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Concept development assessment game – suitable collecting framework in scientific military research

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Abstract

Scientific research is crucial for progress across all areas of society, including the military sphere. However, as the security environment becomes increasingly dynamic, unpredictable, and complex, research methods in military sciences must address contemporary challenges by providing flexible frameworks for evaluating and testing new concepts necessary for the adaptation of force structures. This article analyzes the Concept Development Assessment Game (CDAG), which offers a structured framework for collecting qualitative data in military-specific research. The game serves as a qualitative tool used for testing and refining concepts at an early stage of development, providing a controlled and flexible environment for collecting necessary data. Moreover, it ensures a mechanism for employing a wide range of data collection methods, such as observation, focus groups, or questionnaires, thereby enabling the triangulation of collected data and, consequently, the foundation for valuable outcomes in the effort to transform military structures.

Keywords:
CDAG; military science; collection method; scientific research.

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In a continuously changing security environment, characterized by intense competition among actors (Joint Doctrine Note 1-19 2019, 1; Mazarr et al. 2018, 1; Mazarr, Blank et al. 2022, 111-113; MCDP 1-4 2020, 1-3), where conflicts and technologies evolve rapidly, the adaptation of forces to current challenges represents an operational necessity to establish the prerequisites for operational success in potential future conflicts (Nistorescu 2024, 195).

In this context, research and conceptual development in the field of military sciences require flexible and innovative methods for testing and evaluation to address these challenges. The Concept Development and Assessment Game (CDAG) emerges as an essential qualitative method, enabling in-depth analysis of theoretical concepts within a controlled environment where operational risks are minimized. CDAG provides researchers with a platform to test complex scenarios, ranging from new doctrines and strategies to emerging technologies and operational procedures, thereby supporting the continuous adaptation of defence structures.

As military sciences rely both on rigorous data collection and the qualitative interpretation of phenomena, CDAG represents an ideal framework for collecting and analyzing relevant qualitative data. Through its exploratory nature, this method allows researchers to capture the nuances and complexity of participants' behaviours and perceptions, thereby creating a solid foundation for understanding and improving the concepts under study.

Research problem

Although there are works addressing aspects of the Concept Development and Assessment Game (CDAG) in a military context, in Romanian literature, in-depth research on this topic remains extremely limited. The lack of systematic approaches represents a significant gap in the Romanian specialized literature, requiring careful investigation to clarify and structure the ways in which CDAG can support military scientific research and provide reliable results in this field.

Research aim

For this reason, the present study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the correct use of CDAG for data collection, as well as to explore the advantages and limitations of the game as a data collection tool in military scientific research, highlighting its role in the continuous adaptation of doctrine and defence structures.

Research target

This paper is aimed at all researchers in the field of military sciences, especially those at the beginning of their journey. It seeks to provide an adequate, coherent, and valid structural framework for data collection specific to the military domain, as well as viable guidance on the methodological options necessary to ensure the logical coherence of their research when opting for such an instrument.

Research methodology

The methodology employed in this study is a qualitative one, with the goal of understanding and presenting the nuances of the Concept Development Assessment Game (CDAG). The primary method used was document analysis, which enabled an in-depth exploration of the topic and the identification of CDAG's essential elements, thus providing a broad and detailed understanding of the subject.

Given the qualitative nature of the study, the following research questions guided this scientific approach:

- What is CDAG, and how is it conducted?
- What are the benefits and advantages of using CDAG in military sciences research?
- What are the potential limitations of using CDAG, and how can they be mitigated?

Paper structure

The paper is organized into two main sections to address the research questions. The first section focuses on the theoretical presentation of what CDAG is, providing a practical guide for its organization and use to ensure an efficient operational framework. The second section is dedicated to highlighting the main advantages of using this instrument as a framework for data collection in research specific to the military field. It also discusses the primary limitations and considerations that should be taken into account when choosing to employ such a game.

CDAG – what is it and how is it conducted?

