

Strategic Partnerships and Kenya's National Security: Assessing the Role of the National Defence College in Advancing Defence Diplomacy, 2020–2025

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ABSTRACT

The evolving nature of contemporary security challenges has increased the importance of strategic military education in preparing national security leaders capable of addressing complex and multidimensional threats. National Defence Colleges (NDC) have increasingly transformed from traditional military training institutions into strategic platforms for developing senior leadership, strengthening civil-military relations, and enhancing defence diplomacy. This study examined the role of the NDC Kenya in advancing national security priorities, with particular focus on the alignment of its educational programmes with Kenya's security strategy, foreign policy objectives, and emerging security challenges. The study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative data from structured questionnaires with qualitative insights from interviews and document analysis involving military officers, NDC alumni, government officials, and defence experts. The findings revealed that the NDC has made significant contributions to strategic leadership development, interdisciplinary engagement, and international defence cooperation. A majority of respondents considered the College's curriculum relevant to Kenya's security priorities, particularly in areas such as counterterrorism, regional security, maritime security, and emerging domains including cyber threats. However, the study identified institutional limitations, including weak curriculum feedback mechanisms, inadequate performance measurement frameworks, limited stakeholder participation, and the absence of a formally articulated grand strategy to guide long-term institutional alignment. The study argues that while the NDC has developed into an important centre for strategic thought and military diplomacy, its impact can be enhanced through stronger integration with national security planning frameworks, improved curriculum governance, and expanded engagement with regional and international security institutions. The study contributes to scholarship on professional military education by demonstrating how strategic education institutions can serve as instruments for national security policy development and defence diplomacy in Africa.

Keywords: Strategic military education; National Defence College Kenya; national security; defence diplomacy; strategic leadership; professional military education; grand strategy.

INTRODUCTION

The nature of national security has undergone significant transformation in the post-Cold War and post-9/11 security environment. Contemporary security challenges are no longer limited to conventional military threats but increasingly include terrorism, cyber insecurity, transnational organized crime, maritime disputes, climate-related risks, information warfare, and geopolitical competition. These complex threats require states to develop strategic leaders who can integrate military capabilities with political, diplomatic, economic, and societal instruments of power. Consequently, professional military education (PME) institutions have become central components of national security systems by preparing senior leaders capable of analysing complex security environments and contributing to strategic decision-making (Yarger, 2006; Bruneau & Matei, 2013).

National Defence Colleges (NDCs) represent the highest level of professional military education in many states and serve as institutions for developing strategic thinking among senior military officers, government

officials, and other national security actors. Unlike tactical and operational military training institutions, NDCs focus on national strategy, defence policy, international relations, and the broader political dimensions of security. They provide platforms where military and civilian leaders engage in strategic dialogue, exchange perspectives, and develop approaches for addressing national and international security challenges (Lissner, 2018). Through these functions, NDCs have evolved beyond conventional training institutions into centres of strategic thought, defence diplomacy, and national security policy development.

International experiences demonstrate the strategic significance of NDCs in shaping national security approaches. Institutions such as the United States National Defense University, the United Kingdom's Royal College of Defence Studies, and similar institutions in Pakistan, India, Nigeria, and Egypt have contributed to the development of strategic leaders capable of linking military policy with national objectives. These institutions have also facilitated defence diplomacy by creating networks among military and civilian leaders from different countries, thereby strengthening international cooperation and mutual understanding among security actors (Cotter & Forster, 2004; Nye, 2004). Through strategic education and international engagement, NDCs contribute to the projection of influence, the development of security partnerships, and the promotion of cooperative security frameworks.

The increasing importance of NDCs is particularly evident in Africa, where states continue to confront complex and interconnected security challenges. Terrorism, violent extremism, weak governance structures, regional instability, and resource-based conflicts have created demands for security leaders who possess both military expertise and broader strategic competencies. African NDCs have therefore become important institutions for strengthening strategic leadership and promoting regional security cooperation. For example, Nigeria's National Defence College has contributed to preparing senior leaders involved in regional peacekeeping and counterterrorism efforts, while Egypt's defence education institutions have supported strategic responses to security challenges in North Africa and the Middle East (African Defence Review, 2022). However, despite their growing importance, limited empirical research has examined how African NDCs contribute to national security strategy formulation and implementation.

