence College. The ongoing debate surrounding senior professional military education touches upon several crucial aspects. There is a far-reaching consensus on the scope of senior professional education, and its primary focus is on strategy. Less agreement has been reached on the role of military history versus innovation. Opinions differ on the purpose of senior PME, with contrasting views advocating mere preparation for the following staff assignments at the strategic level versus broad education that might be useful for future assignments. Senior PME programs are expected to involve active learning with a spectrum of experiential learning forms. The curriculum is expected to be delivered by a diverse faculty offering insights from the fields that are useful for the preparation of the graduates to operate in complex strategic environments. The graduates of senior professional military education programs are expected to be promoted to key command and staff positions at the strategic levels within national defence establishments and international organisations.

The Baltic Defence College has conducted its Higher Command Studies Course for twenty years. As it was modelled after Western war colleges, its primary aim and educational philosophy do not differ much from those of its counterparts in NATO member states. Owned by three Framework Nations, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the College and the course are unique in terms of ownership and management. The Higher Command Studies Course serves a much broader community of several allied and partner nations, preparing senior military officers and civil servants for assignments at strategic levels

nationally and within international organisations. Its curriculum is rather oriented toward the long term as it does not focus entirely on preparing graduates for their immediate assignments. It is future-oriented, with studies centred on recent and ongoing developments in the security environment. The course puts a premium on active learning and relies on external speakers for a substantial part of its educational activities. Blending expertise of high-level professionals in security and defence with the educational approaches of the college faculty proves productive and keeps the curriculum relevant to the evolving security environment. The course remains responsive to the needs of the Framework Nations and relies heavily on the feedback system that assures quality control and guides improvements to the curriculum and delivery. While the College does not have absolute control of the HCSC graduates' careers, recent years have shown a clear trend of assigning them important positions at strategic levels both nationally and within the international community.

The topic of senior professional military education warrants heightened consideration, especially in the European PME community. While senior education is predominantly a national responsibility, it is also facilitated by international educational institutions such as the Baltic Defence College. Observations from the Higher Command Studies Course reflect unique institutional lessons learned that are not necessarily fully applicable to other senior professional military education programs in Allied or Partner nations. Nevertheless, sharing insights on challenges and best practices associated with preparing senior officers and their civilian counterparts for executive roles at strategic levels directly enhances the relevance and responsiveness of professional military education to evolving security dynamics.

Disclaimer

The author explicitly states that the views expressed in the paper are strictly their own and do not reflect the official positions of BALTDEFCOL or the Framework Nations.

Acknowledgements

This work was carried out as a part of the BALTDEFCOL Personal Publication Plan 2023-2024 and the BALTDEFCOL Professional Development Plan for 2024.

References

1. **Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Oversight & Investigation.** Another Crossroads? Professional Military Education Two Decades After the Goldwater-Nichols Act and the Skelton Panel, Committee Print 111-4, April 2010, p. XI, XIV, 34-36
2. **U.S. Department of Defense.** Summary of the National Defence Strategy 2018 of the United States of America. Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge. Washington D.C. 2018
3. **Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.** Joint Officers for Tomorrow's Ways of War. The Joint Chiefs of Staff Vision and Guidance for Professional Military Education & Talent Management. Washington D. C. 01 May 2020
4. **Cieślak E.** Understanding People and Technology. Professional Military Education and Challenges of Future Commanders Development. Challenges to national defence in contemporary geopolitical situation, 2018(1), p. 134-141. doi:10.47459/cndcgs.2018.20
5. **Andres R.** The Good Idea Fairy Knocks: Seven Things to Understand Before Opining About Professional Military Education. War on the Rocks. August 12, 2018. <https://warontherocks.com/2018/08/the-good-idea-fairy-knocks-seven-things-to-understand-before-opining-about-professional-military-education/>
6. **Ellinger E. & Posard M. N.** Imagining the Future of Professional Military Education in the United States. Results from a Virtual Workshop. RAND Corporation, Santa Monica 2023, p. 19-20
7. **Allen C.** Is Professional Military Education really "stagnant"?, August 29, 2019, War Room, Army War College, <https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/articles/professional-military-education-stagnant/>
8. **Schultz T. S.** The Road Less Traveled: Both Sides Are Right About Professional Military Education. War on the Rocks. July 30, 2018. <https://warontherocks.com/2018/07/the-road-less-travelled-both-sides-are-right-about-professional-military-education/>
9. **Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.** Officer Professional Military Education Policy. CJCSI 1800.01F. 15 May 2020.
10. **Antrobus, S. & West, H.** 'This Is All Very Academic': Critical Thinking in Professional Military Education. *The RUSI Journal*, 167(3), 78–86. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2022.2112521>
11. **Tornhill P.** To Produce Strategists, Focus on Staffing Senior Leaders. War on the Rocks. July 20, 2018. <https://warontherocks.com/2018/07/to-produce-strategists-focus-on-staffing-senior-leaders/>
12. **Scales R. H.** Ike's Lament: In Search Of a Revolution in Military Education. War on the Rocks. August 16, 2017. <https://warontherocks.com/2017/08/ikes-lament-in-search-of-a-revolution-in-military-education/>
13. **Lacey J.** How Does the Next Great Power Conflict Play Out? Lessons from a Wargame. War on the Rocks. April 22, 2019. <https://warontherocks.com/2019/04/how-does-the-next-great-power-conflict-play-out-lessons-from-a-wargame/>

14. **Lee C. & Lewis B.** Wargaming Has a Place, But Is No Panacea for Professional Military Education. War on the Rocks. August 5, 2019. <https://warontherocks.com/2019/08/wargaming-has-a-place-but-is-no-panacea-for-professional-military-education/>
15. **Goode C.** Best practice principles for professional military education: A literature review. *Journal of Defense Resources Management* 10:2(2019): 5-20.
16. **Corum J. S.** Some Key Principles of Multinational Military Education. *Connections*. Vol. 11, No. 4 (Fall 2012), p. 10-26.
17. **Corum J. & Johanson A.** 20 years of the Baltic Defence College: Professional Military Education in the Baltic States. Tartu 2019.
18. **Salkutsan S. & Stolberg A.** The Impact of War on the Ukraine Military Education System: Moving Forward in War and Peace. *Connections Quarterly Journal* 21, no. 3 (2022), pp: 67-76 <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.21.3.41>.
19. **Šiuparis A.** Professional military education in the Baltic States. *Baltic Rim Economies* 2/2024, p. 24, https://www.centrumbalticum.org/en/publications/baltic_rim_economies/baltic_rim_economies_2_2024/alvydas_siuparis_professional_military_education_in_the_baltic_states
20. **BALTDEFCOL.** The Higher Command Studies Course 2024. Course Plan. Tartu 2023.
21. **BALTDEFCOL.** The Higher Command Studies Course 2025. Course Plan. Tartu 2024.
22. **BALTDEFCOL.** Baltic Defence College Development Plan 2024-2032. Approved by Joint Communiqué of the Baltic Defence Cooperation Ministerial Committee on 19 January 2024 in Riga, Latvia.
23. **Johanson A.** Excellence in Professional Military Education. Baltic Defence College. Tartu 2024.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of CNDCGS 2024 and/or the editor(s). CNDCGS 2024 and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.