

AN ALIEN IN A STRATEGIC THINKING WORLD

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Strategic thinking unleashes the power of leaders on all levels to reach goals, overcome challenges and creatively change the situation from where it is to the desired end-state. All leaders have resources (time, talent and capital) to varying degrees within their organizations. So, technically, all leaders are strategists. The reality, however, is that not all leaders are good strategists. A good leader can evolve in a good strategist by learning how to develop a strategic thinking mindset. Hence, the focus of the current article is on the main ingredients that contribute to the development of strategic thinking.

Key words: *strategic thinking, effectiveness, efficiency, strategy challenges.*

1. INTRODUCTION

„Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.”
- Sun Tzu

The term strategy comes from the Greek word *strategos* (meaning military general) – so it was strongly related to the armed domain from the very beginning.

Strategy, in that sense, has an obvious military character. However, since the Second World War civil institutions businesses, corporations, non-military government departments, even universities – have started to develop strategies,

by which they usually mean policy planning of any kind. Thus, the term strategy is no longer the exclusive field of the military. As war and society have become more complicated, its definition has been broadened to include consideration of non-military factors – economic, political, psychological, moral, legal and technological. In its fuller meaning, strategy is the art of mobilizing and directing the total resources of a nation or community of nations, including the armed forces, to safeguard and promote its interests against its enemies, actual or potential.

In this broader sense, strategy is also called „grand strategy”. In the

military context, „strategy” means policy or planning that involves the actual use or the threat of use of force; the application of force as an instrument of national policy. In other words, strategy includes the development, intellectual mastery and utilization of all of the state’s resources for the purpose of implementing its policy in war. „In recent times a more useful distinction has been made between the strategic, operational and tactical levels of warfare. The strategic level is concerned with the employment of a nation’s entire armed forces in the larger totality of the nation’s security; the operational with the employment of forces in a military campaign or operation; and the tactical with forces actually in contact with the opponent” [1].

Strategic thinking unleashes the power of leaders on all levels to reach goals, overcome challenges and creatively change the situation from where it is to the desired end-state. All leaders have resources (time, talent and capital) to varying degrees within their organizations. So, technically, all leaders are strategists. The reality, however, is that not all leaders are good strategists. A good leader can evolve in a good strategist by learning how to develop a strategic thinking mindset.

And not only the leaders should benefit from that kind of education. One of the concepts developed in the modern warfare is „Mission Command” – meaning essentially that all levels of military management are encouraged to shape its strategic direction. In other words, a military force „equipped” with strategic thinking will always be superior.

Strategic thinking requires agility and decisiveness in choosing a plan and sticking with it. However, you have to be always aware of new, more promising opportunities. It is a balancing act between consistency and flexibility.

2. STRATEGIC-FOCUSED CULTURE

Planning is expensive, but not planning is far more expensive.

I allow myself to make the above statement considering the experience earned at IDMC (International Defense Management Course) which I had the occasion to graduate in a prestigious US institution. Therefore, I proceeded to „The New World” armed with the aspiration to comprehend what tells apart the US citizens from us, excepting the obvious financial potency. I tried to grasp – in what they say and in what they don’t say – the essence of what they have and we

do not have, in the military, but also in the other domains.

The organizing institution, DRMI (Defense Resources Management Institute) is directly subordinated to the United States Secretary of Defense and located in the city of Monterey, California. IDMC was designed for US partner nation military officers, rank O-3 through O-6 and equivalent civilian officials (my colleagues were 36 students from 22 different countries). The Course structure included modules of Defense Resources Management, Information Resources Management, Decision Making Theory, Design Theory, Human Resources Management, Logistics Management and other lectures from renowned experts. The cornerstone which provided the coherence to the overall study resources was the logical structure of the curriculum, each component being perfectly integrated to the Course's main architecture. All the lectures started by explaining the connections with what was previously taught and finished with a short introduction in the next topic. The main teaching method was the collaborative discussion. Consequently, thanks to the flexible program, many of the theoretic lectures were accelerated, in order to gain time for the debating sessions, with all the students together

or in small groups – very interesting occasions of understanding the problem-solving approaches in different countries.