Kenya provides a significant case for understanding the relationship between strategic military education and national security. As a major security actor in East Africa, Kenya operates within a complex security environment characterised by terrorism, regional instability, maritime security concerns, cyber threats, and competition over strategic resources. The persistent threat posed by Al-Shabaab, Kenya's participation in regional peace and security initiatives, and its growing interest in maritime security demonstrate the need for strategic leaders capable of integrating military, diplomatic, and political approaches to security management (Government of Kenya, 2016). These challenges require institutions that can develop leaders with the capacity to anticipate emerging threats, formulate strategic responses, and operate effectively within regional and international security frameworks.

Established as Kenya's premier institution for strategic defence education, the National Defence College (NDC) has played an important role in developing senior military and civilian leaders responsible for national security decision-making. The College provides advanced education in national security, defence policy, international relations, and strategic studies, while also promoting interaction between military officers, government officials, academics, and international participants. This interdisciplinary approach reflects contemporary understanding that national security cannot be addressed through military instruments alone but requires cooperation among multiple sectors and stakeholders (Bruneau & Matei, 2013).

The NDC has also contributed to Kenya's defence diplomacy through engagement with regional and international partners. The participation of foreign military officers, international study programmes, and collaboration with defence institutions abroad have enhanced professional exchanges and promoted mutual understanding among security actors. Such engagements reflect the broader role of military education as an instrument of soft power, where states use educational networks and professional relationships to strengthen diplomatic influence and defence cooperation (Nye, 2004). However, the extent to which these activities translate into measurable national security benefits remains insufficiently examined.

Despite the strategic importance of the NDC, several questions remain regarding its institutional effectiveness and alignment with Kenya's evolving security priorities. While the College has continuously adapted its programmes to address contemporary challenges such as terrorism, cyber threats, and regional security dynamics, concerns remain regarding curriculum coherence, stakeholder participation, institutional evaluation mechanisms, and the relationship between strategic education and national security planning. In particular, the absence of a formally articulated grand strategy has raised concerns about whether strategic military education is sufficiently connected to Kenya's long-term national objectives. As Yarger (2006) argues, effective strategic leadership requires a clear understanding of national interests, strategic objectives, and the relationship between available resources and desired outcomes.

Existing studies on Kenya's national security have largely concentrated on terrorism, defence policy, regional security cooperation, and military operations, with limited attention given to the role of professional military education in shaping strategic leadership and national security outcomes. This represents an important scholarly gap because institutions such as the NDC influence how future security leaders interpret threats, develop policy perspectives, and engage with domestic and international security actors. Understanding the contribution of the NDC is therefore essential for evaluating the broader relationship between strategic education and national security effectiveness.

This study addresses this gap by examining the role of the National Defence College Kenya in advancing national security priorities. Specifically, it evaluates the alignment of NDC programmes with Kenya's security and foreign policy objectives, assesses the College's contribution to strategic leadership development, and identifies institutional challenges affecting its effectiveness. The study argues that while the NDC has developed into an important institution for strategic leadership and defence diplomacy, strengthening its curriculum governance, stakeholder integration, and strategic alignment would enhance its contribution to Kenya's national security architecture.

By focusing on Kenya's experience, this article contributes to the wider literature on professional military education, strategic leadership, and defence diplomacy in Africa. It demonstrates the importance of military education institutions as strategic instruments that connect defence policy, national security planning, and international cooperation.

Problem Statement

Despite the growing complexity of contemporary security challenges, including terrorism, cyber threats, geopolitical competition, maritime insecurity, and transnational conflicts, states increasingly rely on strategic military education institutions to develop leaders capable of integrating military, diplomatic, and policy responses. NDCs have therefore evolved beyond traditional military training institutions into strategic platforms for shaping national security thinking, strengthening civil-military relations, and advancing defense diplomacy. Globally, institutions such as the National Defense University of the United States, the Royal College of Defence Studies in the United Kingdom, and similar institutions in Africa and Asia have demonstrated the importance of strategic education in aligning military leadership with broader national objectives.

