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Shaping Leadership at ACSC: A Commandant's Perspective on "What 'Right' Looks Like"

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Abstract

The Army Command and Staff College (ACSC) of the Nepali Army serves as the premier institution for mid-career professional military education, developing mid-level officers through an intensive year-long program. This paper examines 'What Right Looks Like' for an ACSC graduate, focusing on how the course bridges the gap between tactical competence and strategic understanding. In an increasingly complex security environment characterized by hybrid threats and gray zone challenges, ACSC aims to develop scholar practitioners capable of addressing security problems that extend beyond conventional military solutions.

The paper highlights the transition of officers typically from Major to Lieutenant Colonel, from direct tactical leadership to organizational, operational, and advisory roles. Through structured planning processes such as the Tactical Planning Process (TPP), ACSC prepares officers to serve as critical contributors at brigade, division, and Army Headquarters levels. Emphasis is placed on critical thinking, ethical leadership, and the ability to translate complexity into clear and actionable guidance.

A qualitative research design has been used with descriptive and analytical methods in this study to examine the various aspects related to the mid-level officers. The data were collected from primary sources from the mid-level officers and secondary data were collected from various doctrinal manuals, scholarly articles, SOPs, Acts and Regulations. The collected data were analyzed and examined through thematic analysis.

The study further explores the academic and global orientation of ACSC, including its Master's Degree Program and focus on multinational operations, particularly United Nations peacekeeping. Ultimately, ACSC produces officers characterized by intellectual

agility, operational competence, and moral integrity, capable of meeting contemporary and future security challenges.

Keywords

Mid-Level Officer, Army Command and Staff Course, Professional Military Education, Mission Command, Hybrid Warfare, Civil Military Relations, Ethical Leadership, United Nations Peacekeeping

Introduction

"The time is always right to do what is right." – Martin Luther King, Jr. (King, 1967, p.1)

In any professional military organization, the mid-level officer typically holding the rank of Major or its equivalent occupies a uniquely decisive position within the command-and-control structure. This cohort generally consists of officers who have completed company command, served in diverse operational and instructional appointments, and are preparing for staff and command responsibilities. At this stage of professional development, officers' transition from being primarily executors of orders to interpreters of intent, integrators of multiple functions, and trusted advisors to commanders (Huntington, 1957). What 'right' looks like in simple term is all about influencing people positively, helping them discover their own path to right. Consequently, the concept of "What Right Looks Like" for a mid-level officer extends far beyond technical proficiency or procedural compliance; it encompasses intellectual maturity, moral courage, sound judgment, and the ability to connect tactical actions with strategic purpose (Lust, 2012).

For the Nepali Army, the Army Command and Staff College is the institution entrusted with ensuring that the bridge between tactical execution and strategic leadership remains strong and enduring. As the Commandant, my vision is to make ACSC as a premier institution for cultivating adaptive and visionary mid-level military commanders and staff officers equipped with leadership acumen, operational expertise, and critical decision-making skills to excel in complex national, interagency, and multinational security environments while serving as a national center for advanced security dialogue, doctrinal innovation, and strategic thought. My focus is grounded in a simple yet enduring educational philosophy: ACSC does not teach officers what to think, but how to think. The Course is designed as a rewarding intellectual crucible to develop the scholar practitioner, an officer equally capable of defending a Master's dissertation with academic rigor and a mountain pass with tactical precision.

Since its establishment on 20 December 1990, ACSC has continuously evolved to meet the changing demands of national security and military professionalism (Nepali Army, 2026). The first staff course commenced on 5 September 1993, marking a decisive step in formalizing mid-career officer education. Recognizing the interdependent nature of modern security, the curriculum was expanded in April 2003 to include inter-agency components and further strengthened in 2006 with the integration of a Master's Degree Program, reinforcing ACSC's academic and professional standing (ACSC, 2026).

