

LINCOLN HALL

Interim Strategic Plan 2026 – 2027

National Defense University

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DEPARTMENT OF WAR
NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY
WASHINGTON DC 20319-5066

22 April 2026

MEMORANDUM FOR ALL NDU FACULTY, STAFF, STUDENTS, AND STAKEHOLDERS

SUBJECT: Educating for Warfighting Advantage: NDU's Interim Strategic Plan

NDU's Interim Strategic Plan serves as a critical 12-to-18-month bridging strategy designed to provide direction as the 2027–2031 Strategic Plan is developed. The global strategic environment reflects increasing threats and rising conflict, complicated by disruptive technology and accelerating changes in the character of war. Our ability to out-adapt and outthink our adversaries underpins victory. Our mandate is clear: **we do not provide education for the sake of education. We educate to guarantee our national security; more pointedly, we educate in order to fight and win.**

To meet this challenge, NDU must function as the Department of War's intellectual center of gravity and warfighting laboratory. This Interim Strategy operationalizes our efforts to enhance institutional effectiveness. We will focus on our warfighting mission with a bias for action.

This strategy and guidance establish our immediate priorities across three Enduring Strategic Objectives—*Warfighting Output*, *Decision Advantage*, and *Institutional Adaptation*—and direct several critical near-term actions, including:

- **Establishing a Joint Warfighting Core:** We are instituting a common academic calendar and the Joint Combined Warfighting Course (JCWC) for all JPME II programs.
- **Elevating the Enterprise:** We are formally incorporating the National Intelligence College (NIC) as NDU's sixth college and actively working toward the realization of the National Warfighting Education Center (NVEC).
- **Maintaining Academic Mastery:** We will uphold the highest standards of academic rigor. At NDU, admission confers opportunity, not entitlement. Only sustained, demonstrated excellence merits graduation.
- **Expanding our Reach:** We will pilot and scale new educational modalities beyond our 10-month resident programs, including hybrid delivery, short courses, and stackable certificates, to mass educational effect across the Joint Force.

The insights gained from our near-term pilots and structural realignments will directly inform our permanent design for the 2027–2031 horizon. Together, we will ensure that NDU delivers education that the nation requires to achieve warfighting advantage.

A blue ink signature of P. A. Garvin, written in a cursive style.

P. A. GARVIN
Vice Admiral, U.S. Navy
President, National Defense University

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The Secretary of War, the Honorable Pete Hegseth, addresses an NDU CAPSTONE Course.

Introduction

Victory smiles upon those who anticipate the changes in the character of war, not upon those who wait to adapt themselves after the changes occur.

— Air Marshal Giulio Douhet

To serve the needs of the United States and priorities of the Department of War, the National Defense University (NDU) must deliver decisive warfighting advantage in the conflicts of today while accelerating the institutional adaptation required for the uncertainties of tomorrow. Escalating global conflict and disruptive technologies accelerate the changing character of war. Cognitive advantage over the nation's adversaries underpins victory. Functioning as the nation's intellectual laboratory, NDU educates for uncertainty, executes operationally relevant research, and dynamically engages the nation's strategic leaders for competition, crisis, and conflict.

To realize this cognitive advantage, we must concurrently catalyze a sweeping restoration of the United States' industrial capacity. Revitalizing our industrial base is a strategic imperative required to deter aggression, sustain high-intensity conflict, and counter threats in cyber and irregular warfare. This restoration demands a whole-of-nation approach: securing vulnerable supply chains, modernizing infrastructure, and rapidly scaling the production of critical munitions alongside pervasive artificial intelligence and advanced autonomous systems. Furthermore, we must forge tighter integration with the commercial sector to quickly transition dual-use innovations, such as AI-driven analytics, uncrewed platforms, and asymmetric capabilities, from the laboratory to the battlefield. Ultimately, rebuilding the industrial might of America requires ensuring our intellectual overmatch and is inextricably backed by an unrivaled physical capacity to produce, sustain, and deploy decisive combat power across all domains.

Authorities

Title 10 U.S.C. § 2165 establishes NDU and its components. As a Chairman's Controlled Activity (CCA), the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction (CJCSI) 1801.01F, *National Defense University Policy* serves as NDU's charter. NDU demands high standards and rigor, as inculcated in Title 10 U.S.C. § 2163, the *Joint Chiefs of Staff Vision and Guidance for Professional Military Education and Talent Management* and Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) accreditation.

