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War in Ukraine: The Importance of Professional Military Education and Academic Education

By
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The War in Ukraine shows a new perspective on how war was fought between a great power with another state. A short invasion expected by Russia has now extended to ten months. Some initial territories gained by Russia have been recaptured by Ukraine. There were opinions that the Russians were unable to accomplish its planned quick 'special military operation' in Ukraine yet because they were using outdated strategies, doctrines, tactics, techniques and procedures. Others opined that the 'failures' of Russia was due to the supports given to Ukraine from other states in terms of resources and intelligence to sustain the war. An illustration is the support of an air defence package worth £50 million pledged by Britain's new Prime Minister Rishi Sunak during his first visit to Ukraine recently (Prime Minister's Office press release, 19 November 2022). As winter approaches, the world is now discussing on Russia's weaponization of winter in Ukraine and what lies ahead following ten months of war. Without disregarding other factors, how well the Russian troops perform in the battlefield would depend resolutely on the Professional Military Education (PME) they received. Indeed, PME can play a critical role as a catalyst of intellectual excellence for success, more so in a diverse volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment where crucial decisions have to be made. PME plays the vital role in facilitating officers and soldiers' understanding on how the world is changing and ascertain how the military must change to match the new world and new battlefield environment. Thus, the intention of this commentary is to highlight the importance of PME as an important determinant of success or failure in wars and conflicts. Based on this contention, this commentary will look into the challenges faced by the National Defence University of Malaysia (NDUM) in incorporating the PME in its academic education curricula with the aim of improving PME and academic education in NDUM.

Foremost, it is paramount to understand what PME is and its importance. The importance of PME can be seen in the famous book entitled 'On War' by Carl Von Clausewitz (Howard, Michael and Paret., 2007). He emphasized:

“Theory then becomes a guide to anyone who wants to learn about war from books; it will light his way, ease his progress, train his judgment, and help him to avoid pitfalls ... Theory exists so that one need not start afresh each time sorting out the material and ploughing through it, but will find it ready to hand and in good order. It is meant to educate the mind of the future commander, or, more accurately, to guide him in his self-education, not to accompany him to the battlefield.”

Carl von Clausewitz

PME equips military officers and personnel with the knowledge, skills and attitude for them to succeed in wars and conflicts. In this regard, Winston Churchill’s speech at Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri on 5 March 1946 stressed the relevance of PME by relating PME as “Professional attainment, based upon prolonged study, and collective study at colleges, rank by rank and age by age – those are the reeds of commanders of future armies, and the secret of future victories” (Britannica, T., 2022). Likewise, studies have emphasized the important role of PME as vital in the creation of successful military organisations. However, in practice, training in defence organisations often predominates over education. The result would lead to an Officer Corps that is unable to function well in peacetime preparations and would eventually fail on the battlefield due to an inability to think critically and effectively.

In more recent thinking, Kenney (1996) pointed out that PME is expected to prepare students with three crucial types of knowledge: the ethos, culture, and core values as well as the technical and tactical skills applicable to how they fight war. Importantly, PME is said to equip them with the wisdom and judgment in making decision during diverse situations. The significance of PME is also reflected by Gregory, Kennedy and Neilson (2002) in their book entitled “Military Education: Past, Present, and Future”. They say that the evaluation of a nation’s armed forces is often only done in the aftermath of a great military debacle. Nevertheless, the authors also pointed out that military education has purported to have change war fighting concepts such as information warfare, asymmetrical warfare, cyber warfare and hybrid warfare that have been topics of discussion in defence universities, colleges and institutions. They suggested that international scholars and leaders in various fields examine the PME experience of various nations so as to draw important lessons learned. The examination of a nation’s PME would allow improvement and restructuring of its PME to attain success and prevent failure in battlefield. Relating PME to the War in Ukraine, it is necessary to know the PME attributes of the Russia and Ukraine defence forces. It is said that quality PME produces quality officers and soldiers operating in the battlefields. This notion alludes to the fact that PME provides the defence forces of Russia and Ukraine with the intellectual and operational capabilities in making the right strategic, operational and tactical decisions during this extended period of war in Ukraine. It is articulated that the significance of PME can be surmised at two levels. At the microlevel, PME provides the officers and soldiers with the ability to think innovatively and apply learned knowledge and skills in different situations to stay alive or be killed. While at the macrolevel, the ingrained PME among its decision makers would determine the survival of the nation; in this case, victory or failure for Ukraine or Russia.

War and conflict studies are embedded in the PME programs and courses of Defence universities, colleges and institutions. Similarly, wars and conflicts and its consequences have also been subjected to analysis and studies in strategic and defence studies programs in public universities. Looking at the PME in NDUM; similar to other defence universities, colleges and institutions in the world, NDUM faces the concern and the need to establish the right PME for its Officer Cadets and to face the challenges of integrating the appropriate PME into its academic education curricula. Unlike other public universities in Malaysia, the niche of NDUM is on security and defence. With Officer Cadets and civilians as its undergraduates, NDUM

faces the complex task of integrating PME with academic education. It has to ensure its PME is aligned to the defence requirement while maintaining its focus on the areas of study needed in civilian education. Consequently, both the defence and civilian academics in NDUM have to be mindful that the contents of NDUM programmes and courses must be tailored towards effective and efficient delivery of professional study. Exacerbating this challenge, successful PME and academic education rely much on the ability of the university in recognising the changing environment that requires adaption to the education imparted. The question that arises from these challenges is how can the PME and academic education in UPNM keep pace with the rapidly changing environment whereby students have to learn and handle new ways of thinking? Be it PME or academic education, the adopted education curricula form a critical component which enable the students, in their future endeavour, to manage and adapt to change especially during war and conflicts.

