



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 613

January 21, 2025

A Modest Proposal to Improve Joint Professional Military Education

Admiral Charles Richard, USN (Ret.)

ADM Charles Richard, USN (Ret.) is a former Commander, U.S. Strategic Command, and the University of Virginia Miller Center's James R. Schlesinger Distinguished Professor.

Robert Peters

Robert Peters is the Nuclear Deterrence and Missile Defense Research Fellow at the Heritage Foundation.

For upwardly mobile officers in America's military, a year at a Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) institution to acquire a Master's degree is very often necessary for promotion. These schools, located at the Army War College in Carlisle, PA, National Defense University in Washington, D.C. the Naval War College in Newport, RI, and elsewhere, are meant to prepare officers for the jump from tactics (commanding a battalion or a single ship) to the larger, operational levels of war, where they may command a brigade or a squadron of ships as part of a larger combat engagement.

Far too often, however, the JPME teaches topics in the wrong order. Very often, JPME overemphasizes the strategic level of war at the expense of the operational level of war. In this sense, they are asked to consider and ultimately understand the movement of entire armies and fleets as part of a broader conflict between nation states, often times before such considerations are required for their rank. An example would be a Navy Lieutenant enrolled in JPME I being asked to write a paper on the use of strategic ambiguity in the Indo-Pacific theater. A worthy topic this is – but perhaps not one for a Lieutenant.

The consequence of such a jump is that they do not receive the education they need to understand the role their brigade or naval squadron plays at the operational level of war and



how they can best achieve operational effect with the forces assigned to them or a members of an operational staff.

This affects service training as well. One author, as Commodore of a ballistic missile submarine squadron, found one commanding officer training his wardroom on the political dynamics between the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and Turkey and Iraq. Again, an important topic, but not the highest priority or most useful for the officers on an SSBN.

This must change—and JPME should dedicate itself to teaching rising officers the skills they will need to progress and succeed at the next level of warfare.

The Rise of the DIME – Elements of National Power

One example of how JPME, at times, focuses on the wrong level of instruction is the DIME.

Anyone who has spent time in the Defense Department in the last two decades recognizes the term, “DIME,” which represents four key elements of national power: diplomacy, information, military, and economics. American national security professionals, however, are increasingly focusing on the D, I, and the E, at the expense of the M. The authors are not arguing that defense professionals don’t need to understand the DIME concept—far from it—but the full breadth of the DIME should not be the focus of their analysis. They instead must be the undisputed experts in the *military* instrument of power and understand enough of the rest of the concept to know how the military instrument fits in and underpins the rest of the instruments of nation power as part of an overall strategy.

The DIME as a concept became fashionable within the Defense Department during the Global War on Terror. It was taught at various JPME institutions and became a centerpiece of strategy courses not long after 9/11. Dissertations and term papers with titles such as “DIME Operations: The Ultimate Form of War for the United States in the 21st Century” became commonplace during this period.¹ By the late 2010s, even official Defense Department Joint Doctrine used the DIME as a central organizing principle.² By 2019, West Point’s Modern War Institute was publishing papers that called for the DIME to be the organizing principle in how to prosecute a war: “In a real-world case of war, during the beginning of hostilities, the State and Defense Departments would assemble trained [DIME Planning Teams] that would immediately begin executing Army Design Methodology to achieve a comprehensive, DIME solution to achieve an optimal negotiated settlement.”³ Indeed, it has even become fashionable in military publications to expand on the DIME concept, to tack on financial, intelligence, and law enforcement (DIMEFIL) to the elements of national power,⁴ or tout new constructs such as “PESTEL” for political, economic, social, technological, environmental, and legal instruments of national power.

Indeed, the DIME has become so central that multiple JPME institutions teach it as a central core of their curricula. Washington, D.C.’s National War College’s Primer for all incoming students uses the DIME as it’s the central organizing construct of its teaching of “instruments of national power.” In this construct, the military is one of only four “co-equal” instruments of power.⁵



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The “CAPSTONE” program within JPME, which rising generals and admirals are required to take, notes that the first learning objective of the program is to “Understand the Joint warfighting security environment and the relationships of all instruments of national power.” It goes on to note how CAPSTONE is meant to “ensure newly selected Generals and Flag officers understand the fundamentals of joint doctrine and the Joint Operational Art; how to integrate the elements of national power in order to accomplish national security and national military strategies and how joint, interagency, and multinational operations support national strategic goals and objectives.”⁶ CAPSTONE, which again, focuses on rising generals and admirals, is a better place for this analysis than the War Colleges which teaches more junior officers, but even CAPSTONE may be too early for such study. Indeed, a thorough understanding of the DIME is probably only required at the 3 and 4 star level – for generals responsible for prosecuting a broader conflict in concert with their colleagues in the Departments of State, Treasury, etc.