In March 2010, ACSC expanded its global engagement by admitting International Student Officers, transforming the college into a multinational strategic dialogue forum. To date, ACSC has produced 2,179 graduates, including 1,226 Nepal Army officers and 120 international officers from friendly nations. These graduates represent a professional network shaped by the ACSC standard officers prepared to command effectively at the unit level. This paper, therefore, seeks to examine what constitutes "right" for a mid-level officer in the Nepali Army, with particular emphasis on the role of ACSC in shaping officers capable of meeting contemporary and future operational demands. It also aims to present a clear and academically grounded understanding of "What Right Looks Like for a Mid-Level Officer" from the perspective of an Army Command and Staff Course (ACSC) student officer. Furthermore, this paper seeks to link professional military education with the practical demands placed on mid-level officers operating in complex and uncertain environments (Huntington, 1957; Clausewitz, 1976).

Scope

This paper has mainly focused on key thematic areas relevant to the mid-level officers and their roles to include the contemporary operational environment, the command pillar and the importance of the mid-level officer in the military. Likewise, this paper has also highlighted the aim and purpose of the Army Command and Staff Course, the expectations of the commanders from the mid-level officers and vice versa, and finally the relationship between the training and its effect on operational performance of the officers.

Modern Operational Environment

The most common abbreviation used to refer the modern operational environment (MOE) is VUCA, which means volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. The VUCA landscape is furthermore defined by rapid technological advancement/expansion, multi-domain/dimensional operations (land, air, sea, space, cyber), and the blurring of lines between war, conflict, competition, and peace (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). It is also

characterized as hybrid and asymmetric threats from state and non-state actors operating within mass populations. Hence, the key aspects of the modern operational environment are Multi-Domain Dominance (land, air, maritime, space, and cyberspace), Asymmetric and Hybrid Threats, Increased Complexity and Velocity, Population Centric Operations and Strategic Competition (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022).

Contemporary military operations occur in an increasingly complex, information-rich, and media-saturated environment. Actions on the ground are rapidly observed, recorded, and disseminated across multiple platforms, often stripped of context or nuance. In such conditions, even minor tactical decisions can have disproportionate strategic consequences, influencing public perception, policy decisions, and international legitimacy. Clausewitz's concept of friction remains highly relevant, as uncertainty, incomplete information, and human limitations shape outcomes far beyond technical execution (Clausewitz, 1976). Mid-level officers, positioned at the intersection of strategy and tactics, bear primary responsibility for translating intent into action while mitigating the inherent uncertainties of this environment.

Peace Support Operations (PSOs) are one the main components of the modern spectrum of operations, which face enormous challenges in the modern operating environment. United Nations peacekeeping missions face a range of operational and strategic challenges, including asymmetric warfare and complex intrastate conflicts that strain traditional doctrine and operational frameworks (Policy Journal of Social Science Review, 2025). Complex or ambiguous mandates, often shaped by political constraints at the Security Council level, can undermine timely deployment and effective action on the ground (PWOlyIAS, 2024). Protection-of-civilians mandates further complicate peacekeeping tasks and require UN Missions to balance force protection with civilian safety under volatile conditions (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2015). Interactions with local populations, civil society actors, and NGOs are central to mission success but may be compromised by cultural misunderstandings and resource limitations (The Journal of Peace Research, 2017). These dynamics can rapidly escalate into political incidents if mismanaged, affecting the legitimacy and credibility of the mission (Combat Axis, 2024). Mid-level officers, in particular, must combine situational awareness, cultural intelligence, and diplomatic skills with tactical proficiency to navigate these environments (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2024). Their role is to anticipate potential friction points, provide timely advice to commanders, and ensure that tactical actions align with broader operational and political objectives.

Likewise, disaster management and adaptation is another important component of the modern operational environment which includes disaster risk assessment, mitigation measures and response plan; Immediate Action and Safety (search and rescue, evacuation, and providing emergency medical care, food, and shelter); Technological Integration (Utilizing drones and robots to manage crisis); Structured Coordination etc. (UAV Publications, 2025). Domestic disaster response operations present comparable challenges. The Nepali Army's performance is judged not only on operational efficiency, such as the speed of relief delivery but also on the transparency of coordination with civil authorities, the professionalism of interactions with affected communities, and the clarity of public communication (Sapkota 2021). Mid-level officers serve as the primary interface between the army and society in these high visibility situations. Their judgment, conduct, and ethical decision making directly influence public trust, institutional credibility, and the perception of the army as a disciplined and legitimate force (Kasher, 2003).

