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The Army Capstone Concept and Institutional Adaptation

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Introduction

Today's operational environment is increasingly complex, with an ever-expanding array of threats. Within this environment, four trends emerge: growing uncertainty, accelerating change, increased competitiveness and greater decentralization. These trends reflect a future in which the Army is compelled to rapidly adapt in order to defeat new unforeseen threats as they present themselves in unexpected ways. Our challenge then is to build an Army whose leaders and Soldiers are comfortable with change and can rapidly adapt themselves, their units and even the institution as a whole to prevail in the future.

In his 1872 novel *Through the Looking Glass*, Lewis Carroll captures the essence of our challenge. His antagonist, the Red Queen, lectures Alice about what it takes to advance in the game of chess. Suddenly, Alice finds herself running hand-in-hand alongside the Red Queen:

"Now! Now!" cried the Queen. "Faster! Faster!" And they went so fast that at last they seemed to skim through the air, hardly touching the ground with their feet, till suddenly, just as Alice was getting quite exhausted, they stopped, and she found herself sitting on the ground, breathless and giddy. The Queen propped her up against a tree, and said kindly, "You may rest a little now."

Alice looked round her in great surprise. "Why, I do believe we've been under this tree all the time! Everything's just as it was!"

"Of course it is," said the Queen: "what would you have it?"

"Well, in our country," said Alice, still panting a little, "you'd generally get to somewhere else—if you ran very fast for a long time, as we've been doing."

"A slow sort of country!" said the Queen. "Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, just to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!"

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Lewis Carroll's world in the late 19th century was an age of discovery and science, learning how systems fit together, and determining how the industrial age would affect the social fabric. So what Lewis Carroll was talking about was a reflection of the science of the time and the revelation that was discovering that systems are interdependent. And because of their interdependence, if we want to keep up with the system, we have to evolve at least as fast as the system. If we want to get ahead of the system, we have to evolve twice as fast. The choice is to adapt or perish.

The Challenge

This is the challenge we confront in the Army today. If we fail to recognize that the pace of change in this competitive security environment is exponential, not linear, we will find ourselves falling behind. We have made tremendous adaptations during eight years of war and are unquestionably the most capable and seasoned force on the planet. At the operational and tactical levels, those adaptations are very apparent.

Adaptations made at the operational and tactical levels are actually easier to make and we ought to admit that as we try to determine how to go forward. They are easier because a combatant commander has both enormous authority to make adaptations and the requisite flexibility in funding. These adaptations are generally resourced through funding formerly known as supplemental and now known as Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) funding.

The institutional side of the Army is a very different challenge. To realize change, the institutional Army must align itself against existing processes external to the Army—notably the five-year Program Objective Memorandum or POM cycle of the Department of Defense and the two-year budget cycle of the United States government. We've made significant progress, but I don't think we've completely cracked the code on that yet.

I think the challenge for us all is to understand that in a competitive security environment, institutional adaptation is an imperative—and we have to be ready to run faster than our competitors to stay ahead. However, we also can't ignore the first rule of wing walking. A wing walker has several rules: the first and most important is never let go with both hands at the same time. Never let go of that grip you have before you reach for and achieve another grip. That's wing walking.

If we think about the message of Lewis Carroll with the Red Queen and then this primary rule of wing walking, it's a good way to see ourselves. We know we have to increase the pace at which we change and adapt, and yet at the same time we are in a very precarious stance, much like a wing walker, and we dare not let go with both hands at the same time to try to leap ahead. That's our challenge.

The Army Capstone Concept

In December 2009, TRADOC published a major revision to the Army's Capstone Concept under the title *The Army Capstone Concept—Operational Adaptability: Operating Under Conditions of Uncertainty and Complexity in an Era of Persistent Conflict*.¹ This landmark document describes the broad capabilities the Army will require between now and 2028 to defend America and help to secure our interests in the world. Writing and publishing this concept were significant undertakings, and the document will have major implications across our Army for years to come.

The new Capstone Concept differs from its predecessors in a number of important ways. We conducted a rigorous and holistic examination of emerging global trends in an effort to understand

¹ U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, *The Army Capstone Concept—Operational Adaptability: Operating Under Conditions of Uncertainty and Complexity in an Era of Persistent Conflict, 2016–2028* (TRADOC Pam 525-3-0), <http://www.tradoc.army.mil/pao/2009armycapstoneconcept.pdf>.

likely implications for the future security environment. We also ensured that the concept was nested within, and complementary to, *Capstone Concept for Joint Operations*, published last year by Joint Forces Command.² Finally, an experienced team of officers from the Army, other services and key allies circulated the TRADOC document for review and comment among a wide array of military, government, think tank and academic theorists, subjecting it to an unprecedented level of intellectual scrutiny.

