

The Changes of Leadership as the Focus of Military Operations Changes to Homeland Defence and Collective Defence¹

Capt. Aleksandras Melnikovas

Chief Methodologist, Leadership and Methodology Development Centre, General Jonas Žemaitis Military Academy of Lithuania

Introduction

For a long time, peace and stability were considered self-constituting facts, leading to the notion that an actual war in the twenty-first century is highly improbable. However, the outbreak of a full-scale war in Ukraine highlighted that peace and stability, sovereignty, and independence are the core values that ought to be defended and fought for. The immense transition of focus from peacekeeping and stabilization missions to a renewed emphasis on territorial defense and collective defense agreements exemplifies the challenges military leadership is currently confronted with.

The dynamic nature of the current geopolitical environment poses multiple challenges for Lithuanian military leadership, particularly with the issue of the shifting emphasis of its missions and operations. Until recently, the Lithuanian military were in a position to choose the fights by deploying or not deploying

¹ The article was prepared based on presentations and discussions during the international leadership seminar „The Changes of Leadership as the Focus of Military Operations Changes to Homeland Defence and Collective Defence“, organized by the General Jonas Žemaitis Military Academy of Lithuania from 2023-12-11 to 2023-12-15.

the Armed Forces into operations outside Lithuania. With the start of the large-scale Russian invasion in Ukraine and Belarus being a part of this, the situation has changed drastically – we no longer have the luxury of choosing whether to fight or not. We will have to fight, and it is not up to us to choose the time or place. The Military Academy of Lithuania (MAL) is responding to these challenges by revising its leadership development concept, conducting numerous events and updates of the related curriculum, and placing considerable emphasis on and allocating substantial resources to develop future leaders for the evolving battlefield.

As the focus of military operations changes from non-Article 5 Crisis Response Operations to Homeland Defense and Collective Defense Operations, this significant shift may require a reevaluation of Lithuania's military officers' leadership development concepts and strategies.

In order to examine the needed changes in leadership and leadership development concepts, MAL has organized the Seminar on Leadership with contributors from Lithuania and allied nations. The seminar, therefore, focused on the question: *What changes in leadership and leadership development concepts are needed to prepare effective officers-leaders for the future battlefield?* Altogether, fifteen active duty and retired senior officers from Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, Belgium, Ukraine, and the USA contributed on topics of current trends in leadership, Russian military leadership, lessons from the Ukrainian military leadership, as well as practitioners' and educators' perspectives on leadership development.



General view of the Conference Hall. *Photo by E. Genys*

1. Current Trends in Leadership: Competences and Traits

The discussion on current trends in leadership combines the conceptual frameworks of business leadership and military leadership. Although the core essence of leadership remains the same, a distinction could be drawn in the context of the operational environment and levels of responsibility. Business leadership, operating in a market environment, mainly focuses on profits and economic gains, while military leadership operates in a hostile environment where leaders are directly responsible for their soldiers, and even a minor mistake may cause a life-or-death situation for the subordinates. There is a consensus, however, that the concept of contemporary leadership, whether it is business or military leadership, is mainly based on the theory of transformational leadership, which is often related to the major question of *how to lead* or *how to make influence*. This is based on four pillars of transformational leadership: leading by example,

individual approach, motivation, and providing autonomy. The leader and a common goal are the main factors that unite people. The leader's attention and individual approach towards subordinates help to motivate and encourage people. Leaders should provide different levels of autonomy to their followers, who have both energy and critical thinking. Also, effective leaders not only establish and achieve objectives but also lead by example – manage their time, possess motivation and determination, and exhibit excellent follower qualities.

The challenge for modern leaders lies in maintaining a balance between being authoritative and approachable, emphasizing the importance of healthy relationships based on respect, trust, and commitment. As a key aspect of modern strategy, transformational leadership demands empowering individuals, driving change, and adapting to diverse contexts. Leadership traits such as bravery, wisdom, love, and devotion, along with a strong moral perspective, could be identified as crucial. These values contribute to building trust and setting boundaries.