Without question, a nation enjoys more forms of power than simply military capabilities and prowess – but it is hard to overstate how much the DIME concept has come to dominate discussions about strategy, warfare, and influence among our national security professionals, in particular America’s corps of senior military officers. While it is good to conceptualize the utility of all tools, there is a danger in a Defense Department that diffuses its focus across ALL instruments of national power to the detriment of the one instrument of national power for which it is ultimately responsible: military power.

When to Use – and NOT Use – the DIME Framework

As noted, the DIME as framework for coordinating instruments of national power is useful, but there are downsides.

The DIME inadvertently focuses attention on all four elements as if they are equal in effect – but the military underpins, or gives power to, the other three elements. As Frederick the Great said, “diplomacy without arms is like music without instruments.”⁷ Put another way, unless an adversary is prevented from achieving its objectives by military force *outside* negotiations, it has no interest in taking seriously peaceful alternatives being offered *inside* negotiations.

The military does not act alone in furthering national goals, but it is indisputably the necessary foundation that the other elements of national power rely upon during times of acute crisis or conflict. Absent a sufficient and therefore credible military force that can impose costs on an adversary, diplomatic offers carry no weight, information cannot be acted upon, and economic well-being is held hostage by the more powerful military. In the final analysis, an actor’s economic power or information messaging capabilities are irrelevant if it has insufficient military power.

The DIME construct therefore should not be the central framework for JPME. Instead, JPME should first and foremost teach about the military instrument of power, while also giving exposure to the diplomatic, information, and economic instruments of power. The reason for this is that JPME teaches officers at the O5 (Lieutenant Colonel or Commander) and O6



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(Captain or Colonel) level. Yet, their concentration should be on the transition from the tactical to the operational level of military art.

Within the Defense Department, the focus in America's officers' corps over the last twenty years on diplomacy, information, and economics has come at the expense of their understanding of how to employ military power to achieve favorable outcomes. Both authors of this paper have observed multiple instances when officers, confronted with difficult problems during a simulated conflict or crisis that has an obvious and difficult military challenge, focus their attention on all components of the DIME. Indeed, in such simulations, military officers discuss the need to identify diplomatic or economic solutions to *military-specific* challenges.

The focus of the DIME construct within JPME results in officers who talk about diplomacy, information, and economics, particularly as tools to employ during times of conflict. This raises an obvious question: *who is there to advise and advocate for the military aspect of national power if military officers diffuse their attention across all levers of national power?* Moreover, military officers will never be as proficient as State Department officials at employing diplomatic tools or Treasury Department officials at economic instruments of national power. At best, they will be modestly-informed amateurs.

The more time military officers spend thinking about non-military instruments of power, the less time they have to think about the military component of the DIME – which, at the end of the day, is what they are responsible for, particularly when it comes to escalation dynamics and achieving victory. Military officers and even civilian Defense policy makers should defer to officials who work in the State Department, Treasury Department, and elsewhere on the non-military aspects of the DIME.

Training Military Officers to Carry Out Military Functions

If not the DIME, what should be the central focus of our nation's military officers? Military personnel should be trained to primarily examine the military instrument of power. Such an examination should be within the context of their current command or staff position and the associated missions and responsibility. While those officers need to be aware of the broader context into which their military operations will fit into, they must answer the following questions thoroughly:

- What can I do with my assigned forces and current authorities?
- What can I do with my assigned forces with additional authorities?
- What support can I request from another commander?
- What support can I offer another commander?

These questions should be the focus of instruction within the JPME system. In particular, these questions can help officers at the O5 and O6 level transition from the tactical to the operational level of analysis. Such a shift in analysis is critical, as officers attending JPME should be shifting their analysis from individual unit engagements (such as a naval destroyer



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or a fighter squadron or a tank battalion meeting their peer on the field of battle) to fleet-level or corps-level engagements across a theater of operation.

