A Practical Guide for Developing and Writing NATO Concepts

Part I: About Concepts

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Introduction

The purpose of this series of 3 articles is to provide practical guidelines for developing and writing NATO, in cause military, concepts and for evaluating the validity and quality of those concepts, with the ultimate goal of encouraging the development of more, thoughtful and useful concepts. Although focussed on NATO concepts, most of the guidelines can be used for (multi)national concept development too.

The HQ SACT's CD&E handbook prescribes the methodology, as illustrated below, as the basis for the development of a NATO concept. The intent of these articles is to supplement it by offering practical advice to concept developers in the exercise of judgment and creativity, both of which are essential to the development of good concepts. By collecting the guidelines in a series of articles, the non-prescriptive nature of these should be clear.

These guidelines are based on the 2002 publication "A Practical Guide for Developing and Writing Military Concepts" by John F. Schmitt supplemented with some personal experience.
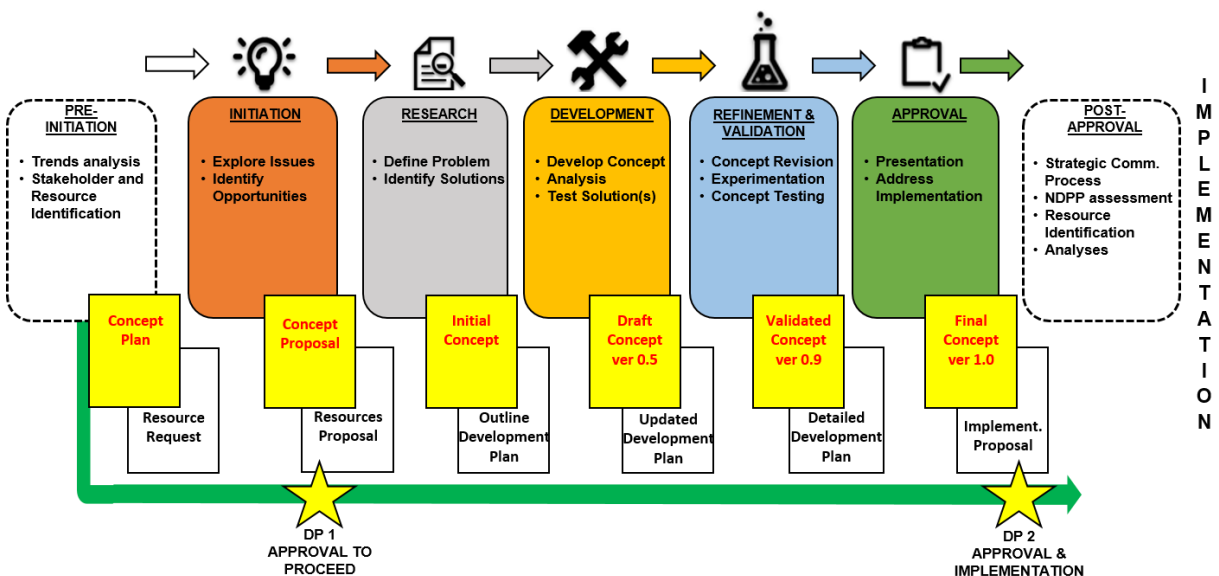
Concepts and concepts

The use of the word concept has proliferated to the point that an important and useful tool has been rendered practically meaningless. The term concept has come to be

applied loosely to any description of military (or even non-military) activity or capability. Descriptions of purely technical or procedural activities are promoted as concepts. Outputs and results of an intermediate step of the CD&E methodology are shamelessly called 'concepts' leading to unfulfilled expectations of the value of the offered product.

Adding to the confusion, concepts of operation are sometimes mistakenly – but not always intentionally - referred to as concepts. A concept is distinct from a 'concept of operation' or CONOPS, which is defined in AAP-06, as "A clear and concise statement of the line of action chosen by a commander in order to accomplish his given mission.". Where a concept describes operations generally by type, a concept of operation describes a course of action chosen for execution in a determined situation. A concept of operation can be thought of as the instantiation of a concept (of operations, mind the 's') under a specific, unique set of conditions.

A concept defined

According to the AAP-6 (NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions), a concept is "*a solution-oriented transformational idea that addresses a capability shortfall or gap*". Just having an idea is not sufficient, within NATO you have to write it down on paper. This paper has the status of a 'Concept Proposal' and starts the initiation phase of the above-mentioned methodology. After a successfully run through all the phases, we consider the document fully developed, researched, refined and validated, and has it earned the label '(approved) concept'.