Across all operational environments, whether conventional, peacekeeping, or disaster response, mid-level officers must demonstrate a multidimensional skill set. Tactical proficiency alone is insufficient; they must also possess social awareness, cultural sensitivity, ethical grounding, and the ability to navigate complex moral dilemmas. Officers are required to balance competing operational, political, and humanitarian priorities while maintaining professionalism under scrutiny. This environment demands not only competence and initiative but also critical thinking, ethical judgment, and the ability to synthesize fragmented information into actionable guidance (Thapa, 2024). The modern operational landscape, therefore, underscores the centrality of mid-level officers in ensuring that organizational intent is executed effectively, responsibly, and in alignment with national and international expectations.

The Command Pillar: Cultivating Tactical and Operational Mastery

The core of the ACSC graduate's professional identity is anchored in the ability to lead effectively under extreme adversity. The aim of this course is to educate and train mid-level commanders and staff officers in leadership, critical thinking, ethical foundation, decision making, operational planning, and staff functions to effectively command and support the full spectrum of military operations, interagency, and multinational operations, while advancing research, doctrinal development, and a common understanding of security challenges in support of national security objectives (Army Command and Staff College, Nepal, 2026). The curriculum of the course functions as an intellectual crucible, guiding officers through the transition from direct tactical

leadership to complex organizational and operational responsibilities. As Nepal's premier institution for developing adaptive and visionary mid-level commanders and staff officers, the Army Command and Staff College (ACSC) builds upon the foundational experience of officers who have completed mandatory Company Commander training, refining their capacity to synchronize unit-level command and staff functions with broader operational and strategic objectives (Army Command and Staff College, Nepal, 2026). In doing so, ACSC graduates serve as a vital bridge between tactical execution and the complex demands of national, interagency, and multinational security operations.

Central to this mission is the enhancement of professional military competencies, ACSC also provides focused education to strengthen student's planning, organizational management, communication, and coordination skills, while simultaneously developing advanced problem solving abilities as well. Through rigorous application of the Military Decision-Making Process (MDMP) as prevalent as Tactical Planning Process (TPP) in Nepali Army, the course ensures that tactical actions are never disconnected from higher operational and strategic purposes. While technical and tactical proficiency remains essential, it is deliberately subordinated to the cultivation of moral and professional character. Integrity, discipline, and ethical leadership are embedded as core principles, ensuring that graduates maintain a steadfast professional bearing, project calm under pressure, and demonstrate resolute judgment in high-intensity operational environments (Military Dispatches, 2024).

Beyond battlefield and staff competencies, the ACSC curriculum expands officers' strategic perspective as well. The college serves as a national hub for advanced security dialogue, doctrinal innovation, and strategic thought. Graduates are trained to act as integrators, enhancing interagency and multinational cooperation by building shared understanding among military and civilian partners. This education ensures that mid-level officers can support senior leadership in promoting strategic awareness, operational coherence, and policy-informed decision-making. Furthermore, ACSC equips officers to operate effectively in the ambiguous "Gray Zones" of contemporary conflict, where conventional military solutions alone are insufficient. Through intensive research, study, and practical exercises, graduates emerge as disciplined, analytical instruments of the state, capable of safeguarding national sovereignty while contributing meaningfully to regional and global security efforts.

Importance of The Mid-Level Officer

The role of the mid-level officer can be best understood through Carl von Clausewitz's concept of friction, which explains how uncertainty, chance, and human

limitations complicate even simple military activities (Clausewitz, 1976). Mid-level officers operate where this friction is most pronounced where plans encounter reality and decisions must be made under time pressure and with incomplete information. Consequently, their responsibilities are not purely administrative, but fundamentally decisional and interpretive. Thus, ACSC graduates as the Mid-Level Officer not only serve as a vital bridge between tactical, operational and strategic level of operations, it also paves the way for them to be evolved as senior level commanders and leaders (Thapa, 2024).

