

# Concept for Joint Warfighting<sup>1</sup>

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The U.S. military has mostly been involved in counter-insurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan since 9/11. The Nation's military is now in the position of having to re-learn how it might fight a large, conventional conflict against nuclear-armed powers like China and Russia. U.S. battlefield victories are far from guaranteed, and the officers responsible for drafting major war plans are new to the challenge, having spent the bulk of their careers facing technologically inferior adversaries like the Taliban. The need for top-down guidance in the form of a joint warfighting concept has never been greater. Without it, the United States stands to lose the next war it fights, and lose badly.

## Introduction

Traditional military concepts about joint warfighting are increasingly outdated. For example, the U.S. Army's 1980s era AirLand Battle

Only through development, articulation, and demonstration of a truly joint concept will the Joint Staff, combatant commanders, and military departments be able to shape the capabilities required to deal with the priority threats of China and Russia.



<sup>1</sup> Based on T. Greenwood and P. Savage, "In Search of a 21st Century Joint Warfighting Concept," *War on the Rocks*, September 19, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/09/in-search-of-a-21st-century-joint-warfighting-concept/>.

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Doctrine—which guided military operations in Desert Storm—does not account for the heightened role of cyber operations, space operations, and information operations in modern warfare. A 2017 update to the joint Air-Sea Battle Concept developed in the 1970s and 1980s underestimated the potential contribution of land forces. While U.S. military departments have been working hard on multidomain concepts since at least 2015, a comprehensive approach is necessary to implement the 2018 National Defense Strategy.<sup>2</sup>

## Warfighting Concepts versus Doctrine

More than 40 years ago, Army General Donn Starry defined doctrine as “what is written, approved by an appropriate authority and published concerning the conduct of military affairs.” He went on to say, “Doctrine generally describes *how* the Army fights tactically; *how* tactics and weapons systems are integrated; *how* command and control and combat service support are provided; *how* forces are mobilized, trained, deployed and employed” (Starry 1979, 88). Military concepts are thus descriptions of capabilities that do not yet exist but have the potential to solve a military problem.

In Starry’s day, the overriding problem was how NATO forces could defend against a Soviet land attack across Europe. Today, joint or multidomain operations must cross air, land, sea, cyber, and space domains and the electromagnetic spectrum to credibly deter China and Russia. Historically, most joint concepts have been developed top-down in a process overseen by the Joint Staff. This process continues as outlined in various modern warfighting documents; however, more work is needed.

## Current Efforts to Draft a Joint Concept

The military departments are continuing to develop their warfighting concepts in imaginative ways, though each calls its emerging concept something different:

- Air Force—multi-domain command and control
- Marine Corps—expeditionary advanced based operations
- Navy—distributed maritime operations
- Army—multi-domain operations

Each of these concepts focuses on a different aspect of the problem, and each has adopted different assumptions about war against a major power, which makes them difficult to integrate. Also, while the concepts may comply with Defense Department guidance, they are hardly joint, and they leave little room for combatant commanders to make decisions. Only through development, articulation, and demonstration

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<sup>2</sup> See *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge*, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

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of a truly joint concept will the Joint Staff, combatant commanders, and military departments be able to shape the necessary capabilities. Without that, war with China or Russia becomes more likely *and* more dangerous.

## Today's Bottom-Up Approach

Joint concept development relies too heavily on a bottom-up approach that begins independently within each department—a process that pays insufficient attention to integrating efforts into a holistic warfighting concept at the joint level. Accordingly, the bottom-up effort should be complemented by a more robust top-down approach that proactively integrates the bottom-up concepts with the Joint Staff's broader perspective and the combatant commanders' regional- and threat-specific insights. In this way, the best ideas will come together in an adaptive, unified, joint warfighting concept that resonates with U.S. allies and partners.

In one respect, the bottom-up approach is positive because it has stimulated thoughtful discussion at various command echelons and has focused overdue attention on how the military departments can best combine, project, and leverage combat power across all domains. Such a holistic approach is necessary to create multiple dilemmas for an adversary in different domains that span the tactical to strategic levels.

## Preparing for Big War

The military departments face two major obstacles in trying to independently develop approaches for great power competition and conflict. First, the current set of concepts have not matured much beyond the working hypothesis level. Second, the concepts require additional rigorous examination and experimentation to assess their feasibility.<sup>3</sup>

For example, the U.S. Army created an experimental Multi-Domain Task Force at Joint Base Lewis in McChord, Washington. Although not yet fully manned, the task force has become the Army's lead tactical organization for testing ways to generate or exploit kinetic and non-kinetic effects across the air, land, sea, space, cyber and electronic warfare domains. Insights gleaned from real-world experimentation may reveal innovative methods for deploying the task force or other Army elements in support of the joint campaign (Judson 2018).

