

THE EVOLVING SKILLSET OF THE MILITARY PROFESSIONAL: BEYOND KINETIC OPERATIONS

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Abstract: The contemporary security environment is characterized by increasing complexity, rapid technological change, hybrid threats, and growing competition in the information domain. These developments are influencing not only the conduct of military operations, but also the skills and competencies required of military professionals. While traditional military capabilities such as physical readiness, technical knowledge and leadership remain essential, they are no longer sufficient on their own. Contemporary military personnel are increasingly required to operate in complex informational environments, cooperate with diverse actors and make decisions under conditions of uncertainty.

This paper examines how the skillset of the military professional is evolving in response to these changes. Using a qualitative conceptual approach based on a review of relevant literature, selected NATO doctrinal documents, and practitioner observations from professional military education and multinational operational environments, the paper identifies three interconnected domains of competence: physical, cognitive, and social. The analysis suggests that contemporary military effectiveness depends not only on the ability to apply force, but also on the ability to understand and orient in complex environments, process information critically and communicate effectively across organizational and cultural environments.

The paper also discusses the implications of these developments for professional military education, emphasizing the need to balance tradi-

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tional military competencies with the development of adaptability, critical thinking, lifelong learning, and cooperation skills. It concludes that the future military professional will be defined by an integrated combination of physical, cognitive and social competencies that extend beyond the traditional focus on kinetic operations.

Keywords: military profession; professional military education; cognitive competence; social competence; hybrid threats; contemporary warfare; military adaptation

Introduction

The military profession has never been static. Throughout history, changes in the character of warfare have influenced not only how armed forces are organized and equipped, but also what is expected from those who serve within them. Classical scholars of civil-military relations and military professionalism viewed military expertise primarily through the lenses of leadership, discipline, technical competence, and the effective management of violence (Huntington, 1957; Janowitz, 1960). These foundations remain essential today and continue to distinguish the military profession from many other occupations. At the same time, however, the environment in which military professionals operate has undergone significant transformation.

The contemporary security environment is characterized by increasing complexity, uncertainty, and interconnectedness. Military operations are no longer conducted exclusively in clearly defined battlefields against easily identifiable adversaries. Instead, military personnel are expected to operate in environments shaped by hybrid threats, rapid technological change, information competition, and interaction with a wide range of civilian and international actors. Contemporary conflicts often involve a combination of military and non-military instruments, blurring traditional distinctions between war and peace and expanding the range of skills required from military professionals (Hoffman, 2007; Freedman, 2017).

These developments have direct implications for the military profession. Physical readiness, technical proficiency, and leadership remain indispensable components of military effectiveness. However, operational experience from multinational missions, peace support operations, and professional military education (PME) environments suggests that these traditional competencies alone are no longer sufficient. Military personnel are increasingly required to interpret complex information environments, interact with diverse cultural groups, cooperate across institutional boundaries, and make decisions under conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty. In many situations, understanding the environment has become as important as acting within it.

The growing emphasis on the cognitive and informational dimensions of conflict further reinforces this trend. Contemporary military organizations increasingly recog-

nize the importance of critical thinking, adaptability, information awareness, and effective communication. These competencies do not replace traditional military skills; rather, they complement and enhance them. Consequently, the profile of the military professional is evolving from one centered primarily on kinetic capabilities toward one that integrates physical, cognitive, and social competencies.

The aim of this paper is to examine how the skillset of the military professional is evolving in response to changes in the contemporary security environment. Particular attention is given to the growing importance of cognitive and social competencies alongside traditional military capabilities. The paper employs a qualitative conceptual approach based on a review of relevant academic literature, selected NATO and military doctrinal documents, and authors' observations derived from PME and multinational operational environments. Rather than measuring individual competencies empirically, the paper seeks to identify and explain the broader trends that are reshaping military professionalism in the contemporary security environment. It argues that the changing character of warfare requires a broader understanding of military professionalism and highlights the implications of this transformation for PME and training.