Reflecting on historical examples, qualities like commitment, courage, and the capacity to foster professional relationships have been constants in successful leadership. These attributes, rooted in both historical and contemporary contexts, underscore the evolving nature of leadership in the military, reflecting the complexity and diversity of modern military operations.

Considering the current trends in leadership discussed above, it may be argued that the MAL aligns its leadership education with current trends by emphasizing transformational and value-based leadership. This approach reflects the global shift in military leadership, focusing on developing leaders who are adaptable, morally grounded, and capable of inspiring change. MAL's concept of leadership development is attuned to these evolving needs, ensuring that its graduates are well-equipped to lead effectively in the modern military landscape. This strategic alignment demonstrates MAL's commitment to fostering leaders who can navigate the complexities of contemporary military challenges.

2. Russian Military Leadership: Systemic Deficiencies

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has exposed deep flaws within Russia's military establishment that are undermining its battlefield effectiveness. These systemic weaknesses reflect political and cultural pathologies deeply rooted within wider Russian society.

Imperialist National Identity

A key driver of Russia's military failures is its imperial mindset. The Kremlin views Ukraine as an artificial state with no legitimate nationhood apart from Russia. This arrogant presumption led Russia to fundamentally underestimate the Ukrainians' willingness to fight for their sovereignty and move westward toward Europe. Moscow wrongly assumed that Russian forces would be welcomed as liberators instead of resisted as invaders. This confident belief in Russia's natural dominance over its neighbors blinded leaders in Moscow, which also affected their own military capabilities.

Widespread Corruption

Another major vulnerability Russian forces face is endemic corruption, driven by the extreme centralization of wealth by Russian elites. The defense industry is filled with corruption and fraud, with military officials routinely stealing money allocated for vital equipment maintenance and soldiers' rations. Procurement officers purchase large quantities of substandard equipment, selling what is of good quality for personal profit on the black market instead. Due to years of corruption, Russian troops are ill-equipped and demoralized. Russia is unable to sustain prolonged large-scale combat operations due to widespread logistics failures. Out of the listed 12,500 tanks, just 3,300 were considered operational at the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine. The remaining combat vehicles irreparably deteriorated as corrupt officers systematically dismantled and sold their electronics, optics, and engines.

Societal Brutality

Combat performance is also significantly lowered by the disturbing mistreatment and exploitation of regular soldiers. The extremely violent and corrupt culture in Russia, whose elites maintain power through violence and place little value on human life, is reflected in the military. *Dedovshchina*, an abusive ritual of hazing and bullying in which senior conscripts abuse and torture more junior recruits, is the result of a brutal culture. Officers not only tolerate these abusive rituals but even promote them to impose discipline and obedience. This oppressive environment, however, fosters resentment, not loyalty or solidarity. Russian troops fight not out of patriotic ideas but simply to survive, focused more on self-enrichment through looting than achieving military objectives. These dynamics severely undermine unit cohesion and the mutual commitment vital for battlefield resilience and victory.

Military Incompetence

Military leaders are also partially responsible for wasting the military potential of Russian troops, thanks to their apparent incompetence. Thoughtful assumptions and poor planning guided expectations for a lightning-quick victory within days. The General Staff believed that superior force concentrations would be sufficient to win within days, and as a result, they were unable to recognize the impact of contemporary precision weapons. Aging Soviet-era commanders, lacking imagination or interest in studying recent conflicts, employed familiar but outdated tactics like World War II-style frontal assaults against entrenched defenders armed with antitank missiles. Inflexible reliance on overcentralized control and battle drills left frontline troops passive, confused in the face of changing conditions, and unable to display the tactical initiative essential on a dynamic battlefield.

Unwillingness to Decentralize

The Russian military was founded as a force of autocracy, designed to fight internal dissidents rather than defeat foreign enemies, and the incapacity of the current Russian armed forces to transfer authority and promote lower-level decision-making reflects that heritage. The armed forces were designed first and foremost for keeping the population under the Kremlin's authority. Initiatives by subordinates were treated as dangerous freelancing. Strict top-down command is intended to maintain soldiers as mindless robots subjected to the orders of their superiors. As opposed to contemporary Western doctrine, which encourages dynamic decision-making based on a shared tactical picture, Russia's military system operates slowly and waits for orders from distant higher echelons of command before reacting to rapidly evolving threats.

