



The Icarus Effect

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When I think about our transformational HQ and especially about its products, I see reports like the Strategic Foresight Analysis, the Future Framework for Allied Operations, concepts that give us a glimpse of a possible future, thought-provoking papers... Some find it hard to sail on this warm breeze of change blowing through the HQ. Leaving the comfort of one's mental box to stretch the brainmuscles by making sense of the blurred view on the future is a difficult path some prefer not to take. Certainly, when that path can lead to making mistakes and misinterpretations. Whatever the sacrifice, an organization aspiring to excel must undertake this voyage.

Recently, there is a colder wind picking up. This wind does not allow reflection. It bites you in the face and demands immediate action. As soldiers, we like this kind of wind because it calls to our nature of problem solvers. It urges for action, and that is what we prefer. No wonder that our chain of command is taking the lead in the quest for tangible outputs. They too are military brought up in a world of quick solutions. Now the Sirens sing of innovation, but this music is probably just another way to wreck our ship against the rocks of shortsightedness.

I agree that NATO's sole transformational HQ should come up with short-term solutions for big problems. We may not continuously be with our head into the future; otherwise, we risk losing the others with their boots in the mud and to sever all connection with reality. However, it may not become our focus.

The current situation makes me think of the Greek story of Icarus. Minos, the king of Crete, threw him and his father Daedalus, an artisan, into prison for disobeying. Daedalus had a plan, however, and started building wings for himself and Icarus to help them escape. He told his son not to fly too high so that the sun would not melt the wax holding his wings together. Icarus did not listen and soared towards the sun. Sure enough, his wings melted, and he plunged to his death.

That is how most of us with a little bit of interest in ancient Greek history remembers the story. In fact this is the short version and wrapped in it comes the lesson "Don't fly too high!" An important lesson of humility warning us to limit your ambition of risk making a mistake. The effect of Icarus is that we are afraid to aim high as not to burn and drown. Our culture is fixated on this part of the myth, leaving us to belief that it was the whole thing.

The old Greeks were much smarter than to warn us only for the risk of flying too high. They knew life was not that simple. You cannot achieve much by staying low to the ground. Otherwise, they would have remained a people of farmers without the rich culture they had known. The whole story completes the lesson.

Daedalus also warned his son not to fly too low, as the spray from the sea would saturate his wings and drag him down to drown. He would not go far either if kept it safe by hugging the waves. Aiming for the stars can be risky, but so is being overly cautious. One has to fly in Daedalus' zone: neither too low, nor too high.

It is worth remembering this second piece of advice too and keep the complete lesson at heart. If we want to thrive, we need also to get out of our comfort zone; we must not fly too low.