The paper is structured in five sections. Following the introduction, the first section examines traditional understandings of the military profession and the competencies historically associated with military expertise. The second section discusses key developments in the contemporary security environment that have influenced the evolution of military roles and responsibilities. The third section presents a framework of competencies required by the contemporary military professional, organized around physical, cognitive, and social domains. The fourth section considers the implications of these developments for PME and training. The paper concludes by discussing the broader significance of these changes for the future of the military profession.

The Traditional Military Profession

The concept of the military profession has been the subject of scholarly debate for decades, if not for centuries. Although different authors have emphasized different aspects of military service, there is broad agreement that the military profession possesses a distinct body of expertise, a strong sense of responsibility, and a unique relationship with the state and society. Military professionals are entrusted with the management and application of force on behalf of the state, a responsibility that distinguishes the profession from most other occupations, but at the same time places significant ethical and professional demands on its members.

One of the most influential approaches to military professionalism was developed by *Huntington*, who defined military expertise as the specialized knowledge required for the management of violence. According to Huntington, military professionals are distinguished not only by their technical competence, but also by their responsibility

toward society and their corporate identity as members of a distinct profession. His work established a foundation for understanding military professionalism through the concepts of expertise, responsibility, and professional autonomy (*Huntington, 1957*).

A somewhat different perspective was offered by *Janowitz*, who emphasized the social and political dimensions of military service. Writing during a period of significant geopolitical change, Janowitz argued that military officers increasingly required political awareness, communication skills, and the ability to interact with civilian institutions. Although many of his observations were linked to the realities of the Cold War, they anticipated developments that would become increasingly important decades to come. Many of the competencies he identified, particularly communication, political awareness, and interaction with civilian institutions, have become even more relevant in contemporary military operations (*Janowitz, 1960*).

Traditional understandings of military professionalism were largely shaped by the requirements of industrial-age way of warfare. Success depended on physical endurance, discipline, technical proficiency, and effective leadership within clearly defined command structures. Military education and training systems were therefore primarily designed to develop tactical competence, operational effectiveness, and the ability to function within hierarchical organizations. These competencies remain fundamental to military effectiveness and continue to form the backbone of professional military development.

At the same time, the military profession has never been completely static. Changes in technology, society, and the character of warfare have continuously influenced the expectations placed upon military personnel. *Moskos, Williams, and Segal* (*Moskos et al., 2000*) observed that modern armed forces increasingly operate in environments characterized by greater interaction with civilian society, international organizations, and multinational coalitions. These developments gradually expanded the range of competencies expected from military professionals beyond purely technical and tactical expertise.

Contemporary discussions on the military profession continue to emphasize the importance of traditional competencies such as leadership, discipline, physical readiness, and professional ethics (*Snider, 2005*). However, these discussions also acknowledge that the environment in which military personnel operate is changing. While the core foundations of military professionalism remain intact, the demands placed upon military professionals have expanded significantly (*Đukić, 2025*). Understanding these changes requires a thorough examination of the contemporary security environment and the factors that are reshaping military roles and responsibilities.

The Changing Character of Warfare

The military profession has always evolved in response to changes in the security environment. Throughout history, developments in technology, political organization, and military doctrine have influenced not only how wars are fought, but also the competencies required of military personnel. While the fundamental purpose of armed forces remains unchanged, the context in which military professionals operate has become significantly more complex. Modern security challenges increasingly extend beyond conventional military confrontations and require a broader understanding of the operational environment.

One of the most significant developments has been the growing prevalence of hybrid threats and hybrid forms of conflict. Rather than relying exclusively on conventional military force, state and non-state actors increasingly combine military, political, economic, informational, cyber, and other instruments to achieve strategic objectives (Hoffman, 2007). Such approaches often seek to exploit vulnerabilities below the threshold of armed conflict, creating ambiguity regarding both the nature of the threat and the appropriate response. As a result, military professionals are expected to understand not only military activities, but also the broader political, social, and informational dynamics that influence security environment. In many contemporary situations, military actions alone are insufficient to achieve operational objectives, making a broader understanding of the operational environment a critical professional competency.