Mission

NDU educates for warfighting advantage to win in competition, crisis, and conflict.

Vision

The Nation's warfighting intellectual center of gravity delivering education, research, industrial collaboration, and allied and partner engagement.

Unlike many civilian universities, NDU provides mastery-focused education, requiring students to demonstrate the targeted level of competence before they may move on to new material. Admission confers opportunity, not entitlement. These practices preserve NDU as an environment where only sustained, demonstrated excellence merits graduation, making selectivity both an entry condition and an enduring expectation.

Values

These enduring values define NDU's institutional character and guide how we decide and operate to maximize the cognitive advantage delivered to the Joint Force:

Warfighter-focus: NDU exists to generate warfighting advantage. Academic, research, and institutional focus and effort are prioritized by their contribution to warfighting effectiveness, reflecting our obligation to prepare future leaders to confront and overcome threats to the United States.

Academic Mastery: Admission confers opportunity, not entitlement. Graduation is earned through demonstrated excellence in critical thinking and strategic leadership. NDU develops the whole warfighter – intellectually, physically, and professionally – while holding students to the standards required to lead at the highest levels of the national security enterprise.

Collaborative Leadership: National security depends on collaboration across government, industry, the nation and with international partners. NDU personnel are collegial, respectful, and team-oriented, transforming individual capacity into unified institutional strength to solve national problems.



Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Dan Caine

Radical Transparency: Transparency enables trust, integration, and learning across NDU. Open information sharing and applying lessons learned accelerate institutional improvement and reduce inefficiency and keep the institution focused on mission execution.

Integrity: Trust, openness, and ethical conduct is the bedrock for all other values. University personnel demonstrate integrity, operating under the concept of academic freedom within the bounds set to protect information. Central to this integrity is an unwavering commitment to the American values that define our Republic and the character of our Armed Forces.

Strategic Context

“We live in dynamic times. Global risk is scaling exponentially. The complexity of the modern battlefield demands constant adaptation, and we must continue to drive the pace of change to maintain our superiority—in this type of environment, inaction carries risk” – General Dan Caine, CJCS

The United States is operating in a global operating environment defined by intensifying great power competition, growing conflict, and rapid technological change that is dramatically reshaping how wars are fought and how decisions are made. Adversaries are compressing decision timelines.

Strategic Approach

To outpace this compression and maintain decision superiority, our educational environment must transform into a dynamic incubator for cognitive agility. Preparing our national security leaders for this accelerated change in the character of warfare requires moving beyond traditional pedagogy to leverage advanced, technology-driven educational modalities. We must immerse future commanders and strategists in AI-enabled wargaming, hyper-realistic synthetic training environments, and data-driven experiential learning, while simultaneously utilizing continuous, asynchronous platforms that deliver tailored knowledge at the point of need. By fully integrating cutting-edge learning modalities, we will cultivate a cadre of highly adaptable leaders equipped to process complex information, thrive amidst chaos, and execute rapid, decisive action across every contested domain.

This strategy and guidance establish our immediate priorities across three Enduring Strategic Objectives—Warfighting Output, Decision Advantage, and Institutional Adaptation—and direct several critical near-term actions, including:

- **Establishing a Joint Warfighting Core:** We are instituting a common academic calendar and the Joint Combined Warfighting Course (JCWC) for all JPME II programs.
- **Elevating the Enterprise:** We are formally incorporating the National Intelligence College (NIC) as NDU's sixth college and actively working toward the realization of the National Warfighting Education Center (NVEC) enhancing a whole of nation approach.
- **Maintaining Academic Mastery:** We will uphold the highest standards of academic rigor. At NDU, admission confers opportunity, not entitlement. Only sustained, demonstrated excellence merits graduation.
- **Expanding our Reach:** We will pilot and scale new educational modalities beyond our 10-month resident programs, including hybrid delivery, short courses, and stackable certificates, to mass educational effect across the Joint Force, interagency, government, and industrial base.