Although it was not stated neither in the description of IDMC, nor on the website of the institution, I appreciate that all the pedagogical approaches from the Course converged towards founding, developing and consolidating the strategic level thinking. The target was for all the participants to be able to build a strategic model, constantly following the relationship and the correct sequence of steps in any endeavor: identifying the threat/ the purpose generating any kind of project → formulating the strategy/ objectives necessary in order to fulfill the purpose → defining the forces/ capabilities able to apply the strategy → using the existing resources to generate those forces/ capabilities. Even if the aforementioned model was studied in order to be applied at national defense, the connection with the concept of strategic thinking is obvious, making it relevant at every institutional level and on every kind of project, be it related to a profession or personal life.

TARGET → OBJECTIVES/
STRATEGY → FORCES →
BUDGET

I confess that I was shocked upon grasping the meaning of this

lesson, understanding how often I had to suffer in my country due to poor planning, where the main mistake is to think in the opposite direction of the described process. How many times have you heard of „strategies” that place the cart before the oxen, starting the process with what should be the last question: how much money/ people do we have? We must always start with – and never lose sight of – what we want to achieve, which is the final goal. Eventually, if the budget is insufficient, we can rethink the strategy by redistributing resources over a longer period or by setting intermediate goals that will gradually lead us to the desired end-state.

The other struggle that led me to strategic thinking concept, was to figure out the difference between two terms used frequently during the IDMC: effectiveness and efficiency. In terms of understanding and even putting into practice the idea of efficiency, we Romanians are doing well. Our education and our mindset before 1989 heavily relied on ideas such as: maximizing productivity or increasing work efficiency. There is a legendary example of the nail factory, which was given the task by the Communist Party to double its annual production and resorted to a creative solution: taking advantage of the fact that production was reported

in kilograms, the factory doubled the size of every nail. The final products, of course, proved to be almost useless. After 1989, efficiency really became one of our national values, the Romanian is proud to be able to manage any situation, anywhere and anytime, with what he has at hand. We got to the point where the expression „to make a whip from a certain resource” also entered folklore.

The problems arose, for some students (especially from Eastern-Europe and from Latin countries), in understanding the second term. After I began to understand the notion, for a long time I was convinced that in the Romanian language there is no word that would fully capture its meaning. As you know, in the Inuit language (the language spoken by the Eskimo people) there are about 50 words for snow and not even one for war, or so it was before the Eskimos were „civilized”. From here we can draw some conclusions about the way of the Eskimos relate to conflicts and similarly about the strategic thinking of Romanians. However, after searching the dictionary, I found the term „eficacitate”. Although the term exists, imported in Romanian from French, the explanation in DEX is „the quality to produce the (positive) expected effect; efficiency”. As you can see, our definition also includes

the concept of efficiency, partially overlapping the two notions.

I will try a schematic explanation of the two notions, highlighting the fundamental difference between them:

efficiency = outputs / resources;

effectiveness = outcomes / outputs.

Thus, we define efficiency by measuring the outputs of an action or a project, considering the amount of resources used. Similarly, effectiveness is expressed by the proportion that the expected, desired results represent from the total outputs.

One example would be the decision we all make every year, where to spend New Year's Eve. Judged strictly in terms of efficiency, the decision to attend a party organized at a cheap restaurant seems very good: with few financial resources we provide food, music and party. But if the expected results – in this case our preferences – do not include beans and sausages, dubious wine, manes and questionable entourage, the lack of effectiveness will lead us to a different decision.

Another example: in communication, efficiency means investing resources in learning new languages and developing interpersonal skills to get along better with strangers. But effectiveness – and that is the US people way of

thinking – means investing most of your resources to be among the people you have something in common with, whom you want to communicate with, and only then focus on how you get along with them.