In this Capstone Concept we've reconsidered, rethought and challenged previous assumptions. We've done this because we've learned a great deal over eight years of war and know a lot more about the 21st century now than we did ten years ago. That's not to say that previous assumptions about our ability to achieve certainty were wrong. It is to say that some of our assumptions were just not realized. For instance, achieving knowledge dominance through technology—the quality of firsts: see first, understand first, act first, win decisively—was never realized. That's because adversaries or potential adversaries around the world understood what it took to deliver that quality of firsts and took actions to make sure we didn't. Our adversaries have decentralized . . . they've networked, and they've proliferated technology. They live among the population, which means we can't gain the kind of knowledge we thought we could from a distance and deal with problems exclusively through precision.

Technology will never deliver everything we need to know about our adversaries. Army forces must first strive to understand the situation in depth, width and context, then develop the situation through action, adjusting the approach over time as needed. To understand our enemies' capabilities, intentions, morale and level of support among the civilian population, we have to think, act, learn and then adapt. Notably, “developing the situation through action” is one of the two key themes in the Army Capstone Concept. The other is “grounded projections,” which I will discuss later.

Decentralization

Developing the situation through action requires continuous interaction with the environment—your partners, the enemy and civilian populations. And in a future where our adversaries are largely decentralized, we too have a requirement to decentralize to confront them. We've done that. In fact, we've done it remarkably well, and for the most part invisibly—meaning it's not apparent that we've decentralized to the extent we have.

There are implications to that decentralization. We were on a path to build a network optimized for echelons above the brigade combat team. Now what we really need is a network optimized at echelons below brigade. This has created some challenges in trying to adjust a long-term program of record.

We've pushed capabilities down to brigade level that previously existed at echelons above brigade. Those decisions have implications in how we use those capabilities, how we develop them, how we train them and how we train the leaders who are going to employ them. Those kinds of challenges are much clearer to us today with the experiences of the last eight years.

And it also means that although we need to decentralize, we also must recognize that, at some point, we may need the ability to reaggregate those resources. We need to take a look at ourselves and figure out how we become a hybrid organization, an organization that retains that which is necessary in the hierarchical structure, while having the capability to operate decentralized.

Mission Command

Decentralized organizations are generally built more on trust and collaboration than on command and control. Don't misunderstand me, I'm not advocating that we do away with command and control in the Army. However, it has become increasingly clear that if we're going to decentralize capability and

² Department of Defense, *Capstone Concept for Joint Operations*, Version 3.0, 15 January 2009, http://www.jfcom.mil/newslink/storyarchive/2009/CCJO_2009.pdf.

authority to lower and lower tactical levels, and if we're going to empower the edge, then we've got to give our tactical leaders mission orders that are broad enough and that reflect our intent. Orders can't be so prescriptive that they constrain our subordinates' ability to develop the situation through action. This requires leaders to have a broad understanding of the art and science of mission command as well as the science of command and control. It requires Soldiers and leaders grounded not only in the tactics, techniques and procedures of force on force, but also in integrating capabilities in an environment that is increasingly crowded and transparent.

In this environment, traditional, hierarchical decisionmaking must give way to more collaborative and decentralized approaches, informed from the bottom up and driven by the co-creation of context.

Leader Development

We used to think that the best information comes from the top down. But if you've followed what I've described so far, it implies that the most important information comes from the bottom up. If that's true, then we have to prepare young men and women to be able to deliver it and also to prevail in that environment with all the capabilities we've provided.

This is causing us, and me personally, to do a lot of thinking about the implications to leader development. If we're going to provide all this capability, and if we're going to tell these young men and women at the lowest tactical echelon that they are responsible to develop the situation, to contribute to building context and to execute their mission, then we have to consider the leader development implications.

But let me highlight that it's just as important to talk about what's not going to change in leader development. I want to describe a fight scene from the movie *Never Back Down* that will help illustrate this point. In this particular scene, two fighters are seen warming up in the middle of a raucous crowd. One fighter is overtly exhibiting his prowess in Capoeira, a form of martial arts marked by fluid acrobatic play and feints in an attempt to intimidate and confuse the opponent he's about to fight. Meanwhile, the other fighter is simply standing off to the side watching the demonstration. At this point, it's difficult to tell just how intimidated he is. The fighters come to the center of the ring and the referee signals the start of round one. However, the martial artist isn't quite done with the show and proceeds to do a series of flips, kicks and a one-armed handstand before he does a series of back handsprings right into the perfectly timed right jab of his opponent. I think that guy must still be laid out on that mat. It's clear to me by that illustration that the martial artist lost sight of the fundamentals.