However, despite the strategic significance of military education, limited empirical attention has been given to the extent to which the NDC Kenya contributes to the realization of national security priorities. While the College has played an important role in developing senior military and civilian leaders and promoting regional defence cooperation, questions remain regarding the coherence of its programmes with Kenya's evolving security environment, foreign policy objectives, and long-term strategic interests. In particular, concerns persist regarding curriculum responsiveness to emerging threats, integration of civilian and military perspectives, institutional mechanisms for curriculum review, and the ability of the College to function as a strategic knowledge hub beyond its traditional training mandate.

Existing studies on Kenya's national security architecture have largely focused on operational responses to terrorism, regional security cooperation, and defence policy, with limited scholarly examination of how strategic military education institutions influence national security outcomes. This creates an important

knowledge gap concerning the relationship between professional military education and national security strategy formulation and implementation. Furthermore, the absence of a clearly articulated grand strategy framework has raised questions regarding how effectively institutions such as the NDC align their educational objectives with Kenya's long-term security interests.

This study therefore examined the role of the National Defence College Kenya in advancing national security priorities by assessing the alignment of its programmes with Kenya's strategic objectives, evaluating its contribution to strategic leadership development, and identifying institutional challenges affecting its effectiveness. By addressing this gap, the study contributes to broader debates on the role of professional military education in strengthening national security, defence diplomacy, and strategic decision-making in Africa.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by **Institutional Theory**, which explains how organizations are shaped by formal structures, norms, values, and external expectations within their operating environments (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014). The theory was relevant because the National Defence College (NDC) operated within an institutional context influenced by Kenya's national security priorities, defence policies, regional security dynamics, and international professional military education standards.

The study applied Institutional Theory to examine how the NDC aligned its programmes with Kenya's evolving security requirements. The theory argues that organizational legitimacy and effectiveness are enhanced when institutions align their structures and practices with accepted norms and strategic expectations (Scott, 2014). In this regard, the study assessed how the NDC curriculum incorporated emerging security concerns, including counterterrorism, cyber security, maritime security, and strategic leadership development, to support national security objectives.

The study further applied DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) concept of **institutional isomorphism** to analyse how the NDC adopted international military education practices and strengthened partnerships with foreign defence institutions. These engagements facilitated knowledge exchange, enhanced interoperability, and supported Kenya's defence cooperation and military diplomacy objectives.

Institutional Theory also provided a basis for examining challenges affecting the NDC's strategic effectiveness. The study identified limitations, including inadequate stakeholder involvement in curriculum development, weak performance evaluation mechanisms, and the absence of a clearly articulated national Grand Strategy, which affected the alignment between strategic military education and long-term security priorities.

Overall, Institutional Theory enabled the study to analyze the NDC as a strategic security institution rather than merely a training establishment. It provided a framework for understanding how institutional structures, national priorities, and international norms influenced the College's contribution to strategic leadership development, defence cooperation, and Kenya's national security interests.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to examine the role of strategic military education at the NDC, Kenya, in enhancing national security. The mixed-methods approach enabled the integration of quantitative data on respondents' perceptions with qualitative insights into curriculum relevance, strategic leadership development, and institutional effectiveness. A descriptive case study approach was adopted, with the NDC serving as the primary unit of analysis due to its mandate as Kenya's premier institution for strategic defence and security education.

The study targeted key stakeholders involved in or affected by NDC programmes, including senior Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) officers, NDC instructors, alumni, defence experts, government officials, and international military participants. Purposive sampling was used to select respondents with relevant experience in strategic military education and national security matters, while stratified sampling ensured representation of military, civilian, and international perspectives. The study collected data through semi-structured interviews, structured questionnaires, and document analysis. Interviews generated qualitative insights into the contribution of NDC programmes to strategic leadership, defence policy, and security cooperation, while questionnaires provided quantitative evidence on perceptions of curriculum alignment and institutional performance. Documentary sources, including defence policies, strategic documents, NDC curricula, and relevant academic literature, were analyzed to contextualize and triangulate primary data.

The validity of research instruments was enhanced through pilot testing and expert review by practitioners and scholars in defence and security studies. Reliability of questionnaire items was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha to determine internal consistency. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically to identify key patterns related to strategic education, national security priorities, and institutional challenges. The integration of multiple data sources strengthened the credibility of the findings through triangulation.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process. Participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained due to the sensitive nature of defence-related information. Ethical approval was obtained from relevant research authorities, including the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI), before data collection commenced.

