

Professional Military Education – A Force Multiplier?

‘Conceptual construct to lifelong learning’

Education is critical to capacity building. It is pivotal to the transformation of military leadership from an operational to a strategic mindset. Education empowers human resources and ensures lifelong learning. It is continuous and progressive and has a bearing on awareness that leads to better vision, planning and execution.

While education is the process of nurturing a person to fulfil the needs of an organisation and the development of understanding of the guiding principles, theory and concepts, the broader intent is to make well-informed, competent and responsible citizens of the nation. In the course of the subtle variance at large, while training is an instruction on ‘What to think’, education teaches ‘How to think’. In the triad, military experience consists of past realities and applications, military training constitutes present reality and skills and military education comprises future realities and knowledge. While we train for the known, we educate for the unknown.

Military education is broad-based and has evolved globally over a while. The process of teaching offers how to think. It encompasses a continuous and never-ending process that develops mentally and finds autonomous realisation. This is lifelong acquisition of knowledge characteristic of a certain culture or society that never ceases. It has three-fold objectives of mastering the theory of military operations, creating a continuum that progresses a scholar warrior to the highest level of strategy and doctrine and is complementary to the training at all levels of the seniority gradient. It instills leadership qualities from the cradle of indoctrination that continues throughout the spectrum of service life. It teaches how to think and transcends the transition of knowledge into skills. It helps develop a multifaceted understanding of the geopolitical and cultural landscape.

Military education provides an intellectual architecture for battlefield success. It contributes to Civil-Military Relations, a culture of reflection and a capacity for critical analysis. A key component of military education is exposure to the principles of civilian control and importance of democratic values. This helps to build a professional military that is capable of understanding the political dynamics of the country and reinforces the importance of respecting civilian authority. It fosters a sense of professionalism and ethical leadership among officers, ensuring that they understand their role as defenders of the state. It thus promotes dialogue and understanding between military and civilian authorities.

Military education cultivates an aspiration for excellence. In the ensuing, it is important to understand the nuances and criticality of education in the Indian Armed Forces. It maintains a professional edge with an enduring education program that prepares for challenges in a rapidly changing world order. A robust education program for creating an agile, fully professional force capable of decision superiority at the strategic, operational and tactical levels underscores this criticality. Military education, thus, is the cornerstone of professional mastery.

Professional Military Education (PME) is the bedrock of sustained development of an officer's mind and spirit. It has the basic premise of advancement, preservation and communication of military wisdom. It develops armed forces personnel with unparalleled intellect and operational capabilities. The history of PME dates back to the panel on Joint PME of the United States House of Representatives chaired by Congressman Ike Skelton, which issued a report in 1988 on the lack of intellect examined by the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defence Reorganisation Act of 1986¹. The key recommendation of the panel was to establish a two-phase education process in service colleges with a follow-on phase in staff colleges. Goldwater-Nichols Act aimed to encourage intellectual integration with civilians and services. It stipulated the mission of PME schools to provide expertise in warfare specialties and a broad and deep understanding of the major elements of services. It provided expertise in the integrated employment of land, sea, and air forces and matters relating to national security strategy, national military strategy, strategic planning, contingency planning, and command and control of combat operations under a unified command. It underscored the need to maintain PME schools for the armed forces and separate Joint PME (JPME) schools.

The generic reforms required to manage uncertainty include thinking skills, language training, geography, history, politics, culture and civilisations, morals, ethics, military and international laws and leadership. At the root of cultural knowledge is an understanding of the ancient Indian knowledge system that explores the profound Indic heritage of statecraft and strategic thought that is acquired from ancient scriptures based on Indian philosophy and wisdom. Thinking skills constitute an ability to solve problems, analyse, synthesize, plan, implement and sustenance to negotiate with cross cultural and geopolitical landscape. These skills are the best preparation for complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty. Cultural intelligence and cultural competence ingrained in military education include dimensions of physical environment, social and geopolitical structure with a belief in the local demography. It helps to learn, understand and engage diverse regional and foreign cultures in confronting unconventional threats. Cultural education along with regional studies supports the capability for conduct of operations. Cultural knowledge is a necessary component in understanding the belief and value system of the people and their outlook toward society. Understanding the land, topography, and demography makes an integral part of the broad cultural capability needed to meet the current and future challenges.

While professional criticism is the ability to agree to disagree, constructive criticism and professional dissent generate healthy conclusions and productive outcomes. It is an innate ability to foresee, anticipate and assess higher-order effects to see a wider view of things through creative and critical thinking. Officers need to be adaptive, versatile, and flexible in a Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous operating environment. The role of PME is to provide education to complement training, operational experience, and self-development in producing professional competence. Understanding geopolitics constitutes a broad exposure to international relations, foreign policy, the geopolitical landscape and its effects on the world order. Educational diplomacy as a component of soft power is a persuasive approach to international relations, involving economic and cultural influence. To remain abreast

of the changing geopolitical environment, officers must educate and arm themselves to find solutions to multitude of challenges. It is this sustained effort and development in the officers' mind and spirit that encompasses PME.

Airmindedness is a lifelong study that requires a nuanced knowledge of the application of air power along with the mastery necessary to generate it. The study of air power history is a vital element in the educational curriculum. It has a historical significance that brings the possibility it creates into focus, both individually and as an air force. Airmindedness is achieved through broad education that creates a professional air force.

Since training for war is a continuous process, officers must be able to operate in an increasingly complex environment. PME must be based on a studied approach to safeguard national interests. Acquainting the contemporary operational environment requires greater cultural and geopolitical awareness that has a bearing on national security. Curated and crafted modules on the Massive Open Online Courses environment are the need of the hour. Intellectual superiority provides for assured capability advantage in the long run. This is developed and nurtured through concerted, conscious and continued education. PME must therefore be stimulating, interesting and thought-provoking.

Winston Churchill once said, "Professional attainment, based upon prolonged study, and collective study at colleges, rank by rank, age by age – those are the title reeds of the commanders of future armies, and the secret of future victories"². Since education propels and propagates the discharge of professional wisdom and expands and broadens influence and diplomacy to greater platforms, it is the cornerstone for professional mastery and a force multiplier. Education, being intangible, directly accrues human cognition and acumen of not just the combat force but the thinking potential of an organisation. With education alone, one can empower the human potential and the cognitive ability to learn and adapt to changing situations. Education thus creates confidence in unexplored, ambiguous and uncertain situations. This confidence self-assures during difficult and unforeseen circumstances.

Education fosters mutual trust and ensures effective communication, jointness and familiarity in consonance with joint operational doctrinal excerpts in the Indian Armed Forces. As the development of professional mastery contributes to the efficacy of services, the Indian Armed Forces must further nurture the potential to think creatively, reason critically and act decisively in the face of ambiguity and uncertainty.

*'Vidya Dadati Vinayam, Vinaya Dadati Patram' meaning 'knowledge gives humility, which gives capability'*³

Endnotes

[i] "Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986", defense.gov, accessed on 10 May 2025,

history.defense.gov/portals/70/documents/dod-reforms/goldwater-nicholsdodreordact1986.pdf

[ii] “Wit & Wisdom”, International Churchill Society, 25 Apr 2015, accessed on 13 May 2025, winstonchurchill.org/publications/finest-hour/finest-hour-119/wit-wisdom-5/

[iii] Manish Sabharwal, “Making campus equal, excellent”, The Indian Express, 25 Sep 2024, accessed on 14 May 2025, indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-higher-education-universities-public-funding-9586693/

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