The Concept Development Assessment Game (CDAG) is a practical tool, validated by NATO, which provides a framework for refining various conceptual documents within the Alliance. Since the game's name has not been implemented in Romanian, this article will use the terms CDAG and "*Joc pentru dezvoltarea și evaluarea conceptelor*" interchangeably, both referring to the same concept.

NATO specifies that this method can be used to test and refine a wide range of documents, such as doctrines, concepts, policies, manuals, or specific processes, and it has already been employed in major NATO projects (NATO ACT 2014, 2).

CDAG is an analytical wargame developed jointly by NATO's Allied Command Transformation and the Netherlands Ministry of Defence Research Organization (NATO ACT 2011, 12). Generally, wargames are recognized as effective methods for defence experimentation (UK Ministry of Defence 2021a, 58).

CDAG serves as a qualitative method for testing and developing conceptual documents (NATO ACT 2021, 30). While some researchers agree that no universally accepted definition of qualitative research exists (Salmons 2022, 2) and that it is inherently challenging to define (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey 2020, 41), it is widely acknowledged as the most suitable approach when explaining, understanding, or

describing phenomena, processes, or behaviours (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey 2020, 43); (Ravitch and Carl 2021, 49).
Given its exploratory nature, qualitative research allows for conclusive data collection about phenomena, focusing on context, individual perspectives, and the subtleties associated with the subject under study (Salmons 2022, 2; Sharan B. Merriam 2019, 5). For this reason, CDAG's qualitative nature directs researchers' efforts toward studies aimed at understanding phenomena, nuances, or participants' experiences and perspectives regarding the tested concepts.

The nature of research objectives and questions is a critical factor influencing the direction of research and determining whether a qualitative approach is appropriate (Leavy 2023, 9; Leavy 2020, 2). In military-specific research, CDAG as a qualitative method can be used to test how military structures respond to the introduction of new weapon systems or technologies or to evaluate the adaptability of specific defence strategies.

In such cases, the qualitative method enables researchers to gain a detailed understanding of perceptions, team dynamics, and challenges faced by participants, offering profound insights into real behaviours and interactions. Furthermore, the game can serve as a data collection framework for exploring participants' reactions and impressions to a new doctrine or procedure, testing how these integrate into decision-making processes and identifying potential areas for improvement.
Qualitative research in these contexts provides not only feedback on the viability of tested procedures and doctrines but also insights into participants' adaptability. Thus, CDAG becomes an effective qualitative research method in the military field, focusing on obtaining a deep understanding of participants' reactions and perspectives, thereby facilitating the adaptation and refinement of military concepts based on real needs.

The Concept Development Assessment Game is a "tabletop" game focused on resolving scenarios created using the concept card provided. The game's purpose is to test the previously developed concept and identify existing gaps and optimization paths. Therefore, the game is not recommended as an initial step in the research process. Its role is to consolidate an idea or concept developed through other methods and identify solutions to mature the concept further.
Before applying this game, it is recommended to assess its viability. NATO provides guidance on determining the appropriateness of CDAG use based on the maturity level of the concept under analysis and military operations, as illustrated in Figure No. 1.

At a minimum, the Concept Development Assessment Game (CDAG) requires the following participants:

- Game teams
- Analysts

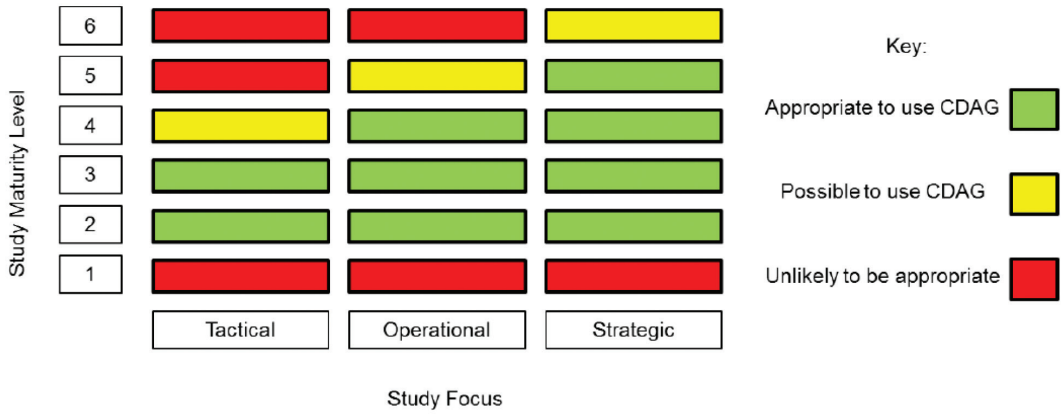

Figure 1 CDAG suitability test
Source: NATO Concept Development Assessment Game "CDAG" Handbook 2014, 6.

- Concept leader/advisor
- Moderator

The game teams are responsible for testing the concept during the game. Unlike adversarial wargames, CDAG is non-competitive; all participating teams have the same responsibilities and work to solve the same problem. There is no upper limit on the number of teams, but a minimum of two teams is required. Each team should consist of 6–8 players with expertise in the specific domain of the concept being tested. Ideally, these players belong to the category of personnel who will regularly operate with the concept if implemented. The teams' primary role is to analyse and critique the concept being tested, adhering to the game's rules to identify vulnerabilities within a concrete scenario.

Analysts play a critical role in data collection, with at least one assigned to each game team. Their function is crucial for the data collection phase of the scientific process. Therefore, a preparatory stage before the game is essential to train analysts. It is recommended that each working team have a dedicated analyst throughout the game. The analyst's responsibilities include monitoring not only the responses provided but also participants' reactions during the game, as well as alternative solutions that may have been discarded during the rounds. Additionally, the data analysis process must consider potential biases from individual analysts. Applying reflexive measures during data collection can help minimize the impact of such biases on the collected data.

The concept leader is the person who developed the concept, document, or product to be tested and refined through CDAG. Their involvement in the game should be kept to a minimum to avoid influencing participants regarding potential solutions. Their role should be limited to clarifying specific aspects of the concept developed if needed by the teams' players.

The moderator is a key element during one of the game's critical stages—the plenary sessions. The moderator guides the discussions between teams to ensure the objectives for each round are achieved. It is recommended that the moderator understand the concept but be someone other than the person who developed it to avoid influencing team discussions.

All these roles are crucial for the potential outcomes of CDAG. Therefore, special attention should be given to the sampling strategy. Considering the qualitative nature of the data and the specific methods of data collection during the game, the sampling should be **non-probabilistic**, most likely subjective, based on predefined criteria (Rassel et al. 2020, 243). This approach involves deliberately selecting the sample rather than choosing randomly (Moser and Korstjens 2018, 11).
This method is a common practice in qualitative research (Dawson 2019, 49); (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey 2020, 164; Braun and Clarke 2013, 55). Predefined selection criteria should include participants' expertise, group homogeneity, or their level of interest in the subject.

CDAG is structured into **six rounds** conducted over a maximum of four days, following the schedule outlined in the table below. Longer durations have proven inefficient due to participants' waning interest and attention.

TABLE NO. 1

Tentative CDAG Schedule

Schedule	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4
08.00 – 11.00	❖ Admin activities ❖ Presentations	Round 1	Round 3	Round 5
12.00 – 15.00		Round 2	Round 4	Round 6

The first day must be dedicated to administrative activities for preparing participants and organizing the workspaces. This includes a series of presentations covering the game's methodology and objectives, the employed scenario, the team composition and participant roles, as well as the concept to be tested. These presentations aim to ensure an optimal understanding among participants regarding the game's process and the expectations for its potential outcomes.

Additionally, since one of the methods for collecting data from participants is through a questionnaire (as will be detailed later), it is recommended that the methodology for completing the questionnaire also be explained on the first day to optimize the game.
To ensure the rigour of the game, it is advisable to establish a set of rules to be presented during the administrative activities. These rules should remain visibly displayed in physical format in the workspaces throughout the game.
Moreover, on the first day, it is necessary to allocate workspaces for each team

and provide the necessary logistical support: laptops, flipcharts, markers, pens, highlighters, post-it notes, etc. This ensures an optimal framework for the game to proceed smoothly over the following days.