English allows the understanding and remembering of the concepts through an ingenious wordplay:

efficiency = doing the things right;

effectiveness = doing the right things.

From here we can conclude the risks related to the lack of one of the two qualities in decision-making. If a decreased efficiency will lead to the risk of give an incorrect or incomplete solution to a problem, then the lack of effectiveness will induce a very good solution but to a different problem. Ultimately, inefficient means reaching the target, but through many detours, while ineffective means partially or even completely failing to achieve it.

Examples of inefficiency are abundant in Romania: from the trivial daily shopping session – in which too few of us use to seriously plan in advance what we will buy, and even fewer are respecting the initial poor planning – to public investments that bring us roads with monthly changed curbs stones, but with potholes in the roadway. Let me give one more example of

strategic thinking, perhaps the most important. We all know that the basic purpose of democratic elections is to invest the most capable of us with the power to make decisions on our behalf, so they will provide efficient leadership. But is of the utmost importance not to stop here with the intellectual approach, forgetting what is much more important: striving to be effectively led, meaning in the desired direction.

Read the next wonderful piece of strategic advice: „Strategic thinking is all about thinking ahead, anticipating what your competition is going to do, and then taking risks in order to succeed. You’re thinking big, you’re thinking deep, and you’re thinking across time. You want to envision all of the possible problems, solutions and outcomes to a given problem, challenge or opportunity.”[2] Any military organization may learn from this quote. You will never guess where I have found it. On the „Wisconsin State Farmer” website. In US, strategic thinking is used even in running a farm! And many others don’t use this essential tool for get on tracks our lives, our businesses, our career or – let’s think of a useful example - our country!

3. STRATEGIC THINKING IN EDUCATION

On a personal, individual level, the increase of EFFICIENCY has a

great importance at the beginning of life, when we have to walk, to talk, to learn better and better. The focus is on HOW we do things. And EFFICIENCY is the measure of this HOW. Later, as the challenges in our lives become more complex, EFFECTIVENESS increases in importance (which high school/college should I attend? which city/country should I live in? who should I marry? etc.) Therefore, increasing the importance of EFFECTIVENESS in making personal decisions is related to the development process of the individual.

I had the opportunity to test the theory that the average „American” is obese, superficial, arrogant, and uninformed about the geography or history of the world. I appreciate that the template image is correct, but before being the first to throw the stone, we must be very careful if today’s image and especially tomorrow’s image of the typical Romanian does not become dangerously similar. What I did not expect, however, was to see the advanced level of knowledge in two directions. First, almost anyone in the United States can describe their national tax system and know what loans are they able to access, in what types of funds and with what interest rate will invest the money they do have now or will have in

the future. Secondly, and we touch again the issue of strategic thinking, there everyone has a plan. Children and then young people learn from home and from the school/ college/ university to strategically approach any endeavor: to plan, to accomplish complex tasks using intermediate objectives and – the most important – to fulfill every ongoing project.

Similarly, in Israel, almost all children, starting right from pre-school level, are attending shooting lessons (with a bow or a pneumatic

capacity, nor the development of individual or competitive skills. The lesson is much deeper: the future citizen learns that all movements and gestures, all steps performed during a project, must be subordinated to a final purpose. In the end, you have to achieve a goal. Once they have learned this way of thinking, no matter what goals the children will set for themselves later, they will never forget that everything they do on all phases of a project is vital and also, that more than everything, is