In professional military organizations, the mid-level represents the critical link between strategy and tactics. While senior leaders establish objectives and allocate resources, and tactical leaders execute assigned tasks, mid-level officers ensure coherence between intent and action (Thapa, 2024). They interpret higher direction, coordinate multiple functions, and adapt plans to changing conditions. In the Nepali Army, this role is intensified by the wide range of operational environments, including plain, hill, mountainous terrain, jungle and urban areas, domestic security operations, disaster response, and multinational peacekeeping missions (Nepali Army, 2022). Across these contexts, mid-level officers must balance adaptability with strict adherence to the commander's intent.

Mid-level officers also play a significant role in civil military relations. During internal security operations including Aid-to-Civil Authority and disaster response, they are often the most senior military representatives interacting directly with civil authorities, local leaders, and affected populations (Sapkota 2021). Their conduct, contribution, judgment, and communication therefore have a direct impact on public perception of the Army. As Huntington (1957) emphasized, professional military effectiveness is inseparable from legitimacy, ethical conduct, and respect for civilian authority. Accordingly, “what right looks like” at the mid-level includes restraint, responsibility, accountability, efficiency and professional behavior, in addition to operational effectiveness.

Professional Development and Strategic Preparedness at ACSC

The Army Command and Staff Course is designed to prepare officers for these complex and demanding responsibilities. While specialization has value, professional effectiveness at the mid-level requires broad competence across command, staff, planning, and advisory functions. As reflected in the well-known proverb that a “jack of all trades” may be more valuable than a narrow specialist, breadth of capability is often

essential for leadership at higher levels (Mieder, 2004). ACSC therefore seeks to develop adaptable officers capable of integrating diverse inputs into coherent and practical solutions.

A central objective of ACSC is to develop officers who understand the relationship between tactical actions and strategic outcomes. In addition, it also focuses on developing and preparing mid-level commanders and staff officers; enhancing professional military competencies, ensuring ethical and professional leadership; promoting operational and strategic thinking and understanding; developing analytical and critical thinking, strengthening joint, interagency and multinational cooperation and interoperability; promote and enhance strategic awareness (Army Command and Staff College, Nepal, n.d.)

Mid-level officers play critical role in modern military operations specially on operational Integration, adaptability & decision Making, technological & multi-Domain Warfare, command & leadership and bridging the Gap. Modern military operations demonstrate that tactical decisions can have immediate political and strategic consequences, particularly in information-rich and civilian-centric environments. ACSC emphasizes operational art, critical thinking, and contextual awareness to enable officers to appreciate the broader implications of their decisions (Clausewitz, 1976).

Army command and staff course is crucial in building efficient staff by enhancing technical proficiency in staff procedures, developing analytical skills, and promoting collaborative decision-making in joint, multi-service and inter-agency environments. ACSC prepares officers for staff and advisory roles at formation and headquarters levels. Effective staff work requires more than the accurate reporting of information; it demands the ability to provide commanders with clear assessments, feasible options, and honest professional advice. Commanders rely heavily on their staff officers to manage complexity and support timely decision-making. Through structured instruction, syndicate discussions, and practical exercises, ACSC seeks to develop these essential competencies.

Leadership development is an equally important focus of the ACSC course. It contributes on developing effective by fostering strategic and operational thinking, decision-making under pressure, advanced conceptual Thinking, collaboration and team building and collaborative skills necessary for joint, interagency, and multinational environments. Mid-level officers in Nepali Army are future battalion commanders and key shapers of organizational culture. They influence command climate, mentor junior

officers, and establish professional standards. ACSC therefore reinforces ethical conduct, accountability, and professional identity, ensuring that graduates demonstrate both sound judgment and effective leadership (ACSC, 2026). In summary, ACSC aims to produce mid-level officers who demonstrate:

- **Systems Thinking:** the ability to understand military organizations as integrated systems of people, processes, resources, and capabilities operating within complex environments.
- **Critical Thinking and Effective Communication:** the capacity to analyze complex problems, exercise sound judgment, and communicate ideas, assessments, and recommendations clearly and persuasively.
- **Ethical Leadership and Moral Courage:** the willingness to uphold professional values, provide honest and timely advice, and make principled decisions under pressure.
- **Joint, Interagency, and Multinational Awareness:** a clear understanding of the Army's role within broader national security structures and international operational frameworks.