Lack of an Effective NCO Corps

Complicating these problems is Russia's lack of an empowered professional non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps to provide small unit leadership as experienced mentors and trainers. Instead, officers are required to carry out duties that would typically fall under the responsibility of experienced NCOs in Western forces on top of their regular duties. Additional NCO's tasks overwhelm these inexperienced junior officers, taking focus away from their leadership responsibilities. The high casualty rates then devastate organizational memory and magnify weaknesses in Russia's centralized training system, which is overly reliant on these same junior officers to train replacements. As a result, the new recruits are put into the combat meat grinder without receiving proper training.

Reflecting on Russia's performance in the war with Ukraine, it becomes evident that these systemic issues have hindered the Russian military's adaptability and effectiveness. The lack of decentralized decision-making, poor communication, and a culture of corruption have contributed to its underperformance. After decades of firmly

established authoritarianism and widespread corruption, Russia's economy, culture, and social institutions have been degraded to the point that fundamental flaws negatively affect the country's performance on the battlefield. Vladimir Putin's leadership is likely to be unable to manage these flaws, and Russia's hopes of becoming a major military force again seem rather unrealistic. In the absence of significant changes, it appears that the authoritarian leadership of the Kremlin will continue to waste Russian potential by prioritizing corrupt favoritism above qualifications.

3. Practitioners' Perspective: Self-development and Dedication

Practical Military Leadership: Developing Skills Through Dedication

Leadership is vital for any military's success. At its core, leadership involves guiding people towards a goal through purpose, direction, and motivation. There is no doubt that leaders must be developed deliberately over time since the myth of "naturally born leaders" is false – leadership is learned consistently through dedicated study, constant practice, and gaining experience.

Considering the practical perspective of leadership, military officers must not only exhibit leadership skills and be good leaders but also grow new leaders out of their subordinates within lower ranks. They can develop future leaders by serving as inspirational mentors and role models for subordinates. Effective leaders provide a clear strategic vision and define goals for their teams while allowing and supporting initiative in execution. For example, they issue mission-type orders that declare the purpose and end goal but give flexibility for subordinates to determine the best ways to achieve it.

Additionally, leading multinational forces presents unique challenges for military leaders. Differences in languages, cultural backgrounds, tactical doctrines, and military terminology can sometimes cause misunderstandings. Respect and open communication channels are vital to overcoming such issues. Leaders should proactively take time to explain tactics, terminology,

and procedures to aligned units from different nations in order to get everyone on the same page. Additionally, treating all soldiers with dignity and respect enables multinational teams to build trust and cohesion – critical ingredients for operational success.

Overall, practical leadership requires lifelong learning – effective leaders must continuously learn to make fully informed decisions and properly train their teams. Leaders also need to quickly absorb and process new information to react to dynamic situations. The key to success lies in the hard work of self-development and the ability of a leader to grow new leaders and build effective teams.

Persistent Practical Leadership Competences

While evolving technologies and methods shape the conduct of war, it may be argued that, from a practical perspective, the fundamental essence of leadership has remained largely constant. Certain leadership competences and traits remain most valuable for successful leadership regardless of time: strength of character, being a role model, trustworthiness, genuine care for the wellbeing of subordinates, and persistent determination. By fostering a climate where subordinates' needs are taken care of, leaders gain the moral authority to inspire and motivate them to go the extra mile. Something as small as a visit or casual chat from the commander offers reassurance, letting subordinates know their role is valued. This thoughtful interaction mitigates stress and fortifies them to overcome moments of weakness that are inevitable in war.

Practical leadership could also be differentiated in terms of levels of command, as leaders must operate at every level of command, from a sergeant coordinating a small squad up to a general directing an entire division. Junior leaders tend to interact directly with individual subordinates, while senior leaders focus more on providing strategic guidance to subordinate formations. However, regardless of echelon, fundamental leadership still involves building trust, promoting teamwork, sustaining optimistic momentum, and driving units to accomplish missions despite chaos and uncertainty.