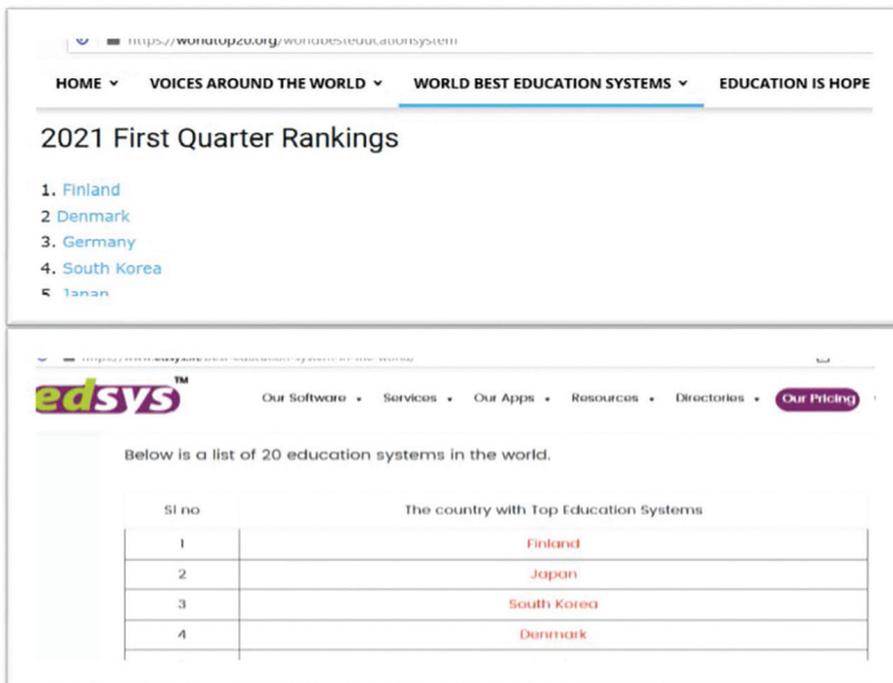


Fig. 1. Education systems

weapon, depending on their age). The main objective of the activity is not the increase of the country’s fighting

paramount not to get their eyes off the target.

I had the pleasure of attending

a meeting, in 2017, at a school in Bucharest, with a Finnish teacher, Krista Lahtien, principal of a school in Turku. Among the suggestions for improving our children's education, both at school and at home, she described succinctly – but proudly – what everybody in Finland knows: „The Government's key project is the complete reform of the school between 2015 and 2019. The aim is simple: to make Finland education system the most competent in the world by 2020". In the above figure, I present excerpts from the first 2 pages delivered by Google when searching for „world top education systems" [3,4].

We understand from these examples that strategic thinking is no longer the exclusive prerogative of military art and does not even have to be necessarily associated with adulthood. It is about learning from the right age how to make a decision and how to carry it out. If this seems something obvious, which does not require theorizing and learning, then ask a sports instructor how complex it is to learn how to perform correctly an elementary task as throwing a punch or even running.

4. STRATEGIC THINKING IN THE MILITARY

Five levels of military strategy have been developed for understanding the aspects of warfare that need to be addressed by a

commander and his forces. The five levels are:

1. Technical: weapon interaction
2. Tactical: forces directly opposed fight one another; nature of terrain is pivotal
3. Operational: struggle of minds; combat encounters
4. Theater: relates military strength to territorial space; the satellite view
5. Grand: confluence of interactions that flow up and down the levels of strategy to determine outcomes.

These five levels give military personnel a common framework of understanding in discussing their goals, objectives, and means of attainment. While it's important to develop plans to be effective at each level, the awareness that successful military strategy depends on the combining of thought and activity at each level is the true key to military victory.

There are very few areas where the use of paradox is as valuable as it is in military strategy. A bad road is good. A rocky shore is a safe place to land. A nighttime attack presents the best opportunity for victory. Paradoxes abound in the realm of military strategy. Very often, the much sought-after element of surprise is shrouded in paradox. A bad road that is difficult to traverse may be the best choice because the enemy least

expects an attack from that avenue. A rocky shore is a safe place to land troops because the enemy will have the fewest number of troops available to defend it. A nighttime attack may be the riskiest for the attacker but the cover of darkness allows the enemy to be taken by surprise.