The PME policy established in NDUM seeks to further enhance the education of the Officer Cadets in defence strategy, logistic and resource management and other related fields such as cybersecurity and information management. The output and outcomes of these effective PME policy and education programs would be officers and graduates who have general bodies of knowledge and a developed habits of mind to handle a broad spectrum of undertakings. Importantly, they should be able to solve problems and produce practical advice for their superiors in their organisations. To enhance PME and academic education in NDUM, a few factors have to be taken into consideration.

First, the conception of education has to be clearly understood by all in formulating the PME curriculum. There must be a common understanding of interpretation and application of learning taxonomies incorporating the cognitive, psychomotor and affective domains. This understanding is important to ensure that the curriculum provides the relevant PME and academic educations. For cognitive domain, the programs and courses in NDUM have to be reviewed continuously on its ability to nurture the breadth and depth of views, diverse perspectives, critical and innovative thinking as well as reflective and abstract analysis in handling complex situations and problems faced in wars and conflicts. Where else, for the psychomotor domains, the training that the Officer Cadets have to go through in NDUM shall be able to enhance their capabilities to perform and function in their tasks. Finally, the affective domain should address the attitudinal understanding of matters in their specific functions and tasks in their respective career in the Malaysian Armed Forces.

Next, the formulation of PME has to be weighted in relation to the advent of technology. Military history has shown how revolution of military affairs through advancement in technology has changed the battlefield landscape and transformed the warfighting concept, operational requirement and tactical techniques and procedures. A historical example that illustrates the effectiveness of PME was the World War II blitzkrieg concept adopted by the German Panzer units which incorporated tanks, aircrafts and radios (communication) in successful attacks. It was the PME which had played a significant role emphasizing on education development of the Officers' corps in Germany during the interwar period which led to the creation of the blitzkrieg concept (Addington & Corum, 1993 and "The training of officers", 1990). We have also seen how the information revolution too has digitized the battlefield which require appropriate PME of the Officers and soldiers to provide them with the knowledge and know-how for added advantages in the battlefield. Thus, the challenge of the defence universities, institutions and colleges lies in developing PME curriculum which could help to keep in pace with the rapidly changing technological and information technology advancement. It requires the formulation of a pragmatic PME curriculum that could produce Officer Cadets and graduates of intellectual

excellence who possess a shift in thinking allowing them to triumph and survive in an uncertain future battlefield and operating environment.

Another consideration that NDUM has to take into account is the process and pedagogy used by NDUM/ Military Training Academy (*Akademi Latihan Ketenteraan (ALK)*) in implementing the PME. This aspect is paramount as the Covid-19 Pandemic has shown the unpreparedness of the lecturers and teachers in utilizing technology to impart lectures and lessons at the initial stage of the pandemic (Ma et al., 2022 & Sim et al., 2020). Taking lessons from this shortfall, in an unpredictable future environment, the application of PME should look into innovations in pedagogical methods and education technology as potential methods. There are a few pertinent debated questions that have to be addressed. Pertaining to pedagogical approach, the question is whether the PME should retain the established classroom and lectures model or to adopt a new, high-tech approach? There are pros and cons between virtual or face-to-face for PME implementation. There must be a balance. Although educational technologies can enable the transmittal of huge amount of information, it is argued that PME encompasses more than transmission of facts. It involves inculcating critical thinking and analytical skills as well as ethos and wisdom which could be imparted face-to-face and through students learning from each other. Another highly discussed question on pedagogy is pertaining to whether to adopt a teacher-centred or student-centred approach? For PME, it is argued that it should evolve from passive transmittal (teacher-centred) to active students' engagement through real-world fusion of theory and practice as well as other collaborative methods (students-centred). Thus, the development of efficient PME programs would require the faculties and management to interact with the students for better effective and efficient learning. Also, another relevant question for the formulation of PME is what would the appropriate mixes for future PME be? As seen in NDUM, there are "imbalances" of students/graduates between the different faculties of NDUM which produce different experts in accordance with the fields of studies of the respective faculty. There must be a good mix of social science graduates who should be supplemented by engineers, doctors, computer scientists and others to resolve different kind of military problems. Similarly, there should be a good mix of lecturers and faculty members to facilitate the PME.

All in all, having looked at the various considerations needed for an effective PME and the intricacies involved in formulating one; clearly the notion that quality PME produces quality officers and soldiers seems to be valid. Russia employment of forces in the initial invasion of Ukraine reflected an outdated PME operating in a new environment. Consequently, the Russian troops were bogged down in long convoys and had succumbed to the Ukrainians effective use of anti-tank weapons. The importance of the various factors and considerations to formulate an effective PME in NDUM cannot be emphasized enough. The discussions above clearly revealed the need for the military and civilian personnel to be involved in designing the PME and civilian academic curriculum to have determination and a clear vision as well as moral courage to formulate and oversee the implementation of the PME programs. Their roles as military and civilian educators are vital in the creation of successful PME programs which could support the notion that quality PME produces quality officers and soldiers operating in the battlefields.

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