Colleges and Components

Greater than the sum of its parts, NDU's strength lies in the combined impact of its six colleges and specialized components. While Service war colleges focus on joint warfighting through domain-specific lenses, NDU's colleges concentrate on the strategic and functional dimensions of conflict that cut across domains. Together, the six colleges provide specialized depth in national strategy, resourcing and mobilization, irregular warfare, cyber and information operations, and strategic intelligence including the newly integrated National Intelligence College (NIC). This focused expertise gives the Joint Force an asymmetric edge and strategic advantage.

College of Information & Cyberspace (CIC) equips graduates to compete, operate, and prevail in the cyber domain and information environment, which are under persistent attack from the PRC,

Russia, the DPRK, Iran, and non-state adversaries. Our programs give students the intellectual and informational edge required for the U.S. and its partners to win.

College of International Security Affairs (CISA) is the University's irregular warfare college, with programs at Fort McNair and Fort Bragg. CISA's graduates are equipped to address violent struggles for legitimacy and influence, countering terrorism and transnational criminal networks, and prevail across the continuum of competition and war.

Dwight D. Eisenhower School for National Security and Resource Strategy (ES) educates students to resolve one of the most urgent national security vulnerabilities: erosion of U.S. industrial capacity. America's defense industrial base remains costly, slow, and constrained. Munitions stockpiles are limited and surge capacity is insufficient. Students are prepared to reverse these trends, and ES uniquely convenes executive branch agencies, Congress, and industry to put in place lasting solutions.

Joint Forces Staff College (JFSC) prepares graduates to lead at the Joint Force Headquarters level, from the seabed to cislunar space. Students learn to integrate joint and combined capabilities to overwhelm adversaries, as well as their decision-making and ability to respond.

National Intelligence College (NIC) forges graduates who can ensure the United States maintains an intelligence advantage over its adversaries. Students are educated in providing government leaders with timely, penetrating, and actionable intelligence necessary to outcompete and win in conflict.

National War College (NWC) prepares graduates to be uniquely educated critical thinkers with the skills to integrate the military with other instruments of power (diplomacy, information and economic tools) and to achieve national goals in peace, crisis, and war.

CAPSTONE (encompassing Capstone, Keystone, and Pinnacle) prepares general and flag officers, senior enlisted, and senior executives for the responsibilities of executive leadership, where their decisions will shape national policy and government actions.

Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) provides the Department of War with applied, cutting-edge research, rigorous analyses, and wargaming exercises on priority national security issues. INSS shapes strategy, informs decisions, and mitigates risk to ensure the United States can fight and win.

Strategic Objectives

NDU must **prioritize warfighting excellence and the warrior ethos**, producing leaders grounded in the principles of the Republic and skilled in the application of military power; deliver graduates, research, and wargaming that **provide the Joint Force with enduring decision advantage** in a

rapidly changing operational environment; leverage NDU's unique educational and relational platform to **strengthen strategic partnerships** and shared understanding with allies and partners for meaningful burden-sharing; and **demonstrate institutional rigor** through disciplined standards, transparent processes, and outcomes that are aligned with warfighting needs.

- **Strategic Objective 1 — Warfighting Output:** NDU produces graduates who deliver decisive cognitive advantage to the Joint Force in competition, crisis, and conflict, integrating joint, interagency, and international capabilities to increase U.S. and allied warfighting effectiveness.
- **Strategic Objective 2 — Decision Advantage:** NDU serves as the Department of War's intellectual center for national security thinking, integrating education, research, wargaming, and strategic dialogue to improve the quality of strategic decision-making and enhance the effectiveness of the Joint Force.
- **Strategic Objective 3 — Institutional Adaptation:** NDU builds and sustains a modern, adaptive institution continuously developing its faculty, infrastructure, and capabilities to keep pace with the changing character of competition, crisis, and conflict.

Lines of Effort

NDU will pursue three lines of effort (LOEs): academic excellence, future ready, and engage leaders. These LOEs will remain consistent across the interim and final 2027 – 2031 strategies, ensuring momentum gained during our bridging period is sustained.