None of this is to say that the DIME should be ignored or jettisoned by the Defense Department or from its JPME system. Indeed, at the strategic level of analysis – that is, at the four-star or Combatant Commander level – military officers must understand how the military component of national power aligns with the diplomatic, information, and economic instruments of national power. The construct of integrated deterrence – which focuses on the employment of all instruments of national power in order to deter adversary aggression, first unveiled in 2022 – is the right means by which military power should be coupled with other instruments of national power. But this should be done at the strategic levels of analysis. The authors endorse the 2023 Congressionally-mandated and bipartisan Strategic Posture Commission, which states “The United States must develop and effectively implement a truly integrated, whole-of-government strategy to address the 2027-2035 threat environment, and must be able to bring all elements of American power to bear against these impending threats.”⁸ And as a recent Lawrence Livermore report notes, our nation should “invest leadership’s political capital toward...integrated deterrence to advance a national and intra-alliance discussion of the emerging two-peer problem and its implications for deterrence.”⁹

For military officers seeking (or chosen by their military Services) the highest levels of command to understand the role that the military instrument of power can play within the broader DIME construct, there are a handful of excellent security studies Master’s degree programs across this country (and some within easy driving distance of the Pentagon) that offer just such an education. Officers on the track to getting three and four stars should be encouraged and supported to take advantage of such programs – but the Defense Department should question the continued organization of JPME curricula around the DIME analytic construct.

Conclusion

Once the above operational-level questions have been answered, military officers should determine what the rest of the government must do as part of an integrated deterrence construct. They should focus their efforts on ensuring that military solutions align with broader strategic goals – but they should be very hesitant to take the lead on the non-military aspects of the DIME.

Failure to focus on the proper level of analysis – tactics for junior officers, operations for mid-level officers to early-grade generals and admirals, and strategy for the highest ranks – will leave our nation underprepared for military engagements that will ultimately decide the outcome of war. It also will undercut the potential utility of the other elements of national power that depend on the ultimate reliability of the military instrument. Given the deteriorating state of the world’s security environment, now is the time for military officers to focus on their core functions: the profession of arms.



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¹ LCDR Albert E. Rice, USN, “Dime Operations: The Ultimate Form of War for the United States in the 21st Century,” Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, April 2003, available at https://aul.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/delivery/01AUL_INST:AUL/.

² Vice Admiral Kevin Scott, USN, “Joint Doctrine Note 1-18,” The Joint Staff, April 2018, available at https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/jdn_jg/jdn1_18.pdf?ver=2018-04-25-150439-540.

³ Harrison Morgan, “Dropping DIMES: Leveraging All Elements of National Power on the Multi-Domain Battlefield,” The Modern War Institute, West Point, September 18, 2019, available at <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/dropping-dimes-leveraging-elements-national-power-multi-domain-battlefield>.

⁴ Konstantin Khomko, “A Nation Needs More than a DIME,” *Defense.info*, April 3, 2019, available at <https://defense.info/williams-foundation/2019/04/a-nation-needs-more-than-a-dime>.

⁵ Steven Heffington, Adam Oler, and David Tretler, “A National Security Strategy Primer,” National War College, Washington, D.C., 2021, available at https://nwc.ndu.edu/Portals/71/Images/Publications/NWC%20NSS%20Primer%202021.pdf?ver=F2C_dWgjNc2G1hvOWob5wA%3d%3d.

⁶ “Capstone: General and Flag Officer Course,” National Defense University, available at <https://capstone.ndu.edu/Home/Course-Overview/>.

⁷ Linda Ochiel, “Which Way Forward? ‘Diplomacy Without Military Power is Like Music Without Instruments’: An Analytical Assessment of Tools of Diplomacy,” University of Nairobi, November 2013, available at https://www.academia.edu/5287495/Which_Way_Forward_Diplomacy_without_military_power_is_like_music_without_instruments_AN_Analytical_assessment_of_tools_of_diplomacy.

⁸ Madelyn Creedon and Jon Kyl, et al., *America’s Strategic Posture* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2023), available at <https://www.ida.org/research-and-publications/publications/all/a/am/americas-strategicposture>.

⁹ Brad Roberts, et al., “China’s Emergence as a Second Nuclear Peer: Implications for U.S. Deterrence Strategy,” Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory Center for Global Security Research, 2023, available at https://cgsr.llnl.gov/sites/cgsr/files/2024-08/CGSR_Two_Peer_230314.pdf.

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