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Wargaming Is Alive and Well at Naval Postgraduate School

By Retired Vice Adm. Ronald A. Route, President, Naval Postgraduate School - January 20, 2016



Naval Postgraduate School students, faculty and visiting allied military officials execute a wargaming exercise on hybrid warfare tactics in the Arctic region sponsored by the U.S. Special Operations Command. The analysis is one of several wargaming exercises held twice each year during wargaming, and represent a small part of the university's active presence in wargaming. U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Shawn J. Stewart

In a recent article published by [War on the Rocks](#), Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work and Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Paul Selva detailed a compelling case on the strategic value of effective wargaming. In short, these esteemed defense leaders described an intent to reinvigorate the wargaming practice in the DOD in support of a defense culture that thirsts for strategic innovation and free thought, yet must live within the drought caused by financial constraints.

Here at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#), we have been teaching our officer students the wargaming craft for over three decades. The current version of the course, an operations analysis course entitled OA4604 – Wargaming Applications, is taught twice a year and culminates in a weeklong exercise we call Wargaming Week, where students design, execute and evaluate wargaming scenarios in a team-driven environment under the guidance of our diverse faculty.

The scenarios are quite real, and are driven straight out of the war rooms of Navy and Defense commands throughout the world; this quarter's slate of wargames could not exemplify this more. For example, OPNAV N96 (Office of the Director of Surface Warfare), on behalf of the Distributed Lethality Task Force, sponsored a game to examine the deterrence capability of the Navy's new Distributed Lethality (DL) concept in a Western Pacific scenario. This effort, complementing the three Distributed Lethality (DL) Workshops that were conducted earlier this year by the Naval War College, hit several key wargaming tenets that Deputy Secretary Work and Gen. Selva emphasized in their article.

One unique feature of the game was the focus on Red Teaming, where students designed the game to critically examine Distributed Lethality through the eyes of an adversary applying asymmetric approaches against the U.S. team. A recent NPS graduate and Navy SWO returning to the university from the CNO's Strategic Studies Group teamed with several international officers from Southeast Asian navies to direct the Red Team's assault on the DL Adaptive Force Packages (AFPs).

NPS also has the capacity to execute these games at the classified level, giving students the opportunity to truly explore the intricacies of the scenario without restriction. A recent classified wargame, also in relation to the Distributed Lethality concept, explored war at sea tactics to specifically support software development for tactics development and decision making.

Additional wargames held this past quarter were sponsored by the U.S. Special Operations Command, including the High North wargame sponsored by SOCOM J-31, which examined the reaction of the U.S. and key allies and partners to a resurgent Russia employing hybrid warfare tactics to expand the Russian sphere of influence in the Arctic.

Beyond the Navy and DoD relevance of these wargaming scenarios, we believe there is an impressive collaboration of perspectives simply in the participating students themselves. In our first Distributed Lethality wargame, the student game design team was composed of a U.S. Air Force officer from the Defense Analysis program; two Indonesian Navy officers, one from the National Security Affairs program and another in the Graduate School of Business and Public Policy; and a U.S. Army officer from the Operations Analysis curriculum.

The Indonesian officers provided unique knowledge of potential regional allies, partners and adversaries within the scenario, and key results included findings of how potential adversaries and strategic partners perceived the Distributed Lethality concept's deterrence capabilities, a view which may provide unique revelations compared to one designed and played exclusively by U.S. Navy



Naval Postgraduate School students, faculty and visiting allied military officials execute a wargaming exercise. U.S. Navy photo



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officers.

And in our recent classified wargame, players included a U.S. Air Force F-35 pilot, a U.S. Navy F-18 pilot, and two surface warfare officers, along with programmers from Navy Surface Warfare Development Command Dalghren and NPS. A key finding from this combination of perspectives centered on how integrating U.S. Air Force assets with the Distributed Lethality concept provided new acquisition and targeting capabilities to the team's Adaptive Force Packages.

While this quarter's slate of wargames demonstrates our institution's commitment to the effort, it is our cumulative, mature campus-wide program that we believe is in direct alignment with Secretary Work and Gen. Selva's efforts. Over the past six years, NPS students have designed and executed more than 35 sponsored games for the Navy, DOD and other defense organizations, and even two games sponsored by partner nations. We have also had two student groups travel to San Diego to conduct wargames at the Space and Naval Warfare Systems Command in support of the Undersea Integration Program Office's Undersea Constellation program.

The NPS Wargaming Activity Hub has coordinated and presented one-week Basic Analytic Wargaming courses to Combatant Commands and other defense organizations; this past summer, we conducted courses for the Indonesian Navy in Surabaya and for U.S. Central Command in Tampa, Florida. Looking ahead, our faculty are coordinating now with U.S. Marine Corps Combat Development Command (MCCDC) and Australia's Defence Science and Technology Group to present similar courses in the coming year.

At NPS, our mission of graduate education supports the development of leaders and strong collaborators. As Deputy Secretary Work and Gen. Selva move forward on their initiative to reinvigorate wargaming, we expect they will find a diverse community of leaders well versed in its strategic value, ready to support that effort.

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