As mentioned earlier, the Concept Development Assessment Game (CDAG) consists of six rounds, each lasting approximately three hours. These rounds are independent, meaning the results of one round do not influence the activities in subsequent rounds. Each round involves the two-game teams, both performing the same four main phases, as illustrated in Figure no. 2:

- Introductory phase.
- Working phase.
- Plenary phase.
- Round questionnaire.

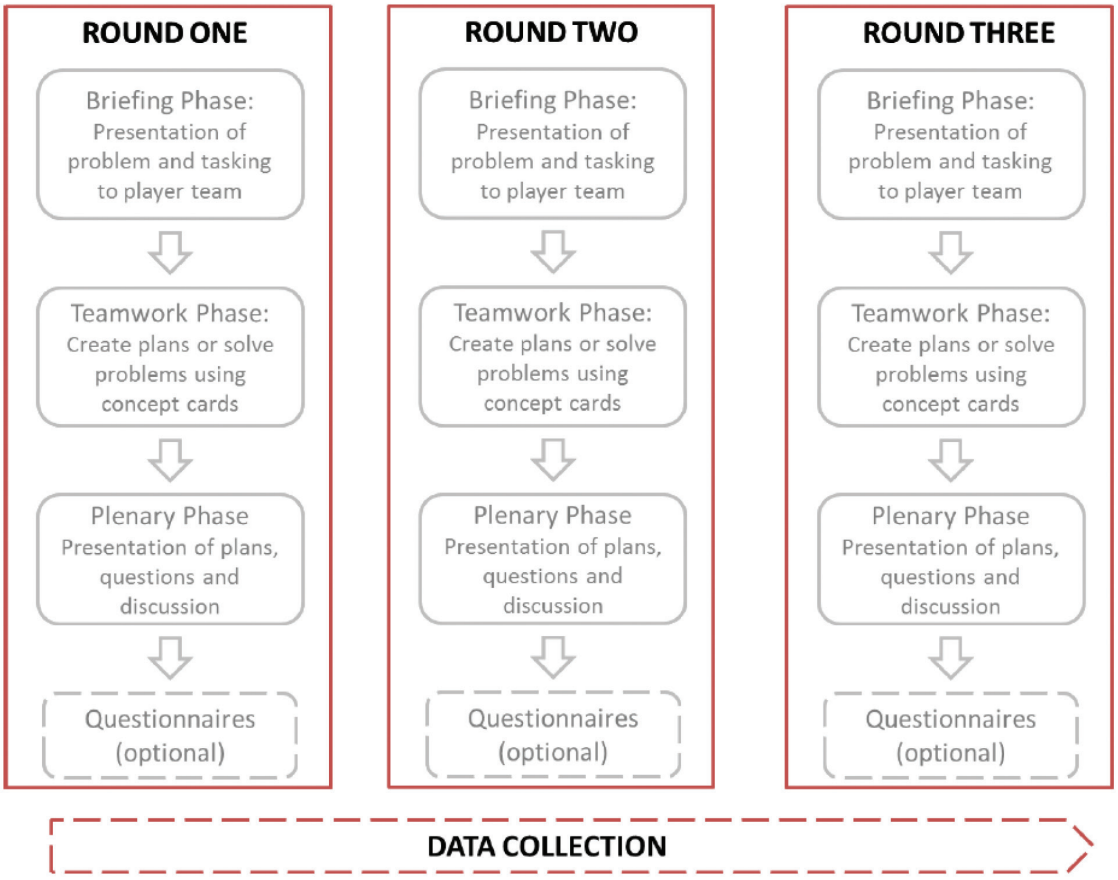

Figure 2 Phases and rounds in a CDAG
Source: NATO ACT 2014, 16.

Each round begins with an **introductory phase** conducted in plenary by all game teams, together with the moderator and the concept leader. During this phase, relevant aspects of the game are presented, such as the scenario, the specific vignette for the round, the problem to be solved, and the concept card that may be used to address the problem. This phase lasts approximately 10-15 minutes.