Through structured instruction, practical exercises, and syndicate discussions, ACSC prepares officers to serve as the intellectual and operational backbone of brigade, division, and Army Headquarters formations. The course also strengthens leadership capacity, professional judgment, and decision-making under uncertainty, ensuring that graduates are ready to navigate both conventional and complex contemporary security challenges (Mieder, 2004).

What Commanders Expect from Mid-Level Officers

It's already reiterated that Commanders' main expectation from mid-level officers is to perform as the vibrant bridge between strategic intent and operational/tactical execution, necessitating them to manage resources efficiently, lead by example, and resolve problems without supervision. Commanders' expectations of mid-level officers are shaped primarily by operational experience rather than theory. In conditions of uncertainty and pressure, they value officers who are reliable, clear in their thinking, and capable of acting independently within the framework of the commander's intent. Trust, professional competence, and sound judgment are therefore central to effective performance at the mid-level (Huntington, 1957).

Clarity of Thought. First and foremost, commanders expect clarity. Operational environments are inherently ambiguous and often inundated with information.

Commanders rarely have time to scrutinize every report or data point, relying on mid-level officers to distill complex information, identify critical issues, and present concise assessments with feasible options (Department of the Army, 2019). The ability to simplify complexity and support informed decision-making is a defining hallmark of an effective mid-level officer.

Disciplined Initiative. Second, commanders expect initiative. Modern operations are dynamic, and conditions can shift rapidly. Commanders cannot intervene in every situation, making it imperative for mid-level officers to exercise disciplined initiative. Acting decisively within the bounds of command intent, they must seize opportunities, mitigate risks, and maintain operational momentum (Department of the Army, 2019). This is the practical application of professional judgment under the conditions of friction and uncertainty described by Clausewitz.

Trustworthiness and Integrity. Finally, commanders expect trustworthiness. Mid-level officers are frequently entrusted with sensitive responsibilities, including negotiations, intelligence oversight, financial management, and liaison with civilian authorities. Confidence in an officer's integrity, judgment, and ethical conduct is essential for the effective functioning of the chain of command (Piellusch, 2011). As Huntington (1957) emphasized, the profession of arms rests not only on technical expertise but also on moral responsibility and ethical conduct.

Operational Expertise and Meticulous Execution. Mid-level officers are expected to be experts in their fields and proficient in working independently.

Lead by Example and Leading from the Front. Mid-level officers must be able to lead by example. At the same time, they must be visible and share hardships with soldiers in the front line.

Resource Management. They are expected to be responsible, accountable and transparent in resource management having deep understanding of logistics, personnel management, and financial stewardship to manage allocated resources efficiently (Piellusch, 2011).

Effective Communication. Mid-level officers must be able to provide timely and factual assessments to their superiors which will contribute effective decision-making.

Expectations of Officers from ACSC. Mid-level officers attending ACSC arrive with high expectations. Building on significant operational experience, they seek deeper insight into higher-level decision-making and preparation for expanded responsibilities.

Officers expect the course to sharpen their judgment, broaden their strategic perspective, and enhance confidence in managing complexity and uncertainty (Clausewitz, 1976).

Officers also anticipate a learning environment that fosters open discussion, critical debate, and professional dialogue. While military hierarchies are necessary, excessive rigidity can stifle independent thought. Without an atmosphere of trust and intellectual safety, officers may become risk-averse and reluctant to offer candid advice—traits that are counterproductive at the mid-level. From an institutional perspective, the Army must provide mid-level officers with the tools, resources, and command climate necessary to translate training into performance (Piellusch, 2011). Practical planning frameworks, decision-support systems, access to relevant information, and mentorship from senior leaders who exemplify professional excellence are critical to demonstrating in practice what “right” looks like at this level.