The development of strategy requires the courage to accept uncertainty. As the French have said, strategy is the art of conducting war by means of coup d'oeil (glance or look) from behind a horse's ears, not in an office on a map. Strategists must accept that they will not have all of the information and not see the spectrum of events, yet be committed to creating and implementing the strategy. In business, a lack of data is often the culprit for not developing or committing to a new strategy. Moving forward with determination, or using the „educated guess” method, will not fill the gap left by a lack of data but it's preferred to the remaining option of doing nothing when the enemies are maneuvering.

Many of those who worked in the ROU military near the turn of the millennium probably remember the ironies addressed to the newly graduated officers of the Air and Land Force Academies, whose license degree was in „Organizations Management”. I belong to one of the first batches of „manager officers”,

who obviously could not compensate, in the initial months of career, the lack of experience and unfamiliarity with the specific customs of the units where we were first appointed, by the knowledge learned on the school seats. But were so many moments in my later career when it was painfully clear that for some colleagues would have been extraordinarily valuable, if not a full resources management course, but at least a 3-4 hours long learning segment.

In addition, it would be a great idea for all the military leaders – to have on their offices or in their pockets – a handbook describing the basics of the management. The science of management does not deny the existence of possible innate qualities or skills that favor some people in the act of command. But the advantage of studying the art of leadership is undeniable, at least in order not to repeat the mistakes made by others in hundreds of years of organizations history.

Regarding the military decision-making, we can say that at the tactical and operational levels, efficiency is more important, and at the strategic and policy levels, the approach must be predominantly oriented towards effectiveness. Therefore, we can look at the of duality efficiency - effectiveness and implicitly the predominance of

strategic thinking, depending on the level of structures in the Romanian military, as defined by current legislation: when moving higher from level 1 to level 4 structures, the balance leans towards the second factor, characteristic of strategic thinking. In fact, in the mentioned IDMC course, the expression used in describing a decision or action was always „effective and efficient”, hence placing effectiveness on the first place.

US NDU (National Defense University) mission, as defined in their Strategy for the future (May 2019) [5], is to „educate joint warfighters in critical thinking and the creative application of military power to inform national strategy and globally integrated operations, under the condition of disruptive change, in order to conduct war”. Moreover, one of NDU’s main desired outcomes, is to produce „strategically minded warfighters with strategic thinking skills, emotional intelligence, and excellent communication skills”.

An excellent article about strategic thinking (and the lack of it) in Australian Defence Force [6], dated 2018, states: „Strategy is popular. And for good reason. There is no subject more essential in the preparation of national security professionals and military leaders than the teaching of strategy. Equally, strategic thinking

is often cited as being one of the most important abilities to foster within organisations. It is regarded as one of the core requirements of senior civil service employees and the mastery of strategic thinking is one of the pillars of future competitive advantage. However, despite the touted importance of both strategy and strategic thinking, the majority of CEOs cited the «lack of strategic thinking as the main problem in their organisations». In fact, the UK Chief of Defence Staff, Sir Jock Stirrup, proclaimed that the UK had «lost an institutionalised capacity for, and culture of, strategic thought».

Speaking about the need to learn and apply strategic thinking, the same article cites: „The outcomes of poor strategic thinking capabilities are evident in recent conflicts. As reported by RAND and observed by Maher (2016, pp. 82-3): «Army often learns tactical and operational lessons from the wars it fights, it often struggles to incorporate these wars broader strategic lessons». Several operational reports from the Middle Eastern deployments demonstrated that the Australian Defence Force also lacked strategic thinking. For example, an operational report from 2012 stated that «...the Australian Defence Force (ADF) needs to identify and develop Commanders that think at the strategic (macro) level in order

to design and implement effective campaign plans» – while another in 2011 said «...there is plenty of room to improve education of military planners and...personnel to think in terms of effects». It is likely that this widespread deficiency is a result of a gap in the Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) continuum. That is, militaries rely on the ad hoc identification of good strategic thinkers on an as needs basis rather than deliberately curating the officer corps to ensure there is a ready supply of strategic thinkers.”