Another way to looks at concepts is through the lens of 'ends, ways and means', of which a concept corresponds generally to the 'ways'.

- The **end** is the stated objective, ranging from a broad strategic aim to the accomplishment of a particular task.
- The **ways** are the method or scheme (that is, the 'concept') by which the means are applied to accomplish the ends. The essence of a concept is this description of method.
- The **means** are the military capabilities to be employed in the given situation. They may range from the full arsenal of military forces available at the operational or strategic levels to a particular capability such as a weapon system, vehicle, training system or specific unit at a lower level. A description of a capability by itself does not constitute a concept; capabilities can be created but not used as envisioned, while identical capabilities employed differently would constitute different concepts. That is why the description of the DOTMLPFI is in most cases a necessary, integral part of a concept, but does suffice to have a concept.

Likewise, the description of a desired objective does not constitute a concept; any number of different approaches or methods, employing various capabilities, could conceivably accomplish that objective. The end is necessary to provide context, and the means are needed to describe what resources will be applied, but the essence of the concept is the way in which those capabilities are to be employed. In this sense, concepts are primarily descriptions of how things are done.

Historical, current and future concepts

Concepts may describe past, present or future military actions or capabilities.

An historical concept describes its subject as it applied in some past context. Often the concept will not have been articulated explicitly at the time, but must be deduced from the historical record. Examples are the concept of blitzkrieg, the Napoleonic system of logistics, and the techniques and procedures of ship-to-shore movement practiced in the Second World War. The first two were not explicitly codified at the time, but have been deduced since, while the third was codified before, although continuously modified during the war. Historical concepts are both a product and a tool of historical analysis.

A current concept describes its subject as it is intended to apply today, with today's organizations, methods and technologies. A current concept may be written down and/or codified in existing doctrinal, tactical, technical or procedural references, or it may be emergent (i.e., arising pragmatically and implicitly from current operating, technological and institutional conditions and identified only historically) or, more likely, it may combine both explicit and emergent elements. Current concepts should provide the basis for operations planning (i.e. for a CONOPS) and existing military doctrine, organization, materiel acquisition, training, education, tactics, techniques and procedures.

A future concept articulates how it is envisioned its subject will apply in some future context. Initially a future concept is untested and should be the subject of rigorous experimentation and debate. This forces it to evolve and eventually validates or invalidates it. In this way, a future concept evolves, following the CD&E methodology, from an untested hypothesis to a more assertive, but not necessarily fully validated, conclusion. Only after the concepts have been experimentally examined to the point that it has been validated with reasonable confidence can it provide guidance for the requirements process. Many concepts cannot be fully tested in peacetime. Since by definition future concepts cannot be deduced from past practice or observed in current practice, they must be stated explicitly in order to be understood, debated and tested and to influence the development process.[1]

Concepts and doctrine.

Doctrine is defined as "Fundamental principles by which the military forces guide their actions in support of objectives. It is authoritative but requires judgement in application" (AAP-06). The term "doctrine" is often used more widely to refer not only to fundamental principles, but also to approved, implemented (that is, "doctrinal") organizations, training methods, educational programs, etc. Concepts are the core of all doctrine (in both the specific and wider meanings), although concepts are not doctrine until tested, approved by the nations and promulgated by the NATO Standardization Organization (NSO).

Not all future concepts will become doctrine; many will not (and should not) survive scrutiny by the CD&E methodology. The invalidation of a future concept should not be considered a failure of the concept development methodology, but a success because the methodology has invalidated an unsatisfactory concept and prematurely stopped it from implementation.

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[1] Unless otherwise specified, the concepts discussed hereafter are future concepts.

Current and future concepts not fixed

Current and future concepts are not fixed, but evolve over time in response to various factors. These factors include technological, political, societal, cultural and other developments that necessitate changes in the concept.

A concept will also evolve in response to other concepts, our own related concepts as well as those of the NATO nations or potential adversaries. This evolutionary dynamic is an essential element of concept development. Even after a concept is approved as doctrine, the concept will continue to evolve (although the official doctrinal statement of it may not be updated for some time). In this way, concepts continuously evolve in advance of doctrine. Successful future concepts change over time and eventually become current concepts, which in turn eventually become historical concepts, at which point they finally become fixed as historical descriptions (although an evolved version may continue to develop as a current concept).

Now that we understand what a concept is, we will see in the next article some practical guidelines for developing and assessing future concepts.