FINDINGS

Strategic Alignment of NDC Programmes with Kenya's National Security Priorities

The findings demonstrated that the NDC had achieved considerable alignment between its strategic education programmes and Kenya's evolving national security priorities. The majority of respondents perceived the College's curriculum as responsive to the country's defence and foreign policy requirements, with 76% indicating that NDC programmes were either aligned or highly aligned with national security objectives. This finding suggests that the College has progressively transitioned from a traditional military education institution focused primarily on operational command preparation towards a broader strategic education platform incorporating contemporary security challenges, diplomatic engagement, and whole-of-government approaches to national security.

The observed alignment was largely attributed to the incorporation of emerging and traditional security concerns within the NDC curriculum. Respondents identified counterterrorism, particularly Kenya's response to Al-Shabaab and regional violent extremism, as a major area of curriculum relevance. Similarly, maritime security and the blue economy were highlighted as increasingly important themes, reflecting Kenya's strategic interests in safeguarding territorial waters, protecting maritime resources, and maintaining security within the Western Indian Ocean region. The inclusion of cybersecurity, information warfare, environmental security, and resource-based conflicts further demonstrates the College's recognition that contemporary security threats extend beyond conventional military domains.

The findings indicate that the NDC's curriculum adaptation reflects the changing character of security, where national defence increasingly requires integration between military capability, diplomatic engagement, technological competence, and socio-economic considerations. This supports the argument by Yarger (2006) that strategic leadership education must prepare senior leaders to analyze complex security environments where military instruments represent only one component of national power. Similarly, Bruneau and Matei (2013) observed that modern professional military education institutions must move beyond tactical competence and develop leaders capable of strategic analysis, inter-agency coordination, and policy engagement.

Table 1.0: Respondents' Assessment of NDC Curriculum Alignment with Kenya's National Security Priorities

Assessment	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Curriculum aligns with national security priorities	38	76
Curriculum incorporates emerging security threats	36	72
Curriculum supports Kenya's foreign policy objectives	35	70
Curriculum undergoes periodic review	38	76
Technology and innovation considered essential for relevance	35	70
Existing stakeholder feedback mechanisms are effective	20	40

Source: Field data 2025

The findings presented in Table 1.0 demonstrate a strong perception of institutional relevance, particularly regarding curriculum alignment and responsiveness. However, the results also reveal an important contradiction. While respondents acknowledged that the curriculum addresses contemporary threats and undergoes periodic review, confidence in the mechanisms supporting curriculum development remained relatively low. Only 40% considered existing feedback mechanisms effective, suggesting that curriculum transformation may occur through informal institutional processes rather than through a systematic and transparent review framework.

This gap has important implications for institutional effectiveness. Institutional theory argues that organizations maintain legitimacy through continuous adaptation to changing environmental expectations while developing internal mechanisms that sustain organizational learning (Scott, 2014). Although the NDC has demonstrated external adaptation by incorporating contemporary security themes, its internal processes for generating and integrating strategic knowledge require further strengthening. The implication is that curriculum relevance should not depend solely on the responsiveness of individual instructors or leadership but should be embedded within a formal institutional review system involving defence planners, operational commanders, intelligence agencies, diplomatic actors, and academic experts.

The findings further revealed specific areas where respondents believed the College required deeper engagement. Approximately 24% of participants identified limitations in cybersecurity and maritime domain awareness training. These concerns reflect the rapidly evolving nature of security threats facing Kenya. The 2023 Kenya Education Network (KENET) cyber incident was frequently cited as an example demonstrating the vulnerability of national infrastructure to digital threats. The concern expressed by respondents suggests that although cybersecurity has entered the NDC curriculum, greater emphasis is required on cyber strategy, information warfare, artificial intelligence, and digital resilience.

This finding corresponds with broader debates in strategic studies that argue military education institutions must anticipate future threats rather than simply respond to current operational challenges. According to Lissner (2018), institutions responsible for strategic education contribute to national security most effectively when they develop foresight capabilities that allow states to prepare for uncertain security environments. Therefore, strengthening emerging security domains at the NDC would enhance Kenya's ability to formulate proactive rather than reactive security strategies.