A second factor shaping the contemporary security environment is the growing importance of information. Technological advances have dramatically increased the speed, amount and accessibility of information, creating both opportunities and challenges for military organizations. Information now influences public perception, political decision-making, operational effectiveness, and strategic communication (STRATCOM) in ways that were unimaginable only a few decades ago. Military personnel increasingly operate in environments where narratives, perceptions and public trust can have direct operational consequences. Consequently, the ability to assess information critically, identify misinformation and disinformation, and communicate effectively has become increasingly relevant to military effectiveness. Similar trends have been observed in studies examining the impact of disinformation and the growing need for regulatory and educational responses in the contemporary information environment (Poposka, 2016; Poposka & Ilik, 2025). A tactical event can now produce strategic consequences within hours through social media, further increasing the importance of information awareness at all levels of military activity.

Recent NATO concepts such as the cognitive domain or information advantage show a growing recognition that military effectiveness more and more depends on how individuals and groups understand and interpret, but also act upon information. Although these concepts are most often discussed at the strategic level, they however

depend upon the competencies of individual military professionals who must process information, make decisions, and interact with others under conditions of uncertainty (NATO, 2021; NATO, 2022).

A third factor contributing to the evolution of military professionalism is the increasingly multinational and interconnected nature of military operations (Brooks, 2021). Contemporary military missions frequently involve cooperation among allies, partner nations, international organizations, governmental institutions, and civilian actors. Operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, the Balkans and numerous peace support missions demonstrated that military success often depends upon effective coordination among diverse participants with different organizational cultures, professional backgrounds, and national perspectives (Atkins, 2023). In such environments, communication, cultural awareness, and interpersonal skills are increasingly becoming operational requirements rather than merely desirable personal attributes. Differences in language, organizational culture, and national perspectives can directly influence coordination, trust, and decision-making within multinational environments.

These developments do not diminish the importance of traditional military competencies. Physical readiness, technical expertise, discipline, and leadership remain essential foundations of military professionalism. However, they are no longer sufficient on their own. The combination of hybrid threats, information competition, and increasingly complex operational environments has expanded the range of competencies required from military personnel. Contemporary military professionals must not only be capable of acting effectively, but also of understanding, interpreting, and influencing the environments in which they operate. This shift provides the basis for discussing the evolving skillset of the military professional through three interconnected domains of competence: physical, cognitive, and social. Together, these domains will serve as a framework for understanding how military professionalism is adapting to the demands of the contemporary security environment.

The Evolving Skillset of the Military Professional

The developments discussed in the previous section suggest that contemporary military professionals operate in an environment that differs significantly from that of previous generations. While the fundamental purpose of the military profession remains unchanged, the competencies required to perform effectively have expanded in response to changes in warfare, technology, and the broader security environment. Traditional military skills, however, continue to provide the foundation of professional effectiveness, but they are increasingly complemented by competencies associated with information processing, critical thinking, communication, and cooperation across organizational and cultural boundaries.

This evolution does not imply the replacement of traditional military professionalism with an entirely new model. Rather, it reflects the gradual expansion of professional requirements. Military personnel must still be capable of performing demanding physical tasks, operating complex systems, and leading under conditions of risk and uncertainty. At the same time, they are additionally required to understand complex operational environments, interpret large volumes of information, and interact effectively with a diverse range of actors. For analytical purposes, these competencies can be conditionally grouped into three interconnected domains: physical competence, cognitive competence, and social competence.

Physical Competence

Despite significant technological advances and changes in the character of warfare, physical competence remains a fundamental component of military professionalism (Huntington, 1957; Snider, 2005). Armed forces continue to operate in environments where physical endurance, resilience, and the ability to perform under demanding conditions directly influence operational effectiveness. Military personnel must be prepared to function in extreme climates, under psychological pressure and in situations of uncertainty and risk. In that sense, no technological development has eliminated the need for individuals capable of performing effectively in such circumstances.

Physical competence is not the fitness alone. It includes tactical proficiency, mastery of military equipment and weapons systems and the practical skills necessary for mission execution. These competencies have traditionally formed the core of military expertise and remain essential for operational success, as *Huntington (1957)* argued in his discussion of military expertise. Contemporary military operations increasingly rely on advanced technologies, yet these technologies remain dependent on human operators who must understand their capabilities, limitations, and appropriate application. Consequently, professional competence continues to require the integration of physical readiness with technical expertise and operational judgment (Moskos et al., 2000).