The scenario used can either remain consistent throughout all rounds or vary depending on the game's objectives and the concept being tested. However, to avoid confusing participants, it is recommended to use the same scenario throughout the entire CDAG. Additionally, employing a concise scenario design is a recognized CDAG practice (Collins and Hasberg 2018, 245) to prevent participants from becoming overwhelmed with details, ensuring their focus remains on the concept card being tested.

Each round involves a specific vignette, independent of others, situated within the scenario's context. The vignette provides teams with the necessary information to resolve the assigned problem, serving as the framework for discussions and analysis. Furthermore, the vignette outlines the role each game team assumes in addressing the given situation. It is important to note that all teams receive identical documents, roles, and tasks throughout the game.

During the introductory phase of each round, teams are also provided with a concept card specific to that round. This card contains either an excerpt or the entire concept intended for testing. The concept card serves as a potential tool for solving the problem outlined in the vignette. Teams can choose whether or not to use the card and are free to propose alternative solutions based on their preferences.

The second phase of the round, **the working phase**, focuses on identifying solutions to the given problem. It lasts approximately 90 minutes, with each team working separately in designated rooms. To generate solutions, teams may employ a variety of analysis methods and techniques that encourage critical thinking and explore alternative perspectives for addressing the problem, thereby enhancing the viability of the results (TRADOC G-2, Version 9.0 2022; UK Minstry of Defence 2021b; NATO ACT 2017). A simple and widely accepted technique that can be employed during the working phase is brainstorming, which stimulates creative thinking and the identification of innovative solutions (NATO ACT 2017, 31).

To ensure accountability and increase participant engagement, it is recommended that each round designate a team leader responsible for coordinating activities during the working session and presenting the conclusions during the plenary session. Additionally, as previously mentioned, each team should have at least one analyst assigned. The preparation of analysts is emphasized once again to ensure an efficient data collection process.

The next phase of each round, **the plenary phase**, is conducted jointly by all game teams under the guidance of the designated moderator and lasts approximately one hour. During this phase, the concept leader may also be present to ensure that the teams' responses are correctly understood and aligned with the theoretical framework of the study. Figure no. 3 illustrates the organizational structure of this phase for each round.

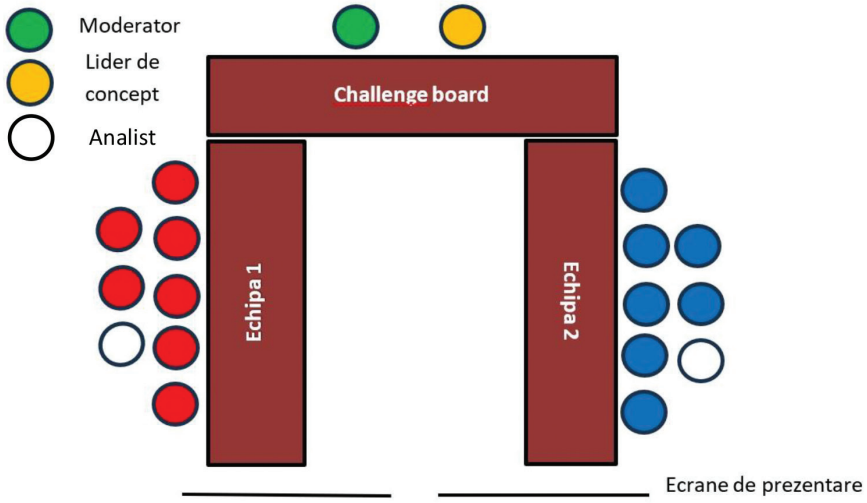

Figure 3 Plenary phase set-up
Source: NATO ACT 2014, 19.

During this phase, each team leader designated for the respective round presents the solutions their team identified to address the given situation. At the end of their presentation, members of the other team, the moderator, and the concept leader may ask clarifying questions about the presented information. This approach ensures a constructive discussion between the teams, with the potential to further develop and refine the solutions presented.