Training Versus Outcome and Performance of Mid-Level Officers

Training for mid-level officers is crucial to enhance skills, knowledge, and attitudes that contribute to improve job performance, productivity, and organizational goal achievement. Effective and organized training for these leaders enables effective decision making, high morale and motivation, proper utilization of resources, and augmented institutional attainments. A persistent challenge in professional military education is ensuring that formal training translates into improved operational performance. While the Army Command and Staff Course provides essential intellectual foundations, its long-term effectiveness depends on reinforcement through follow-on assignments, organizational culture, and leadership practices (ACSC, 2026). Without such reinforcement, the benefits of education may remain largely theoretical.

One contributing factor to the gap between training and performance is the emphasis on assessment rather than evaluation. Professional military education often prioritizes knowledge recall and doctrinal familiarity over judgment, adaptability, and application. However, at the mid-level, the quality of decision-making under uncertainty is more critical than the quantity of knowledge possessed. Clausewitz emphasized that effective command depends on judgment in conditions of friction rather than technical mastery alone (Clausewitz, 1976).

Skill atrophy further widens this gap. When newly acquired planning and decision-making competencies are not applied in subsequent assignments, officers may revert to familiar but less effective practices. To mitigate this risk, the Army must deliberately reinforce ACSC learning through appropriately designed follow-on postings, continuous

professional development, and structured mentoring. Such reinforcement enables officers to internalize educational outcomes and apply them in complex operational contexts.

Mentorship plays a particularly important role in bridging the gap between education and performance. Officers who benefit from experienced mentors are more likely to apply newly acquired concepts, exercise professional judgment, and navigate institutional constraints effectively. In this way, effective training for mid-level officers is not just about theoretical, conceptual, skill attainment; it is also essential for achieving strategic/operational/tactical objectives through effective leadership and performance (Piellusch, 2011).

Conclusion

“Remember that the junior Soldiers in your unit, both officer and enlisted, will depart your unit thinking they have seen what right looks like. Your responsibility [as the commander] is to ensure they have.” – U.S. Army Major General Larry J. Lust (Lust, 2012, p. 33)

“What right looks like” for a mid-level officer is defined less by doctrinal mastery and more by behavior under pressure, uncertainty, and moral complexity. Commanders require officers who can think critically, act decisively, and uphold institutional values. Soldiers require leaders they can trust, and society requires an Army that operates with legitimacy, restraint, and professionalism (Lust, 2012).

The Army Command and Staff Course represent a pivotal transition in an officer’s professional development. It marks the shift from task-focused execution to organizational thinking and strategic awareness. While ACSC provides the intellectual framework and professional foundation for this transition, its effectiveness ultimately depends on institutional culture. If the Army consistently values critical thinking, honest professional advice, and ethical leadership, the qualities developed at ACSC will endure. If not, a gap between educational intent and operational practice will persist.

Ultimately, “what right looks like” is demonstrated not through doctrine or coursework alone, but through the daily decisions and conduct of mid-level officers. As the vital link between strategy and tactics and between the Army and the society it serves these officers play a decisive role in translating professional military education into credible, ethical, and effective action (Lust, 2012).

In conclusion, proudly recalling its almost 3 centuries of glorious history with its significant image both at the national and international field, Nepali Army holds a strong

base to proudly claim on ‘what right looked like’ in preserving Nepal and Nepali Army’s core values and vital national interest. Likewise, being on the same line of ‘what right looked like’, as per the intent and directives of respective Chief of Army Staffs in different periods of time, ACSC, since its establishment, has played the pivotal role in developing efficient mid-level officer corps who have maintained and upheld the image and legacy of Nepali Army so far.

As per the changing pattern of time and need of time, since its establishment, the Army Command and Staff College has been maintaining and upholding its image and legacy in line with ‘What Right Looks Like’ with so many remarkable accomplishments meeting all the requirements of mid-level officers of the Nepali Army as per the modern operational requirements. With its two important pillars, military officers with PSC status and academic with MSS degree, ACSC, already involving the international student officers (ISOs) and Inter Agency Student Officers (IASOs), has evolved as a center of excellence.

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