Leadership also remains closely connected to the physical domain. Military leaders are expected to make decisions under pressure, maintain discipline, and preserve cohesion in challenging environments. The credibility of leaders often depends not only on their professional knowledge, but also on their demonstrated ability to share hardships and perform alongside those they lead. In this respect, physical competence continues to serve as an important source of professional legitimacy within military organizations (Snider, 2005).

At the same time, the role of physical competence should not be viewed in isolation. Contemporary operations increasingly demonstrate that physical readiness alone does not guarantee success. Military professionals may possess excellent tactical

skills and technical expertise, yet still encounter difficulties when operating in complex informational, political, or multinational environments. Physical competence therefore remains a necessary, but not sufficient condition for professional effectiveness. It provides the basis upon which other competencies are developed and applied, making it the first of the three domains required of the contemporary military professional.

Cognitive Competence

If physical competence remains the foundation of military effectiveness, cognitive competence increasingly represents its multiplier. The growing complexity of contemporary security challenges requires military professionals not only to act effectively, but also to think critically, adapt rapidly, and make quality and informed decisions under conditions of uncertainty. Modern operational environments are characterized by information overload, ambiguous situations, competing narratives, and rapidly changing circumstances that often provide no clear or immediate solutions (NATO, 2021; NATO, 2022).

Cognitive competence encompasses a range of abilities, including critical thinking, analytical reasoning, judgment, problem-solving, adaptability and decision-making. These competencies enable military personnel to interpret complex situations, evaluate information, identify assumptions and assess potential courses of action (CoA). While such abilities have always been relevant to military leadership, their importance has increased significantly as military operations have become more interconnected and information-intensive (Kahneman, 2011).

The increasing volume of available information presents a particular challenge. Access to information does not automatically improve decision-making; in some cases, it can complicate it. Military professionals must therefore be capable of distinguishing relevant information from noise, recognizing biases, evaluating sources, and understanding the limitations of their own perceptions and assumptions. As *Kahneman* (2011) demonstrated, failure to do so may result in flawed assessments and poor operational decisions.

The importance of cognitive competence is also reflected in recent military and NATO thinking. Concepts such as information advantage and the cognitive domain emphasize that success increasingly depends on the ability to understand and interpret the operational environment more effectively than potential adversaries (NATO, 2021; NATO, 2022). While these concepts are often discussed at strategic and operational levels, they ultimately rely upon the competencies of individual military professionals who process information and make decisions on a daily basis.

Experience from military operations further demonstrates that effective decision-making frequently occurs under conditions of incomplete information and time pressure. In such situations, professionals often rely on experience, pattern recogni-

tion and judgment, rather than purely analytical processes. *Klein (1998)* argues that expert decision-makers frequently recognize familiar patterns and rapidly identify workable solutions based on accumulated experience. Consequently, contemporary military professionals must combine analytical thinking with practical judgment, adaptability, and continuous learning.

The growing importance of cognitive competence does not diminish the significance of physical readiness or technical expertise. Rather, it enhances their effectiveness by enabling military personnel to apply those capabilities appropriately within complex and uncertain environments. As warfare becomes increasingly influenced by information, technology, and human perceptions, cognitive competence is likely to remain one of the defining characteristics of the contemporary military professional.

Social Competence

The third domain of professional competence reflects the increasingly social and informational nature of contemporary military activities. Modern military operations rarely occur in isolation. Military professionals routinely interact with allies, partner nations, civilian authorities, international organizations, non-governmental actors (NGO), local populations, and the media. As a result, professional effectiveness increasingly depends upon the ability to communicate, cooperate, and build relationships across organizational, cultural and national boundaries (Janowitz, 1960; Moskos et al., 2000).

Social competence includes communication skills, cultural awareness, interpersonal effectiveness, information literacy, and the ability to operate effectively within diverse social and information environments (Stanar, 2025). These competencies enable military professionals to understand different perspectives, establish trust, manage complex interactions, and communicate effectively with a variety of stakeholders. In multinational and interagency operations, such abilities contribute directly to mission effectiveness by facilitating coordination, cooperation, and shared understanding among military and civilian actors. Moreover, contemporary military education increasingly recognizes that social competence is not supplementary to professional expertise, but a core component of professional military development in complex operational environments (Stanar & Starčević, 2025).