The final phase of each round may involve the completion of a **questionnaire** by all team participants to collect their direct feedback. This helps to better understand how they perceived the game's progression. The questionnaire aims to assess their level of understanding, the effectiveness, and the relevance of the concept card in solving the proposed challenges. It is worth noting that, for time efficiency, the methodology for completing these questionnaires is explained during the first day of the game, as part of the administrative activities, and should remain consistent across all rounds.

Arguments and considerations regarding the employment of CDAG in military research

There are numerous advantages to choosing the Concept Development and Assessment Game (CDAG) as a research tool. The mere fact that it is utilized by the world's largest alliance to develop its operational concepts is a compelling argument for adopting and integrating it into scientific research. Other **benefits of CDAG include**:

- Providing a framework for creative problem-solving in operational contexts, incorporating scientifically validated methods that facilitate critical thinking. This ensures the potential for innovative solutions that contribute effectively to the development of tested concepts (Feckler 2011, 2).

- Fostering open communication among team members, creating a space for the free expression of informed opinions.
- Economic testing of concepts, improving them at a low cost before they are tested in large-scale exercises (Collins and Hasberg 2018, 237).
- Reducing the risk of concept failure by enabling testing in a low-risk theoretical environment before practical application.
- Facilitating the identification and management of potential risks associated with the tested concept.
- Creating a forum for expert discussions, fostering opportunities to further develop the analysed concept.
- Offering flexibility, as the tool can be adjusted not only in relation to the concept being tested or the objectives set but also during the game's progression.
- Serving as a continuous learning method for participants. Scientifically proven methods for developing participants' critical and creative thinking skills can be integrated into the game (NATO ACT 2017, Foreward).
- Given the need for continuous adaptation of systems to the challenges of today's increasingly complex and volatile operational environment, CDAG can support the testing of new military concepts. The rapid technological evolution of contemporary society significantly influences the character of conflicts, and CDAG provides an economical, risk-free way to test new approaches, concepts, or operational methods for adapting armed forces to the current operational environment.

However, **the main advantage** of the Concept Development and Assessment Game (CDAG) is its ability to enable data collection through multiple methods, ensuring data triangulation. This feature is why we chose this title for our study. Three scientific data collection methods can be employed at different stages of CDAG: observation, focus groups, and questionnaires.
Data collection is carried out by analysts during team activities, plenary sessions for each round, and the final stage via administered questionnaires. Once the activity concludes, all analysts hand over their collected materials to the concept leader. Thus, CDAG provides a coherent framework for data collection.

During **the teamwork phase**, designated analysts collect data using **observation**, recognized as one of the main methods in qualitative research (Creswell 2013, 166); (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey 2020, 289; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2019, 378). This method allows for a deeper understanding of the context, enabling the collection of rich and detailed data. In CDAG, analysts are advised to use an observation sheet provided by the concept leader on the first day of the game during administrative activities.
We reemphasize the importance of an analyst training session at the start of the activity to enhance data collection efficiency. Each observation sheet should also include methodological instructions to ensure the effectiveness of the data collection process.

Due to the structure of the game, the data collection method used during **the plenary phase** is the **focus group**. This method involves a moderated group discussion in which participants share their ideas on a specific topic (Crabtree and Miller 2023, 156). The organizational setup of CDAG, as previously described, aligns perfectly with the focus group method during the plenary phase. Additionally, the choice of focus groups is supported by the optimal group size for discussions, which academic literature suggests ranges from 4 to 15 participants (Krueger and Casey 2014, 33).

The qualitative nature of the game also aligns well with focus groups, as this method is almost always used to collect qualitative data (Stewart şi Shamdasani 2015, 42). Analysts collect data during this phase by electronically recording the entire discussion and noting the key debates on observation sheets also used during the teamwork phase. The advantage of this method is its interactive environment, which encourages innovative solutions through diverse perspectives based on each team's results.

