

Designing Design: Teaching Strategy and Operations for Small Militaries

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The small military forces of most developed countries typically face limited constabulary duties in the current strategic environment. While Russia and China and other revisionist powers are currently challenging some of the principles on which international society is founded, they do not yet (and may never) pose the kind of existential challenge to that society as seen historically in powers like the Soviet Union, and Nazi Germany. Operations for small militaries are, thus, largely about aid to civil power within their home states and what has been termed “contribution warfare” in Canada.

This environment represents a challenge for education within the context of traditional War College level curriculum. The War College is meant to teach the leaders of armed forces (and increasingly, public servants from security related departments) the knowledge necessary to “lead the institution”. In terms of strategy and operations, it is all about linking policy to military operations through the “ends/ways/means” construct of modern strategic theory. In small militaries, however, operational design is generally the purview of the leading coalition partner (typically the US, though sometimes NATO), and the policies adopted by the state may often have relatively little to do with achieving specific military objectives. Despite this fundamental epistemic challenge, well educated military leaders have never been more important in the charged media environment in which contemporary operations are conducted. So how should senior officers be taught at the highest levels?

This presentation examines the experience of working through this specific pedagogical challenge through the lens of “Design thinking”. It explores the origin and development of the Canadian Forces College’s “Modern Comprehensive Operations and Campaign Design” course taught to colonels and senior public servants on the National Security Programme, the Canadian Armed Forces’ equivalent to a War College level programme. Rather than blindly following the models taught in the US and the United Kingdom, the course illustrates the complex challenges that are raised in by issues like the contemporary information environment, the problems presented by coalition and whole of government operations, and the vagaries of interventions in foreign societies as well as the problem of intelligence prioritization while introducing the concepts suggested by Design thinking. The course culminates in a one week problem framing exercise.