The multinational nature of contemporary military operations further reinforces the importance of this domain. NATO and coalition activities regularly bring together personnel from different cultural, organizational and professional backgrounds. Although military organizations often share common objectives, differences in language, organizational culture and national approaches can influence communication, expectations, and decision-making processes. The ability to navigate these differences has therefore become an increasingly important professional requirement (Thomas & Inkson, 2017).

The informational dimension of military activity also contributes to the growing importance of this competence. Military personnel increasingly operate in environments where information is rapidly disseminated through traditional and digital media platforms. Individual actions can be observed, interpreted and shared almost instantaneously, sometimes generating consequences far beyond the immediate tactical level. In such environments, effective communication and information awareness become important elements of professional conduct and organizational credibility (NATO, 2022).

Social competence also contributes to mission effectiveness by supporting cooperation between military and civilian actors. Contemporary operations often require coordination with governmental agencies, international organizations, humanitarian actors, as well as local communities. Success in such environments depends not only on military capabilities, but also on the ability to communicate, negotiate and build productive relationships with a wide range of stakeholders (Janowitz, 1960).

Taken together, these developments suggest that social competence has become an increasingly important component of military professionalism. While physical and cognitive competencies remain essential, they are often exercised within social environments where communication, trust and information shape outcomes. Experiences from intercultural and interreligious dialogue further demonstrate that trust and mutual understanding are often built upon the recognition of shared values and common ethical foundations, even among groups with different cultural and religious backgrounds (Grizhev et al., 2025). The contemporary military professional must therefore be capable not only of acting and deciding effectively, but also of interacting effectively with others in complex and interconnected environments.

The expansion of professional requirements raises an important question for military organizations. If contemporary military professionals are expected to develop competencies across physical, cognitive and social domains, military education and training systems must adapt accordingly. The next section therefore considers the implications of these developments for professional military education.

Implications for Professional Military Education

The evolution of the military profession has important implications for professional military education (PME). If contemporary military professionals are expected to operate effectively across physical, cognitive and social domains, educational systems must ensure that these competencies are developed in a balanced and integrated manner. Traditional military education has historically focused on tactical proficiency, technical expertise, discipline and leadership. These elements remain fundamental and continue to provide the foundation of military effectiveness. However, the complexity of the contemporary security environment requires educational approaches that extend beyond the transmission of military knowledge and technical skills.

One implication is the growing importance of developing cognitive competence throughout a military professional's career. Modern operational environments require personnel who can think critically, evaluate information, challenge assumptions and make decisions under conditions of uncertainty. Critical thinking has become an increasingly important component of professional military education because it enables military professionals to question assumptions, recognize biases, evaluate evidence, and make sound judgments in complex operational environments (Gerras, 2008). PME therefore needs to create opportunities for analysis, reflection, problem-solving, and decision-making rather than relying exclusively on the acquisition of doctrinal knowledge. Scenario-based learning, case studies, red teaming activities and professional discussions can help develop the intellectual flexibility required in complex operational environments. These approaches are increasingly reflected in contemporary discussions on military education, which emphasize adaptability, critical thinking and the ability to operate in rapidly changing environments.

A second implication concerns the development of social competence. Contemporary military professionals increasingly operate in multinational, interagency and civil-military environments where effective communication and cooperation are essential. PME should therefore provide opportunities for interaction with diverse perspectives and professional cultures. International exchanges, multinational exercises, interdisciplinary learning activities or engagement with civilian institutions can contribute to the development of cultural awareness, communication skills and the ability to build professional relationships across organizational boundaries.

The growing importance of information in contemporary warfare also requires greater attention within military education. Military professionals must be capable of evaluating information critically, recognizing misinformation and disinformation and understanding how narratives and perceptions influence operational outcomes. Information literacy should therefore be considered an important component of professional development rather than a specialized skill limited to particular branches or functions.