There is only one institution in the United States that delivers lethality on behalf of the nation, and that's the military. There are many things we can do for our country but only one thing that we must be able to do.

For example, there are two fundamentals that we must deliver out of Basic Training. One is a sense of the values that underpin our profession. The other is a positive attitude about learning. Let's face it, in ten weeks we're not going to deliver much more. We do our best with physical fitness training, we do our best with the warrior skills, the warrior tasks and battle drills. In fact, we do a great job of it. It's a remarkable metamorphosis in ten weeks. We do the same with our young officers coming on active duty. These things cannot change. Shame on us if we allow ourselves to drift away from the fundamentals.

Army Learning Concept

The other thing we have to do in developing Soldiers and leaders is to adapt our training and education system to their learning styles while ensuring we still deliver the high-quality content they need and deserve. There's a video from the TRADOC archives that helps illustrate exactly what I mean. The video was shot in 1981, and it features General Don Starry, TRADOC Commander, wandering into a shopping mall in Hampton, Virginia.

In the clip, General Starry stops to observe a video arcade full of kids. General Starry makes four observations about what's going on in that room. The first is that two-thirds of the games are military in nature. Second, all the people in the room are volunteers and in fact pay to play the games. The third observation is the place is almost always full. Finally, he makes the profound observation that everyone in the room is learning something. The clip concludes with General Starry challenging the Army to think about how the Army should learn differently.

You know what they say: if you want a new idea, read an old book. We've got to think about how technology can be leveraged to learn. There are not that many new ideas out there. There are just different circumstances in which they manifest themselves. What I suggest to you is that the manifestation of the potential for technology to help us learn today is phenomenal.

We're eagerly trying to determine how we can learn better. It's not about saving resources. You'll hear people say that we want to create distance learning, virtual environments and gaming to save manpower. It's not about that. It's really about catching up to the generation that's following us. It's about improving our learning models through technology without sacrificing standards so we can provide rigorous and relevant training and education to a new generation.

We are trying to figure out what this means, and we've got the TRADOC G3 championing an effort called "The Army Learning Concept 2015." The concept will describe the learning environment we need in 2015.

Why are we doing this? Because competitiveness is the new norm, and we are no longer dominant everywhere all the time in every domain. We're in a competitive security environment. In that environment, the dimension in which we have to prevail is the competitive learning environment. If we prevail in the competitive learning environment, we'll be able to make the kinds of adaptations and innovations that we need to stay ahead.

Grounded Projections

That leads me to my final point about the second major theme of the Capstone Concept: grounded projections into the future. As the Capstone Concept points out, our projections must be grounded in a clear understanding of lessons learned and an appreciation of military history. They must also reflect an unbiased analysis of the future operational environment and the potential military applications of emerging technologies.

As an institution we tend to think about the future in 15- to 20-year increments, and this drives leap-ahead approaches to acquisition and adaptation. The Capstone Concept asserts that we can no longer afford to leap beyond what we can realistically see. Rather than looking decades ahead, the Capstone Concept suggests we should adapt based on grounded projections of five to seven years into the future. That's really about as far out as we can see reasonably well and a much more realistic time horizon. Coincidentally, that also brings us closer to the constraints of our five-year POM cycle, allowing us to be more adaptive as an institution.

Conclusion

As all of these major initiatives make clear, the Army Capstone Concept is allowing us to reframe the problem of future conflict while describing the framework for adaptation in a rapidly changing world. Our challenge now is to take the necessary steps to institutionalize that adaptation in our leader development, our training and education, our concept and requirements development, and our acquisition processes. The Capstone Concept will show us the way.

Let me conclude with a short vignette from Lewis Carroll's other major work, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, that will help drive home this final point. After chasing the White Rabbit down the hole,

Alice arrives in Wonderland where, after wandering for a while, she meets the Cheshire Cat. Completely at a loss as to her whereabouts, Alice asks the Cat:

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a great deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

“I don’t much care where,” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

The Army Capstone Concept will serve as the Army’s roadmap to ensure we know where we’re going.



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