I will add that, in ROU, the study of strategic thinking, which provides decision-making support from the platoon level to the pinpointing of MoND major programs, should not be absent from the basics of military education. I believe that it is too late to start forming strategic thinking during the career courses necessary to advance to the ranks of colonel or general, without relying on a steady structure, built from the beginning of the individual’s military career and subsequently based on a solid foundation formed in early school, family and society. Except for a short component entitled „Projects Management”, which I attended during my academical years (in Air Force Academy), I must confess that I did not encounter, in all forms of military education that I graduated

(Military High School, Academy, Basic Course, Advanced Course, Staff Course), any discipline that came near the concept of strategic thinking. Of course, there are the Resources Management Courses in DRESMARA, but too few officers are attending and, more important, those education forms are placed way too late in an officer’s career.

5. TOP STRATEGY CHALLENGES IN ROMANIAN MILITARY

For many managers and leaders, the very word „strategy” conjures up thoughts of endless PowerPoint presentations, binders collecting dust and general confusion. A survey by Roger Martin of the Rotman School of Management found that 67 percent of managers believe their organization is bad at developing strategy. Harvard Business School professor David Collis is even more direct: „It’s a dirty little secret: Most executives cannot articulate the objective, scope and advantage of their business in a simple statement. If they can’t, neither can anyone else.” [7]

What seems to be the cause of this lack of performance when it comes to strategy? I identified the top challenges in improving strategic thinking in ROU military system:

a. Time

The most common strategy challenge is time. With more responsibilities and fewer people to handle them, many commanders are overwhelmed with activities. While distributing tasks off a to-do list every day, may grant themselves a sense of accomplishment, the mentioned activity doesn't always equal achievement. If the individual tasks aren't strongly supporting the strategy, then we may fall into the trap of activity for activity's sake. When there are lots of things to do, commanders feel guilty stopping to take time to think strategically about their organization's missions. After all, military personnel evaluation sheets do not include a big box for „Thinks strategically for one hour a day”. When there is a lot to get done, time to think is often the first thing to go.

b. Organizational inertia

Numerous studies in the social sciences have shown that people prefer the status quo to change. When leaders change strategy, inevitably they are changing the allocation of resources, using differently the time, people, and budgets. Since strategy involves trade-offs, certain people will be gaining resources and others losing resources. Obviously, those

scheduled to lose resources are going to prefer to keep things unchanged. Another factor in the preference of the status quo is the „if it ain't broke, don't fix it” mentality. For microstructures that have experienced success in the past, the idea of making changes to the strategy is opposite to common sense, so their question is: „Why change what made us successful?”. What they may not realize is that changes in the unit mission may be making the current strategy obsolete.

c. Lack of alignment

Getting people on the same page is difficult when it comes to strategy. The challenge lies in the fact that different groups within the military organization have their own goals and strategies. Sometimes they align with others, but often times they don't. When there is misalignment, power struggles erupt and instead of working with one another, leaders from different areas work against each other to ensure their priorities take precedence.

d. Not understanding what strategy is

Even at the highest levels of military organizations, confusion abounds as to what exactly is a strategy. Perhaps due to its abstract nature, strategy tends to mean different things to different people. It's often confused with mission, vision,

goals, objectives, and even tactics. Failure to provide commanders with a universal definition of strategy and clear examples to refer to, leaves the term open to interpretation, creating ineffective planning and inefficient communication. Too many organizational leaders say they have a strategy when they do not. A long list of things to do is often mislabeled as strategies or objectives. A helpful tool to improve the understanding of those notions is GOST (Goals, Objective, Strategy, Tactic):

A lack of priorities is a red flag that the difficult work of making trade-offs – choosing some things and not others – was not accomplished in setting the strategy. Good strategy requires trade-offs, which in turn help establish priorities by filtering out or postponing activities that don't contribute to the achievement of goals.