A leader's core mission is to construct a firm belief in victory in



In the first row from the left: Major General (Ret.) John L. Gronski (US Army); Major General (Ret.) Vitalijus Vaikšnoras; Member of the Parliament, Republic of Lithuania, Lieutenant General (Ret.) Arvydas Pocius; Brigadier General Almantas Leika, Commandant Lithuanian MA; Colonel General Mykhailo Koval, Commandant Ukrainian NDU. *Photo by E. Genys*

the hearts and minds of subordinates – to make them truly believe success is achievable despite all obstacles. Yet leaders cannot inspire motivation in others if their personal motivation and belief in success fail. They must demonstrate an unbreakable personal commitment before they can transmit determination to the rest of the team. This permanent requirement continues to exist in the contemporary battlespace. While technologies evolve, the fog of war, chaos, friction, and brutality are still persistent on the battlefield. Commanders in the past, present, and future require a complex skillset to navigate multifaceted challenges, comprehend complex innovations, and yet be able to relate to subordinates on a basic human level.

It may be argued that from a practical perspective, leadership is largely consistent with the core competencies of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Based

on a practical perspective, effective leaders serve as inspirational role models, displaying idealized influence. They motivate teams by providing a compelling vision and linking mission objectives to values and beliefs (inspirational motivation). Leaders promote creativity and innovation by encouraging subordinates' initiative in execution (intellectual stimulation). Finally, they consider individuals' unique skills and potentials when delegating tasks and empowering teams, while also being able to connect with subordinates on a human level (individualized consideration).

4. Ukrainian Military Leadership: Experience from the Front

The Ukrainian military leadership places considerable emphasis on decentralized decision-making, fostering initiative among subordinates, and preserving high troop morale. These principles align with the fundamental prerequisites for effective mission command. The Tuzla Island incident of 2003 served as a practical illustration of how junior officers could effectively organize regional forces to counter the Russian threat in the absence of senior leaders. The incident mentioned above exemplifies that Ukrainian leadership recognizes that adaptability to a shifting environment and flexibility are more crucial for executing successful strategies than rigid conformity to orders from above, as is the case with Russian military leadership.

However, some changes emerged during the current war. With enormous force imbalances in the first stages of the war in 2022, commanders initially had to focus on preserving combat power, even if it meant territorial losses. But as it was illustrated at Bakhmut, when the stakes are existential, preserving national integrity takes priority over avoiding casualties.

As the war progressed, resilience, psychological strength, and care for subordinates became critical leadership tasks. With brutal urban combat and the ever-present threats of artillery strikes or even torture if captured, fostering troop morale had become even more vital. It was necessary to have a "generation that doesn't cry"

mentality while maintaining compassion for soldiers' suffering.

To achieve victory, Ukrainian military leaders must continue fostering initiative and adaptability in junior officers, thereby facilitating dynamic decision-making and disciplined initiative. They must also strengthen officers' strategic thinking abilities to employ limited resources optimally. Furthermore, as mobilized civilians are likely to continue to comprise a substantial part of the force, creatively motivating them through inspiring purpose and care will also continue to be essential.

For Lithuania's military, the essential requirements for competent leadership remain largely consistent. Ukraine's experience does, however, offer some valuable lessons. Firstly, investing in junior officers and NCOs to exercise disciplined initiative will likely be key to succeeding against Russia's centralized, complicated, and rigid command system. Realistic training, especially for mobilization forces, is crucial to building physical and psychological resilience. While Lithuania's armed forces are already well-trained, the bar for professional excellence must be raised even higher given Russia's failures. Continuously improving critical and strategic thinking abilities at all levels will help maximize fighting power.

Secondly, Ukrainian experience shows that a full-scale conflict requires not only the expertise of the military but also the support of the general population. In this regard, communicating a higher purpose – national sovereignty and identity – appears to be of the highest priority for the military and civilian leadership of Lithuania at this time, in order to inspire the military and general population to resist the aggressor with strong determination.