Beyond curriculum content, the findings highlighted the importance of stakeholder engagement in maintaining strategic coherence. Respondents identified the Ministry of Defence, National Intelligence Service, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other national security institutions as important contributors to ensuring that academic programmes reflect national priorities. However, participants noted that engagement with these actors remained inconsistent and lacked a structured institutional framework. This limitation reduces opportunities for operational experiences and policy perspectives to inform strategic education.

From an institutional perspective, this demonstrates the importance of organizational embeddedness. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue that institutions gain effectiveness when they establish strong relationships with surrounding organizations and adopt practices that enhance legitimacy. For the NDC, deeper institutional connections with security agencies and international partners would strengthen its position not only as a training institution but also as a strategic knowledge centre capable of contributing to Kenya's national security policy development.

Overall, the findings indicate that the NDC has achieved significant progress in aligning strategic education with Kenya's security priorities. Its curriculum reflects contemporary threats and demonstrates institutional flexibility. However, the evidence also suggests that maintaining long-term relevance requires stronger curriculum governance mechanisms, improved stakeholder integration, and greater investment in emerging security fields. The College therefore possesses substantial strategic potential, but its future influence will depend on transforming curriculum adaptation from an informal responsive process into a deliberate institutional capability.

Institutional Capacity for Strategic Leadership Development

Beyond curriculum alignment, the findings demonstrated that the National Defence College (NDC) has increasingly become a strategic leadership institution capable of shaping the intellectual and diplomatic capacities of Kenya's senior military and civilian leaders. The evidence indicates that the College's contribution extends beyond the transmission of military knowledge towards the cultivation of strategic thinking, interdisciplinary engagement, and international security cooperation. This transformation reflects the changing nature of national security, where effective leadership requires an understanding of political, diplomatic, economic, technological, and military dimensions of power.

A significant finding was the positive perception of the NDC's contribution to strategic leadership development. Qualitative responses revealed that respondents consistently identified strategic thinking and leadership development as the College's most important contribution, with 30 participants highlighting this as a major institutional strength. Participants indicated that the NDC experience enhanced their ability to analyze complex security environments, evaluate strategic alternatives, and appreciate the relationship between national defence policy and broader government objectives.

Table1.2: Major Institutional Strengths Identified by Respondents Regarding NDC Programmes

Institutional Strength	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Strategic leadership development and critical thinking	30	60
Inclusion of allied/international participants	25	50
International study tours and experiential learning	22	44
Expansion of military diplomacy seminars	18	36
Modernization of digital research infrastructure	17	34
Establishment of stronger allied coordination mechanisms	15	30

Source: Field data 2025

The prominence of strategic leadership development among respondents illustrates the central role of the NDC in preparing senior leaders for complex security environments. Unlike traditional military training institutions that primarily focus on operational effectiveness, the NDC operates at the strategic level by developing leaders capable of interpreting geopolitical trends, managing defence relationships, and contributing to national policy formulation. This finding supports Yarger's (2006) argument that strategic education institutions serve as incubators for strategic thinkers who can connect military capability with national objectives.

The findings further indicate that the College's emphasis on interdisciplinary participation has strengthened its strategic value. Approximately 63% of respondents acknowledged the positive impact of expanding participation beyond military officers to include civilian officials from institutions such as the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs, National Counter Terrorism Centre, and other government agencies. This development represents a significant institutional shift towards a whole-of-government approach to security governance.

The inclusion of civilian actors reflects the changing understanding of national security, where threats such as terrorism, cyber insecurity, climate-related risks, economic instability, and transnational crime cannot be effectively addressed through military means alone. By bringing together military officers, diplomats, intelligence practitioners, and civilian policymakers, the NDC provides a platform for developing shared strategic perspectives among actors responsible for national security.

This finding corresponds with Bruneau and Matei's (2013) argument that professional military education institutions contribute to democratic and effective security governance by encouraging interaction between military and civilian leadership. Such interaction enhances mutual understanding, strengthens civil-military relations, and improves coordination during national security decision-making processes.

A further significant finding was the contribution of international participants and external engagement to the College's strategic development. Twenty-five respondents identified the participation of allied officers as one of the NDC's major strengths. Respondents indicated that international participation enhanced exposure to different military doctrines, strategic cultures, and approaches to security management. This diversity of perspectives was considered valuable in preparing Kenyan leaders to operate within multinational security environments.