The third data collection method applicable to CDAG is the **questionnaire**, recognized as suitable for qualitative research strategies (Charmaz 2014, 116). The questionnaire aims to understand the phenomenon and concept under study. It is essential to carefully design the questions to ensure methodological coherence with the game's qualitative approach. Open-ended questions are recommended, as they are well-suited to qualitative research practices, capturing participants' detailed perspectives related to the objectives.

The structure of the questionnaire must be logical, facilitating a coherent flow for respondents and potentially enhancing the quality of the responses. The guidance provided by Ian Brace and Kate Bolton in Questionnaire Design: How to Plan, Structure and Write Survey Material for Effective Market Research (Brace and Bolton 2022, 38-42) can serve as a valuable resource for planning data collection activities using this method.

To streamline the data collection process, electronic platforms like Google Forms can be employed. These systems often provide automatic charts and graphs of results, facilitating efficient data collection and analysis.
We must also acknowledge certain **limitations** of using such a structural framework for data collection. These represent weaknesses in the study that could potentially influence the results and conclusions of the research (Theofanidis and Fountouki 2018, 155).

First, the quality of the data is dependent on the analysts' experience in collecting it and their ability to capture elements truly relevant to the undertaken study. In this context, we reiterate the necessity of prior training to enhance their capacity to gather data aligned with the research objectives.
Additionally, while the game cannot replicate certain intrinsic psychological traits of armed conflicts, such as fear, fatigue, or stress (Popa 2019, 46), which military

personnel experience in real-life situations, it does provide a conducive environment for collecting qualitative data aimed at refining various military concepts.

It is also important to consider the methodological limitations inherent in the employed collection methods. Data obtained through observation is influenced by the observer's presence and subjectivity. Data from focus groups may be affected by conformity pressures on some participants and the influence of dominant opinion leaders. Meanwhile, data collected through questionnaires might be superficial, given that this method is applied at the final stage of the game.
All these limitations must be considered to ensure proper interpretation of the results and to transform the Concept Development and Assessment Game into an effective framework for data collection in scientific research specific to the military sciences domain.
Furthermore, **maintaining the methodological coherence** of scientific research is crucial. The Concept Development and Assessment Game is recommended exclusively for qualitative studies based on inductive reasoning, focusing on exploring military phenomena and identifying new solutions to current operational challenges.

It is advisable to select a qualitative research strategy consistent with the game's nature, which is to develop concepts in their early stages. For this reason, Grounded Theory (GT) may represent the most suitable research strategy. The essence of GT aligns with the organization of CDAG, as it is a qualitative approach involving systematic data collection and analysis, with constant refinement and comparison of results until a theory is developed (Charmaz and Thornberg 2021, 305). Thus, CDAG can support this process of refining theories and concepts.

Moreover, considering how the game is conducted, special attention must be paid to **ethical considerations**. All participants should be explicitly informed about the voluntary nature of their involvement in the study and their unconditional right to withdraw from the research without facing any negative repercussions. This ensures an appropriate environment for collecting valuable data, which is the primary premise for high-quality results.

Conclusions

The Concept Development and Assessment Game (CDAG) is a versatile tool that can make a substantial contribution to scientific research in the military field, providing an organized and efficient framework for testing operational concepts in their early stages of development. Through its adaptability, CDAG ensures the creative integration of data collection methods such as observation, focus groups, and questionnaires, fostering a qualitative scientific approach based on triangulation and result validation.

The main identified advantages, including its capacity to facilitate critical thinking, save resources, and manage risks within the testing environment, underscore the significant value of CDAG as a tool for developing military concepts. Furthermore, its flexibility and organizational structure allow for experimentation with new ideas and solutions, significantly reducing the risks associated with their direct implementation in the field. However, certain methodological limitations, particularly those related to the data collection methods used during the game, must also be analyzed and considered.

In conclusion, we regard CDAG as an extremely important tool for researching and developing military concepts, especially for young researchers. Despite its limitations, it offers a structured, ethical, and efficient approach to data collection, serving as a valuable resource for identifying viable solutions to ensure the continuous adaptation of military structures to the challenges of the contemporary operational environment.

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