Finally, Lithuania should increasingly emphasize resilience, care for subordinates, and flexibility in leadership training. In scenarios involving a Baltic conflict, where dispersed and isolated units would likely be cut off from higher echelons, junior officers and NCOs will frequently need to take initiative and act independently without orders. Training leaders to be able to operate in challenging conditions, inspire and raise troop morale, and improvise with creativity will help to compensate for the potential enemy's

advantages in numbers and firepower.

Overall, the Ukrainian military leadership's adaptable approach and focus on troop morale offer valuable insights. The war, meanwhile, shows that hard work, professionalism, and resilience will likely determine success on the battlefield. By developing junior officers and NCOs for independent action and initiative and senior leaders for creativity and strong mission command skills, the Lithuanian military will be better equipped to defend the homeland if called upon to do so.

5. Educators' Perspective: Officers for the Future Battlefield

Military education institutions face the essential mission of educating cadets as the leaders who will navigate the armed forces through future challenges. The insights from Lithuanian, Belgian, and Estonian military academies, therefore, provide valuable lessons allowing us to identify the necessary developments to produce adaptable, morally equipped, and effective leaders for tomorrow's battlefield.

Values-based Leadership and Followership

From educators' perspective, instilling common values is the core factor in officer education. Cadets must internalize ethical foundations before learning strategy or tactics, since they will have to navigate tactical and moral gray areas when clear guidance is absent. Value-based leadership, therefore, may serve as a compass when making moral decisions on the battlefield. Moreover, common values serve as a unifying factor among the military; sharing common values creates a sense of unity and camaraderie and fosters a shared motivation that allows to effectively pursue a common goal.

Another vital lesson is that leadership relies on competent followership. Officers serve as transmitters between the higher commander and their subordinates; therefore, they must motivate and care for subordinates while executing superiors' intent. In this regard, a military setting will always require an officer to be



Leadership from educators' perspective. Panel discussion. From the left: Major General (Ret.) John L. Gronski (US Army); Brigadier General Almantas Leika, Commandant Lithuanian MA; Rear Admiral Yves Dupont, Commandant Belgian RMA; Brigadier General Vakur Karus, Commandant Estonian MA.

Photo by E. Genys

both a leader and a follower. Military education, therefore, should highlight this dual responsibility in order to educate future officers as responsible leaders and effective followers at the same time.

Educating to Adapt to Complexity and Uncertainty

From educators' perspective, one of the most important roles of military education institutions is to provide a safe environment in which cadets can make mistakes and learn from them. Cadets must be allowed to fail while training in a secure environment. They should be able to practice leadership roles, make inevitable errors, and learn from the feedback without real-world consequences beyond learning. Mistakes in a controlled environment prepare cadets for the coming shocks of leading under the complexity and uncertainty of combat conditions. However, in order to prepare

effective leaders, tolerance for mistakes must also be balanced with maintaining standards. Different levels of control and discipline may be required to deal with troops reluctant to embrace military requirements; therefore, the officers must be trained to employ disciplinary measures along with motivation and purpose.

With the battlefield increasingly connected to wider political and social domains, leaders require new skills to handle complexity and risk. As technical skills alone cannot overcome the fog of war and friction, future officers' education should incorporate creative problem-solving, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence to collaborate with diverse partners in regional and international settings.

Future conflicts will demand leaders to be flexible enough to succeed in a rapidly changing, hostile environment where plans tend to become irrelevant and top-down directions are not delivered. With dispersed formations likely cut off from higher echelons, junior officers and NCOs must make decisions under stress without orders, guided only by senior commanders' intent and contingency planning. As warfare evolves, leaders need cognitive agility to quickly adapt novel concepts and recognize opportunities to effectively employ new technology. In this regard, military education institutions should push cadets outside their comfort zone with increasing responsibilities so they can gain confidence to act independently. Military education, therefore, should shift from a set of drill exercises to open-ended scenarios requiring adaptability and creativity.