The presence of foreign military officers also contributes to Kenya's military diplomacy objectives. Through professional interaction and knowledge exchange, the NDC creates networks of defence professionals that can strengthen future cooperation during peacekeeping operations, regional security initiatives, and bilateral defence engagements. This supports Nye's (2004) concept of soft power, which highlights education and professional networks as mechanisms through which states influence international relationships without relying exclusively on coercive capabilities.

The findings also demonstrated the importance of international study tours as a component of strategic education. Twenty-two respondents identified these programmes as valuable because they connected theoretical learning with practical exposure to foreign defence institutions, strategic planning systems, and security governance models. Participants viewed these engagements as important mechanisms for understanding comparative approaches to defence management and military diplomacy.

The role of experiential learning identified in this study supports contemporary approaches to professional military education, which emphasize that strategic competence develops through exposure to diverse perspectives and practical problem-solving environments. As argued by Cottey and Forster (2004), military exchanges and educational engagements contribute to confidence-building, transparency, and cooperation among defence establishments.

However, despite these strengths, respondents also identified areas requiring institutional improvement. A recurring concern was that international engagement, although valuable, remained insufficiently institutionalized. Several respondents argued that the NDC had significant diplomatic potential but lacked a formal mechanism for converting international interactions into sustained strategic partnerships. The recommendation for an Allied Coordination Cell emerged from this concern, with 15 respondents suggesting that a dedicated structure would improve the management of international participants, alumni networks, and defence cooperation initiatives.

This finding indicates that while the NDC has successfully created opportunities for military diplomacy, it has not fully developed the institutional mechanisms required to maximize these opportunities. Institutional theory explains this limitation by emphasizing that organizational effectiveness depends not only on external relationships but also on internal structures that sustain those relationships over time (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Therefore, international engagement requires stronger coordination mechanisms to transform symbolic relationships into strategic outcomes.

Another important finding concerned technological adaptation and learning innovation. Seventeen respondents identified digital infrastructure modernization as necessary for improving strategic research capacity. Although the adoption of hybrid learning platforms during the COVID-19 period demonstrated institutional flexibility, respondents argued that digital transformation should extend beyond online delivery towards advanced research capabilities, strategic simulation platforms, and data-driven analysis.

This finding is particularly significant because contemporary strategic leadership increasingly depends on technological literacy and the ability to analyze complex information environments. Future military leaders must understand cyber operations, artificial intelligence, information warfare, and emerging technologies that influence national security. Therefore, investment in digital learning infrastructure would enhance the NDC's ability to prepare leaders for future security challenges.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the NDC has become an important institution for strategic leadership development and military diplomacy. Its strengths lie in cultivating critical thinking, integrating civilian and military perspectives, exposing participants to international experiences, and developing networks among defence professionals. However, its strategic impact remains constrained by limited institutionalization of partnerships, insufficient digital capability, and the need for stronger mechanisms to convert educational interactions into long-term strategic influence.

The evidence suggests that the NDC possesses the institutional foundation required to evolve from a professional military education institution into a regional centre of strategic thought and defence diplomacy. Achieving this transformation, however, requires deliberate investment in institutional structures that sustain international engagement, encourage research innovation, and strengthen the connection between strategic education and national policy formulation.

Structural Constraints Limiting Strategic Effectiveness of the National Defence College

Despite the significant contribution of the National Defence College (NDC) to strategic leadership development and national security education, the findings revealed several institutional constraints that limit its ability to fully function as a strategic actor within Kenya's national security architecture. The most prominent concern identified by respondents was the absence of a formally codified national Grand Strategy to provide long-term direction for defence planning, strategic education, and institutional development. This challenge was highlighted by 20 respondents, who argued that the lack of a unified strategic framework creates uncertainty regarding the long-term priorities that should guide the College's curriculum, research agenda, and diplomatic engagements.

The absence of a Grand Strategy has important implications for the strategic coherence of professional military education. While the NDC has demonstrated adaptability by incorporating contemporary security concerns such as terrorism, cybersecurity, maritime security, and regional stability, respondents argued that curriculum development often remains reactive rather than anticipatory. Without a clearly articulated national strategic vision, the College risks responding to immediate security demands rather than preparing leaders for emerging geopolitical challenges.