LOE 1: Academic Excellence

Forge unparalleled cognitive overmatch by delivering academically rigorous and intellectually uncompromising instruction for the nation's warfighters, interagency civilians, and international and private-sector partners. Aggressively modernize "gold-standard" resident programs while simultaneously multiplying strategic impact across the Joint Force. Deploy adaptable learning models, including stackable credentials, short-duration intensives, and advanced hybrid modalities, to arm leaders with decisive intellectual combat power at the speed of relevance.

- **The Joint Warfighting Core:** Solidifies a unified, synchronized foundation for strategic education by institutionalizing a common academic calendar and the Joint Combined Warfighting Course (JCWC). This integration guarantees that all Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) II programs deliver a consistent, high-intensity baseline strictly focused on the creative, decisive application of national and military power across all domains.
- **Expanded Pathways for Strategic Impact:** To instill this cognitive effect across the Joint Force and the broader National Security Enterprise, scale agile educational delivery beyond traditional resident programs. By pioneering stackable certificates, immersive hybrid delivery, and point-of-

need microlearning, we ensure continuous intellectual development for leaders regardless of their geographic deployment or operational tempo.

- **Uncompromising Academic Excellence:** Enforce academic rigor through unyielding, mastery-focused standards where only demonstrated intellectual superiority merits graduation. Our assessment frameworks are exacting, data-driven, and coherent across the university—serving as an objective mechanism to validate true excellence, identify capability gaps, and drive relentless institutional improvement.

LOE 2: Future Ready

Adapt all support elements, programs, and infrastructure at the pace demanded by emerging technology and multi-polar geopolitical competition. Pursue secure, modern infrastructure, exceptional human capital, and efficient operating systems by all available means to secure the foundation of the warfighting mission.

- **Enterprise Consolidation and Improvement:** Free resources by consolidating and improving common administrative and academic support functions. Centralize Registrar services, Institutional Research, and Web Services, and map internal processes to eliminate institutional drag and reinvest saved capacity into the mission.
- **Organizational Structural Efficiency:** Simplify institutional design by flattening hierarchies, standardizing workload analysis, and reducing or reshaping overhead across all echelons. Ensure maximum structural responsiveness to accelerate decision-making and mission execution.
- **Workforce Agility:** Pilot innovative faculty and staff modalities, including the use of adjuncts, shared faculty appointments, and job-sharing agreements. Address critical capability gaps and leverage available human capital through flexible, agile employment models.

LOE 3: Engage Leaders

Actively engage the nation's political, governmental, legislative, and industrial base leaders, alongside partners and allies. Sustain and build the institution's role as the Department of War's intellectual center of gravity to directly address the nation's most complex strategic problems. Establish the National Warfighting Education Center (NWECE) as a cornerstone to this effort, delivering a premier warfighting laboratory that integrates wargaming, classified instruction, cyber and AI capabilities, and a cross-enterprise collaboration.

- **The National Warfighting Education Center (NWECE):** Construct the defining intellectual center of gravity for the National Security Enterprise to outmaneuver adversaries across a landscape of great power competition, compounding global crises, and escalating conflicts. Bring together Strategic Wargaming, the National Intelligence College, and Cyber and Digital Warfare Laboratories within a single, secure warfighting laboratory designed for immersive,

enterprise-wide collaboration and continuous industry engagement. Underpin this decisive integration by fielding advanced, AI-driven threat modeling and real-time intelligence synthesis to guarantee decision advantage for the Secretary of War and the Joint Force: making cognitive overmatch the cornerstone of national power.

- **Executive Leadership and Engagement:** Elevate CAPSTONE and senior-level programs to explicitly address vital national requirements for strategic leadership. Equip flag officers, political authorities, legislative officials, and industrial base leaders with the cognitive agility to seamlessly synchronize all instruments of national power. Deploy targeted, high-impact short courses for captains of industry and senior executive appointees to forge an unbreakable civil-military alignment, ensuring a unified, whole-of-nation approach to complex global crises and great power competition.
- **Strategic Partnership Reciprocity:** Leverage the International Fellows program to advance a model of strategic reciprocity and burden-sharing. Foster shared strategic understanding with partners and allies to integrate international capabilities into a unified, credible deterrent force.

Resources

All strategy must be resource-informed, which will require a deliberate focus on effectiveness, integration, and efficiency. By improving how we operate, we optimize the targeting of resources toward initiatives that ensure NDU is future ready.