Updating Curriculum and Learning from Experience

In order to ensure that training remains up-to-date with combat realities, academies consistently incorporate knowledge gained from battlefield experiences. Officers returning from missions and operations provide instructors with current challenges to shape curricula. Exercises with tactical units, mentorships, and guest speakers further close the gaps between classrooms and battlefields. Additional simulations and role-playing exercises, however,

may provide cadets with direct exposure to leadership situations involving complex tactical as well as ethical dilemmas. Academies must foster cultures of innovation that rapidly convert identified lessons into improved preparation so cadets enter service ready for the future fight, not the past one.

Overall, military academies must balance between providing fundamental professional skills and educating adaptable, values-driven leaders able to operate in a chaotic, changeable, hostile, and violent environment. Military education institutions have a profound duty to develop officers who are willing to sacrifice in combat yet remain grounded morally, creative yet principled leaders who will shape armed forces into powerful tools standing on the guard of their nations.

Conclusions

The changing nature of the battlefield will demand new approaches to leadership development in order to fully prepare officers to effectively navigate through the complexity and chaos of the modern battlefield. As technical expertise alone cannot overcome the inherent fog and friction of war, leadership principles that empower subordinates through idealized influence, inspiring motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration will foster the adaptability required to navigate uncertainty. But competency must be grounded in strong moral foundations instilled through value-based education. Knowing when and how to act cannot be separated from knowing why to act.

However, military academies can only provide the initial competence. Self-development, lifelong learning, and ongoing mentorship will develop the initial competence into the mastery of leadership arts needed to lead forces on the contemporary battlefield. Officers fulfilling the complex role of leading subordinates while supporting superiors must exemplify the balance of follower competencies and leader initiative. This duality starts with character and emotional intelligence enabling human

connection, trust, and motivation within teams.

Although some principles remain timeless, leadership development concepts must evolve. In this regard, the concept of leader's education developed by the Military Academy of Lithuania, grounded in the theoretical premises of transformational leadership and values-based leadership, aligns well with the contemporary requirements for leaders' development. However, the discussions have shown that in order to prepare effective officers-leaders for the future battlefield, changes in leadership development concepts are vital. Therefore, several areas of improvement could be highlighted:

1. Practice over theory: Leadership education concepts must concentrate more on practical leadership than theoretical leadership. As leadership is a learned skill developed through consistent practice and experience, future military officers must practically apply the main leadership competencies: idealized influence, inspiring motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration. Cadets, as future leaders, must be provided with the possibility to practice serving as role models, motivating teams, encouraging creativity and initiative, and leveraging the unique skills and potential of their subordinates in a controlled educational environment. Allowing cadets to practice leadership failures in the safe space of training classrooms will cultivate the resilience and comfort with fluid conditions that combat requires.

2. Curricula updates: A constant update of curricula by continuously integrating insights from frontline leadership experiences may help to prevent stagnation and ensure leadership development programs are up-to-date. Also, open-ended exercises demanding critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration skills, which may better emulate battlefield realities, should be prioritized over predictable scenarios and sets of battle drills.

3. Decentralized decision-making: Officers should be encouraged and trained to make quick, informed decisions independently. This requires a shift from the traditional top-down command approach to a more flexible, responsive model. Cadets'

training should focus on empowering them to take initiative, using their judgment to respond to situations on the ground.

4. Technological proficiency: The increasing role of technology in warfare necessitates leaders who can integrate new innovations while maintaining a personal connection with their subordinates. Military academies should continuously update their curriculum to include the latest technological advancements and provide hands-on experience with modern military tools and platforms.

Overall, while the fundamental nature of leadership remains largely constant, its application must evolve to meet the dynamic challenges of future battlefields. This involves a combination of upholding core leadership values while integrating new strategies, technologies, and understandings of human behavior. Merging the core leadership values with evolving technologies and providing future officers with possibilities to practice and learn from mistakes in a controlled educational environment may, to a large extent, contribute to developing leaders who are able to creatively accomplish missions in dynamic conditions through force of will and strength of character on the future battlefield.