We must not let the Multi-Domain Task Force be a one-off. The historical record indicates that experimentation can point the way to the future, serving as a vehicle for exploring further doctrinal and conceptual possibilities.<sup>4</sup> Given the complex interplay between domains and the still-immature theater implications of cyber and

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<sup>3</sup> See K. M. Woods and T. C. Greenwood, 2018, "Multidomain Battle, Time for a Campaign of Joint Experimentation," *Joint Force Quarterly* (1st Quarter): 14–21, [https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-88/jfq-88\\_14-21\\_Woods-Greenwood.pdf?ver=2018-01-09-102341-740](https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-88/jfq-88_14-21_Woods-Greenwood.pdf?ver=2018-01-09-102341-740).

<sup>4</sup> See W. Murray, 2002, *Experimental Units: The Historical Record*, IDA Paper P-3684, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a412051.pdf>.

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space capabilities, it is perhaps time to consider forming joint experimentation units or augmenting service-conducted experiments with joint capabilities.

Once the military departments agree on how to conduct all-domain operations, they must ensure that the cohesive, lethal, and time-sensitive application of joint combat power addresses real-world warfighting needs. As lessons learned from Operation Urgent Fury in Grenada revealed, integration does not naturally result from development of the concept process (Stewart 2008, 29+). In a more recent example, U.S. troops and NATO allies still lack secure field interoperability (Sisk 2019, 1), despite numerous directives and technical standards for achieving it.

## **Full Integration Leads to Convergence**

Fully integrating the joint force is necessary to achieve convergence—the U.S. Army term for creating simultaneous effects from all domains faster than the enemy. Convergence happens at the operational level. It requires joint force commanders to orchestrate actions across all domains to create opportunities to advance tailored campaign objectives. This is more than arbitrating between semi-independent, separate warfighting activities occurring in service-specific battlespace that has not yet been integrated with other joint forces or effects.

One approach the joint force commanders can take to facilitate integration and foster convergence is to decide in times of peace how they will organize their forces for war. They have various options available, including designating a subordinate land component commander to control both Army and Marine forces, designating a subordinate maritime component commander to command both Navy and Marine units, or standing up a separate joint task force headquarters. By determining the command-and-control arrangements before war occurs, the joint force will have a baseline of proficiency to train for in peacetime.

## **“Fight Before the Fight” and Readiness**

The gap between what a force can do now and what it might need to do in the future cannot be filled by a single concept that is optimized for all operational challenges. Instead, the military departments should maintain high warfighting proficiency within their respective domains without the expectation that the joint force can successfully conduct all-domain, large-scale, conventional operations around the globe. This can only be realized through an aggressive exercise program at the level of the combatant commands that requires joint force headquarters and component headquarters to collectively engage forces provided by the individual departments in realistic and recurring multidomain-focused training exercises at scale.

The tension between readiness priorities of the various military components is a perennial challenge. Moreover, combatant command headquarters seem unable to routinely provide response cells to support component-level exercises. This missed training opportunity ends up requiring subordinate units to role-play as a higher headquarters for which few are manned, trained, or equipped. During exercises, the joint force needs to repeatedly evaluate its own written concept or an integrated

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version of military department concepts being practiced. Repetition will not only help assigned units become more proficient at accomplishing their joint missions, it will give the geographic combatant commanders mission-essential feedback necessary to further refine their joint warfighting concepts.

## Next Steps

To fill the voids discussed in this article and optimize the development of joint concepts that meet the demands of the 2018 National Defense Strategy, consider the following three initiatives:

1. *Expand the current concept development approaches of the military departments* and invite formations with other departments and combatant command observers to participate in their exercises and experiments. The meaningful insights accumulated over time from these activities will enable geographic combatant commanders to better understand how their assigned forces can be effectively integrated into the joint force and employed in their theaters.
2. *Accelerate the pace and frequency of geographic combatant commanders' joint force experimentation* for conducting multidomain operations against China and Russia. This should start with rigorous examination of how the command will execute critical joint warfighting functions beginning with command and control
3. *Dispatch observer teams from the Joint Staff to exercises and experiments hosted by combatant commands* to gather insights and lessons learned. This practice will not only add context to ongoing Joint Staff efforts to supervise “global integration,” but also provide field commanders increased confidence that delegation of authority to the lowest practical echelon is a routine peacetime practice at the four-star level.

Collectively, these initiatives will help reduce institutional friction among the military departments, joint force commanders, and the Joint Staff. More importantly, they will ensure the military departments receive top-down guidance so they can adapt their warfighting approaches to best meet the needs of the joint force commander in the event of war with China or Russia. Assigned forces must understand a joint force commander’s vision, campaign sequencing, organization for combat, and general scheme of maneuver before conflict occurs if they are to meet a combatant commander’s expectations and standards.

## The Stakes

Drafting a warfighting concept that communicates all these vital ideas across the joint force is challenging—but it won’t be an academic exercise because the result will go a long way toward deterring China and Russia. If deterrence fails and war ensues, the concept will give the U.S. military an important advantage at a time it needs it most.

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This marks the first time that either Tom or Pat has been recognized for a publication nominated for the Welch Award.