f. Lack of training/tools for thinking strategically

Many managers aren't considered strategic simply because

Table 1. GOST

Goal	Objective	Strategy	Tactic
What	What	How	How
General	Specific	General	Specific

e. Lack of priorities

A great cause of frustration among managers is the overall lack of priorities at the command level. Not everything is equally important. If priorities are not clearly established, then it becomes difficult for people to determine what they should be working on and why. This lack of priorities prevents people from better organizing their work, resulting in the frustration of feeling torn apart between too many initiatives.

they've never been educated on what it means to think and act strategically. The disconnect on proficiency in strategic thinking may occur between any two levels of subordination. The chief perspective and the perspective of his direct subordinate may differ. There simply is no one perfect strategy fit for all situations or that will last for all time. There are multiple ways to complete a mission. That's why building up

strategic thinking capability within any organization is so vital.

g. Firefighting

A firefighting mentality starts from top-down within the organization. If subordinates see their commanders constantly reacting to every issue that comes across their desk, they too will adopt this behavior. Firefighting then becomes embedded in the culture and those that are seen as the most reactive, oddly enough, get the greatest recognition. Managers who thoughtfully consider each issue before responding don't seem to be doing as much as the firefighters, when in reality, they're exponentially more productive. „Let's think about that” is a simple but powerful phrase that can eliminate reactivity inside your microstructure. The next time you receive an e-mail marked urgent or an alarmed phone call, or even someone comes charging into your office with a „burning” problem, reply with „Let's think about that”. Then stop and consider how this helps you achieve your goals and supports your strategic focus. Impose that method to your subordinates, teach it to your colleagues and kindly inform your superiors about it.

h. Commitment

Gaining commitment from subordinates to support and execute the strategy annoys many managers. If the people expected to execute the strategy aren't aware of it, or don't understand it, then commitment level will be low to inexistent. A shocking percent of the military personnel are either unaware of or don't understand their unit's strategies. This percent may be reduced by some leaders, using Mission Command. Another reason for low commitment is that many people don't understand the reasons behind the strategy and how it will help them achieve their goals. If leaders fail to share what are the strategies and why the strategies are in place, and don't translate them to people's respective work, the level of commitment will be minimal. Acting by the rule: „Think one level up, act at your level and control on level down” would substantially improve the commitment level.

How many of these challenges does your team face? More important, what are you doing to overcome them? The inability to effectively navigate strategy challenges can have devastating long-term effects on an organization.

To more effectively develop and execute strategy, it stands to reason that we need to better understand it. In order to better understand it, we need to be skilled at thinking about it. And therefore, strategic thinking is one of the most valued skill in leaders.

6. CONCLUSIONS

A perfect illustration of the applied strategic thinking was the response of an American lecturer to my question: „- It seems easy to talk about the judicious management of defense resources when you have a budget of \$640 billion. But what would you do if you had to limit yourself to just 10 billion next year?” (I intentionally failed to specify that the last amount I referred to would be expressed – in the case of the ROU MoND budget – in lei). The speaker’s approach was as follows: „- I can’t say now how I would distribute the 10 billion, but I would definitely start by spending the first billion on a good planning process, so I can be sure that the other 9 really get where they are really needed.”

The only criticize I can formulate to the IDMC was that many lessons were a little bit too much business oriented. Of course,

during peace time, the corporate warfare is the closest possible thing to an actual military conflict, therefore it’s natural that strategic thinking will also develop in that field. Rich Horwath, CEO of Strategic Thinking Institute said that “... when you think about the pace of change in most industries and the increasing level of competition due to digital factors and changing business models, strategic thinking is no longer a nice to have, it’s a must-have” [7]. However, I feel that I would have valued more a stronger military flavor through the IDMC, especially in the applied debates and practical examples.

As a final thought, I cannot stop thinking, as in the classical dilemma with the egg and the chicken: are the US a strategic thinking culture because it is such a rich country, or does it have so many resources because of their strategic oriented mindset?

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