Table 1.3: Institutional Constraints Affecting the Strategic Effectiveness of the NDC

Institutional Constraint	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Absence of a formally codified Grand Strategy	20	40
Need for expanded military diplomacy seminars	18	36
Inadequate digital research infrastructure	17	34
Weak stakeholder participation in curriculum development	16	32
Lack of formal Allied coordination mechanisms	15	30
Limited monitoring and evaluation framework/KPIs	14	28
Curriculum redundancies and insufficient integration	13	26

Source: Field data 2025

The findings presented in Table 1.3 demonstrate that the challenges facing the NDC are not primarily related to institutional capacity but rather to strategic integration and governance mechanisms. The College has developed considerable expertise in strategic education; however, respondents perceived limitations in connecting its educational outputs with broader national security planning processes. This suggests a gap between strategic leadership development and strategic policy implementation.

From the perspective of institutional theory, organizations derive effectiveness not only from their internal capabilities but also from the degree to which their structures are embedded within wider institutional frameworks (Scott, 2014). In the case of the NDC, the absence of a formal Grand Strategy represents a broader institutional weakness because it limits the ability of the College to align its programmes with clearly defined national priorities. While the institution has adapted to changing security demands, its strategic direction remains influenced by immediate policy requirements rather than a comprehensive national framework.

This finding supports the argument by Lissner (2018) that grand strategies provide states with a coherent mechanism for connecting resources, institutions, and long-term objectives. For strategic education institutions such as the NDC, a grand strategy provides the intellectual foundation upon which curriculum priorities, research agendas, and leadership development objectives can be established. Without such a framework, professional military education risks becoming fragmented and overly dependent on changing political priorities.

A related concern identified by respondents was the limited institutional role of the NDC in shaping defence diplomacy and national security policy. Although the College participates in regional and international security engagements, respondents argued that its contribution remains largely educational rather than policy-oriented. The NDC is recognized primarily as a training institution rather than as a strategic think tank capable of influencing regional security discussions or generating policy recommendations.

This limitation represents a missed opportunity for Kenya's defence diplomacy. Internationally, leading defence education institutions such as the National Defense University and similar institutions in other countries have evolved beyond training functions to become centres for strategic research, policy dialogue, and international engagement. These institutions contribute to national influence by producing strategic knowledge and facilitating networks among defence professionals. The findings suggest that the Kenyan NDC possesses similar potential but requires a stronger institutional mandate and research orientation to fully realize this role.

Another major challenge concerned the absence of comprehensive monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Respondents noted that the College lacked clearly defined Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for measuring the effectiveness and long-term impact of its programmes. Although graduates are widely recognized as possessing enhanced strategic awareness and leadership skills, there remains limited evidence demonstrating how NDC education influences defence decision-making, military diplomacy outcomes, or national security performance.

The absence of measurable indicators creates difficulties in assessing institutional effectiveness and justifying future investments. Contemporary professional military education institutions increasingly employ evaluation frameworks that measure not only academic outcomes but also strategic impact, leadership performance, policy contributions, and institutional partnerships. The findings therefore suggest that developing an evidence-based evaluation system would strengthen accountability and enable continuous improvement.

Respondents also identified weaknesses in curriculum governance and stakeholder engagement. Although the NDC consults with institutions such as the Ministry of Defence, National Intelligence Service, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, participants argued that engagement mechanisms remain inconsistent. Operational commanders, diplomatic actors, intelligence professionals, and allied institutions were not always systematically involved in curriculum review processes.

This finding has significant implications because strategic education requires continuous interaction between theory and practice. Military education institutions cannot remain isolated from operational realities; rather, they must function as platforms where academic knowledge, policy requirements, and operational experiences

interact. Bruneau and Matei (2013) emphasize that effective professional military education depends on institutional openness, interdisciplinary exchange, and continuous adaptation.

The findings further revealed concerns regarding teaching methodologies. Several respondents criticized the continued reliance on traditional lecture-based approaches, arguing that such methods are insufficient for developing strategic judgement and adaptive leadership. Participants advocated for greater use of scenario-based exercises, strategic simulations, seminars, policy debates, and experiential learning methodologies consistent with international military education practices.