These requirements suggest that PME should increasingly emphasize adaptability and continuous learning. The rapid pace of technological, social and security developments means that many of the challenges military professionals will encounter during their careers cannot be fully anticipated during initial education and training. Consequently, educational systems should not only provide knowledge, but also cultivate the ability and motivation to learn throughout a professional career. Approaches associated with self-directed and lifelong learning have gained increasing attention in this regard, as they encourage learners to take greater responsibility for their own professional development (Hase & Kenyon, 2000; Blaschke, 2012). Similar observations have been made in studies examining the application of heutagogical principles within contemporary educational environments, including military education (Ilieva Nikolovska et al., 2019).

At the same time, the growing emphasis on cognitive and social competencies should not be interpreted as reducing the importance of physical competence. Military organizations ultimately remain responsible for the application of force and the successful execution of military operations. The challenge for PME is therefore not to replace traditional military education, but to complement it. Effective professional development requires the integration of physical, cognitive, and social dimensions in a manner that reflects the realities of the contemporary security environment.

Ultimately, the future effectiveness of military organizations will depend not only on the technologies they possess or the doctrines they employ, but also on their ability to develop professionals capable of understanding, adapting to and influencing increasingly complex operational environments. PME will remain one of the most important mechanisms through which military institutions prepare their personnel for these evolving demands.

Conclusion

The military profession has continuously adapted to changes in warfare, technology and society. While the fundamental responsibility of military professionals remains unchanged, the environment in which they operate has become significantly more complex. Contemporary security challenges are increasingly shaped by hybrid threats, information competition, technological innovation and multinational cooperation, creating demands that extend beyond traditional military expertise.

This paper has argued that these developments are expanding the skillset required of the contemporary military professional. Physical competence remains the foundation of military effectiveness and continues to underpin operational performance, leadership and professional credibility. At the same time, the growing importance of information, uncertainty and complex operational environments has elevated the role of cognitive competence. Military professionals are increasingly expected to think critically, process information effectively, adapt to changing circumstances and make sound decisions under pressure. Equally important is the growing relevance of social competence, which enables effective communication, cooperation and relationship-building across organizational, cultural and national boundaries. These developments reflect broader transformations in military professionalism, where effective professional performance increasingly depends on a combination of traditional military expertise and a wider range of cognitive and social competencies (Đukić, 2025).

These competencies should not be viewed as competing priorities. Rather, they represent complementary dimensions of military professionalism. The effectiveness of contemporary military personnel depends not only on the ability to apply force, but also on the ability to understand the environment, interpret information and work ef-

fectively with a wide range of actors. The military professional of today must therefore be capable of operating across physical, cognitive and social domains simultaneously.

The findings also highlight the important role of PME. As the demands placed upon military personnel continue to evolve, educational and training systems must support the development of a broader set of competencies while preserving the foundations of military professionalism. The challenge is not to replace traditional military education, but to build upon it so that it prepares personnel for increasingly complex and interconnected operational environments.

Ultimately, the evolution of the military profession reflects a broader shift in the character of warfare itself. Military success will continue to depend on physical capability and operational proficiency, but these qualities alone are no longer sufficient. In an era where information, perception and human interaction play an increasingly important role, the future military professional will be defined not only by the ability to act, but also by the ability to understand, adapt and influence. In this sense, the evolution of military professionalism is not a move away from kinetic operations, but a recognition that military effectiveness increasingly depends on competencies that extend beyond them.

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Summary

The contemporary security environment is characterized by increasing complexity, rapid technological change, hybrid threats, and growing competition in the information domain. These developments are influencing not only the conduct of military operations, but also the skills and competencies required of military professionals. While traditional military capabilities such as physical readiness, technical knowledge and leadership remain essential, they are no longer sufficient on their own. Contemporary military personnel are increasingly required to operate in complex informational environments, cooperate with diverse actors and make decisions under conditions of uncertainty.

This paper examines how the skillset of the military professional is evolving in response to these changes. Using a qualitative conceptual approach based on a review of relevant literature, selected NATO doctrinal documents, and practitioner observations from professional military education and multinational operational environments, the paper identifies three interconnected domains of competence: physical, cognitive, and social. The analysis suggests that contemporary military effectiveness depends not only on the ability to apply force, but also on the ability to understand and orient in complex environments, process information critically and communicate effectively across organizational and cultural environments.

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