This observation reflects broader transformations in military education globally. Contemporary strategic environments are characterized by uncertainty, hybrid threats, and complex decision-making requirements. Therefore, future leaders require opportunities to practice strategic reasoning rather than merely acquire theoretical knowledge. A stronger emphasis on experiential learning would enhance the NDC's contribution to strategic leadership development.

The digital transformation challenge also emerged as a significant institutional limitation. Although the adoption of hybrid learning during the COVID-19 period demonstrated organizational flexibility, respondents indicated that digital capability remained insufficient, particularly regarding research infrastructure, knowledge management systems, and strategic analysis tools. Given the growing importance of cyber threats, artificial intelligence, and information operations, investment in digital infrastructure is essential to maintaining institutional relevance.

Overall, the findings reveal a paradox within the NDC's institutional development. On one hand, the College has demonstrated considerable success in producing strategic leaders, promoting international engagement, and aligning its curriculum with contemporary security concerns. On the other hand, its ability to influence Kenya's broader security architecture remains constrained by structural limitations, particularly the absence of a guiding Grand Strategy, weak evaluation mechanisms, limited policy influence, and insufficient institutionalization of partnerships.

The evidence suggests that the NDC has reached a critical stage in its institutional evolution. Its future relevance will depend not only on maintaining quality military education but also on transitioning into a strategic knowledge institution capable of contributing directly to defence policy, military diplomacy, and regional security cooperation. Strengthening its institutional mandate, establishing measurable performance frameworks, and embedding its programmes within a national Grand Strategy would enable the College to move from being primarily a training institution towards becoming a strategic engine for Kenya's national security interests.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the extent to which the NDC, Kenya, aligns its strategic military education programmes with the country's national security priorities. The findings indicate that the College has made substantial progress in developing a curriculum that responds to contemporary security challenges, including terrorism, maritime security, cyber threats, and regional instability, while strengthening strategic leadership among senior military and civilian officials. The integration of interdisciplinary learning and international partnerships further reinforces the College's contribution to Kenya's evolving security architecture.

Despite these achievements, the study identified important institutional gaps that constrain the NDC's strategic effectiveness. The absence of a clearly articulated national Grand Strategy limits the coherence between strategic military education, defence policy, and long-term national security planning. Similarly, weak stakeholder engagement in curriculum review, limited monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and inadequate institutional performance indicators reduce the College's ability to assess and continuously improve its strategic impact.

The findings support the proposition that effective professional military education extends beyond knowledge acquisition to encompass institutional adaptability, strategic coherence, and policy relevance. Consistent with

Institutional Theory, the study demonstrates that the effectiveness of defence education depends on the alignment of institutional structures and educational programmes with national strategic priorities.

Overall, the study concludes that the National Defence College remains a critical institution in strengthening Kenya's national security capacity. However, enhancing its contribution will require stronger strategic governance, institutionalized curriculum evaluation, and closer integration between military education and national security policy. Such reforms would position the College not only as a centre of professional military education but also as a strategic institution supporting Kenya's long-term defence and security objectives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that the Government of Kenya develop and institutionalize a comprehensive National Grand Strategy to provide strategic direction for defence education, national security planning, and foreign policy coordination. Such a framework would strengthen the alignment between the National Defence College (NDC)'s educational programmes and Kenya's long-term strategic objectives.

The NDC should institutionalize a structured curriculum review framework involving the Kenya Defence Forces, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs, National Intelligence Service, and other security stakeholders. Regular evidence-based curriculum reviews would ensure sustained responsiveness to emerging threats, particularly in cyber security, maritime security, hybrid warfare, and strategic competition.

The College should also strengthen its monitoring and evaluation systems by adopting measurable institutional performance indicators that assess graduate competencies, policy influence, and operational impact. Such a framework would enhance accountability while providing empirical evidence of the College's contribution to national security outcomes.

Finally, the NDC should deepen strategic research and international collaboration by expanding partnerships with regional and global defence institutions and positioning itself as a national strategic think tank. This would enhance defence diplomacy, policy innovation, and strategic foresight, thereby reinforcing the College's role in supporting Kenya's evolving national security priorities.

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